



Report on
Helping Myself Learn
Pilot Course

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All the materials can be found online at:
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/changing.htm>

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1.0 Executive Summary

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.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Background and Purpose

The background to this research is a two-year national collaborative cross-sector project to increase the capacity of the Literacy and Essential Skills fields to address the impacts of violence on learning. The *Web-based tools to support effective learning and teaching for survivors of violence* project was funded by the Government of Canada’s Office of Literacy and Essential Skills. While there is a growing body of research and innovative practices to address the impacts of violence on learning, (e.g. Horsman, 1999/2000; Morrish et al., 2002; Parkdale Project Read, 2003) there is still a dearth of knowledge among most practitioners, administrators, and learners about how to remove barriers that impede successful learning outcomes.

This report deepens knowledge on this issue through examining the learning outcomes of two pilot courses. These courses were designed to assess the value of the online student kit named “Helping Myself Learn” in supporting Essential Skills development through enhancing literacy learners’ ability to lessen the impact of violence on their own learning, and supporting teachers to address this issue skillfully. The research used a qualitative approach to assess how the learning kit helps students to develop the Essential Skills needed for success in learning, work and life. We sought to explore whether any Literacy and Essential Skills program might find that equipping students with an understanding of the impacts of violence and tools to address those impacts might lead to gains in students’ Essential Skills, improve classroom participation and learning, and enable students to gain new strategies to overcome barriers to success.

The pilot course was delivered in units that mirrored the structure and focus of the five themes addressed in the “Helping Myself Learn” kit, ways of seeing the impacts of violence on survivors: Spacing Out, Old Patterns, Judging, All or Nothing, and Crisis. While the “Helping Myself Learn” kit enables adult literacy and essential skills students to better understand how violence affects their learning and provides them with a range of strategies to increase success in all learning areas, this research specifically looks at how the tool supports the acquisition of Essential Skills, in particular those of Working With Others and Thinking. We tested the hypothesis that through the use of this tool students would see gains in skill areas such as working in pairs and with a team, contributing to group success through leadership or support, memory use problem solving, and organizing and job task planning.

3.0 Preparation and Project Members

3.1 Course Design

The pilot course was designed for two locations with two distinct groups of students, those participating in community college literacy, upgrading and other Essential Skills programs at George Brown College (GBC) and those taking part in adult literacy classes in a community-based program, Parkdale Project Read (PPR). These organizations, both in Toronto, were selected because both were part of the larger two-year project. Each course was planned to run for ten weeks, one two-hour session per week. The aim was to recruit approximately 15 to 20 students for each location, in order to ensure sufficient data for the study and allow for expected attrition. The students to be recruited were those who are often the hardest to reach and teach, so we expected substantial drop-out during the course.

Outreach was carried out through a series of information sessions that allowed students to learn about the student kit, its purposes and design, and the goals of the research, as well as to understand that if they participated in the course they would also be participating in the research study. Students who expressed interest met individually with the project researcher to ensure full understanding of the project goals, the nature of the research, and all relevant information to ensure informed consent. Consent forms were signed at this meeting and students were given an information sheet on the study and contact information for the researcher.

No skill assessment was done at the initial interview; students self-selected based on their interest in the topic. At GBC, the outreach to learners included several School of Work and College Preparation programs: Academic Upgrading (AU) including programs in community-partner organizations, *Redirection Through Education* (RTE) and *For You*, both transitional programs for adult learners working towards goals of entering post-secondary programs, developing work readiness skills, and/or increased life skills. At PPR, all learners in the program community were given information about the research project and pilot course and met individually with a member of the research team to sign the informed consent.

In consultation with the GBC Academic Upgrading managers and instructors, students were encouraged to attend the pilot course in lieu of their afternoon AU math or communications courses with the assurance that instructors would support the student to catch up with any missed material. Students were also encouraged by AU instructors to consider how the pilot course's material might be integrated into their work in upgrading classes through group projects, individual speeches or

presentations on the topic of learning and violence. One AU instructor reported that a student did take on a presentation to the class and carried out extensive reading in preparation. This student spoke at the closing class about how important that process was for her sense of herself as a learner.

The pilot course at PPR met on Fridays so that it didn’t conflict with other literacy classes and ensured a measure of privacy for the participants, as PPR is an open concept space. The students were enthusiastic about having a course available on a day when the program is usually closed to learners, and about the opportunity to expand their knowledge of a unique topic and to practice and acquire new language, interpersonal, and technical skills.

The planning stages included arranging the technology needed to support the learners in using the online kit extensively in group settings, in pairs and individually. GBC used a specially designated classroom in the Deaf Upgrading program which was ideal for many reasons as it had SMART board and projector technology available to present material to the group. This classroom had a bank of computers that lined the walls, so students did not have to go to a separate room when the instruction included individual or pair interaction with the online tool. Also, the classroom was arranged in a circle around the board, ideal for group facilitation of topics surrounding learning and violence where we could predict that there would be a considerable amount of vulnerability and sharing. Having the students face each other and the instructor allowed for the right atmosphere.

The PPR space similarly allowed for the students to sit in a circle. The program also had enough computers in the space to allow for pairs to work together as well as a portable projector, screen and wireless enabled laptop that allowed the instructor to present material from the online tool to the larger group. For both GBC and PPR, we purchased devices that allowed for two headsets to be plugged into one computer for pairs of students to work together in listening activities without disturbing others.

3.2 Research Design

The research design for this project was modeled on Classroom Action Research, a methodology that relies heavily on focus group interviews, researcher observations in the classroom setting, and on student self-assessments and reflection. The overall goal of CAR is to promote improvement in classroom methods through observation and practical suggestions deduced from the analysis of research findings. This type of research was particularly suited to this project as it is possible to make practical

suggestions based on observations and to make recommendations for further study, even with a fairly small and brief study.¹

At the beginning of the course, each group of students participated in a focus group and completed a self evaluation through the use of a questionnaire rubric. Before the interview and administration of the questionnaire, we gave students a brief introduction to the concept of Essential Skills and how we might be looking at these throughout the course. We asked them about their skills in thinking and in working with others, in relation to life, work, and school. (For question guidelines to all the research data, see appendices)

For the second phase of the research, the students contributed learning journal entries at the end of each class, which they understood would be used as a part of the ongoing research. Guided questions were proposed by the researcher and then selected and asked by the participant observer at the end of class. These journal entries were collected directly from the students by the researcher and not seen by the course instructors.

During each session, the participant observer wrote observations regarding the students' use of Essential Skills and engagement with the student kit. Observers were encouraged to document challenges and development in use of the two Essential Skills under study. The observers also noted the ways in which the kit encouraged the development of skills, and engaged the students with questions aimed at clarifying meaning or deepening understanding where a student might be describing or using the two designated Essential Skills as well as any others. The primary researcher proposed guided questions to help focus the participant observers' notes during the classes and their reflections after the daily sessions, to prompt detailed observations of the Essential Skills.

The final stage of the planned data collection involved a post-program focus group and completion of the same self-assessment tool/rubric used in Stage 1, delivered in the same way. As an ethical safeguard for the students, all parts of the research data were kept strictly separate and private from the course instructors. Students were then able to make observations or express discomfort with the course, the student kit, or the manner of instruction, without concern that the course instructors would learn about this information.

¹ For more information on Classroom Action Research, please see: "The What, Why and How of classroom Action Research," by Gwynn Mettetal. Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (JoSoTL). Volume 2, Number 1 (2001) pp. 6-13.

3.3 Research In Practice

Participant Profiles

George Brown College: In total, the project did outreach to about 200 students from the GBC programs mentioned above. 15 students who self-identified an interest in the topics contacted the primary researcher and signed the consent forms to participate in the research. Students represented a diverse cultural and ethnic make up including Aboriginal, Vietnamese, South Asian, Latin American, and Eastern European as well as diverse gender identity and sexual orientation. Many of the students engaged in the pilot were participants in the *Redirection Through Education* and *For You* programs, and had experience with the mental health system. The GBC course included 4 men and 11 women ranging in age from 21 to 55. The average daily attendance during the course was 7 students and there were 8 participants on the closing day. The attendance of GBC students fell off after the 5th week of the course in direct correlation to the end of the semester for *RTE* and *For You*.

Parkdale Project Read: Outreach was aimed at all current participants in all of the currently running programs. 16 students self-identified an interest in participating and signed the consent form for participation in the research. Students in the program represented Canadian and newcomer populations of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities including Aboriginal, Middle Eastern, African, and the Caribbean. This group was made up of all women, the majority being English Language Learners (ELL). The average daily attendance for this group was 11, and at completion of the course, there were 13 participants, a very significant number for retention in a community based literacy group. Many members of this group held strong religious beliefs, especially representing the Muslim and Christian faiths. During this course these students were extremely respectful of each others’ religious views and the ways others reported drawing on their faith in their daily lives. During part of the course, some of the students were observing Ramadan, which involved fasting for the day leading up to and during the classes. This took away somewhat from the unifying quality of sharing snacks, but students encouraged one another and attendance remained unusually high for a community-based group in spite of this challenge.

