



These materials might help to convince you, or others, that addressing the impact of violence on learning at your college will make a difference. They reveal a little about the effect this work can have on student success and retention, and staff job satisfaction.

What is included:

**1. The Executive Summary of the Report on the Helping Myself Learn Pilot.**

This pilot study shows what a difference addressing these impacts can make.

**2. A Student Story.**

This account of an interaction between one counsellor and her student reveals the difference it can make when teachers, counsellors and students begin to understand the ways that the impacts of violence can complicate learning.

**3. Stories from teaching and counselling staff.**

These brief quotes reveal the difference that learning about this issue can make for the staff – making their work more satisfying and successful.

## Executive Summary, Report on the Helping Myself Learn Pilot

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This research study is part of a two-year collaborative project, titled *Web-based tools to support effective learning and teaching for survivors of violence*. The overall project goal was to increase the capacity of the Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) field to address the impact of violence as a barrier to the acquisition of these skills. The project objective was to provide institutions with the knowledge they need to guide them in the adaptation of their programs, and to increase the availability of tools to assist practitioners and students to identify ways LES learning is affected by violence, and provide them with strategies to support learning success.

This small study was designed to assess the effectiveness of one of the tools created through the project: the student tool “Helping Myself Learn.” The intention was to explore whether helping both educators and students identify the impacts of violence on learning and develop strategies for overcoming these effects enhances Literacy and Essential Skills acquisition, particularly in the two skill areas: Working with Others and Thinking. In order to explore this question, a short pilot course was developed and delivered to two groups of students, one in a Community College setting and the other in a community based literacy program. Through the use of focus groups, self assessment writings, and participant observer notes, the research assessed participants’ skill development in the two Essential Skills.

Overall, the study provides strong evidence that the student kit, “Helping Myself Learn,” is an excellent basis for instruction that helps learners to mitigate their experience of violence and equips them with tools to increase their Literacy and Essential Skills. Even though the course only lasted 20 hours over 10 weeks, it had a significant impact on students’ understanding of the issue and their knowledge of strategies they could use to address it. All of the students showed improvement in the two Essential Skills under review. Although the number of students was relatively small (approximately 20), the range of students in the pilots suggests that the material is effective for colleges and community programs and all levels of students.

Introducing the themes of learning and violence had a significant impact on students' recognition that their past experiences were directly impacting their current participation and success in school, work and life. Students identified such difficulties as "blocked memory" and anxieties. They learned that these challenges could be addressed through suggestions and strategies presented in the course, which encouraged greater levels of presence of mind, lowered anxieties, and decreased all-or-nothing thinking; shifting coping mechanisms which had kept students from fully engaging in learning environments. Students began to see changes in their Thinking Skills as they tentatively started to use these new strategies.

Furthermore, through engaging with the kit and the course instruction, students began to see that they tended to self-isolate in order to protect themselves from conscious or sub-conscious fears of others in environments where they lacked total control, and this limited their ability to work with others. As their understanding of this pattern increased, they began to allow themselves to trust others, be more compassionate with themselves and others, to contribute more fully to the shared learning experience, and so to develop their skills of Working with Others.

The pilot demonstrated the value of both teachers and students increasing their understanding of the impacts of violence on learning and their knowledge of strategies to mitigate them. We learned from students that they had been inclined to give up on themselves as learners, and know that in the absence of this sort of approach too many students will do exactly that. An opportunity to change that message of failure and embrace new possibilities needs to be made available to all students in all settings if many are to succeed in developing Essential Skills.

The full report can be found online at:

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/lrnteach/research.htm>

## A student's story

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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.

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## Stories from teaching and counselling staff

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### ***Instructor's story***

Having been involved in developing the content for this college tool for the last year and interviewing many students during that time, I've come to realize the breadth and depth of trauma that many of our students have experienced in their lives. I am awed and at the same time buoyed by the determination and strength of will that I see as I orient each new group every three weeks--some students are more overt in sharing the traumatic events of their lives and some choose not to-- but they have chosen to make a change in coming back to school. As I talk to my new students about the services available to them through our college, I now speak of how the experience of violence can impact our ability to learn and where we can get help/what we can do when feeling triggered or overwhelmed. Recently, one of my new students thanked me for talking about the issue in class and how validated she felt after that discussion. As a result of delving into the violence and learning issue, I teach differently, I interact with my students differently and I'm a stronger advocate. I am not a counsellor, but I'm a better, more compassionate teacher as a result of having had access to these wonderful materials. Thank you.

Academic Upgrading instructor

### ***From a counsellor's chair***

Being involved with the OLES project has been a great professional development opportunity. This process allowed me to revisit and deepen my understanding of the effect of violence on learning. At the same time, I found myself cherishing the opportunities to envision change in a college setting with the OLES team. During these meetings, we would discuss strategies that would better support students with their learning and well-being. I then noticed a change in the way I would work as a counsellor and community practitioner. As I became more reflective on my practice, I would openly share some of the research with students and staff, which would open up spaces for others to share their experience and insights with me. I also became more hopeful that the college environment would become a more compassionate learning environment that would create a sense of community and belonging. I really value this opportunity to continue to reflect on the impact of violence on learning.

Academic Upgrading Counsellor