

Exploring the Relationship Between Violence and Learning

by **Bernadette Walsh**

There are times when I know why I am involved in adult literacy; these are when students say they have learned, or when I observe new behaviours because learning has occurred. At other times, however, I wonder what exactly is going on. On occasion, I have felt

confused and frustrated when students show a lack of attention, aloofness or oversensitivity towards actions of other learners, and I have not known how to respond. Were these behaviours due to learners' experiences of abuse? Occasionally students have related to me experiences of violence (past or present). I listened as a way of supporting them, but wondered what I was supposed to do with what I heard. I began to feel the need to learn more about how to create a safe environment for learners and myself, and about the connections between violence and literacy learning.

This desire led me to attend a workshop about Alberta practitioners who were already exploring the issue at a project in Alberta called Violence and Learning: Taking Action (VALTA). The VALTA workshop was co-facilitated by Jenny Horsman with Mary Norton and Judy Murphy at the Ontario Literacy Coalition conference in June of 2004. The two-year-long VALTA project involved nine practitioners, and resulted in a book, *Violence and Learning: Taking Action*.

Later that summer I enrolled in a course called Women, Violence and Literacy Learning, led by Jenny Horsman and offered by the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). Course participants were encouraged to read *Take on the Challenge: A Sourcebook from the Women, Violence and Adult Education Project*. Jenny Horsman co-authored and edited the book with Elizabeth Morrish and Judy Hofer. *Take on the Challenge* contains the learning from a three-year project, Women, Violence and Adult Education (WVAE), which involved thirteen practitioners from six adult education programs in the New England region of the United States.

Both my summer course at OISE and the VALTA project drew from activities and examples of the WVAE project that were documented in *Take on the Challenge*. While attempting the visual art or movement activities (such as collage or yoga), or while reading fiction about family or other forms of violence, we were encouraged by Jenny to ask questions about violence and learning. Reflecting on violence while experiencing my own physical and emotional struggles as I attempted the art activities or read the fiction helped me, I hope, to become more empathetic.

Both the WVAE and VALTA projects included face-to-face workshops with practitioners. The VALTA project also had a 12-week online component. These two books provide not only background information on the participants and their projects, but also sections written by project participants. Both projects appear to be research-in-practice exercises; however, the VALTA project specifically identifies itself as such, especially in the five Changing Practices research reports.

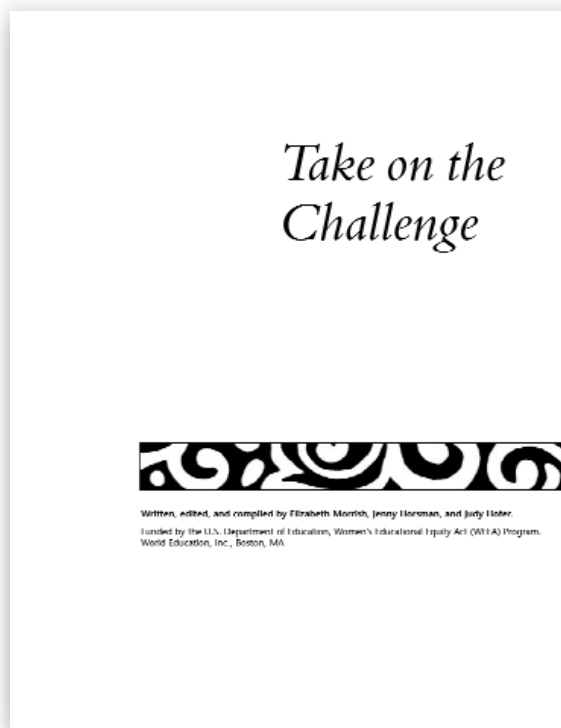
Take on the Challenge and *Violence and Learning* provide information and activities to better understand violence, and ways to change programs to further assist learners who have experienced violence. *Take on the Challenge* also includes a section on how to build a "web of support" around programs. Practitioners are encouraged to reach out and learn about supports for themselves and the women in their programs. They are also asked to consider how their programs might support other organizations serving the same clients. I enjoyed the idea of mapping a community of support.

The first section of *Take on the Challenge* describes different aspects of violence: that it is found in homes, in institutions (workplaces or government departments), and that it has both a private and a public dimension. Any situation that encourages power of one group or individual over another may produce violence; so, violence is persistent in society through racism, sexism,

ableism, homophobia, poverty and other forms of oppression. Learners who have experienced these or other forms of violence may demonstrate difficulty in learning. They may take on an all-or-nothing approach to learning; they may struggle with being psychologically present enough to learn; and they may have issues with boundaries and trust; amongst other difficulties. The book emphasizes that learners need to maintain control of their learning, build connections between what is learned and their lives, and so, create meaning (p. 16).