Team Members and Organizational Support

The research team met in the planning stages to solidify the research tools, outreach plans and course objectives. Lee Delaino completed the proposal for the research, the ethics review, the research design, data analysis and reporting. The research team also included Johanna Petite and Esther Nordin as participant observers in the two

pilot courses. Both Johanna and Esther were well known to most of the students as they both instruct in the participants' regular programs. This familiarity appeared to be valuable, making it easier for students to relax and trust these observers, rather than being on their guard as they might have been with others. The course instructors were Heather Lash, who was also a co-author of the online kit, and Eden Tekle, who was new to this course and its materials. These instructors were also familiar to many of the students as regular instructors in some of their groups or classes.

Georgia Quattaro, Dean of the Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies, and Susan Toews, Chair of the School of Work and College Preparation, ensured that the college provided free space for the GBC pilot course and covered the costs of transportation for participating students who needed this support. The Parkdale Project Read collective also provided free space and other supports for the PPR pilot course, including outreach and set up of the space and snacks for each meeting.

Complexities of the Research Process

Framing the course

In the opening of the course, the instructors devoted a significant amount of time helping the students gain a broad definition of violence as framed by the Learning and Violence project. Taking the time to explore what constitutes violence from the systemic and everyday to the catastrophic, and the many ways in which we all experience violence across this broad spectrum, ensures that students feel included in the context of the course and not simply curious onlookers or detached researchers. Students were encouraged to resist the temptation to compare their experience to others' and to understand that just as no two experiences of violence are the same, so also no two people's responses to their experience are the same. Constructing this understanding early in the course allowed for the opening up of students' connections to one another and seemed to contribute to a strong group dynamic.

The course instructors also took a considerable amount of time at the outset to discuss the emotional risks that students take by participating, assuring students that there was no pressure to disclose personal experiences and encouraging bounded discussions of personal history. The research team provided information on counseling supports available to students so that, if at any time they were struggling or feeling triggered by course material, they knew there was a resource for support. Furthermore, the online kit itself is designed with tips on how students can maintain self-care through allowing themselves breaks, changing the activity or stopping when

needed. Each unit of the kit has a clearly indicated link called “Feeling Bad” on its main page, with features a host of suggestions on getting comfort and gathering strength, including inspirational music activities. Students were reminded that clicking on this link is a way to take a break if anxieties or difficult feelings are coming up. It also allows a student to make email contact with the creators of the kit to ask questions or seek further support.

Addressing Student Concerns

Students in the community based learning setting expressed concern during the opening focus group about what the research was going to “do” for PPR, how it would benefit the program. This discussion took up a significant amount of time. This hesitation seemed to continue into the early classes for some students who continued to want assurance that their participation would be beneficial for themselves, but also meaningful in terms of how it might help their community in the future. We understood this as reflecting the critical literacy taught at PPR and the historical context of research done in vulnerable populations that can exploit participants or misuse data. We sought to assure the students that the data would be used respectfully and to the benefit of them and their community. The research team was able to build on the existing relationship between the participant observer and many of the students, allowing the students to gradually accept the research methodology, participate more fully in the course, and provide authentic feedback for the research.

In the early stages of the research in particular, students of all levels from both groups, tended to want to say what they thought would benefit the study, and it took quite a lot of work to get students to respond authentically to reflect their sincere thoughts and feelings about the topic. Both of the participant observers used probing questions to help the students focus less on what they imagined were the research needs and more on seeking to reveal their own more authentic responses.

Effects of literacy and language challenges

The research was designed to assess LES learning in both college and community settings. We created data gathering tools in plain language, provided carefully simplified prompts for the focus groups, and tried to foster a supportive environment. In spite of this, learners in the community setting who had lower LBS levels or were ELL learners, were not able to complete all parts of the self-assessment rubrics. A longer focus group, particularly at the beginning, might have been beneficial; however students might have had difficulty attending, or paying attention in a substantially longer session.

The PPR learning journals also proved somewhat problematic. Although students wrote at the end of each session, their low basic literacy skills, and for many, even more rudimentary understanding of English, along with the newness of most of the concepts of the course, meant that these students would have needed substantially longer to write, some with one-on-one support to scribe. A longer course to develop further understanding in which they could learn to express themselves in writing would also have mitigated these difficulties. In consequence, these writings only occasionally provided relevant data for this study.

Time constraints

Overall, the brevity of the course (ten weeks) and the short periods per class (two hours) proved a struggle for the instructors and for the students. The relatively limited length of the course and the complexity of the new concepts meant that the self-assessment rubrics did not offer any clear data for either group. The short amount of time available for focus groups, combined with the complexity of the topic, inhibited gathering responses from the students with the lowest literacy levels. These students tended to give very brief answers in the opening focus group, and it seemed that some were inclined to repeat the words of other students for lack of vocabulary to formulate individual responses.

There was virtually unanimous agreement between the instructors, students, and research team that a longer course would have been preferable to explore the topics of the kit in greater depth and complexity. A longer course would also have provided for more contrasted data for the research study from beginning to end of the course and a greater ability for the students to articulate these changes. Yet in spite of these limitations students did show remarkably increased understandings of their difficulties with learning, a greater ability to use strategies to support their own learning, and some clear increases in the Essential Skills being observed. There were different considerations for the ideal length of course for each group, which will be discussed in the Recommendations section of this report.

Technology

At both sites the use of the technology was somewhat challenging for the instructors. Using computers with Internet access, LCD projectors, improvising a screen, using a Smart Board, and multiple computers with headsets and splitters to allow for pairs work, and ensuring that all were functioning correctly at the start of every class was time-consuming and challenging. The GBC facilities, along with onsite support by the researcher, made for a slightly easier experience. In contrast the PPR teacher and participant observer struggled to set up temperamental equipment and certain days would have gone more smoothly if the technology had functioned better or if there

had been more on-site support to troubleshoot or get the computer set-up functioning well in advance. In order to try to address these problems the teacher arrived earlier and earlier but was often met by students eager to use this time to talk with her about the course and their lives. Some designated technical support might have made the courses easier to run.

Measuring change

As the research progressed, we realized that it would have been useful to build in more opportunities for observing working with others skills during the course. However, the course did allow opportunities for group discussion and pair work, and students noted how the work that they were doing was enhancing their participation and experiences in their educational programs or in their community. There were several self-reports of improved skills in working with others.

A particularly complex factor in doing research on this issue is that for many students – especially for those who are at the most basic literacy levels, with perhaps the most acute need of understanding about violence and learning - it is only at the end of a course that they develop the awareness and language to speak reflectively about their skills. Yet without that capacity at the beginning of the course it is hard for them to reflect on and report accurately their opening skill level to provide the solid evidence of change in Essential Skill level, especially the more abstract and hard to quantify skills of working with others and thinking. This conundrum led us to draw on an unanticipated form of data – anecdotal data gleaned from the things that students tell their teachers and that teachers observe about their students, particularly in the months following the course. The course instructors and the research team continue to teach and engage in the community with several of the pilot participants in both locations. Naturally, these students continue to check in about progress they see as a result of the course and some of these reflections will be included at the end of this report.

We also found that a startlingly rich form of data was the final class session, particularly in the case of the GBC pilot. The students expressed themselves well as they sought to describe the difference the course had made for their sense of their learning to their classmates, teacher, the participant observers, and guests Lee Delaino and Jenny Horsman. As this final class immediately preceded the focus group in the GBC course, this perhaps meant that the focus group report did not contain some of the statements that more accurately summed up the learning in the course.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Thinking Skills

Students in both groups, as they considered their thinking skills, routinely referred to the idea of being “stuck” in their thinking. This sense of being stuck seemed to commonly affect multiple thinking skills, from concentration and problem solving to decision making, critical thinking and organizing information. Students in the opening focus group, even when asked about their strengths, defaulted to discussing challenges in their thinking skills. Almost without exception, they contrasted their strengths to their weaknesses without prompting from the researcher, whose question was initially about strengths (“when things are going well with your thinking”).

Nearly every student in both pilot groups discussed challenges with the use of memory, concentration and focus, illuminating how thinking can be impacted as a result of violence. Based on the work of the Learning and Violence project and much research, it is clear that remembering can be a complex and charged task for students who have experienced violence. Students described significant struggles with feeling present in a classroom, an effect that the student kit calls “spacing out.” Spacing out - or more formally disassociation - impacts students’ thinking skills, and often occurs in response to feelings of fear for physical or emotional safety or distinct feelings of inadequacy (such as feeling stupid or unable to do things expected of them). Spacing out can be seen as an adaptation, or learning, developed to survive the experience of violence. While such coping mechanisms were a life-saving survival mechanism in the face of past violence, they are now the very habits that now get in the way of learning. The hope is that through a deeper understanding of these barriers, along with information about successful strategies, these students will move toward more creative and effective responses to the anxieties and various difficulties they may face in the learning environment.

