

# **Walking the Line: A Critical Reflection on Tutor-Learner Dynamics**

## **By Heather Lash**

There is a line we walk as one on one literacy tutors that is actually worthy of that cliché: not falling to one side or the other is extremely challenging. Getting the balance right costs a lot. Getting it wrong costs even more.

Many of the tensions and paradoxes that we have to work through are delicate, and seem to have invisible filaments connecting them to our unspoken fears and discomforts. I know they do for me. As “helpers”, we have pretty nuanced and pretty high-stakes relationships to the notion that we are good people, that we are doing at least more good than harm. So speaking critically about how we do what we do can be scary. I have, however, become convinced that the harder it is to put something into words, the more value there is in trying to articulate it.

In order to do right by this complexity, I find as I often do, that the best way to talk it through is just to describe my own experience directly to you.

I’ve been working in adult literacy and education as a tutor and a teacher for more than a decade. I’ve also been in refugee settlement services and advocacy, with one foot sometimes in expressive arts therapy with both these populations. Though I do not think of the word “helper” when I look in the mirror, there’s my brief CV. One of the upshots of this vocation is that I’ve spent an inordinate amount of time with other helpers – facilitating workshops, striking committees, and eating triangle sandwiches with them.

And it has at times been a disheartening experience. Of course, it has been rich with moments of being instructed and inspired by the tireless brilliance that many bring to the work. But I have also been discouraged by repeatedly bearing witness to a tendency – sometimes blatant, sometimes latent – for helpers to misunderstand the nature of their dynamics with the recipients of their assistance. Unwittingly and despite near-universally good intentions, this misunderstanding can have any flavour from the objectifying to the actually pretty insulting.

Now, we work mainly with people to whom very bad things have happened. Economic, political, sexual, and a host of other violences undeniably set the stage for most scenarios that bring people to both literacy and refugee centres. And people bring this stuff with them when they come, and helpers are bound to respond to it (even the violence of failing to acknowledge it is a response).

In some cases where a culturally-learned romanticism animates that response, we will find the altruistic face of a charitable civil society, eyes wide, cooing “Oh you poor dear”, clucking about how such atrocities can happen, how very very different the poor dear’s story is from the helper’s, and how strong, how resilient, how blah blah blah. But what never fails to be overemphasized here is the difference. Though the admiration may be heartfelt, it can make the admired feel like an object on display, trapped as in a hologram, unspeaking.

I name these moments “misunderstandings” in the tone I would with all interhuman dealings: we are all forever making false assumptions about the lived realities of those with whom we relate. It’s just, the risks are more severe where there’s a power imbalance. It is a grim thing indeed to hear a volunteer at brunch speaking really loud and slowly to a newcomer. And it’s hard to pin down why it feels so terrible when a Super Active Volunteer waxes on with, “I need refugees more than they need me...” It could be because it’s so facile to say it, disingenuous, even pandering. I wonder if she’s got the rush of moral superiority all mixed up with her warm fuzzies.

It truly is all in the tone. As a one on one literacy tutor, I can in fact genuinely say that my learner taught me more than I taught her. I just want to try to be accurate about what I mean by that. I want us to get serious about respecting people who and where they are right now. I want to call things by their right names, use the right words. Here’s a really sticky one: *victim*.



As I walk the line I started off by describing, it seems like I have two little characters (I actually think of them as puppets), one on each shoulder. I call them *Marx* and *God*. If I heed one for too long, I become top-heavy and tippy, start to fall off that line – but I am deeply grateful they are both there. Real Marxists and Real Christians both, close your ears; this isn’t an academic treatment.

## Marx

*True solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these "beings for another." The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor-when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. – Paolo Friere*

I'm going to assume you are familiar with the basic underpinnings of solidarity. We are fighting by the side of others, not "on their behalf" or "in their name". We all equally inhabit this unjust world that is a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. I am not going to work with literacy learners so they can fit better into its dehumanizing structures that injured them in the first instance.

I am, instead, going to honour their adulthood, the knowledges and capacities they do have, their choice-making and their agency. I'm not going to pry or coo, because just as with my other adult friends, their stories are private, and I respect the distance that separates us. But whatever happened to them was not their fault, a fact that stays in the foreground because I see problems as structural rather than individual. A Marxist ethic does not administer charity to a needy victim, but rather stands with people, saying "I am not free, not one of us is free, until we all are free (or fed or safe or whatever)."

Not perceiving someone as only, say, a refugee, but as a person as complicated as myself, is essential to doing this work. It is *the* cure for fetishization and objectification. People can feel it when you get up to that kind of thing, too - playing out unexamined notions about their heartrending narrative. Maybe your impression of their trauma has eclipsed all the other truths about their life, and what has brought them to the literacy or refugee centre has stuck out as the most salient facet of their identity, the most important thing about them.

At some level, those with whom we work know all about this stuff. People who have survived violence are often uncannily adept at reading the room, at

figuring out what's underneath. You don't have to know the words "appropriate" or "fetishize" to get a load of when they're going on.

It is precisely out of the intention to avoid these pitfalls - to see people as historical and complex - that many of my colleagues don't even use the word "victim". It's too loaded; it can reduce a whole human being to only their status as victim, and undermine all solidarity.

