

## Discussion Paper # 4

### Helping Learners Find Their Voice

Ningwakwe

I have always been intrigued by the qualitative changes in Learners as they work through their issues and challenges with the help of literacy practitioners. It is invigorating to see them change from being a shy and introverted person who spoke only when spoken to, and volunteered only the information I asked about – if that – to someone who felt confident enough to voice opinions, not only in the classroom, but in other areas of their lives. I like to think of that as “finding voice.”

**Think about a Learner you know who has made those changes in his or her life. That is, someone who found his or her voice.**

**What were the steps?**

**What part did you play in that?**

Literacy practitioners know intuitively that they need to start where the Learners are, and to point out their strengths to them. This is why many practitioners invest a lot of time in the intake process. Yes, we may have forms that we ask the Learners to fill in, but practitioners find that the best data comes out of sitting with the Learners and spending some time getting to know each other.

When I first started out in literacy, and I was training tutors, I encouraged them to listen to the Learners, not only with the ears, but with their eyes and their Hearts. When we listen with our eyes, we watch the Learners' body language, to see what engages them and what causes anxiety. When we listen with our Hearts, we associate what the Learners are sharing with similar experiences in our lives. We may think about what helped us when a loved one moved onto the Spirit World or what sustained us when a child left home – for whatever reason. Listening with the Heart also means sharing when it's appropriate, to show the Learners that another person has experienced what they have. This can give Learners a sense of hope that there is a way forward. As I trained tutors, I also encouraged them to listen to what the Learners were **not** saying. Perhaps this is the most important kind of listening. It's crucial to keep an open mind as to why this might be happening.

I'd like to share an excerpt from a book called The Eighth Habit, From Effectiveness to Greatness. I was drawn to this author's work because he says that:

*The fundamental reality is, human beings are not things needing to be motivated and controlled; they are four dimensional – body, mind, heart and spirit...If you study all philosophy and religion, both Western and Eastern, from the beginning of*

*recorded history, you'll basically find the same four dimensions – the physical/economic, the mental, the social/emotional and the spiritual.*<sup>1</sup>

Here's a poem from the same book that rang true with me:

*There are so many gifts  
Still unopened from your birthday,  
There are so many hand-crafted presents  
That have been sent to you by God.  
The Beloved does not mind repeating,  
"Everything I have is also yours."  
There are so many gifts, my dear,  
Still unopened from your birthday.  
Hafiz*<sup>2</sup>

This poem touched me because Aboriginal spiritual teachings tell us that "...each child has been given gifts by the Creator. It is the role of the parent(s), extended family, and community to support the development of those gifts."<sup>3</sup>

Over the years, in my conversations with literacy practitioners – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – I have heard that they carry a similar belief in their Hearts.

**Think about your interactions with Learners.  
Do your actions reflect these beliefs?**

When Learners walk through our doors, they may be carrying the effects of experiences that were not based on that teaching. If one of those experiences has been violence – spiritual, emotional, mental, physical or societal violence – their gifts may be buried under several layers of feelings. Although their feelings run contrary to this belief, the gifts are still there. At this point, I want to reiterate what Belleruth Naparstek says about courage and heroism. I included some of her words in Discussion Paper # 1 but wanted to include more of the quote:

*I think heroes are people who do good or necessary things at great personal cost. Heroism must be judged by the courage and grit required to do what needs doing. That's why trauma – the great terrorizer – produces heroes. No one has had to override fear the way a trauma survivor does.*

*Sometimes the heroism looks like nothing at all. When a phobic rape survivor makes herself go to an evening PTA meeting, even though her heart is pounding with terror and her body is drenched in sweat – that's a form of heroism. When*

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<sup>1</sup> Covey, Stephen (2004). The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness. New York: Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. (p. 21).

<sup>2</sup> Covey, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Family Literacy (2002). Foundational Training for Family Literacy – Practitioners' Guide. Edmonton: Centre for Family Literacy.

