





*You Can Teach an
Old Dog
New (Magic) Tricks*

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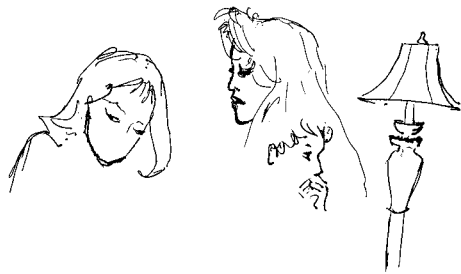
Introduction

What could time spent on art, craft, music, meditation or exercise have to do with improving a literacy program? How would those activities help me teach students who had difficulty learning because of past or present violence in their lives? These activities were part of the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (VALTA) Project course, and I wondered why.

I coordinate a rural literacy program, and had enrolled in the course with mixed feelings: gratitude for the new learning, but also some trepidation. That's because not only has violence affected some of our students, it has also been a factor in my own past.

I knew that reading about violence and its effects on behavior could create intense feelings and bring up painful memories. So did the creators of the VALTA course. They had built in course assignments in movement, art, and music. I did the assignments—serious student that I am—but admit to thinking they were a bit frivolous, not “real learning.” My attitude was “Why spend time and energy on these things when I've got so much to do?”

Mary Norton, one of the VALTA Project facilitators, later explained it this way: “the assignments in movement, art, and music encourage



different ways of learning and knowing, help us bring our whole selves to learning, look after ourselves, and have ways to stay present when feelings rise to the surface.”

During the course I found that by making time for fun and creativity I was more able to handle very serious and often

emotionally challenging reading. By the end of our course I was so impressed with the value of “whole-self” learning that I had no intention of doing the research phase of the project: I just wanted to continue with music, art, and movement for my own benefit in working with my students. I was quite surprised when others in our group said “that’s a research project.”

Research: careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to discover facts or principles. (Webster’s New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, 1984)

The difference between knowing intellectually and knowing in your heart, knowing with your body—it's immense. Huge.

At that point, I still didn't fully comprehend what I had learned. The whole idea of self-care was outside my frame of reference. I thought taking care of yourself meant getting enough sleep and eating your veggies, and that I knew those things—at least intellectually. It took some time to realize I had also learned emotionally and physically, changing the way I react to student stories and behaviors. In this report I hope to show how this happened and why this kind of learning was a key to improving our literacy program.

My Learning Process

At the beginning of my project, I was going on faith—faith in the VALTA Project facilitators' belief that I was “on to something” even if I didn't know what it was. I had no idea what the final product would be, or what was expected from the facilitators. (A rather scary way to go, I admit.) I felt I was fumbling my way to a finish line I couldn't see.

Over the next six months I read and experimented with creative activities. I began yoga, learned crafts and taught them to pre-teens, and designed and sewed a very fancy denim book bag with mirror decoration, appliqué and machine-stitched embroidery (freehand—on a 1974 machine) for my granddaughter. I sang, began learning to read music, and did *Brain Gym* exercises. Books pertinent to my learning seemed to appear when I was ready for them. There was a collection of research articles from the course at my disposal. More were available through Internet sources. Through these activities, I engaged in learning that was mental, physical, emotional and spiritual.²⁹



²⁹ These categories show up in modern writing, including Lohr and Schwartz (2003) and Horsman (1999), but have a longer history in the four quadrants of the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel.

Four Quadrant Learning

- Mental learning:** I read books and research articles and wrote notes and reflections on learning. I was amazed to find many authors writing about integrity, emotional honesty, intuition, health, fitness, spirituality and the relationship between emotions and memory in books geared to the business community as well as to educators.
- Physical learning:** I began yoga lessons, learned *Brain Gym* exercises and spent time walking outdoors. I started drinking at least eight glasses of water a day and became more careful about nutrition (okay, most of the time).
- Emotional learning:** Reading about abuse and seeing some of my own past reflected in others' stories sometimes brought back old pain. Writing my reactions to readings was a challenge when feelings were raw, yet by doing so I began to make connections to my own deeply buried memories and beliefs and see the link between them and decisions I have made throughout my life.
- Spiritual learning:** Integrity—acting (or not acting) on our most basic values—is spiritual. There is a spiritual dimension to changing harmful attitudes and beliefs. Honesty and kindness are spiritual. Learning to empathize with student stories (finally, I could listen instead of cringe) felt spiritual.