Memory use: presence, concentration and focus

The most consistently reported difficulty with thinking skills for both cohorts of students was the use of memory in life, work and school. Students used words like “foggy,” “blank,” and “can’t retain information,” to describe their feelings about memory use. GBC students, participating in other courses, agreed widely about the impact on their performance in testing situations and in remembering previous course work and information given by the teacher and other classmates. Some PPR students were a bit more confident about memory use, most of them reflecting on

how they use their memory to get through everyday routines. However, they also said their memory for short term details was not good in comparison to their long term memory, in which they remember past traumas in vivid detail. One woman recalls, “My memory is so good for something bad—I can’t forget.” This same student reflected on her memory and how being in contact with distant family, where she experienced trauma, can make her struggle with memory for a short time directly after contact with them. Many students at PPR felt that their memory had to be strong because they needed to consistently maintain all of their daily routines and the well-being of the family economics and health. Students noted that the more responsibility that they have for family, the more taxing memory use becomes.

Focus groups, participant observations and learning journals contained themes related to memory of initially struggling to simply stay physically and intellectually present in the class, then to develop strategies to maintain the required concentration and focus on the classroom activities to tackle and learn the concepts and skills that the curriculum offered. Gains in both these areas were reported.

Staying Present

“I have tools that I can fall back on—so it doesn’t seem so scary.”

Participant observations and student learning journals that documented common classroom activities, such as a warm-up in the first class where students interviewed one another and reported back, showed how often students struggled to stay present and engaged in their learning. One student, when given the task of interviewing another and then reporting back to the group, could not remember what her partner had just said, demonstrating a lack of presence in engaging with classmates and course material. In another activity at the opening of the course, students were engaged in a grounding activity and reported that they found it difficult to “just focus,” explaining that bringing their minds into focus in order to engage in the class was a struggle.

In the initial focus group, participants also linked problems with staying present in their classes to challenges in discrete skills such as spelling, writing, reading and math. One student observed a direct connection between the experience of “spacing out” and her difficulties with spelling. She identified that she is able to read but cannot memorize spelling or focus on a text to see how words are spelled. Another said, “when I’m nervous in class, I might zone out or during math class I used to daydream and I can’t get back to the situation quickly.” She noted math as a struggle in particular.

Students' ability to stay present was impacted by several factors, a primary one being outside pressures and responsibilities. In an activity where the group was asked to draw pictures, one student participated only minimally. The group was asked to draw pictures representing themselves at different stages of their lives. Her drawing lacked the detail of some others, and she identified her lack of engagement, saying that she was feeling anxious about outside commitments and worries. This student was then able to choose to leave class before it finished in order to take care of personal matters, recognizing that this would be the most helpful thing to do in the situation and acknowledging that addressing the reasons behind her lack of presence would help eventually lead her non-judgmentally back to the possibility of emotional, intellectual and physical presence in the class.

Students reflected awareness of not only external but also internal sources of distraction and disengagement during discussions, where they spoke about their eagerness for any opportunity to participate in something that would help them become stronger learners. They noted that in order to stay present in their learning they needed to overcome the feeling of being "stupid" or, as in one student's metaphor, to avoid "learning in a box." She described the box as a place she was separated from learning because of the violence she'd experienced and how the energy it took to try to fight her way out of this box meant she had no energy left for learning. Another student used similarly metaphorical language to describe the idea, saying that in her language it is called, "having a big head," which she explained meant that she saw herself as stupid.

Others expressed struggles with learning even more acutely. A student reflected, "Nothing really helps. I'm afraid I'll never succeed, never reach my goals." These challenges to stay engaged in learning took on physical, almost disembodied, manifestations for students too, describing themselves as being "uncomfortable in my skin," or "away from my body." Another described the control others had over her mind and body: "When they control me it's like I had no place to go. I would just zone out." One student identified her coming and going frequently during class as a strategy to deal with the difficulty she was experiencing to sit with the discomfort raised by challenging learning situations. It is difficult to learn or recall information when one is at first struggling merely "to get back, to be present in class," another student said of her struggles with physical and emotional presence in class.

The final focus group, participant observations and student learning journals showed evidence that students made gains in their ability to stay present for their learning through participation in the pilot courses. The data suggests that integrating an understanding of violence as a source of these challenges, and engaging in the

activities within the kit that are designed to address the experience of spacing out—such as grounding activities and other activities that bring their attention back to their bodies—allowed them to accumulate significant strategies to mitigate these impacts themselves. Students reflected on strategizing to stay present a little longer than before, trying not to disengage when anxiety or self doubt came up. One learner reflected: “The first 3 sessions, I felt really spacey...I learned techniques [for] breathing and [when necessary] to leave the classroom. It feels like I have tools that I can fall back on—so it doesn’t seem so scary.” Another student equated her wandering mind to the experience of being hungry. She noted that she’s learning to manage her mind wandering much like one would manage hunger. When she’s hungry, she waits until later in order to finish what she is doing. Much the same with learning, the student may want to wander away mentally, but instead she “keep[s] it for later,” she says.

Focusing on and remembering course content and skills

“I can focus and, therefore, think!”

Beyond the issue of staying emotionally, mentally and physically present for their learning, participants identified the challenge of then focusing on the concepts and skills development in the curriculum enough to experience gains in their learning. Students felt the impact of their struggles with focus and memory in the context of class activities, but it was also observed in terms of their ability to take away learning from the course and come back the following week engaged and connected to the flow of the course material. This was observable in class 5 with both groups of students when the instructors attempted to revisit a topic from the previous week. Many students had difficulty recalling the topic and the instructors were required to spend a significant amount of time reintroducing some of the concepts and definitions as well as the context of the activity.

Some students also recognized the difficulties that arose from being disconnected in the learning environment combined with intermittent actual presence in class (absenteeism). Students identified how the continuous learning process of courses like this is impacted by low and sporadic attendance. One student recognized that the tasks given for course homework overwhelm her, writing, “I get side tracked by so many tasks to complete. I will be working on something and may think of something else and proceed to do it rather than complete begun task. Attention span is challenged.”

Another student made a connection between discrete skills such as reading and writing and his frequent lack of focus and therefore confidence in these areas. He

feels that when he is distracted, his thinking loses focus and he begins to need a lot of help in order to stay with his learning. He articulated a self-perpetuating process in which his struggles to focus impact his ability to remember how to use the skills that help him organize his writing and contribute to reading comprehension and retention of information. Another student identified a heightened sense of anxiety when trying to speak or read aloud in class, saying that she struggles to remember what has been asked of her due to her feelings of anxiety.

Despite these strong and almost sub-conscious patterns, within the time frame of the pilot courses students showed development in their ability to focus and concentrate and therefore apply their literacy and critical thinking skills to learning course concepts and skills. Through improved ability to focus on and listen to instructors and other students, documented in observations of students becoming increasingly aware of others in the class and asking pertinent questions, they demonstrated not only presence and engagement, but integration and application of course material. One student, who had previously struggled to engage in the course, recognized other's responses to questions and reflected this understanding through applying it to her own situation, demonstrating a marked increase in awareness of the topics of discussion and awareness of the meaning of the class activities. The student herself noted that she has been listening, using more thinking skills, and is more able to focus on others in the group sharing on the given topic. Another student recognized that the course provided an opportunity to learn from others, to hear about their experiences and to view her own problems from that vantage point, something she would have missed had she not been able to concentrate on the insights of her classmates. She noted that she felt more engaged in the course, able to understand the lessons and content of the class. This increase in engagement seems the result of clearer thinking, realism and engagement in the "here and now", helping students push aside the perception of being alone in their experiences.

Related to increased focus and concentration, several students reported being more ready to take on reading and writing tasks than they had before the pilot course. One student who had early in the course noted that she struggled with writing skills stated that she had learned that her experience of violence resulted in a lack of focus that contributed to this problem. In class 8 she reported that she felt grounding exercises being used in the class were helping her gain focus and that she had continued to practice these skills in her other classes, noting there might be alternate reasons to why she "can't spell" other than, "I just can't." Another student noted that recently her reading tutor had noted her ability to focus was increasing, resulting in an improvement in her reading skills. She agreed with the tutor saying that she felt she was thinking more clearly. Another student who had only just begun to deal with

a trauma she’d never shared with others demonstrated an increased confidence in class, which the observer felt increased her fluency and confidence in reading and language skills.

