



A student's story

I was working in my office one day when one of the students in our program came in looking for her counsellor (each student in our program is assigned to a counsellor). She is a student who is in her second attempt at starting our program; a smart, tough student who we had had more success connecting to this time around - some condition was different in her life this time, it seemed. Her counsellor wasn't there that day, so I asked if there was anything I could help her with. She said she needed to "vent" so I invited her to talk in my office. For the next half hour she did just that, pouring out all the things in her life that were working against her, disclosing a history of violence, poverty and street involvement, sexual abuse, harmful substance use, self harm and a current relationship that sounded complex at the very least. She described how she had just been sitting in her English class and she said: "you're going to think I'm crazy, but sometimes I'm sitting in class and I am not in my body, I'm not even there."

I didn't think she was crazy. My learning about the impact of violence on learning informed how I talked to this student over the next little while. I didn't try to problem-solve the seemingly endless tangle of problems and issues in her life; she had, after all, just wanted to "vent". Instead I talked to her about what had happened to her in class. I talked about how the experience of violence can cause us to disassociate and leave our bodies - a coping strategy we develop when escaping violence or abuse is not possible. I remembered that she had told me in another conversation that she often found herself becoming aggressive in classes and towards other students, even though that isn't who she normally is. I connected this also to the experience of violence, to triggers, adrenaline and fight, flight or freeze responses. She talked more about English class. It was the semi colon that had caused her mind to disconnect from her body and from what the teacher was saying. She said she had had another experience in which the same teacher had said that you could start a sentence with 'but' or 'and', but in all of her previous education she had had been taught that this was not allowable. This launched her into a panicked uncertainty. If that wasn't a rule, what else wasn't true in college that she'd believed to be true? She told herself that this

was another example of why she wasn't going to make it here – she ended up in a crisis of panic and self-doubt.

As she talked she started to feel calmer. Venting seemed to have been precisely what she had needed and she said she thought she could go back to class. I walked her to her class and in the stairwell on the way down we started talking about the impact of violence on learning again. I explained that when we have experienced violence, we can get triggered into our reactions to and strategies to deal with violence, even when what we are actually responding to isn't harmful. We had a shared moment of recognizing the absurdity of the perceived threat of the semi-colon, and shared a beautiful giggle in the stairwell.

I later learned from our English teacher that she had talked to him about the semi-colon. They decided together that she was never going to need the semi-colon. That it was one part of the course, non-contingent on others and irrelevant to her success in the course. He suggested that she see the semi-colon as similar to an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend who you've totally gotten over. You may see them in the neighbourhood from time to time, but they don't have the power to illicit any response from you – you can just walk on by with a nod.

This student, on that day, resourced with some educators who listened and had knowledge of how her history of violence could be impacting her learning, changed a pattern in her experience of learning. She pushed past the many crises in her life for the moment, moved beyond the negative messages she was telling herself, grounded herself despite triggers and overwhelming physiological responses, and connected with someone who could bear witness to her rage and frustration. Then she courageously laughed, went back to class and broke up with the semi-colon.