Personal Study Generates Personal Data

To observe personal changes, I kept a journal about work with students and events in my personal life. I observed the ways I taught students, their reactions to new methods and behavior, and changes in their learning. I recorded what was done and how it affected me.

I also took notes on the books and papers I read to inform my learning. Sometimes reading took me back to long-buried memories I'd have preferred to left covered. It helped to write in my journal about the incidents and feelings engendered and look at them calmly—as though they involved someone else—and attempt

to see what I'd learned or what I believed as the result of past events. Activities were especially helpful at such times: dancing, singing or yoga lightened my mood, and *Brain Gym* exercises helped me focus.

Data also included drawings and completed crafts as well as journal entries recording the thoughts and emotions resulting from those activities. Music was a wonderful source of both fun and emotional release, and again, activities and results were recorded in my journal.



When memories surfaced I'd feel the emotions that went with them all over again—rage, fear, anxiety. This took me by surprise and I'd have to take what was happening to me and write about it in my journal until I could understand it.

Besides keeping the journal, I returned to notes I had taken during the VALTA course. We had been guided to make observations on our work with students: on emotions present in the program, ways the students or I seemed to be comfortable or uncomfortable in our bodies, ways emotions were expressed or rejected, evidence of the effects of violence on learning. We were also to observe ourselves and our reactions. We were challenged to look and reflect on what we saw and what that meant to our programs, ourselves and our students.

My course notes showed plenty of emotion: frustration on the part of a tutor when a student failed to show up for planned tutoring sessions, humiliation felt by an adult referred to the program, relief when intake procedures focused on what participants *could* do, and shock, on my part, when a student lifted his t-shirt to show horrific scars.

Unwanted Data: Falling Apart and Driving Dangerously

The activities and journaling process seemed to help ground me during my research, and everything was going well—amazingly well—until it came time to complete the writing phase of the work. Suddenly, nothing worked. As I began writing about the gains I'd made from my research, they seemed to be slipping away. Events in both my work and my personal life took time intended for writing. Two weeks after I'd planned to put my material together, I finally began, but lost many hours of work through a computer glitch. My health took a nosedive, first with an infection, then flu.

Some part of me must have found this writing very, very—with a tremendous urge to hide under the covers and do nothing—dangerous: at one point, as I sat down at the computer, I had the eerie sensation that I needed to fasten my seatbelt. If “our body is an external mirroring of our internal state” (Promislow, 1998, p. 93), my state of mind seemed incredibly weak and frightened:

Remember that under stress we manifest all sorts of physiological changes that impact the brain/body and ease of movement.... Stuck stress-circuits put us on auto pilot with conditioned ways of responding that are ingrained and well myelinated, albeit less than desirable. (Promislow, 1988, p. 101)

Learning isn't a controversial subject, but abuse is. “Don't tell” is a message learned very thoroughly: Who wants to hear those things? Who would believe? Yet the telling is important. In Canada, 42 percent of females have experienced violence at the hands of a partner (*Maclean's*, October 13, 2003, p. 14).

There was no way for me to explain either the difficulty or the importance of my learning for my literacy work without explaining that I've also experienced violence. That meant writing about my own emotional and physical reactions to this learning. And I got sick, fried my computer, and generally needed a great boost in courage as well as an end goal in sight to accomplish it.

Learning about Learning: An Excerpt from My Journal

Last night at church we were to learn how to make a rag rug. I had spent a couple of mornings ripping sheets into 1 ½” strips, sewing them together to form one continuous strip, then winding the whole thing into balls as though it was wool.

Found out how impatient I can become! My arms got sore, and I kept tearing off the short end instead of the long end. I had real trouble doing a mundane task that required me to pay attention to what I was doing. It was boring, it was tedious, my chatterbox brain wouldn't shut up, I became really frustrated...

I thought about how there must be a better way to do this, how inept my hands were, how tired my arms were...

How do my students feel, when they try to write a sentence and have trouble spelling a word, forming a letter...how long can they pay attention when the task is entirely new and they don't even know what the end result should be...how frustrated or angry do they become? How do they learn to stick to it?

Goodness, is this how my students feel after their first lesson with me?

I had to talk to myself—gently—when I realized that my frustration was totally out of proportion to the task at hand.

