

CHAPTER 7

BUT HOW CAN I TEACH HER IF SHE CAN'T GET HER BUM ON THE SEAT?

Jenny Horsman

I signed up for a Japanese drumming course a few years ago. I had been fascinated by the physicality of this drumming when I'd watched and listened to a woman's drumming group years before. As someone who had learned to survive by being quiet, avoiding being noticed, and dissociating frequently—separating body and mind—I think I yearned to bring my whole being together in these intricate patterns of powerful reverberating sound.

The first class was wonderful; I was startled to find myself making such a huge noise. I left exhilarated, drumsticks in hand. But by the next week it was getting hard. I had such terrible trouble learning the rhythms. Uniting body and mind to let the patterns we were learning sink into my being seemed impossible. The feelings and thoughts that went through my head each class as I felt more and more stupid, more and more incompetent, were all but unbearable. I wanted to master it, but I despaired. I could still imagine how good it would feel if the patterns of drum beats rolled off my sticks with a sure beat, but I just couldn't believe it could ever happen. The teacher could not have been kinder: he gently pointed

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out to me that each week I was a little better than the week before, interrupting my continual comparison with the better students in the class. He showed me the patterns again and again without one iota of impatience, but it didn't matter. Every week as the harsh monologue went on in my brain I would get more and more inept. I would want to avoid going, but I had paid my money and I was determined not to quit. I watched myself every week try hard to be on time, or even early, yet every week I would be just a little late. I was relieved when I got a slight cold, and couldn't possibly go! I knew it was easier not to miss a class, to arrive on time, yet somehow I just couldn't do it. I found the experience of learning too tortuous, I felt so bad during the class, that it was a huge battle with myself to get there at all. Finally at the end of the first term I quit, telling myself and the teacher that I would be back to start at the beginning again the next year. But somehow I signed up at the very last minute! The class was full. I was disappointed, a little mad at myself for leaving it so late, but oh so relieved. Of course I told myself that next year I really would sign up early. A few years have passed now. I think of it every fall, but I haven't signed up again. I still might some day when I can bring myself to do it—just not this year!

As I lived through this experience, watching myself, wondering at how this course I had been so eager to do had turned into such a nightmare, I found myself thinking of many literacy students I've worked with. I was fascinated (although it drove me crazy) by my total inability to arrive on time. However hard I thought I was trying to leave early and make absolutely certain I would not be late, I seemed to be utterly incapable of it. Once I'd stopped attending I just couldn't convince myself to go again.

My own experience led me to a new understanding of an intensive course I had led. I remembered the women who tried it out and didn't come back, and one woman who arrived late for a month or more—so late that the class was ending—and that even after a long period of not arriving at all. But let me start at the beginning.

The women's course had been running for a week or two. It was a three-month course, meeting three afternoons a week with special funding. We called it the Women's Success Course. Women were still gradually deciding whether to join the class, turning up one day and not the next, but Susan hadn't shown up once. I was disappointed as I had imagined the class would be ideal for her when I wrote the funding proposal.

The course was designed for women "who have been through tough times and want to move on," a course that would take into account the violence in so many women's lives and the ways those experiences might have affected learning. I planned that it would help women to assess and strengthen their supports for learning, including their own belief in themselves, and develop their ability to draw on their whole selves, body,

emotion, and spirit, as well as mind, to help them learn effectively. It would be a chance to begin to plan the changes they wanted to make in their lives. After the initial three months, we would continue to meet once a week for another three months or more to support that process of change—whatever form of change the women wanted to work towards.

Susan hadn't joined the group. I assumed it must be because the timing wasn't working for her: perhaps she couldn't get after-school daycare for her daughter, or may be she was working, or perhaps enrolled in another course. Then I started hearing from the literacy program coordinators that Susan loved the group, that she thought it was very important, that she was really glad it was running. I was puzzled. It didn't seem to make any sense; I hadn't seen her in the classroom, not even once.