But while I agree that the term implies rescuing, which is grossly dangerous in terms of power dynamics, I'm not entirely willing to throw this word out with the bathwater. In order to continually underline how the nasty stuff was not your fault (despite your agency), we need to name violence in a straightforward way. There was a perpetrator. So, there was a ... No, instead I hear there was a "person who experienced violence".

This reminds me of the time my chin experienced the concrete upon my being hit by a lethally careless driver, then experienced his taking off in the dark as my jawbone enjoyed an encounter with the night air. Yes, how we put things matters more than anything else, as my peers who eschew the word "victim" well know. And their commitment comes from a good place, it's just... the relation between helper and helpee feels a bit *too* horizontal when we intone things this way. It's like when one is so moved by a wartime filmic image of someone dying in his own shit in a hole in a concentration camp, and is moved by their empathy to say, "Oh, that is someone *just like me* dying in his own shit in a hole in a concentration camp!"

Well, sorry, no it's not. It is not someone like me in the slightest. I who have never known anything other than the safety of being middle class and white (even though I am neither – even though my safety has not been total – even though I am haunted) am not in the same situation. I cannot deny resonances, but neither can I hijack other people's suffering by claiming it. We are not in totally horizontal relations. We have things to offer, to give, things that we have that others do not have. Like food and shelter and literacy skills.



## God

*...because I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. – Matthew 25:35*

The basic conviction that we are here to take care of each other will always motivate me more than my political awarenesses of structural injustice. Charity, grace, kindness – giving of your stuff and your self all the way to sacrifice – these are important things to name, especially if they give you the juice to continue working in a field characterized by scarcity and plagued by burnout. But here there are even greater risks than those associated with Marx. Because when you rescue someone you (unintentionally?) truncate their capacity to save themselves.

Almost none of us are stereotypical “rescuers” hypnotized by romanticism; we get into far subtler things. We can infantilize the folks we work with by doing too much for them (*it’s just sending a fax, what???*), by solving their problems for them (*well, their social services worker obviously needed a good talking to!*)... we can get so deep into the ethic of “serving” people that we cease to set limits (*cue phone ringing at midnight*), we cease to set and respect boundaries (*it’s just \$10; she’s hungry...*).

Doing too much for people like this sets up a relation that’s now way too vertical, with the helper handing down from above. And when you don’t bring your needs and your limits, you create a one-sided relation that robs the other of the chance to learn to be responsive and responsible, to grow in ways that truly manifest their adulthood, to be challenged by a reciprocal and equitable relationship.

These. Are. Literacy. Skills.

And the transmission of them is tricky, because it requires that you also do your own work. For example, the vast and earnest gratitude that learners sometimes show tutors can become almost a hero worship. How can you be gracious about accepting praise - and validate a learner’s need to give it - while placing the credit for work accomplished squarely back in their hands? All your resources of mindfulness, timing, tact, and intuition are called upon here - and getting carried away with feeling like Jesus or a Knight in Armour will distract you.

Besides all that, if you are “administering charity to a victim”, you’ve left behind your structural awareness of their situation and your political commitment to building a different life with your learner on your learner’s own terms. And that is not an authentic relationship – it’s the kind of rotten lie that brought us all here in the first place. Because we are not free, not one of us is free, until we all are.



There are very few rules with all this. Lately, around my literacy programme, I’ve been a party to some controversies over does this or that infantilize a learner? Like using children’s books. Uh, no, don’t do that, right? Yet the person I admire most in the field recently said well, yes, you could; there are some stunning children’s books and some moments where it would be very fruitful to do so. But it would have to be done with great attention and respect, and done collaboratively with the learner. And you know, I have answered a phone call from my learner at midnight. May have even sent a fax or two. On the other side, there are plenty of times where I have avoided using the word “victim” because it simply had the wrong tone.

So, in the absence of rules, how can we be with the people we help in a way that takes all this into account? For me it’s about staying balanced on the line, letting Marx and God both do their thing, and choosing which way I’ll lean in each instance, with each unique individual. The puppets will take turns dominating. I just need to be alive to the possibilities in every new moment. What I’m reading in order to decide which to follow is how the learner seems to be doing, and I’m checking in with how I’m doing, and measuring both against previously articulated learning goals.

But being alive to the possibilities means I have to show up as a whole person, and stay wholly in the room. I have to really hold the question “How do I best honour you?” in my heart, the exact way I try to with all the other adults in my life. This helps me refrain from imposing my fantasies about what would be Good For Them.

Showing up whole involves our social context too – the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is in the room too – and I may find myself in a place of privilege in that context, which may cause me guilt or anxiety. Or I may be painfully reminded of the way those structures have mutilated me. I have to

just stay with that, and find ways to get the needed tenderness and support to deal with it – other than from my learner. I may be so indignant on my learner's behalf and so overwhelmed by empathy that I lose it. That last one is my main problem, along with over thinking my role to the point where I'm no use to anyone. And I fall off the god damn line; over and over I fall off.

In my experience, if I am brave and present enough to bring that sense of lost-ness to everything I do, I'll never fall too far from the line for too long. The guiding image of the puppets may not do it for you (neither God nor Marx is wildly popular these days); your life has its own metaphors. But you'll know when you're maintaining the balance - just as your learner will, you'll be able to feel it.