“Fay (said I), it's o.k. It's only a strip of cloth. It's smaller than you. It's not worth this anger. In fact—why are you angry? Is it because you expect your hands and eyes to be coordinated—immediately—on a new task? Is it because you've got all these strips of cloth lying on the floor in a heap and you just realized they're tangled and will have to be untangled? Is it because some of them are only four feet long so will require more joins than if you'd ripped the sheet lengthwise instead of crosswise—again?”

So, Fay, calm down. See the funny side. It's an old sheet, for goodness sake.”

So this morning, tried again. Did the first couple of rows—and discovered old sheets torn in strips are much less forgiving than yarn. Threads come off the sides and tangle in the hook. And I lost count—yeeks, you have to keep counting? How can I listen to the radio and count at the same time? And of course, I can't. A couple of rows into the oval, found I had 20 stitches on one side of the original chain, and fourteen on the other.

Not good. It's curling up sort of strangely.

Rip the whole thing apart, because my error seems to be in the second row. Dang. Uh-oh. The fabric strip keeps winding up as the crochet pulls apart. Now I have to untwist it. O.K. I can do that. I'm being more patient here. Sure I am. But I'm listening to the radio so have something for my brain to do besides complain.

Dang! I've un-twisted all that fabric, and as I go to re-wind it on the ball it twists again! Cheeeeeeeeeee!

Somehow, although the result is only supposed to be a rag rug, I seem to be learning something far more important here. The only crochet I have done in my life was back in '74, when I learned enough to make a baby sweater for a friend. It was perfect, it really was—and it took me a month or more to learn enough (from a book, because there was no one to teach me) to make that simple sweater, and several more months to complete the job.

Yes, it was nice. Flawless. And that's the first, and last, thing I made with crochet, until the rug.



Oh—maybe there's something else I've learned! I did learn from a book, back then, and there was no one to teach me. What would I have been able to do if I could have asked someone for help? How important is the teacher? How much does patience on their part count?

And was I afraid to ask anyone to teach me because I feel so stupid when it comes to handicrafts. Because I don't want anyone to know how inept I am? Because I don't really want to admit that following patterns is rather beyond me at present? Because I'll need lots of time, and patience, on the part of a teacher?

Connections: Body, Mind, Emotions

The rug experiment left me humble enough to try something else far, far from my comfort zone—actual physical exercise. I'm a 'slow learner' in the area of sports, with the exception of dancing, where the music and rhythm seem to propel me along. So practicing yoga five days a week was quite a change for me. It took experimentation

to find a routine I could stick to and meet my goal: improvement without exhaustion. I found a yoga teacher to work with once a week, and tapes to use at home on other days. I also found books at our local library, and am continuing to progress. For me, yoga is perfect because you learn gradually, and build both strength and flexibility at whatever rate your body can manage. At the beginning of the VALTA course I would not have believed that *adding* to my activities could make me feel better. I even sleep better.

Many modern writers and executive advisors say the same things: exercise increases our capacity to work, improves both vitality and resistance to stress, and even moderate workouts can improve cognitive and creative capacity. (A plus for me: my workouts are definitely on the moderate side.)

Because the mind and body are so inextricably connected, even moderate physical exercise can increase cognitive capacity. It does so most simply by driving more blood and oxygen to the brain. Exercise is also believed to stimulate more production of a chemical—brain derived neurotrophic factor—which helps repair brain cells and prevent further damage. (Loehr and Schwartz, 2003, p.101)

Taking time for creative activities on a regular basis has also felt good and I really couldn't explain why, except that it was fun and fun is, well—fun. However, Loehr and Schwartz (2003), clarified a relationship between fun and learning for me:

Much like the body, the brain needs time to recover from exertion...it takes time for the brain to consolidate and encode what it has learned.... In the absence of downtime, or recovery, this learning cannot take place as efficiently. (p. 102)

So, in these authors' terms, I've created a positive energy ritual by adding yoga and music to my daily routine. Judy Murphy, one of the VALTA Project facilitators, helped me understand when she said "emotions come out physically; we know that." I *hadn't* known, but it explains why the activities made such a difference. I played piano angrily, danced for joy, typed furiously, sang with gusto. Those activities felt *so good*—and they were part of the course. Assignments. I wouldn't have done them, wouldn't even have thought of doing them otherwise. All are physical; even journal writing is physical. I type like a whiz and put my emotions outside me, where I can *see* them, and face them.

Learning: I Can Change the Way I Feel

I love learning: it's my passion. But love and enjoyment were not the only emotions involved in this learning, as reading sometimes reminded me of unhappy, frightening or sad events in my life. I couldn't keep those memories out so I decided to use my reading to learn ways of dealing with them.

