

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



Recommended citation of this article

Isserlis, J. (2010). Trauma and Learning – What Do We Know, What Can We Learn?. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 5(1), 42–51. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8004065>

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2009 Symposium held at Bow Valley College in Banff, Alberta, Canada. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Wall, T., & Leong, M. (Eds.) (2010). *Low-educated adult second language and literacy Acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the 5th symposium*. Bow Valley College.
<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/470>

About the Organization

LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org>

Website

<https://www.leslla.org/>

TRAUMA AND LEARNING – WHAT DO WE KNOW, WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

Janet Isserlis, Swearer Center for Public Service, Brown University and Rhode Island Adult Education Professional Development Center

This article describes an ongoing project of enabling practitioners to share understandings of issues underlying trauma and learning and to work together to articulate strategies and approaches to support learning for basic literacy level learners and practitioners. The article also touches upon elements of a workshop offered at LESLLA 2009, reviews common wisdom about supporting victims and survivors of trauma and violence, and proposes ways in which practitioners can consider and address the issue in their own settings and contexts.

Introduction

Adult educators have long been aware of the fact that many adults face challenges to learning prior to entering into adult classes. Experiences of violence and trauma – in the lives of learners and educators – have a bearing on our abilities to be present to learning and teaching. Understanding how these experiences shape our abilities to learn and teach has been central to the work of a number of educators, particularly Jenny Horsman and others working in networks of practice such as those referenced by or working with Canadian-based Learning and Violence.net (<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/wherwld.htm>). Horsman has been instrumental in helping educators see that particular behaviours and attitudes that may once have been attributed to laziness or indifference may, in fact, be manifestations of responses to prior exposure to stress, trauma or violence. As well, a proliferation of memoir, fiction and learner-generated writing and publishing has also served to demystify the difficulties learners have faced and to offer suggestions of ways of strengthening our provision of adult literacy instruction (see for example http://swearercenter.brown.edu/Literacy_Resources/screen.html#print%20/%20fiction).

Years ago, I may have thought that the woman who stared out the window or neglected to call me to report an absence just didn't care about school. I now know to consider the fact that she may be a survivor of violence, a partner to someone who controls her use of the telephone or computer, or experiencing other challenges that preclude her being able to come to class or to be present and attentive to learning once she is there. Knowing that I don't know *what has* happened but that there is a possibility that something *likely did* happen enables me to provide multiple means of entry and participation in my classes so that learners aren't doubly failed – once by their particular experiences of violence and, again, systemically, by a school that won't acknowledge a range of needs for and abilities to be present to learning. Just as universal design isn't only helpful to people with special needs (the curb cuts are not only useful to people in wheelchairs, but also for moms with prams), this approach to supporting learners can benefit all of us – whether or not we've experienced trauma.

Awareness of how trauma affects learning has increased in the field of adult education, but much work remains to be done, particularly as the field experiences frequent turnover with practitioners leaving regularly (largely due to insecure working conditions) and with newcomers taking their places – often as volunteers or novice teachers with varying degrees of training, support, experience and/or preparation.

This article briefly reviews the author's work on the issue of trauma and learning and offers recommendations for next steps and ongoing work in practice and policy.

Beginning the investigation: On the Screen

Having noticed learners' struggles to attend to learning and encouraged by Horsman's emergent research, the author, through a fellowship from the National Institute for Literacy (*On the Screen*, 1999 - 2000), worked with ten adult literacy practitioners in Rhode Island in the northeastern United States to explore the complications and implications of violence and adult learning. The fellowship, informed by the author's classroom experience and by Horsman's work, was undertaken in an attempt to make lasting impacts on adult teaching and learning by raising the visibility of issues pertaining to violence and learning. The Rhode Island practitioner cohort worked together over an academic year to identify impacts of trauma on learning, to develop responses and approaches to supporting learners affected by violence or trauma and to make systemic change, where possible, in order to support access to learning for all.

"[Traumatic events] can overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 1992).

"Since language learning demands control, connection, and meaning, adults experiencing effects of past or current trauma are particularly challenged in learning a new language" (Isserlis, 2000).