Throughout the pilot courses, students consistently drew connections between their growing recognition of triggers and awareness of the moments when they “spaced out” and how they could bring themselves back to their learning, seeing how this increased their focus in class and improved their engagement with the course materials and in-class activities. One student, reflecting on her reaction to others and to moments when she feels she’s in crisis, said she was increasingly feeling that because she mattered (in the class, in the world) she would be able to focus for greater periods, feel engaged and that she rightfully belonged in the classroom. The progression for her was, “I matter! I can stay in the moment during crisis,” and then “I can focus and, therefore, think.” Some students were hopeful that given more time and practice with some of the ideas from the course, they would see continued gains in their memory and concentration, even though during the course they were noticing only relatively small increments of improvement.

To conclude our observations about memory, presence and concentration, we report that students described feeling more present, relaxed and competent in school and suggested that this makes them hopeful that they will continue to see improved skills. By the end of the course, while they didn’t articulate that they had seen dramatic changes in their memory skills, students who initially were afraid their memory was not good enough felt that the tools they’d learned in the course, in particular the calming exercises, would allow them to stay present in learning situations and thus enable their memory to work better. One student shared that in spite of ongoing issues with memory due to necessary medication use which he may not overcome easily, he learned that it is helpful to “reach out to others” to work together and that his confidence was growing that memory could become stronger.

Problem Solving

Dealing with anxiety, self-judgment and all or nothing thinking

Many of the participants in the pilot courses experience considerable anxiety in their daily life, which is compounded when trying to engage in a learning environment. In terms of problem solving, students report a fair amount of difficulty as anxiety comes up quickly, causing the student to either “shut down” or be easily overwhelmed, which leads to giving up quickly. Overwhelmingly, students reported a sense of inadequacy or self-judgment as soon as they enter the learning environment, and reflected that trying to work at a problem from this stance is extremely difficult. One

student reported, “I can’t read books that I know I had read before.” But because of her experience of violence, she finished this thought by saying, “I didn’t want to remember.”

In the initial focus group, students were not forthcoming with what they felt the causes of the blocks to problem solving were, perhaps because this was their first discussion in the project and they were not yet ready to share, or because they did not yet understand their problems well. We predicted that in due time the students would begin to make the connections between their experiences of violence, their lowered sense of self, and their struggles when faced with adversity or challenges and the need to solve problems, even in routine work and school settings.

Overcoming feelings of inadequacy and self-judgment

“You can feel stupid but still learn.”

Students spoke very clearly about the breakdown in their problem solving skills in direct correlation with their experiences of violence, highlighting the resulting lack of self-esteem and confidence in abilities. These themes are familiar in the existing research: repeated messages of worthlessness received in the past reverberate in many ways long after, as with all types of violence. The results often include a tendency to “beat oneself up,” having internalized the negative messages; to default to all-or-nothing thinking; and having a complicated relationship to “control,” which may include sliding quickly between the demand to be in total control and feeling like a victim with no possibility to exert control. Ideas about learning influenced by experiences of violence left some students feeling that they could not accomplish anything of value, or if they did attempt to do so, that they would have to be perfect or nearly perfect. For some students, the flip side of this tendency towards perfectionism is to decide not to attempt solving a problem or facing a challenge at all, short-circuiting the possibility of failure by not participating in the first place.

Many students described a keen sense of being inadequate especially in the realm of school, and linked the repeated messages of inadequacy to a breakdown in their ability to contemplate and solve problems. One student said she expects herself to be perfect, and that if she cannot find a way to solve a problem perfectly, then she feels like a failure. This often results in “a paralysis of sorts, and the inability to be strong.” This state of being has a cascading effect for this student, who said that once she begins to struggle with this feeling of weakness, the possibility of being successful in any area of her life decreases.

Other students recognized how their feelings of inadequacy undermine their ability to tackle problems in areas of life outside of school. One student told of failing to properly deal with a bill payment in her personal life, causing her to be extremely hard on herself and struggle to find a solution to the problem. Another student, echoing the feeling that she can't find solutions to problems, wrote about her self-talk in her learning journal: “I still struggle. I'm afraid I'll never succeed, never reach my goals. I'm a failure and it's all my fault.” For some students, this type of undermining of self-esteem seemed to lead to a break down in their ability to contemplate how to get started on problems. One student says that in her family where she has experienced abusive relationships, she is responsible for much care-giving and helping others with their problems, but she can almost never use this kind of thoughtful problem solving for her own concerns.

Students with less classroom experience showed concerns about how to interact in the classroom setting, especially with the teacher. Through a discussion about classroom expectations and student behaviours, students were able to apply problem solving to interactions in the classroom and in their personal lives. One student shared that she experienced a lot of anxiety and feelings of inadequacy when she could not keep up with the learning and would often check out mentally. With classmates' help, this student conceived of a strategy to overcome this problem—she could ask the teacher to clarify a confusing idea, a strategy that she had not realized was available to her to use with teachers. This encouraged another student to strategize about how to continue seeking her education, something that was discouraged in her home and by her husband.

In the latter part of the course students began to show an increase in compassion for themselves, allowing for the realization that one does not always need to be perfect to engage in learning and participate in the classroom. One student showed strong insight into how her perfectionism causes her to give up on difficult tasks if she believes she cannot achieve perfection, and how increased awareness of this tendency allows her to approach her goals (to engage in some summer readings and do some writing) rather than give up entirely. She now believes that achieving each and every task on her list is not paramount to achievement. In class 9, she identified that “you can feel stupid but still learn” showing an increasing willingness to invest in her learning by showing compassion and curiosity towards her perceived vulnerability or weakness. In her learning journal she called it “self-kindness.” She said that now, when she feels like giving up on a problem, she asks herself, “why I feel a need to give up? What's going on in my life, in myself?” Now, she says, “I try to set realistic goals and timelines, so it's not inevitable that I fail.”

One student, who the observer noted often displayed a tendency to avoid problems and feelings, began to note where he was avoiding difficulties, and said, “the things I learn here I take home and think about.” He gave an example from early in the course when he avoided activities that involved physical challenges that were beyond his abilities. He said that now he felt he could try the activities, seeing what might be possible from a sitting position, instead of just saying, “I can’t.” Another student described his shift from feelings of inadequacy in this area, discussing at length how he was using problem solving skills with a problem at home. He closed by saying that his mind had been much more clear the last few weeks, and he’s “not sure why”. Perhaps his experience in the class led to or at least supported this shift.

All or nothing thinking and finding middle ground in problem solving

“...shutting down doesn’t do anything for me.”

During the course, many students identified quite strongly with the “All or Nothing” segment of the course, in which they reflected on how their problem solving abilities were often compromised by a type of thinking that leads to perfectionism or a low tolerance for adversity. As a result, students gave themselves permission to cease striving for constant perfection, and to be more open-minded and flexible in looking for strategies. Many reflected an idea similar to this student who said, “I learned to break down problems and that you shouldn’t get stuck and not to give up.”

Many students reported gaining a new sense of ability in difficult situations through their learning in the course, including dealing with interpersonal conflict and facing difficult tasks where they broke the problems down into steps that are easier to handle. One student spoke about having quite a lot of conflict with a roommate. He said that in the past he “may have been aggressive, but now I am able to pull back,” indicating a change in his problem solving abilities that also impacted his ability to work with others. Another student was unsure whether she could report an improvement in problem solving skills, recognizing that she finds it difficult to accept small improvements as she’s always operated from an all or nothing framework in the past. Though she still struggles, the course has made her aware that she may need to take on less, break problems down into organized steps, and connect with co-workers or classmates in order to successfully accomplish tasks.

Grounding exercises throughout the pilot courses helped students recognize how disembodied they can be while learning, missing out on happenings in the classroom. By and large, they felt that the breathing, movement, stretching and grounding strategies they learned helped them to find the less extreme middle ground, allowing them to come back or stay with their learning, which in turn contributed to lowering

their anxiety and raising their critical thinking and problem solving skills. As one student confirmed, “In the past I have shut down because I couldn’t take it—shutting down doesn’t do anything for me.” “It” in this context referred to her past experiences of learning and being with people through challenging working relationships. Another student recognized that he still mainly tries to simply avoid problems or difficulties but he’s learned to “take a deep breath” —a direct reference to the grounding work done in the course—and see what the problem is. He said he had found success with this technique because it has calmed him, allowed him to focus and not put too much pressure on himself.

All or nothing thinking can also deeply impact interpersonal relationships in the classroom (for example, thinking that a classmate is either all good or all bad, as opposed to human, complex, flawed and unique), which can have dire implications for essential processes of group problem-solving. Students in these pilot courses seem to have made significant gains in challenging all or nothing thinking in regards to each other, developing enough trust and safety in the classroom to work very constructively at group problem-solving tasks offered within the curriculum.