One piece of information that was a tremendous help is very simple: at any time, one's body is in the same state as one's mind.

...if we think there is danger even when there isn't any, we react as if there were. The intensity of the reaction depends on how great we think the danger is...your body engages...and prepares to protect itself through confrontation or flight. Your muscles tense, your blood pressure and heart rate increase, your breath quickens, and your whole body is ready to do something. (Nuernberger, 1996, pp. 36-37)

Reading others' stories felt dangerous, and so did remembering my own. I had to keep reminding myself that to the brain, past, present and future are one, which was why I felt such intensity about past events:

The brain doesn't discriminate between thoughts or images of the past, the present, and the future. To the brain, every thought happens only in the present. Nor does it differentiate between thoughts about an actual physical reality...and fantasies.... So every thought is immediately translated into the body for action. When your mind anticipates the future or dwells on the past, your body responds as if the event were happening in the present. (Nuernberger, 1996, p. 61)

To change the tension or adrenalin rush that was part of my emotional reaction, I could deliberately slow my breathing. By relaxing my breath, I could read, or remember, without experiencing the original emotion. It felt like the difference between watching a movie of an event and living through it.

Another helpful development was learning to recall positive memories, where I had acted in opposition to the emotion being triggered at the time. The VALTA Project facilitators introduced this as a



workshop exercise, and several authors recommended the technique as something to do *before* a stressful situation. By recalling and writing in my journal about times when I acted with integrity, courage, creativity or compassion and acted quickly or was unusually effective, I gave myself a string of positive emotions to call upon when the negative seemed about to cave me in.

I also rediscovered the power of honestly expressing emotion. That's something I've always tried to do—at least, that's what I thought—but my reading brought me renewed awareness. Sometimes, I feel something and can't name it. It's not lack of vocabulary, it's lack of experience in *really feeling* what is there. There are still times when I can only describe a feeling as "uncomfortable," but I am now at least able to articulate that something's going on, emotionally. The last time this feeling surfaced, it was over pairing a particular tutor-student team together. The student needed a tutor, but on recognizing the feeling I decided to wait; later events proved my instinct was correct.

Being emotionally honest requires listening to the strong feelings of "inner truth" which arise, at least in major part, from your core emotional intelligence as it links to your intuition and conscience...what you and others feel communicates the emotional truth all by itself, in your eyes and body language, in the tone of your voice, beneath the words. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p. 4)

More Connections: Emotion and Intuition

Reading that intuition is an essential ingredient for management success was a surprise. I've always had intuition, but certainly didn't trust it. Yet the writers of *Executive EQ* are teaching executives to do just that:

(EQ, or 'gut reaction') sifts through the entire wealth of detail and operates covertly (below the level of consciousness), utilizing what may be described as "as if" loops tied to EQ, and draws your attention to the outcomes to which given actions may lead, and functions as an automated alarm signal—which may lead you to reject, immediately, and prompts you to choose among other alternatives—or as a beacon of incentive, which draws you towards beneficial outcomes. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p. 47)

If a child learns that intuition is something to disparage and that obedience is safer than decision-making, the effects may carry through to many levels of behavior. The image that occurs to me is a hospital syringe full of coloured dye being shot into my brain; it just kind of settles, and can influence decisions in areas that have nothing to do with the origin of the belief.

“Listen to your intuition.” How long has intuition been regarded as suspect and ridiculed? Think about “women’s intuition.” And now executives are paying big money to learn to pay attention to that gut instinct, and communicate their feelings to others.

...researchers...are determining that emotions provide the bottom line for rational decision-making in our lives, based on survival or social risk. Emotions are felt as bodily states, and are the means through which the mind senses how the body feels. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p. 81)

In my journal I wrote, “I’m wondering if there wasn’t a rather sinister reason for children to be taught not to pay attention to that little voice. Because those who *did* pay attention would be better able to make decisions about whom to trust. Maybe “Mr. XYZ makes me sick to my stomach” had a far greater meaning than a child would be expected to understand—yet that child *knew*.