Herman's (1992) explication of trauma, , serves as a guiding frame in examining how adults, including both learners and practitioners, respond to and cope with the awful things they have experienced. Because victims of violence are disproportionately represented among the ranks of adult learners, it is critical that adult educators understand how people cope with trauma in order to understand how to assist them in attending to learning.

Trauma makes it difficult to attend to learning. For some, a startle reflex may make any loud noise a powerful distraction. A lack of self-confidence and life-long messages that they are "stupid" and "no good" set some learners up to expect failure. Some have yet to experience a self efficacy – a sense of being able to make decisions, to act on the world in ways that allow them to assert their knowledge and skills. Having come to believe that they are indeed stupid, it is difficult to find ways for them to imagine they are smart or competent. Learning becomes another thing at which to fail, something else "that I can't do." Hollow promises, such as *you can do it!* aren't helpful; concrete indications are: *Look. Last week you wrote a paragraph; this*

week you've completed two pages. Do you see the progress you've made with your use of punctuation? Providing safe space can also help. Horsman speaks of providing a comfortable chair in a quiet corner in the classroom. Instead of leaving the class or the program because she feels stressed or upset, a learner can move to the corner of the room; she can just listen to the class from there. Her moving to the corner means she is not expected to participate in discussion. She is taking a small bit of control over what she is and is not able to do in a given moment; it is not all or nothing, it is a place in between. Many people who have experienced violence don't get that. It's all or nothing; fight or flight. *I can't concentrate today, so I'll quit school forever.* Horsman's work has opened the doors to many of us who wish to create – and have created – other possibilities for learning and teaching, by finding ways to accommodate learners' intermittent abilities to be present to and to make progress with their studies.

Over the course of *On the Screen's* ten-month fellowship, the Rhode Island cohort participated in monthly meetings, engaged in written reflection (through list serv exchanges and journaling) and participated in pair or small group work. In addition to monthly check-ins, explicit training occurred in the areas of domestic violence and its consequences, issues of child sexual abuse and recovery and also in dialogue with Jenny Horsman, whose text, *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education* we had read and discussed. While the majority of the practitioners in the cohort worked with adult ESOL and basic education students, some were former adult educators – one was working in an elementary school, and one was working within the state's child protective system. Another participant was working as an art therapist in a locked psychiatric facility. Over the course of the fellowship period, teachers explored different approaches to classroom practice, drawing on Horsman's work, and paying attention to their own learners' input and to one another's suggestions and reflections.

In addition to providing ongoing direct service through their program or agency work (learning, teaching, case management), members of the group of practitioners engaged in the fellowship considered attendance policy, confidentiality issues and classroom dynamics through the lens of creating and maintaining safe space for learners and developing flexible guidelines for learners to be able to attend classes. Whereas, for example, some programs had held a 'three strikes' policy (three absences would result in a learner losing her or his place in a program), flexibility was increased, expressly to support those learners whose attendance might have been disrupted by sabotaging partners, or periods of dropping out of school in order to deal with consequences of violence or trauma. We struggled to name ways in which participants could maintain confidentiality or not be compelled to share stories but would learn that programs would accept them and accept their absences as well, if family or household issues created challenges in attendance.

As part of the fellowship work, the author also held workshop sessions with adult ESOL program participants, trying to help all learners understand the legal issues underpinning *any* form of violence as well as to publicize information about services for victims of violence in Rhode Island. In some instances, learners whose cultures 'normalized' violence challenged the suggestion that physical violence against women was an issue; framing the issue as one of abiding by US law posed

one way of addressing that resistance, but there were never any simple answers to many of the questions and challenges posed by male participants.⁹

In addition to classroom-based practice, the project was especially committed to building connections between educators and others in service sectors working with adult learners – welfare and child protective workers, law enforcement and health care providers. It was important for educators to understand the implications of child protective sanctions, welfare regulations and other forms of community control affecting the learners with whom the cohort interacted. For education workers, these adults were students; these same students were also someone else's clients, patients or constituents in some other way. Relationships between learners and service providers are often tense and educators are, at times, drawn into conversations in order to assist learners understand what is being said, what's at risk. By attempting to bridge understandings and communication across the sectors, the project aimed to both ease tensions and to educate service providers about the realities of one another's work as well as about the day to day struggles encountered by adult learners, particularly those who were survivors of violence and trauma.