As an example, in one of the latter classes, the observer noted a significant leap in the students’ depth of trust and engagement with one another. In the course of engaging in a group role play to do with “Old Patterns,” this group of students seemed to swing back and forth between the role playing mode and a sincere discussion together which revealed deep analysis of the topic. Even students who said that they struggled with understanding that unit’s animation (mainly about self-harming behaviour) participated with insight. The students agreed that having a supportive learning environment to come to allows for a break from the old patterns, thereby increasing their chance to use thinking and analysis skills. The part of the animation that was forefront of the discussion was an abusive relationship, and though none of the women in the group spoke in detail about their own situations, it was clear that they were recalling their own and others’ experiences. The group offered one another ideas and resources, one student going so far as offering to bring in shelter information that others might share with women in their life who may need it. Another later reported that the All-or-Nothing section of the kit had encouraged her to think through how she handles problems. She said she has learned to break problems down step-by-step, something she does now in dealing with her home-life and at school.

Organization and decision-making

The same shutting down that students reported in terms of problem solving impacted students' critical thinking and job task organizing skills. Many reported a tendency to procrastinate or to find their minds wandering when trying to complete tasks. More than one student reported that getting started thinking about a problem can be the hardest part, leading to anxiety and panic. Other students get angry with themselves when they experience the challenges of inadequate organizational thinking. They tell themselves that they are "stupid" or will never be able to learn. One student remembered a time when he was lost, and said he "felt low, because I should have been able to figure it out." He concluded that he usually shuts down when faced with difficult tasks, and he also added that this is how he feels about school assignments such as writing, where he often makes excuses to avoid the work. Participants in this research articulated success organizing their thoughts enough to make decisions when they engaged in a reframing or externalizing of the problem so that it became more manageable.

Externalizing and reframing the problem

"... look at what is going on with me—not that the problem is me."

By externalizing problems, students report increased ability to identify tasks and steps to completing necessary tasks. One student summarized this as a gained ability to "stop and think, what is going on that I am not able to think closely." She added that she now can "look at what is going on with me—not that the problem is me." This sense of separating herself from the problem, instead of unrealistically believing that she *is* the problem, allows her to take on the problem, organize her thinking, and take steps towards goals or solutions.

However, at times the discourse of the problem being within them persisted, albeit from a place more informed by an analysis of the links between violence and reactions like fear, anxiety and spacing out. Students made quite dramatic connections between their experience of anxiety or depression and not being able to make decisions or be organized enough to engage in thoughtful decision making. One student who said that she's good at making decisions if it's for the benefit of others, becomes completely blank—meaning she cannot talk, think, listen, understand or problem solve—when she finds herself fearful or anxious. School settings, she says, can sometimes create enough anxiety in her to trigger this type of blankness. Another student connected many of his challenges in thinking to medication that he takes as a result of a violent attack he suffered. He reported that his experience of decision-making now is quite different from how it was before the trauma; he now finds that

he cannot give the attention to a problem he once did, and is not able to think quickly or precisely to find solutions.

In the concluding focus group, some students who had reported in the opening focus group that they struggled with organization reported that they still struggle with this, but also expressed an understanding of the connection between the disorganization or inability to approach difficult tasks or decisions, and the amount of anxiety they feel in their daily lives. One student talked about how she saw herself working toward being more organized: “When I can’t remember things I get scared” she said, but “in school, if I organize it will flow better and the inner conflict and frustration” will have less impact.

4.3 Skills of Working With Others

In the aftermath of violence, students often show a lack of self-awareness of their distrust, judgment, fearfulness, and tendency to compare themselves to others in the classroom setting. Often group conflicts arise as a result of the unexamined feelings that students carry with them. The energy spent on comparing and judging one another often leaves little room to focus on their part in a group dynamic or in solutions to problems the group might like to take on. Furthermore, the experience of marginalization due to situations involving violence, poverty, and mental health concerns results in social isolation and becomes part of someone’s reality, in turn having a significant impact on Essential Skills. Once in the classroom, students who have experienced violence can find themselves being triggered by interactions with others, with varying types of responses, much like the fight, flight or freeze responses they may have had in past encounters with violence. Students may act out in the classroom, argue with one another or physically and emotionally respond to the stress by crying or leaving the room. Others may show “flight” or “freeze” reactions by becoming passive, a way of leaving the room by escaping into their mind, and disengaging with others. Teachers may interpret the silence as lack of interest or agreement with the discourse in the classroom, while students may report that they are not really engaged in learning.

Isolation through judging self and others

During the opening focus group many students already displayed a significant understanding of how violence has impacted their learning. But at this initial focus group this understanding was limited by the belief each student held that they were the only one with this experience. Many felt very alone in this struggle. “I always thought it was just me” one student said. One student reported isolation to the extent that he did not have enough experience with groups to be able to self-assess his

working with others skills. He directly related this to his experience of being bullied in school, which led him to slowly withdraw from participating. Another student agreed that because of being bullied, he did not like school and could see the impacts on his adult life as he chose mostly to work on his own or for himself. At the initial stage these students also seemed at a loss to understand how to cope, could not readily speak about their experience, and had few strategies to overcome their learning difficulties.

Isolation was a theme for virtually all the students, whether they expressed physical isolation (e.g. agoraphobia, debilitating anxiety that kept them indoors and away from other people) or a feeling of disconnection from others even in the midst of other people, a feeling that they were “the only one” who had violent or negative experiences in their lives, school, and work situations. This isolation creates distrust, shame, and disconnection with learning, to name just a few effects. This section outlines how students were observed—and saw themselves—experiencing and overcoming tendencies to self-isolate in a number of ways.

The lack of self-esteem and a sense of not belonging that many students described seemed to contribute to struggles with judging themselves and others harshly that were observed in both the classes and the learning journals. The impact appeared to be that they did not engage fully with the course material or with their classmates, which limited their ability to participate in the group and work with others.

Isolation through self-judgment

“I don’t have the right to ask for help.”

Nearly every student reported some sort of self-judgment or sense of inadequacy in the classroom setting and could relate this back to their experience of violence. Many students reported that in the classroom setting they are fearful of speaking out or, if they do choose to speak out, are fearful that they are being judged by others as stupid or out of sync. This discomfort could also be read in the bolder students who seemed to be either uncomfortable with silences during the response time or talked over others, and paid little or no attention to how much time they spoke in comparison to others.

Either way, once students were gripped by a feeling of inadequacy, they said the result was a desire to disengage with the group to avoid what felt like too much risk. When things are difficult in a group, one student says, “I can’t help anybody. I can do nothing valuable.” One student identified her negative view of herself in this way: “I feel worthless so I don’t ask for help. I feel I don’t have the right to ask for help. I’m a waste of time.” This sentiment was reflected consistently with students in both

groups, who described themselves as unworthy or flawed in such a way that they often did not feel the right to engage with others in learning. One student in the early classes just felt that she needed to figure out what “made me such a horrible person,” and hoped the course could help with this.

At one period of time when students seemed to be reacting quite strongly to each other and to course material, one student was in tears, expressing frustration due to the ongoing violence in her life. The crying led this student to embarrassment and shame, and she left the classroom for ten minutes to gather herself. Later in her learning journal, she reflected that the frustrations and violence in her life led her to feel she didn’t belong anywhere: not in school or at home. Another student in this same group identified with this learner, saying that he felt a strong sense of isolation due to some mobility issues, and his frustrations with school seemed connected to the frustration of difficulty with mobility and connecting in the school setting.

Isolation through judgment of others

“Wake up and smell the coffee.”

During one class at the outset of the course, the observer noted that students were often triggered by each other. One class check-in was quite disrupted by a student who left, fuming with anger at another who had been snacking and making noise.

In his learning journal, one student recognized that he sometimes struggled with feeling that others in the class were not trying their best. He was reflective and noticed that he carries a harsh sense of judgment against his classmates, but did not have the skills to mediate his perceptions. He was specifically referring to a classmate who was visibly struggling, crying and frustrated, and yet he had a lingering feeling that possibly she was just not trying hard enough. His tone showed that he was dissatisfied with his critical feelings but that he could not easily let that feeling go.

Students’ judgements and disregard for others were also expressed through actions such as absenteeism, checking out during the class through use of cell phone texting or frequently leaving and coming back to the room, missing what has been said. Observers and students began to see this early on, especially noting interrupting and disruptive behaviour, which many saw as a way to disengage from learning challenges but also to offset anxiety about being in the group or interacting with students who made them uncomfortable in some way. In the opening sessions, instructors needed to frequently remind some students that talking over others and engaging in side conversations did not allow for the group to hear one another’s stories.

Some students had a tendency to try to offer “advice” when others shared personal information, or in response to questions posed about the characters in the student kit

animations. This advice tended to be of the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” variety, and it tended to keep these students at arm’s length from their classmates, impacting the group engagement, but also showing a disconnect from their own emotions. In viewing the student kit animation on Judging: Using Harsh Words, students were asked what they might say to the woman in the animation. Instead of empathy and understanding, one student felt very strongly that the woman should, “wake up and smell the coffee. Start loving yourself—wake yourself up.” This student seemed to the observer to be lacking in compassion for the woman experiencing harsh words. The same student felt that others, in response to the All or Nothing animation, “should just give 100 percent—tell yourself I want this.”