...Suspend the voice of judgment. Intuition adds to good judgment; it does not replace it...the point here is that the analytical, logical mind will keep telling you how silly it is to pay attention to impressions about things the ‘facts’ can’t reveal. Your mental critic may whisper, “This doesn’t make any sense” or “It’s only your imagination” or “That can’t possibly be right.” Don’t ignore such messages. Acknowledge and make a note of them—of every impression—for future consideration.... Wait to judge until after you sense the full range of your gut feelings and intuitive signals. If, for example, your first impression is about another person’s intentions, feelings, or thoughts, be certain to seek clarification to know if you’re right. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p. 57)

I remembered times over the years when my intuition told me that I was in danger or should not trust a particular person. Finding out later that my worries *did* have a foundation—that my intuition was amazingly in tune with the truth—was certainly no comfort. At one point I hadn’t protected myself; at another, I hadn’t protected my children. Nuernberger (1986) says: “Whenever you face a problem

that includes a personal threat, depersonalize it so you can maintain mental clarity” (p. 183).

In both cases, had I looked at what I *could* see or do as though it involved another family, I would have called the police and laid charges. “Following your heart” may be much more than a romantic notion; it may lead, instead, to inner truth the logical mind cannot understand. After recalling those two particularly harrowing events, I thought “any normal woman would have seen, would have called the police, would have laid charges...” and understood that because of emotional trauma, I was not a “normal woman” at the time.

The Power of Belief: Believing the Labels

Normal? That’s not what you feel when you’re going through trauma. A few years ago I was working with an adult student who was attending upgrading classes, parenting children, going through a custody battle and carrying memories of incest. Keeping up with class work while dealing with her emotions proved too much, and while I knew what she was going through, the school did not. Her instructor told me the student was lazy and manipulative; she gave up and dropped out.

The effort to appear “normal” through an unstable time was too much for this woman. She told me she was “no good”—and blamed herself for failing to keep her grades up. Ellen Langer’s (1989) messages about the labels we and others place on ourselves resonates. In *Mindfulness*, she says we “experience the world by creating categories” (p. 11). Langer (1997) also says we create categories and labels and then act on the beliefs we have formed “...Rigid mindsets we hold about ourselves affect our performance” (p. 98).

I found myself recalling labels given to me—rotten kid, spoiled brat, *such* a good girl, housewife, fashion illustrator, graphic artist, skater, overeater, battered wife, rape victim, teacher, mother, good mother, good cook, literacy worker, expert, student—and the labels I seem to have placed on myself: not good enough, not smart enough, not pretty enough. I think the last three appeared when I was small and being bullied, and my reasoning was that if I were only good enough, smart enough, or pretty enough it would stop—after all, I was told (by the older, bigger, bullies) that I was getting what I deserved. (Bigger kids should know, right?)

Children don't intend to cause permanent damage to one another, I'm sure. Yet I believe that those labels were colouring my decisions long after the childhood incidents. For example, offering opinions at work took courage, but was still easier than standing up for myself in a painful domestic situation. Looking back, I was mindful enough to know I was in a bad predicament, but not mindful enough to see the obvious solution; on some level I believed I wasn't good enough, or smart enough, to raise my children on my own.

One reason mindfulness may seem effortful is because of the pain of negative thoughts. When thoughts are uncomfortable, people often struggle to erase them. The pain, however, does not come from mindful awareness of these thoughts, but from a single-minded understanding of the painful vent...mindfulness leads to feelings of control, greater freedom of action, and less burnout. (Langer, 1989, p. 202)

Looking back at my life and finding patterns of behavior which *were in accordance with my beliefs* was not a pleasant process. Discovering what I *did* believe, and why, has made acceptance of my own mistakes a little easier—not painless, but easier. Kraftsow (2002)

talks about breaking the conditioning cycle, with conditioning affecting the personality, being "expressions of things that have happened to us in our past, whether known or unknown. (p. 7)

This suggests to me that perhaps it's not essential to remember every detail of our past. It may be that we simply need to be able to look at the expressions that need changing. I personally think there's a reason for memories to *be* repressed; they seem to remain hidden until we're ready to deal with them. In my case, some seemed to be shaken loose after a car accident gave me a concussion. When I finally realized that the nightmares which followed could be recollections of real events, I was at a stage in my life where I could work with a counsellor. Now, many years later, I can honestly say I'm grateful for those memories that have surfaced; painful as they were, they explained my life to me.

Reading that others reacted to violence with feelings and behaviors similar to my own and those of some of my students was important; learning to change the way I thought about events in my past and diffuse the emotions those memories held was incredibly empowering. Looking back with older eyes, I could see that although my actions were far from perfect, I had done the best I could with the knowledge I had at the time. It follows that others

did the same—even those who caused me pain. I read about forgiveness and now understand it doesn't mean condoning bad behavior, my own or that of others; rather, it means I can release negative emotions and get on with my life.