*someone has been so traumatized by a recent auto collision that he cannot get behind the wheel of a car without freezing with fear, but he forces himself to breathe and take the wheel and drive to work anyway – that’s heroism, too. When a Vietnam veteran with post-traumatic stress forces himself to interview for a job, even though he wants to bolt, and it takes every ounce of will, courage, and determination he’s got to override the intense fear and shame he feels -emotions that, by the way, make no sense to him and cause him to question his own sanity – that’s heroism as well.*

*Post-traumatic stress creates such daunting fear and heart-stopping distress that it produces legions of heroes, whose every day is a test of their mettle, commitment and courage.<sup>4</sup>*

Many practitioners believe that a Learner walking through our doors takes an act of courage. The Learner is reaching out; they have hope. If they have experienced trauma, then their courage is two-fold. This kind of courage needs to be rewarded. Many literacy practitioners do just that by using the holistic approach, which helps Learners to develop an inner locus of control and to find their voice.

One of the ways we help Learners to find their voice is through reflective exercises, including writing. Linda Trichter Metcalf and Tobin Simon call this proprioceptive writing – finding your authentic voice.

*The word proprioception, which comes from the Latin proprius, meaning “one’s own,” normally refers to our body’s proprioceptive system. Just as the five senses take in information about the outer world – what we see, touch, smell, taste, and hear – and transmit it to our brains, the little-known “sixth sense” of proprioception also gathers and processes information, but from the inner world of our bodies, the world we alone inhabit.<sup>5</sup>*

Basically, they encourage people to write for approximately 25 minutes while listening to Baroque music. They use this music because its tempo is that of a resting heart rate. I believe literacy practitioners do a form of this when they encourage Learners to keep journals, or to do arts-based sessions.

**Think about the many ways in which you encourage Learners to develop proprioception.  
What are they able to accomplish in their lives as a result?**

## **From silence to confidence**

I’d like to share a story about a Learner finding her voice. In October 2006 I was working with three young women who had been labelled in the institutional educational

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<sup>4</sup> Naparstek, Belleruth (2006). *Invisible Heroes: Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal*. New York: Bantam Books (p. xv).

<sup>5</sup> Trichter Metcalf, Linda and Simon Tobin. (2002). *Writing the Mind Alive: The Proprioceptive Method for Finding Your Authentic Voice*. New York: Random House.

system. One was dressed in ripped jeans and had tattoos on her arms. She had shaved the sides of her head and wore the rest of her hair tucked under a hat made out of army camouflage material. I'll call her Stacey. At first she was silent, but I could tell by her eyes that she was curious about what was happening – open to what I was doing. I also felt that she might be exhibiting the unwritten code of people who grew up in dysfunctional families – don't talk, don't trust, don't feel.<sup>6</sup> I just kept smiling at her and encouraging her to share. One of the most poignant things Stacey said was that she had just gotten off heroin, and that getting off heroin was easier for her than dealing with her literacy issue.

In the group, we were deciding on key messages about literacy we wanted to convey to policy-makers and researchers. By consensus the group decided to do a multi-media presentation, with each person using their particular strength. One chose to do Power Point, another chose to do a skit on "self-esteem". Stacey was undecided about how to participate.

I made copious notes on everything that everyone shared. I fed their words back to them, and asked if we might use a drawing of a flower to convey it – I saw this in my mind's eye, and trusted in that. The centre of the flower could be the Learner, with the petals showing all the areas in which a Learner participates, such as family and community, that impacts on the Learner, and on which the Learner has an impact. A large sun shining on the flower could have wide rays, with each ray representing what nurtures that flower. Nobody wanted to draw the flower, so I gave it my best shot even though art is not my strong suit. I used Stacey's words to fill in as much as I could.

We also brainstormed about how to show the ways recent funding cuts had affected programming. One of the women, a bookkeeper, was quite adept with numbers and said that we could show how a change in one line item affects all others. Amongst the four of us, we decided to do a house of cards, with the foundation and each floor being literacy – that is, the infrastructure. All of the other cards would have words on them like housing, health, etc. As I continued to use Stacey's input, she became more engaged. When we did the dry run for the rest of the group, they suggested that the flower drawing was an excellent metaphor, but that they could not see it very well, unless they were really close to it. They loved the house of cards, but wanted the cards and words to be larger.