Letting go of isolation through acceptance of self and others

“It’s okay to feel that way... there’s a willingness to share that and not feel it alone.”

Students in both groups largely agreed that self-isolation through judging themselves and others is counterproductive to learning; they reflected on how recent gains in group trust, engaging with schoolmates and reaching out for support was bringing a change to their experience of working with others. One student noted in her journal her own tendency to speak out in class without listening to others, not recognizing what others are experiencing in the moment. While this student was observed doing this frequently both before and after her recognition of the behaviour, gains in self-awareness are still significant when unlearning such entrenched coping strategies, and we might assume that her insight and reframing of the behaviour may gradually lead to more visible change in the long term.

At the beginning of the course many students reported feeling that they alone deal with feelings of inadequacy. They said that they felt they were alone in their experience, which others would not be able to relate to, and they pre-judged that they were less able than others. Their concept after the course was that they experience similar feelings and thoughts to others and that what is more, it’s understandable and acceptable that they struggle with negativity. Though one student felt that she was only just at the beginning stages of moving past her feelings of inadequacy and recognizing the blocks they caused to her learning, she was willing to accept that at least, “it’s okay to feel that way, but there’s a willingness to share that and not feel it alone.” For some students with a fear of group dynamics, their tendency had been to maintain a certain distance from other learners, which has impacted their group skills. Such students began to report an increase in listening to others, understanding or sympathizing with how others are experiencing the

classroom, a significant gain for those who had either felt helpless or too overwhelmed with their own burdens to engage others’ problems.

The acceptance of their struggles opened the door not only to clearer thinking (improved problem solving, critical thinking and organizational thinking) but also to a sense of forward progress in their feelings about learning and learning environments. Early in the course observers saw students readily express their judgment of themselves and others in terms of engagement or right to be in the classroom. As one student illustrated, “through the kit, I found out that I am a person with rights.” That emerging sense of rights amounted to a sense that she belonged and deserved access to her education.

One student’s sense of not having a right to be in the course was woven through all of her learning, causing her to downplay her life’s experiences, and display a significant sense of disconnect from the group. This was also tinged with her underlying feeling of judgment of the group or individuals who may not “behave” in a way that she felt was appropriate for college students. By the final class, this student shared an awareness of how she not only belonged but could contribute to the group, and that her self-judgment was not only counterproductive to her own learning, but could be perceived by others as a judgment of them, something that she would not like to convey to others who were trying to stay engaged. Another student, who had been impatient with classmates in the beginning and showed a sense of distrust of the course and instruction, came to say, “judging yourself and others hurts your own learning and the learning of others.” By the later classes students were beginning to see that overcoming these feelings of harsh judgment is possible.

Another student felt that coming to a class in which learners were gaining more acceptance of themselves and one another created an environment where they did not have to worry about being perfect. This student, who in her home life experiences being put down for wanting to attend school, appreciated the growing acceptance of one another’s struggles. By the end of the course there appeared to be less fear of differences in the group, and one student made a connection to her ability to voice her thoughts and push herself to break her own silence, which she connected to increased ability to learn and increased self-awareness and self-esteem.

As these students became more engaged in relating to both the stories in the student kit animations and the stories of their classmates, they became more empathetic and compassionate in terms of understanding others’ struggles to make change. One student who showed harsh judgment for students who would use drugs as a method of escape, chose on her own time to “write a letter” to a character in the animation who uses drugs. She shared her letter, a significant piece of writing for a student

whose writing skills are low, and the tone and approach was a complete turn around from her usual “get over it” philosophy. She later discussed not being completely sure whether in writing this letter she was focused on herself or the recipient, the one using drugs. It seems that this student is developing group skills, demonstrating a growing sense of compassion for herself and others. Her classmate agreed, saying that sometimes we judge others and we judge them wrongly, adding that we seem to judge people out of our own weakness: “Judging hurts—it damages a person.”

Isolation through passivity or domination

People need to feel safe in order to think clearly. When all their energy is engaged in a “fight, flight or freeze” response there is little energy left for engaging in learning. Brain researchers have identified that the ingrained reactions of fight, flight, or freeze take the blood supply away from the neo-cortex needed for higher order thinking and affect the Broca’s language area of the brain. Students, therefore, need to gain trust in order to gain skills.

Throughout both pilot courses, but especially in the beginnings, some students were quite silent, even when they might have been expected to share what was difficult in the classroom. Early in the course, some students seemed to show discomfort (body language, averted eyes) during some of the more graphic animations of the kits, and the researcher noted that these students seemed not yet ready to engage with the group, possibly not trusting that they could share opposing views or object to the content of the animations. As they became more comfortable with the group some of the quieter students revealed that silence does not always mean they are okay with what’s happening—they may not feel empowered to add to the class, or when other people are expressing anger or even simply discomfort, fear kicks in and keeps them from responding. In the case of the PPR group, the researchers wondered whether some of the silence from ELL participants was due to language levels but also noted that some of these students did not seem to listen or engage other learners.

In contrast, there were students who at times dominated the discussion, which early on was seen in different ways with each group. At PPR, it may have been a matter of having students at quite different literacy and language levels, but the researcher also noted that the introduction of “storytelling” opened the door to students telling their own stories, which can be difficult to manage within the time restraints of the course setting. A few of these students tended to be quite dominant in discussions, letting their own needs or ideas take precedence over others, impacting the group and showing a lack of understanding of group dynamics. With the GBC group, there was an example of a couple of students dominating when, in the second class, the

instructor opened up the discussion, offering students a chance to freely offer contributions without the moderating effect of an instructor calling on individuals.

There was a sense that in both groups those who tended to dominate the discussion did lack skills in working with others, and that this behaviour had possibly begun as a strategy to overcome anxiety or attempts to seek validation. In the GBC group, during an early course check-in, one student proved to be overbearing in engaging other students’ thoughts and feelings, verging on parental advice-giving. The observer noted a significant amount of silence from others in the classroom and felt that there was an underlying disapproval of the paternalistic use of advice-giving from the one student. One student at the end of the lesson showed anticipation and expectation of this type of dynamic when she wrote in her learning journal, “I feel nervous when I work with others, because I’m afraid they will try to overpower me.”

Dominant behaviour (as opposed to passivity) as a strategy of self-protection, seemed more prevalent in the GBC group than in the PPR group. A comparative analysis from a critical and systemic perspective could offer insight into this finding. Perhaps the subtle differences in the groups could be due to the broader social privilege GBC students experience due to higher literacy levels and some degree of comfort in institutional settings, as well as the greater representation of men in that group.

Finding new ways of responding to decrease the isolation of passivity and domination

“I’m starting to recognize safe places—places in which I feel free to express myself and learn.”

Participant observers noted that about mid-way through the course (class 4 and 5), as students began to work with one another more cohesively and gained in their trust for one another, they became more engaged in the material and the group was strengthened through increased working with others skills. While these skills were both developed and experienced individually, the impact of this individual development on the larger group and its broader functionality as a learning group became quite evident by the end, especially during the session in which the group processed its closure.

One student who had experienced institutional violence as a child in protective services began to demonstrate increased connection to the course and her classmates, having been very aloof in classes in the beginning and seemingly non-committal about her participation in the course work. She said of this experience that

she was beginning to “recognize safe places—places in which I feel free to express myself and learn.” This student grapples with overcoming the violence of unresponsive institutions that has been a part of her life, and now she is trying to sort out how to be free in a world in which she has found institutions to be abusive at worst, and unresponsive at best.

Students who were particularly dominant in earlier classes, either talking too much or consistently drawing all discussions back to their particular concerns rather than staying with another’s ideas, became more aware of the connection between allowing space for other’s stories, ideas, and thoughts and being a stronger learner. A normally talkative and quite self-focused learner identified in herself the desire to listen more to others, showing an increase in group skills and equating that to increased empathy and compassion for others’ experiences. She acknowledged that her approach to the group is changing: an increase in listening skills is helping her relate to the people in her classes but also to be more engaged with course materials and activities.

In one incident, a student was verging on a panic attack in class due to some personal stress. This student’s issue threatened to overtake the learning of the whole group or perhaps to lead her to flee the classroom and sacrifice her own learning. Yet with encouragement she was able to check out the problem and then quickly return to her learning. She reflected on the impact of this course, to help her talk herself down from panic, be more reflective about her participation in the group, and develop her listening skills to pay attention to the input of others. What’s more, this student was able to recognize later in the course when she was interrupting others, and to offer apologies and listen more fully. As the urge to take flight is challenged, the person is able to take another look at the potential threat and ask if it is really a threat in the here and now, or if they are managing a trigger from past experiences. We believe that students were able to understand that whichever fight, flight or freeze responses they tend to resort to are connected to past experiences and survival strategies, and to begin to renegotiate responses more conducive to learning.