How freeing that is!

More Learning: Freedom and Power

Early in my life I learned that I didn't have the power to change anything important to me. Nobody meant to teach me that, and it wasn't true, but that didn't stop me from learning it, as Langer would say, in a single-minded way. And while I learned other things that contradicted those beliefs on an intellectual level, it wasn't enough to change what I believed on an *emotional* level.

...most of what provokes emotion is learned...generally learned in a single-minded way...emotions rest upon premature cognitive commitments. We experience them without an awareness that they could be otherwise.
(Langer, 1989, p. 175)

Langer (1997) says that “in general young girls are taught to be ‘good little girls’ which translates into ‘do what you are told’” (p. 21). I was told that “little girls are meant to be seen and not heard” and I learned to take my curiosity to the library and stifle my sense of adventure while making my brothers’ beds and folding their clothes. Several of my references for this study contain the word “power” in their titles—a fact I didn't notice right away—and I'm quite sure that it's because, as a child in the 1940's, I learned that I didn't have any power.

...premature cognitive commitments...[are] mindsets that we accept unconditionally, without considering or being aware of alternative forms that the information can take. (Langer, 1997, p. 92)

I had no power to decide, no power to choose, no power to disobey *anybody*—the consequences could be too painful. And I think I was quite young when I “learned” that others could decide what I would do, even what I would say. “Tell Mom you did it or we'll beat you up.” Now, there's a dilemma—a beating from your brothers if you tell the truth or punishment from your mother if you lie well enough to be believed. Apparently I learned to lie very well under duress, because I generally received the punishment. I had no power to avoid it.

When a person believes they have no power, they have no power. They are simply unable to act. There are times...when we each need to feel angry or sad—because that is the inner truth we are experiencing right then, and there are times when it is right to feel anxious, concerned, joyful, or jealous. Unlike the mind, the heart finds it difficult to lie. (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997, p 36)

Results: Personal Changes, Professional Changes

My definition of personal power would be the power to do something or to change something. In this research my goal was to see how involvement and experimentation with new learning and new ways of learning would change me. My journal and notes on reading have given me the data for serious reflection. Looking back over the months I realize that I've been both asking tougher questions and making clearer statements. I seem to be using the word "no" more often and more directly. I'm trusting my intuition more and am slower to anger. Changes are taking place in my personal life as well, such as telling my husband, "I probably won't be doing any housework until I've completed this draft." I was surprised to see my personal changes reflected in a report by Mary Norton and Judy Murphy (2001) about their *Drawing out the self* project:

Although participating in the course did not change women's circumstances, some participants changed how they respond to them. Participants who were interviewed reported that they felt better, had more self esteem, were more open, and were stronger and more able to say "No." ... Singing and art help women to move into other ways of knowing (e.g. non-verbal knowledge, spiritual knowledge) (p. i).

A different type of learning also boosted my "personal power" level, although I found it very difficult. The technique is taught by both yoga masters and Native American writers: shut off my "mind chatter" or "stop thinking in words." Judy Murphy explained the process well in a workshop by comparing training our mind to training a puppy. When the puppy wanders, you gently bring it back, as many times as you need to. You don't speak harshly to it or blame it for acting like a puppy. It's a new behavior; puppy will

learn. Doing the same thing with the wandering, chattering mind isn't easy, so I love Judy's analogy.³⁰ Simply quieting the mind isn't meditation, but it's a move in that direction.

Stilling the mind was begun to help me get a good night's sleep, but results went much further. When I actually accomplished this feat, it put me in a totally different frame of mind, a wonderfully calm place where ideas seemed to arrive without effort. It taught me that I can change the way I use my mind—a powerful idea that took my thinking full circle to childhood and back to the present.

Again, the results carry over to work with students and tutors. One result is that I'm healthier. Some long-standing health problems have improved, and I have more energy. And energy is so important to literacy work: not just physical energy, but mental, emotional and spiritual energy.

With that energy, I began to take on more community work as part of the literacy program, doing presentations on emergent literacy and plain-language writing while continuing with exercise, crafts and music. I believe that the program profile in the community has increased because of those efforts. This has brought new students, many with special needs, to our office.