In our next working session, Stacey almost jumped over to sit beside me. She started to draw the flower on a larger sheet of paper using the broad side of a magic marker. She dictated certain words to me to put on a sheet of paper for her. She confided that she was unsure whether she could speak in front of a group, and that she needed help with spelling and writing. Stacey got on the floor with a large sheet of paper, and drew a much better flower and sun than I had. She also practiced putting together a house of cards using larger cards on which she had printed our words in calligraphy style. Stacey

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<sup>6</sup> I first heard this phrase a little over twenty years ago when I was working in a treatment centre for Aboriginal Peoples with a history of drug or alcohol abuse. I'm not sure who coined the phrase, but Robert A. Becker has a book of the same name.

painstakingly practiced putting together the house of cards, pulling out the bottom card that said literacy funding, and watching the house fall down.

On the third day, we made our presentation to policy makers, researchers and practitioners. Stacey confidently put together the house of cards in front of the audience, showing each card one at a time so the audience could read the words. The final house of cards was three stories high. When she pulled out the bottom card, the whole house fell dramatically. The audience got our point – that literacy is the foundation and the infrastructure for all facets of life.

Stacey made a hasty exit after the presentation. I can only guess why. Why did I share this story in this paper? I wanted to show that voice can be more than speaking – and to remind you that it involves listening from the Heart. Yes, Stacey spoke in the group, but only after a while. In putting together the house of cards in front of the audience, she did something that I could not have pulled off. As she scooted out the door, I sang her praises to the audience. She heard.

When I saw her at dinner that night, Stacey was quite relaxed and happy. It was the same at the airport the next morning when we caught the same flight back to Toronto. Stacey had contributed in the way that she could. Her voice had been included, and conveyed to the audience. She shared with me that, in addition to her work at the literacy program, her boyfriend was helping her to read and write. They have a book that they put on the table each night. Stacey opens it to a page at random and, without looking, points to a word. Her boyfriend then does the same. Stacey's task is to write a sentence using those words. They do as many rounds of this as she has the enthusiasm for until the next time.

Did Stacey know she was going to be part of a group making a presentation to high profile people? I'm literate and didn't surmise that from the write-up we got before this event. I knew we would be brainstorming key messages, but I did not know that everyone was going to take part in the presentation. Stacey rose to the challenge. Out of our group she probably made the highest and best impact on the audience!

**Think about your interactions with Learners, and how you may have facilitated their voice in activities that are meaningful to them.**

**What part did you play?**

**How did you feel?**

**How did they feel?**

## **Building on positive experiences**

Every day, we use the Learners' voices to help shape our approaches with them. An interesting research project listened to what Learners said about what motivated them to learn. Audrey Fenwick interviewed learners for her thesis, [From learning to teaching: An appreciative inquiry into the motivations of adult literacy learners](#). She noted that caring, confidence and safety were repeated all through the learners' stories. Based on what they

said, Fenwick developed 14 strategies to motivate Learners. She calls these Themes of Motivation and the Voices of Literacy Learners<sup>7</sup> :

1. Teachers can share happy energy
2. Engage learners by being relevant
3. Be accountable to the students
4. Let students work in small groups
5. Teach using sequence and reinforcement
6. Teach things that are immediately useful
7. Students have work-related reasons for wanting to learn, but they also want personal satisfaction
8. Life experiences are a form of learning and motivate people to keep learning
9. Caring is important
10. Students gain confidence when they are supported
11. Use teachable moments
12. Make the program safe
13. Use the support and motivation in the family
14. Base learning on ideas, feelings and actions

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Fenwick, Audrey (2004). Themes of Motivation and the Voices of Literacy Learners, in *From learning to teaching: An appreciative inquiry into the motivations of adult literacy learners*. Available online at <http://www.nald.ca/crd/annotation.asp?id=371>.

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