Fear for physical or emotional safety

Students reported that due to their experiences of physical or emotional violence, they carried a lot of fear. Fear, leading most commonly to anxiety and depression, prevented students from engaging in their learning. Most students reported struggling with staying present in learning environments; this lack of presence could be mental (mind wandering, being blocked or stuck in thinking) or physical (not participating in school, leaving situations when anxiety arises, or missing school due

to depression or anxiety). For one student this fear extended to her worries about family in her country where there is unrest and violence. She said that for periods of time after being in contact with those at home, she cannot think, she’s nervous and struggles to participate with groups at school. In her learning journal, one student noted that not only did violence in her life impact her self-esteem, but it also adversely affected her ability to participate in learning. She summed up this connection simply: “I have fear.”

Responses to fear for safety

“Sometimes you don’t want to think of where you’ve been when it’s not good.”

As a result of past abusive relationships or assaults, many students reported not being able to feel safe in group situations. Students described great difficulty in the classroom setting, explaining a heightened sense of their surroundings and misgivings whether the space itself would be physically safe and/or a place they could escape from if need be. One student reported mentally assessing every group situation and every classroom for whether there are easy escape routes and whether she can place herself physically in the environment in a way that allows her to constantly assess her safety. Similarly, another student reported that she would notice her anxiety in the classroom, which she connects directly to her experience of violence, and its impact on her ability to think. This student even realizes that this hyper-vigilance will not allow her to read text too closely for fear that she would focus too much and fail to notice “lurking danger.” Another student reported that, consistently, when he finds himself struggling to stay engaged with his learning, he is dwelling on a violent experience in his past. This disengagement, he notes, occurs during flashbacks to a violent assault, and can even be triggered when given a long reading passage in class or when he is asked to listen to others speak at length.

Emotional safety, likewise, came out in students’ concerns about being “dominated” in groups, where they spoke of fears of having ideas shot down, or being shut down verbally by others. Overall, many of the students said that they simply wrote themselves off over time, deciding that they just could not learn, and said this was a message that was often reinforced by parents, teachers, or abusive partners. This speaks not only to difficulties they experience in working with others, but also to the difficulty they experience imagining themselves as continuous learners, another essential skill needed for work, life and self-actualization.

In contrast to the vulnerable feeling that caused some students to withdraw and feel unsafe, some students were clear that group environments and negative interactions with classmates can sometimes lead them to feel angry and on the verge of acting out

angrily or violently. In the early days of the GBC class, there were some noticeable events in which students were clearly having an impact on one another's participation and engagement. The observer noted that working with others skills were being hampered due to interpersonal conflict. When one of the students reported on her own about the situation, she was clear that both her reaction to classmates and her need to take leave of the classroom for a period were due to her own raw emotions, which she described as rage.

In the face of fear experienced or anticipated in the classroom, it was a struggle for some students to stay physically and emotionally present to the happenings and activities in the classes. One student, who had shared a little about her distrust and concerns for her safety in the group, displayed this discomfort through physical agitation, using her cellphone and texting, leaving the room and coming back several times and generally acting disengaged with the content. At times she seemed unaware of the connection between her disruptive behavior and her feeling of distrust and lack of safety, but the researcher sensed that her discomfort with the group and topic of discussion led to her strained ability to physically remain in the room with others. Another student identified the need to leave the room when she does not understand something or the discussion moves too quickly for her to keep up. This strategy could perhaps be used as a way to settle emotions and quickly return to learning, but in this case the student identified that her reaction was causing challenges in her course participation. Like this student, others reported that not trusting people was a key source of disruption in their ability to work with other students in the classroom setting.

Other students, even when physically present, described feeling emotionally disengaged or guarded, affecting how present they could be to the learning offered by the course. One student, though able to attend regularly and and to stay in the room, said he avoided engaging with the material for a fear of dealing with his own emotions in front of others. The observer noted many times that this student seemed particularly reticent to engage, and he agreed, saying, "sometimes you don't want to think about where you've been when it's not good." In an activity in which students were drawing and describing how they judge themselves harshly, this student said he "tries not to think about it." He spent much of the course deflecting attention away from himself, and though he got along well with the group he seemed to remain somewhat of an outsider as others became closer and more aware of each others' stories. Another student reflected in her learning journal on the lack of stability in her youth, having been adopted into a family that did not care for her. She wrote that she finds herself daydreaming or fantasizing about her birth family, hoping that they might accept her and take care of her in a way that her adoptive family did not. This

daydreaming, while clearly an emotional process, kept her distant from the emotions brought up in the course and by others, and may have felt safer for her emotionally than here and now engagement with the impact of violence on her learning.

Furthermore, worth noting as a testament to the depth of these feelings, some students noted that the lack of safety was not only within the physical space and social environment, but extends to a lack of safety within their own bodies. One student wrote: “when I stop paying attention, I notice that I am...anxious, breathing is still, my sight changes, my heart rate is quick and I’m sweaty.” Another student, who said she had always been perceived as a “good” student, but always struggled to trust others in groups, both socially and at work. These patterns of distrust impacted her physical health, creating anxieties and manifesting in back pain, migraines and other symptoms. She described the hidden nature of the impacts of her fear in groups: “I have been perceived as a good student, but my patterns have caused me problems internally.” She says it helps to learn that there others who share her concerns: “when other people are taking risks, that is better because we are sharing and helping each other.”

Increasing physical and emotional safety

“My whole heart is here.”

Students who had felt a sense of fear for their physical and emotional safety in groups were given tools which they reported helped them not only feel safer, but also to cope more successfully with moments in which they feel unsafe. The ability to question instructors, because of their assurance that the instructor was attuned to the impacts and issues that they might be dealing with in the face of aftermath of violence, was something that some students learned during the course that they were not aware was possible before. One student summarized the change in her experience saying, “now I know I can go to a place and I know that I can leave, I can ask a question (of the instructor). I didn’t feel like this before the pilot.” This is a huge step in increasing the safety experienced in the learning situation.

As students began to trust one another and to open up to the student kit animations, recognizing the authenticity of the scenarios therein, they began to connect their past experiences to their current context. This opening up to the kinship of shared experiences allowed students to feel safer and less isolated, more connected to their peers, and more prepared to address barriers to their learning. Observers saw many experiences similar to that of one student who reported that she was beginning to contextualize her experiences and understand the connection to her challenges with learning. This student recognized that her anxiety and inability to commit to the

course every week (her attendance was irregular) had to do with being uncomfortable with others and with the discussions about violence in one another's lives. One student who had shown a lot of emotion the previous week—something that is difficult for her—shared that she felt a growing recognition that acceptance of her experiences and awareness of not being alone is bringing healing to her. This student showed a significant increase in her ability to stay present in the class, to be open to others and less dominating during class discussion. She reported in the final class that others, including her worker and people in her community, had noted she was calmer and better at handling situations in her social and personal life.

One student came into the group very distrustful and guarded with the group. She often lashed out at other learners and at the course instructor. To the observer, it seemed obvious that she was protecting herself by not engaging the material and by actively criticizing much of what was said or done by others. As the course progressed, however, she began to show a great sense of levity and even used self-deprecating humour in places to increase her sense of belonging and engagement with the group. She showed a deep distrust of language and was very critical of the language used in the kit and by classmates, but by the end of the course was able to open herself up to the idea of “playing” with language—a huge area of growth for her—and to accept other students' use of language (coarse language, analogies or metaphors that she didn't relate to) with much less judgment.

Towards the end of the course, the observers began to note that students who had been passive and quiet in the early classes began to show increased readiness to participate in the class. One student who had discussed her fear of being in groups and also her fear of being in a confined classroom space was able to joke with others about the space—tables askew and the circle not formed properly—in a way that she likely could not have at the outset of the course. Another student who had displayed quite a lot of distrust of the research and was mostly disengaged from the course work, identified in class 7 that she felt “happy to be here—my whole heart is here.” This student, whom the observer noted in earlier sessions seemed anxious waiting for classes to start, seemed more eager and relaxed.

The process of ending a group like this, whether because of the ending or changing of the relationships or the ending or changing of the engagement with the material of the course, can be expected to contain issues of unresolved conflict, avoidance of difficult feelings, diminishment of the impact of the people and the processes involved or total avoidance in the form of physical absence. The growth of a group, and the individual learning of its members therefore, can be made visible in the way in which it ends. During the final class of the GBC pilot, in which students,

researchers and the instructor shared a meal to mark the end of the group, participant observation documented a wonderful depth of engagement in this stage of closure or ending. Students engaged in a very full process of acknowledging the impact of both the people and the learning within the course. In a movement activity in which students were asked to move slowly in a circle together, they commented on the ‘organized chaos’ of trying to get a group to move as one. Reflection on the activity echoed the learning they had done around control and connection in groups and of the process as being at times messy and uncomfortable, but also valuable and meaningful. In a check-out activity in which they were asked to name one thing they hoped for the others in the room, participants showed an extraordinary amount of compassionate other-orientation, wishing for others: to feel more comfortable and important; to set goals for themselves and be happy with them; to allow themselves to open up; to find peace; to remember their own value and to find reminders when they need them; and finally to have a feeling of accomplishment. The last participant reminded others that “we are all a light unto the world.”