Free to Listen: Change in Empathy

It's easier to listen now because this learning has left me more relaxed and I no longer take responsibility for student problems. Making time for relaxation and renewal—basic self-care—has paid big dividends. Because I'm no longer carrying my own bundle of intense memories, I'm less easily disturbed by student stories of violence in their past or present—I am able to listen, to really hear, without taking on the speaker's emotions. I believe that my increased ability to listen came about through the combination of reading about abuse and its effects on learning, feeling the pain, fear, or anger of the writer, and doing *something* to express that feeling, whether it was journal writing, guitar-strumming, or exercising.

So often, students have never expressed their feelings. As much as I needed to get my feelings out when the reading for the course triggered uncomfortable memories or emotions, students may also need to express thoughts and feelings before they are able to

³⁰ Judy found this image in *Path to the heart*, (Kornfield, 1993).

concentrate on literacy work. Steven Covey (1989), in *The 7 habits of highly effective people*, has a whole chapter on empathic communication, or listening to understand:

Empathic...listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world...you understand how they feel.

Empathy is not sympathy...(which is) a form of judgment.... The essence of empathic listening is not that you agree with someone; it's that you fully, deeply, understand that person, emotionally as well as intellectually. (p. 240)

Sometime between the humiliation of feeling beaten by great strips of dog-eared cotton and the self-assurance of learning in new ways, I began hearing more from my students as they shared their thoughts and ideas with me. They shared not only background issues but their present learning needs and desires. I learned that one student used to sleep in a tree; he learned to use phonics to read unknown words. Being able to speak to a willing audience about life as a homeless person seemed to free him to listen and learn. I heard what it was like to be a refugee or a prisoner of war in a country not known for kindness to prisoners. Students who shared life experiences with me were much more open about their learning needs and what they wanted—and didn't want—from learning materials and tutors.

Not that I didn't listen before the VALTA Project. I did, but only to a degree—I would try to keep the student “on track,” ensuring that our time together was spent on literacy. Now I'm not afraid of what I might hear and know some students need to speak. I know I can handle my own emotions, so I make better connections with students whose backgrounds include violence.

I am now in even greater awe of students with the courage to ask for help with reading or writing. I thought I knew how it felt, because I've been continuing to study as I've worked as a coordinator—French, learning disabilities, literacy research—but I studied *from books* so I felt at least a little competence. Trying to balance my body and brain in a yoga pose, and completing the huge-hook-and-strips-of-unwieldy-fabric crochet project were totally humbling experiences. I did finish the rug, after taking it in all its knotty misery to a patient friend who tried to keep from laughing as she showed me how it's done. I really didn't have a clue how a student might feel until I made the rug.

My journal shows how difficult it was for me to express emotions or write about emotional events; again, how do students feel? For most, being unable to learn *is very emotional*, no matter what the source of the learning difficulties. I needed to remember that when memories or ineptitude (the rug) got in the way, I couldn't think or organize myself let alone do this writing.

Accepting Emotions, Creating Trust

I now spend more time with students before matching them with tutors, looking for the emotional connections that must be made rather than simply finding the student's academic needs and matching them with a tutor who has the requisite skills. I've always known that it's important for a teacher or tutor to *like* the student. Now I understand that when a student has experienced violence the connection needs to be deep enough that they feel accepted *with* their history. As program coordinator, it's up to me to be the gatekeeper, to make entering the program feel safe.

If a student seems especially fragile emotionally, I may continue working with them past the original assessment. By beginning the tutoring process myself, I have the opportunity to see how they react to errors made and requests to try new things—to take risks.

When a learner has experienced violence at the hands of others, an attempt to read a new word, compose a sentence, or explain a paragraph can feel very threatening. When your life has seemed like a danger zone, your need for safety is paramount; everything else is secondary. I was certainly in no danger while trying to sew or exercise or make a rug, so the distress I felt was totally out of proportion to the situation. It was only through writing in my journal that I made the connection between my initial failures and earlier times when someone else's disapproval could bring emotional or physical pain. By going through that process, I understood *why* new learning can feel so intimidating. Until students begin to trust their ability to learn, they may not be ready to work with a volunteer tutor.

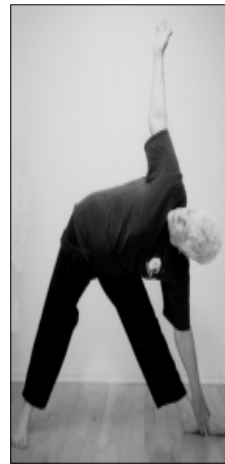
The one-on-one model of teaching or tutoring is necessarily about creating trust. Feelings are often revealed in body language and facial expressions, and I need to pay attention to those communications as well as to words, and teach tutors to do the same. It seems that we say what we think, but *show* what we're feeling. To determine which tutors will work well with students dealing with violent backgrounds, I have one-on-one interviews with new tutors, both at the time of tutor training and again before matching them with students.