Other women had attended once or twice, then disappeared, then returned again, although some came only occasionally. I had watched this pattern, fascinated, wondering what was happening. Drawing on what I knew about the impact of violence on learning, the importance of control, and the challenge to believe in oneself and the possibility of learning successfully, I began to think this starting and stopping might be an important learning process in itself. Perhaps women were plucking up the courage to attend, perhaps they were struggling with their fears of failure, perhaps they needed to stop and start in order to take control in a stressful situation. I had learned that learning situations, however relaxed they are, can bring up anxiety and fear, and can evoke memories of violence and the terror and loss of control experienced during violence. Taking control and stopping and starting might be vital for some women to create safety in the learning situation. When I heard from my colleagues that Susan found the class valuable, she didn't seem to fit that pattern, and I could not see how she could be learning anything. I found myself thinking and joking to friends that I really couldn't teach her if she couldn't get her bum on the seat, at least once or twice!

Eventually I learnt how wrong I was. After another week or so she did start to appear—just as I was finishing teaching the class and women were settling in to write in their journals. Each day I welcomed her with enthusiasm. I gave her her own journal. She wrote. And she cried; the tears often poured down her face. I asked her what she needed, asked her whether she wanted to talk. Women in the class pushed the box of tissues closer. She didn't talk with the other women, or with me. She kept coming back. She continued to write and to cry.

I worried. What should I do? What could I be doing differently to support her? She wasn't talking to me. Didn't she trust that I wouldn't judge her? I didn't push; I just waited and wondered. She came day after day, always at the same time. As I remember it, it was weeks before one day she handed me her journal to read. What I saw saddened and horrified me. It

was a torrent of invective about how worthless she was: how she couldn't learn because she was stupid, how she didn't deserve to have her daughter because she was a bad mother, how she was waiting for me to throw her out of the class because she didn't deserve to be there if she couldn't get there on time.

I was amazed. I had had no idea what she was thinking. How could she be so cruel to herself? I believe on some level she was waiting and looking for me to confirm all her harshest judgements, her self-hatred and self-doubt. I am horrified to think how easily I could have done exactly that! I believe it would have taken so little. I probably needed only to have told her quite kindly that she was too late, that the group was now closed, that she needed to be on time. In the gentlest of criticism she would have heard exactly what she expected to hear. She would have understood that what I really meant was that she WAS worthless, could NOT learn, should NOT be in that class, did NOT belong, and probably even that I believed her daughter should return to the foster family assigned by child protective services.

Don't get me wrong! Of course the last thing I would have wanted to do was confirm even her gentlest criticism of herself. But if program rules about attendance had meant she was automatically excluded.... If funders had been breathing down our necks demanding that women show success as defined by them, that they obtain jobs at the end of three months.... If I had let my own frustration show—frustration that I had done so much work to get the course started, a course that I thought would be perfect for her.... If I had let myself believe that she simply wasn't making the effort to get there at the start of the course, or on time, that she just wasn't motivated enough to study, or didn't care enough to try to make changes in her life. If I had blamed her for my frustration and disappointment rather than owning it myself.... If that frustration had shaped my actions, or even colored the sound of my voice when she arrived.... I am certain it would not have taken much to send her running, to lead her to give up her studies, perhaps forever. In any case, it would have been a long time before she would dare to pluck up the courage, to risk, to try again.

Fortunately this was a special project, an exploration of a new approach; there were no rules about attendance, and no funders demanding a particular level of achievement. I can't say there was no frustration—there was. I worried often about why women weren't there, what I could do differently, whether there was going to be enough change to be recognized as success to write about at the end of the project. I did give myself the space to notice my frustration, to wonder what it said about me and my fears, my hopes, my expectations, and I worked hard at observing myself and the women with curiosity, rather than letting my judgements shape what I believed, what I did, or what I said. I tried not to allow

myself to think I knew anything about WHY the women were behaving as they were. I asked questions and I kept watching.