In order to support the cohort, we used some of our funding to engage the services of an on-call trauma counselor. Participants had access to appointments with the counselor with the understanding that the project would be billed without revealing who had been to visit in the event that participants wished to keep that information private. (In the event, one of the author's students, working in an intergenerational literacy project at a domestic violence shelter did visit the counselor. The author, as well, used some of the counselor's time in a modified supervisory model.) This support was of critical importance in creating safety for the author and cohort members. While programs or communities of practice can take this work on without access to a professional counselor, it is critical that care be taken for those in the group to understand the parameters of what they feel they can and can't undertake. As funding permits access to support workers, all the better for those doing the work in an ongoing manner.

Barriers and supports

Literacy practitioners teach adults to read and write English. They're not providing therapeutic treatment. They are, however, working with learners whose experiences have included a range of very bad things; the practitioners themselves are also likely to have also experienced bad things. We all find our ways through these experiences in one way or another, with varying degrees of grace and success.

In our classrooms, we rarely speak directly of these experiences. However, we are aware of the fact that any one of us may have had bad things happen. So we ask questions that can be answered with *I'd rather not say*, and we ask questions that never compel a learner to describe or report anything she or he does not wish to

⁹ The project's final report http://swearercenter.brown.edu/Literacy_Resources/screenpdf.html enumerates these, and other issues that arose in working with mixed-gender and mixed-nationality groups of adult learners and practitioners.

discuss. For example, we don't ask directly about a childhood memory, but we might ask about something someone remembers as being fun or interesting – from last night or last year or much earlier. We give people lateral choices; we give them an opportunity to answer questions, but we give them choices in the *kinds* of questions they choose to answer. We appreciate that language and literacy learning are hard work and require commitment and engagement. We recognize that it is hard to learn when you're too afraid to tell or not tell, when you're too preoccupied with deciding what people can or can't know about you. So we give learners multiple choices and multiple ways of learning, expressing and being with one another.

Increasingly, in large part due to Horsman's work and to the networks of practice her work catalyzed, practitioners are working together to learn more about the particular contexts in which they are working, to learn about local resources and to find ways to strengthen practice for low literacy – and all – adult learners. Study circles, reading groups, list serves (see, for example, a recent thread on a national list serv about couples studying literacy together <http://www.nifl.gov/pipermail/diversity/2010/003560.html> [retrieved February 4, 2010]) all acknowledge and address the issue as one of many elements having an impact on how people learn and teach. Practitioners are seeing anew how consideration of the needs and strengths of the whole learner is key to supporting learner persistence (see Comings, 2007) and engagement.

As part of a process of initiating discussion or prompting reflection, Figure 1 enumerates obstacles that learners and teachers may commonly encounter. While wanting to maintain an assets-based consideration of the complexities of learning and teaching, it is also important to acknowledge that there will be things that get in the way and that strategies need to be developed to address these barriers. There are also supports to be developed, nurtured and valued as well.

Figure 1: **What gets in the way of learning and teaching?**

| | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| - violence | - poverty |
| - racism | - dis/abilities |
| - immigration status/history | |
| - health and mental health | |
| - gender | - sexual orientation |
| - un/employment | - housing/food security |
| - religion | - economic status |

Practitioners will find that the elements in Figure 1 will have greater or less saliency, depending on their contexts, but are well advised to consider where the program or agency is able to assist learners in dealing with particular barriers, where the program can develop support and where the practitioners can simply be aware of what is going on even if they are not able to do something to address every issue.

Basic level literacy classrooms commonly include adults of mixed age, culture, gender and nationality. An elderly Cambodian woman might be learning alongside a young Hmong mother. The former may be pressed into service as a family or community child minder; the latter may be seeking employment in an entry level position. Each has suffered her own difficult circumstance as a refugee. Both now are part of a larger learning community that might include using the neighbourhood itself as its curriculum -- photographing street signs, making maps, labeling buildings, or describing where to find particular foods, supplies, clothing. The class builds its learning through the things they know and the things they need to know. For example, days and days could go by without anyone mentioning Pol Pot time or other bad memories. (Pol Pot was the despot responsible for the Khmer genocide of the 1970s) Sometimes these memories might be shared in a very matter of fact fashion; sometimes someone needs to leave the table or the room for a little while but knows it will be safe to come back to the group when she is ready to focus back in on studying. Horsman (1990) and others offer numerous specific examples of how to make classrooms safer spaces. Considerations of physical space (hanging posters, having plants and flowers), physical well-being (nutritious snacks, a kettle for tea) and overall well-being (mutually determined ground rules for daily classroom practice) are some ways to make the classroom a safer place.