Since *Take on the Challenge* was used as a resource for the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (VALTA) project in Alberta, some of the information about violence and learning from the former is included within the "Changing Practices" research-in-practice components of the latter text. I was interested to see what the Alberta practitioners learned by paying attention to the day-to-day details of delivering a literacy program.

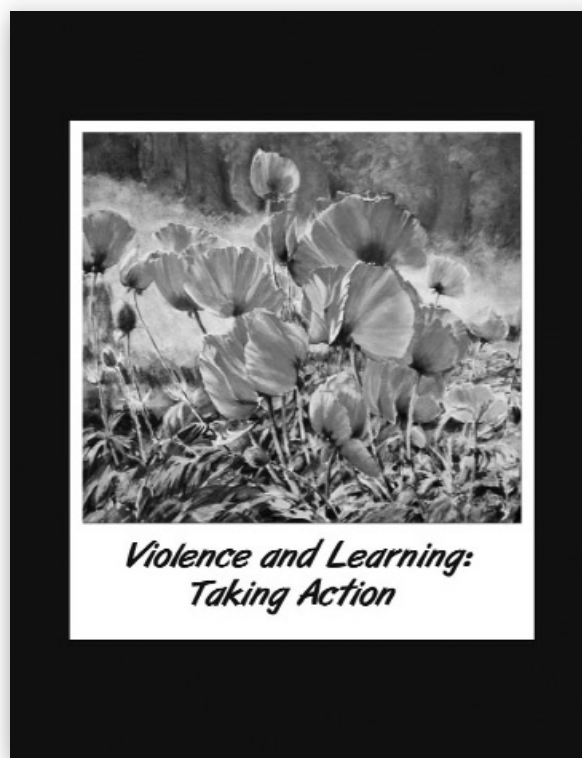
For the Changing Practices part of the VALTA project, Janet Bauer researched how to create a safe space for her writing group. She found that by making changes to the classroom environment (even moving the class to a different location), and by giving choices and control to learners, she could create a sense of safety and stability. Janet co-facilitated the writing group with Laurie Kehler, whose research focused on



how to incorporate into her practice what she learned from the VALTA workshops. Heather Ward led a writing group of a different sort: by incorporating visual art, song and poetry into the writing sessions, she encouraged learners to explore 'self-concept' through new experiences and to bring their whole selves to learning. Brenda Squair developed workshops for literacy tutors to open discussion about violence and its effects on learning. I imagine Brenda's research and handouts would be helpful to anyone who facilitates a session about violence and learning with tutors or practitioners.

Finally, Fay Holt Begg's research explored a holistic approach to her own learning. By reflecting on her experiences, Fay was able to better facilitate learning for herself, as well as for the tutors and learners with whom she works. Fay's research demonstrates how personal change can transform learning environments.

In both *Take on the Challenge* and *Violence and Learning: Taking Action*, practitioners document changes they made to their programs to deal with violence. Often practitioners incorporated embodied learning methods such as movement, yoga, song and visual art to create safe learning environments. Other examples of program changes made during the WVAE project were: a play produced with adult learners at the Community Education Project in Holyoke,



Massachusetts; sessions on mindfulness and stress reduction at the Getting Ready to Work program in White River Junction, Vermont; and a women's support and quilting group at The Genesis Centre in Providence, Rhode Island. According to one WVAE participant, these approaches helped learners to be psychologically present, and to learn and reflect on changes they might make in their lives (Morrish et al. p. 91).

Like practitioners who participated in the WVAE and VALTA projects, I have begun to incorporate visual art into my own informal learning strategies. For example, sometimes I draw instead of writing when journaling. I now find drawing helps me open up to other ways of knowing or seeing. When I return to the literacy classroom, I hope to incorporate various forms of art more often to create a fun and safe environment for learning.

Literacy practitioners interested in exploring the relationship between violence and learning will find both *Take on the Challenge: A Sourcebook from*

the Women, Violence and Adult Education Project and *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* useful resources. I hope that practitioners who read, reflect on and try activities in these texts will begin to make the necessary changes to counter the effects of violence in their programs and thus support learning. ■

Bernadette Walsh has worked in adult English as a Second or Other Language and literacy programs in Ottawa for over ten years. She is currently studying full-time towards a Masters in Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

SOURCES:

Morrish, Elizabeth, Jenny Horsman, and Judy Hofer (2002). *Take on the Challenge: A Sourcebook from the Women, Violence and Adult Education Project*. Boston: World Education. Also available online at www.worlded.org/docs/TakeOnTheChallenge.pdf.

Norton, Mary, ed., (2004). *Violence and Learning: Taking Action*. Calgary: Literacy Alberta.



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