After the profound shift when Susan showed me her writing and I didn't judge her, she started to arrive a little earlier. Often she was in time to join the work of the class. But I noticed that she frequently stayed on the edge, observing rather than participating. One day, for instance, an Anishnawbe Elder led a workshop, with traditional ritual. She invited women to speak, passing her own sacred deer-antler talking stick to each woman to speak about the woman they most admired, and then to describe the ways they too are like that woman. Susan would not join the circle. I tried to invite her in, to ask her what was wrong and why she would not participate, yet could not really learn why she was staying on the outside. I worried whether she felt a conflict between her own strong Christian faith and the traditional beliefs that were being introduced. I watched her carefully during the afternoon. Susan seemed to show reverence for the process, a certain awe of the elder, and I wondered what was leading her to stay on the margins. Later I asked her about the workshop and she said, her face radiant, that it was one of the best classes she had ever been part of. She couldn't or wouldn't tell me why she didn't join in. I wondered whether she preferred to watch, to see at a distance and take it all in, whether she still didn't feel she really belonged, whether she still didn't feel worthy to be a full member of the group, or to take part in such a sacred process.

Over the months she did begin to participate more and more. She seemed to appreciate the help of other members of the group when she had a health crisis and was able to get support when she went into hospital so that her daughter would be safe and avoid being taken permanently into child protective services custody. Later Susan applied for a care worker course at the local community college and was accepted. After a time she acknowledged that she had a problem with alcohol and signed up for a rehabilitation program.

I have told this story many times in workshops and presentations. I like the shock value when participants see that most of us might have contributed to this student's (and of course others like her) sense of failure and worthlessness if the circumstances had been just a little different. Some literacy workers have worried about attendance policies and whether creating space for attendance like Susan's gives a message that "anything goes" and would encourage other students not to attend regularly. Other workers have told me more stories of students who have stayed on the outside observing before they eventually chose to join in. I heard from one worker about a lesbian student who worked in the computer area listening to a group from afar for several weeks until she was ready to join herself. We wondered whether she was observing the safety of the group, fearful

that homophobia might go unchecked. Perhaps, like Susan, it was important for her to follow her own process, to join when she was ready, with no pressure from staff to join earlier. Yet it is so easy to make judgements about the seriousness or the motivation of a student who seems not to "commit" to her studies. Attendance policies are often designed to encourage regular attendance and may help some students push themselves to get to class. Yet such policies will surely make it impossible for others to explore healing possibilities and gradually get to a place where they are ready to attend.

I notice as I tell stories about Susan I am tempted to create a simple recognizable success story. She completed her college training, she got a job, her life was transformed, her daughter is happy and doing well in school. Yet I know success is not as simple as that, particularly if we pay attention to the complex process of healing from trauma and violence and the powerful role that exploring education can play in the process. As I write, several years later, Susan is getting ready to go back to college again, she has started and stopped many community college courses, yet she still returns to the literacy program and continues to explore new possibilities. To me she appears to be on a wonderful journey of healing, learning to be much less hard on herself, recognizing how much she has learned, and making important changes in her life. Yet life is still extremely hard for her, and for her daughter. She still struggles enormously to believe in herself. She still finds it hard to complete a full program and get decent employment.

But perhaps this story is not so much about Susan as it is about me and other literacy workers, about my/our challenge to notice our own patterns, to be curious about our own frustrations, to wonder why each student is behaving as they are, without judgement. Perhaps it is about my desire that as educators we can make connections with our own experiences as learners. I believe we must question what will support each student and begin to reflect with students about what will help them get through some of their emotional barriers to learning. We need to learn to offer a far greater variety of models to help students attend classes in a way that works for them. We need to be allies, not judges or critics, on this challenging path. Some students may find that pressure to attend regularly will help them; others may be defeated by it. One challenge is for educators to own our own frustrations and not to blame students for causing them. I feel bad when a student doesn't show up, when I've worked to prepare for her, but that does not mean she is not working just as hard to get to the class, even if I can't see that struggle.

I am left with my desire, not so much to change Susan, as to change the educational structures that give teachers few alternatives to enforcing attendance policies and imposed measures of success. I want to ensure

that teachers all enjoy the "luxury" of enough time, support, training, and freedom to stay open and observe our own and our students' behavior without judgement, to question concepts of success, and to avoid strengthening students' own harsh judgments that can so relentlessly block possibilities for creativity, learning, and change.