In Rhode Island, some small changes were made in program policy; cohort members – some of whom are still in the field – also share their learning with their colleagues. An increase in awareness of issues of violence has occurred, but workshops and meetings - sharing sessions and discussion groups – are still in demand as teachers chronically attempt to help learners come to grips with challenges encountered in the face on daily grinding poverty and violence. One outcome, though tenuous, is an awareness of the fact that there are complications that affect learning and that programs can and should use funding for ancillary support – something that would have been a ‘hard sell’ in Rhode Island ten years ago.

At LESLLA: Workshop purpose

The purpose of the workshop at LESLLA was for participants to understand the impacts of trauma itself and to develop and expand strategies to address issues related to trauma and learning. The goals of the workshop also included: sharing experience and understandings of effective ways of working with adults with limited literacy; exploring classroom approaches designed to accommodate a range of learning needs, strengths, and circumstances, with a particular focus on immigrants and refugees with low literacy; and reviewing research on and strategies for ensuring the development of safe spaces for learning; and moving practice forward to support teaching and learning for all.

While some participants were already actively engaged in or were familiar with prior scholarship, all of us recognized the ongoing need for additional research and opportunities for sharing stories, strategies and materials. As well, as practitioners working in varying cultures and contexts, we were reminded of the need for clarity around and understanding of the ways in which local contexts and cultures understand and address experiences of violence and trauma. For example, women's experiences of female genital mutilation may appear to be 'normalized' in cultures and communities practicing that mutilation and so some women, if they speak out against it, may face censure or worse from other members of their culture related to the practice. Westerners may be appalled by the practice but our role, as educators, is not to condemn or pontificate, but rather to understand the pressures brought to bear and to assist our learners and colleagues in finding strategies for learning despite the challenges that undergoing the trauma that genital mutilation may well have created. We may be aware that a woman underwent that procedure, but we would be ill-advised to discuss it directly in class, or to introduce a discussion of the topic. We are not counselors or therapists, nor do we aspire to do their work. If the subject arises, we might pursue a factual response – what do we know about the practice? What would people want to learn about it? We might have classroom ground rules that enable us to ask if this is a topic everyone wants to pursue. Perhaps some learners might take on the research as part of a larger project on rights around the world, while others may choose to use their time pursuing other learning. If we listen to our learners, we are not likely to be able to control the content or questions that learners bring to classes, nor can we predict what they might find troubling or triggering. We *can* be aware of the fact that, inevitably, some things *will* be difficult and that we are responsible for understanding how to support learning, how to avoid questions, prompts and assignments that might disadvantage those experiencing trauma and how to access local resources for referral as needed and appropriate. We also need to know how to listen.

Through an iterative process, the workshop at LESLLA enabled those in the room to share their work, contexts, interest in and concerns about trauma and learning. The facilitator briefly reviewed work undertaken in the past ten years, and participants shared their own experiences of working with adult learners who have experienced trauma.

One purpose of this article is to suggest ways in which practitioners can replicate this process in their own settings and communities – through workshops, informal meetings, or ongoing conversations. The article briefly describes the author's study of violence and learning, and the implications of multiple understandings of the impact of violence on adult learning generally and on basic level literacy learners in particular.

So what? What difference does this work make in the lives of learners and teachers?

The compilation of the fellowship cohort's collective learning in the form of a final report, detailing the work of the program – including the intergenerational literacy program at the women's shelter, work with incarcerated learners and consideration of sex offender treatment programs – was submitted to NIFL and is also posted online at <http://www.brown.edu/lrri/screen.html>

In the ensuing decade, many practitioners have continued to work to ensure that thinking of violence and learning is no longer a special topic. The key pieces to consider in addressing issues of violence have to do with enumerating what it is we need to accomplish and finding ways to make these ongoing explorations replicable in numerous contexts (see, for example, www.violenceandlearning.net) over time. Consideration of violence and learning – of the stressors, issues and day-to-day realities that can get in the way of learning to read, write and be present to learning include attention to the elements listed below.