Talking with volunteers about various learning scenarios lets them know what they might encounter, and lets me see their reactions. Tutor attitudes towards learners with difficulties, different ways of learning and teaching, and learning itself all affect the tutoring situation. I need to know each student and each tutor before deciding who to pair as a team.

Once students are matched with tutors, it's important that I stay in touch and encourage both student and tutor to do the same. If appointments are missed or other problems creep in, we need to know the reason. It's easy for a tutor to think the student isn't interested or motivated or that there is some fault with their tutoring. If those things happen, we can lose both student and tutor. A coordinator needs to be available, understanding the high degree of stress and risk involved in learning for many adult students. During this research I learned firsthand that genuine stress can cause genuine illness. Information on how emotions affect learning is now an important part of our tutor training thanks to the VALTA Project.

New Ways of Learning, New Ways of Teaching

Through literacy work, people who thought they couldn't learn become readers or learn to write, and often learn to value themselves more highly in the process. My own confidence increased from learning in areas other than the academic, and students showed increased confidence after learning in the academic area, which was new for them. Another participant in the VALTA Project, Genevieve Fox, said, "because I could make a buckskin dress, I could go to university." I think I know what she means—because I could learn to play a tin whistle and do yoga, I could complete this project.



We now have many more ways to approach reading and writing in our program. One student who loves 50's music read from a rock 'n roll song book, others told their stories and had them written by tutors as reading texts. Some have written their thoughts on fiction or movies, others have shared their artwork and spoken or written about their feelings on making or viewing the art. An ESL learner who spoke almost no English went for walks with her tutor, and learned new vocabulary, shapes, and colours in a wonderfully relaxed atmosphere. The words were written for her at the end of the walk, so she took her first steps in reading English as well.

Brain Gym exercises have also been introduced to some learners, and my intention is to teach them in tutor in-service as well. *Brain Gym* movements help with handwriting, and the office now has a whiteboard where students can write large and erase quickly; we also use it for spelling practice. Students have always had choices about how and what they would learn. Now there are more choices because I've become aware of more possibilities through the VALTA Project.

Intake procedures in our office used to consist mainly of finding the student's academic needs and reading, writing, spelling or math ability. We also had conversations about their school experience and other learning history, such as job skills or hobbies. Now we take it much further and it's been paying off. We talk about what it's like to learn in an area where you're unsure of your abilities: it's a risk, you take a chance. I try to ensure that both students and tutors are comfortable with the fact that learning is sometimes difficult, tedious and frustrating. I encourage them to be honest about what they're feeling at those moments, to have fun and enjoy the process. Students and tutors learn about the need for self-care, relaxation and sleep, and the value of exercise not just to stay healthy and happy but as an aid to learning.

There's more opportunity for student self-direction, and new learning materials have been provided with a greater variety of reading content. Easy-reading subjects include sports, celebrities, outdoor life, success stories, and fiction. We also know that some students simply aren't ready to make choices when they first enter the program, so I suggest they choose from two or three possibilities at their reading level. I think we have a better program than before my research project, and I know that I'm even more comfortable and confident in my role as coordinator.

Conclusion

Exploring new kinds of learning and new ways of learning has been an amazing process for me. It's hard to pin down the connection between play and emotional resiliency, but as the VALTA course continued I knew it was making a difference. Activities I once did simply because they were assignments are *now a part of my life*. I'm hooked on them because they make me feel good.

I found ample evidence of connections between movement, music, art, and learning. There is also strong evidence that these activities support increases in self-confidence, which seems to me to be an important factor in learning. I'm much better, too, at paying attention to intuition after this research, and find it especially helpful in deciding which tutor to pair with a particular student.

Finally, I'm enjoying my work even more. I'm more relaxed, which seems to be helping new students relax more quickly. I found that by making time for fun and creativity I was able to handle the serious emotional challenges that come to a literacy worker when working with a survivor of abuse. Survivors are learning, not only in my program, but in the programs of the other participants in the VALTA Project, each of whom found ways to apply our learning to situations in their communities. It's been a privilege to learn and to share.



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