- Work, collaboration and thinking across disciplines – What might it look like?

Who are the people in contact with the learners with whom we work? When/is it useful for us to know who has appointments where, and which community offices are offering services to the people we know? We don't need to know who is receiving public cash assistance but we need to know that the process of applying for and receiving these funds can be demeaning, stressful and demoralizing. We need to understand that this could cut into class time and to be sensitive to the needs of students in order to address basic needs in addition to addressing their learning goals. We need an awareness of the constituency (learners, their families and communities) that we share with child protective workers, case managers (within and beyond adult education), communities of faith, just for example.

Policy shifts, especially recently - (e.g. through persistence studies)

We need to maintain a shared, ongoing system-wide awareness trauma's impact on learning- increased in ways that don't punish programs for serving fewer students, but validate the fact that learners may need to drop out for periods of time – possibly engaging in distance learning – and returning to classroom settings as they are able. More is no longer as important as better and better served. It is critical that we develop policy that supports dropping out for whatever reasons and doesn't punish students for missing classes. Distance learning – for some learners – will help support continuity while people are out of classes. Research (Comings, 2007) indicates that the relationship building that occurs when programs proactively communicate with students and when students know they can leave and return all mitigate to support learning. Survivors of trauma may need just that much extra time and support; program policy that enables them to have some latitude can make the difference between abject failure and slow but steady progress. Practitioners, too, need to pay attention to their own needs, boundaries and self care. Ignoring practitioners' well-being is likely to risk an increase in burn out, ensuring that we never generate the requisite momentum to create systemic change.

Finally – what next? Ongoing steps

Infusing and integrating awareness into all aspects of adult literacy work of the ways in which adults' life experiences bear on their ability to learn must not be a separate piece of the work. We need to be mindful of the ways in which students and colleagues are able to attend to work and learning, to develop policies that accommodate these various abilities and strengths. We need to understand that some of us have done better at school and have greater confidence than others. Recognizing 'school privilege' with adult learners, practitioners and policy makers ensures that our programs stay true to their missions of supporting learning for those with very little prior education or limited literacy in English or their mother tongue.

Educators working with low educated and limited literacy learners are particularly responsible for recognizing the likelihood of the increased vulnerability of their students' multiple statuses – as (potential) survivors of violence, as people acclimating to new cultures, languages, and new statuses within communities. Our task remains focused on literacy education. Our ability to provide that education effectively depends on our understandings of how to support learners with multiple strengths and challenges. This we can do.

References

- Agger, I. (1994). *The blue room: Trauma and testimony among refugee women: A psycho social exploration*. London: Zed Books.
- CCLOW. (n.d). Making Connections: Literacy and EAL from a Feminist Perspective. Retrieved January 31st, 2010 from: http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/Making_C/Cover.htm.
- Comings, J. (2007). Persistence: Helping adult education students reach their goals: Review of adult learning and literacy. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Retrieved February 4th, 2010, from: <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=1175>
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Horsman, J. (1990). *Something in my Mind Besides the Everyday*. Toronto: Women's Press. Retrieved January 31st, 2010 from: <http://www.jennyhorsman.com>.
- Horsman, J. (1999). *Too scared to learn: Women, violence and education*. Toronto: McGilligan Books.
- Isserlis, J. (2000). [Trauma and the adult English language learner](#). Eric Digest EDO-LE-00-02 National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education. (retrieved January 31, 2010).

On the screen. Retrieved February 1st, 2010, from:
<http://www.brown.edu/lrri/screen.html>

Learning and violence: Dreams of a different world: Towards ending violence and inequality. Retrieved January 31st, 2010 from:
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/dreams.htm>.

Lewis, T. (1999). [Living beside: Performing normal after incest memories return](#). Retrieved February 1st, 2010.

Morrish, E., Horsman, J., & Hofer, J. (2002). Take on the challenge: [:A source book from the women, violence, and adult education project](#) Boston: World education, women, violence, and adult education project. Retrieved February 1st, 2010 from: <http://www.worlded.org/docs/TakeOnTheChallenge.pdf>. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) Program. World Education, Inc., Boston, MA