We can conclude that increased understanding of how they isolate and remove themselves—mentally or physically—from the learning environment allowed students to feel safer, see the survival strategy more accurately, and access greater compassion for self and others. They thus became more engaged as they challenged themselves around this tendency. Furthermore, they learned through assurance from the course instructor that if they were struggling with any of the content from the course or the kit, they could take breaks in order to manage their anxiety and allow them to re-enter more engaged and relaxed. This message is reinforced by the coffee cup links in every ‘room’ in the *Helping Myself Learn* kit, which offer different ways to take a break. This encouragement to care for self by taking breaks appeared to support students to actually stay more present more of the time.

5.0 Key Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for Future Course Design

The pilot course strongly suggests the value of addressing the impact of violence on learning in order to enhance the learning of two Essential Skills, Working with Others and Thinking Skills. More broadly, the pilots suggest that for learners with past or current experience of violence, addressing the impacts of this may be beneficial in enhancing *any* learning. This leads us to recommend that the student kit *Helping Myself Learn* be widely used in upgrading and essential skills classes in order to help students understand, and develop strategies to counteract these impacts.

Course length

In the college setting, a course of this sort should ideally be no shorter than 14 weeks, or a regular semester, with a class length of 3 hours. In the community setting, working with LBS or ELL learners, the course should ideally run for substantially longer. Courses for the LBS and ELL learners in particular need to be mindful of the time it takes to review relevant language and vocabulary and to contextualize the learning and analysis required in the student kit. LBS and ELL learners in the pilot course struggled with understanding the animations which they found too fast, and the teacher was only able to cover a very limited portion of the material for each theme. Various lengths were suggested to make it possible to introduce all of the sections of the kit, such as 3 or 4 classes for each of the 5 sections along with 1 or 2 classes for opening and closing the course – a total of 17 to 24 weeks. However, students in community programs do not often commit for such long periods of time. If there is a need to run courses in shorter time spans, then for this group it may also be beneficial to teach sections of the kit or to narrow the scope of the course to some pertinent themes or topics of interest. All teachers and observers and many students agreed that 3 hours per class is needed in order to carefully open and close each session as well as for deep and thoughtful exploration during the class.

Course delivery

Following delivery of the pilot, one course instructor prepared a comprehensive set of notes on how the pilot course was developed and implemented. The goal with these notes is to provide “a collection of caveats, approaches and ideas for application, and potential pitfalls to avoid in each unit” for any organization wishing to create a similar course. The instructors made many careful choices in the way that the course was run on a daily basis including such things as appropriate opening

check-ins, and room set up, which we recommend in order to facilitate a healthy and cohesive group. We recommend that anyone setting up a course consult these notes which can be found in the Teacher’s Room of the student kit in “changing education” at learningandviolence.net.² Online readers may click [here](#) to go directly to this document.

Both the beginning and the ending of the course should be mindfully planned to consider the challenging nature of the material. The course instructors strongly recommended that the opening sessions should include a significant amount of time allotted to icebreakers, trust building exercises, and creation of group guidelines. The development together of a broad understanding of the definition of violence is a key to students feeling connected to the topic, developing an appropriate understanding of the personal, educational and societal impacts of violence. At the beginning of each class, the instructor should allow time for daily “check-ins” to allow students to address any on-going interpersonal challenges or any anxieties brought from other settings. At the end of the course, there should be a considerable amount of time for thorough and healthy closure for the group.

Over the span of the course, there was much discussion about the graphic nature of the language and topics in the student kit animations. A few students struggled with the use of coarse language and at times seemed unable to focus on the topic due to the distraction created by it. Others felt quite connected to the raw characters in the animation, and praised the kit for being realistic and reflecting language and topics that they could relate to. Students accepted the coarse language more readily when given forewarning that the topics and language used were going to be challenging. We recommend addressing this topic with students at the beginning of the course and revisiting these kinds of warnings with students before each animation.

Arranging seats in a circle was a conscious choice in the pilot course planning. Sitting around tables in a circle gave students the benefit of facing one another but also the “protection” of a table to sit behind. Students used to more formal college settings can feel quite uncomfortable with this at first, and it helps to give students a break from the circle format by including break out groups and periods working alone or with partners at individual computers. Students acknowledged the strength of this format, one saying that the circle meant she was more accountable for her participation with the group and, of past courses, “if someone had noticed that I was never paying attention, maybe something could have been done.” Another student agreed it was difficult at first, but that “by the third class I was able to say it was difficult, to not hide

²<http://learningandviolence.net/StudentKit/TeachersRoom/KitAsCourseCurriculum.pdf>

in the classroom setting. I didn't have to project my worries; I learned to stay in the now." The circle format enabled the group to connect with one another, and encouraged sharing, while the teacher maintained a strong focus on learning.

Technical considerations

It is important to recognize that in a course designed to make primary use of a web-based tool, the instructor must build in set-up time and have the necessary technical support to ensure the smooth integration of the online and live learning. It will be important for future course design to consider that some activities lend themselves to the use of a projector for the group as a whole to interact with the material, while others may be better explored by students working individually or in pairs at their own computers. In some settings it may be challenging to make all this equipment available but we recommend that where possible a room containing both a computer and projector along with a set of computers for individual or pairs work is an ideal setting for using this kit to strengthen Essential Skill learning.

5.2 Recommendations for Use and Additions to the Kit

Students themselves made suggestions for further uses for and additions to the kit. One woman suggested that PPR should create a women's group specifically designed to make use of the student kit. Although the PPR course was attended by only women, her recommendation was to have a course that speaks more specifically to women's issues and the issue of violence as experienced by women in particular. Building on this, there may also be value in designing courses specifically for other groups such as men, women, teens, particular ethnicities, or any other demographic. The course could be modified (in culturally appropriate ways) to develop an understanding of the particularities of violence experienced by a particular group, the impact on this group's learning, and strategies for addressing these impacts. Another student suggested that the kit should be modified to more fully address the complex dynamics of systemic violences and how they create and shape experiences such as poverty, disability, and mental health concerns.

There were several ideas for possible additional "doors," or themes – for example, the ways in which a tendency to "hide" (both literally and metaphorically) in the aftermath of violence can undermine learning in the classroom. We also heard suggestions for additional material for existing themes, such as new animations which include characters with different experiences, perhaps more subtle violences or coping mechanisms, or stories of how the impacts play out not only in the

classroom but also more broadly in interaction with college systems. We believe there would be value in exploring a broad range of further possibilities of this sort.

Students agreed widely that educators need more training on the issue of learning and violence, in order to understand that students’ (especially children’s) behaviour in the classroom may be the result of violence in their lives and not simply because they are “bad” students. This recommendation is important for the successful learning of many more students, and is also telling as it reveals the difference that being aware of this issue made for students and teachers in the pilot. We hope that many more educators, educational institutions and programs will learn about these issues and come to address them using this kit and other materials developed through this web-based learning project. And we believe there would be great value in developing further materials for other learning venues such as elementary and high school, correctional institutions, and the family.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

We believe it would be beneficial to supplement this study by creating a small follow-up project to assess the longer-term impact of this course on students in the pilot course who are willing to participate. We would like to interview these students in-depth about changes in their attitudes toward themselves as learners and in their Essential Skills, beliefs about what allowed them to stay in the course, experiences during other educational courses and learning moments, and decisions about engagement in further educational courses. We would also like to follow up with students who began the course, but did not complete it, in order to assess developing attitudes towards engagement in learning, developments in Essential Skills, reflections on what stood in the way of successful completion of the pilot course, and suggestions for changes that might have improved retention in the pilot, or for alternate appropriate learning opportunities that would have better met their needs.

The pilot courses offered only 20 hours of instruction, so we would like to see whether students engaged in a longer course would demonstrate more significant gains in Thinking Skills and Working with Others Skills. We are also eager to document the impact of short and long courses focusing on other Essential Skills, and other learning. We believe such courses would likely show that this type of course helps improve other skills, in addition to the two examined in this study. Further data on such experiences would provide valuable support for widespread use of these materials.

6.0 Conclusions

In conclusion, this study revealed an increase in two Essential Skills for all the students who participated in the pilot course. Even though this study was limited by the short duration of the course (a total of 20 hours for each pilot), it still had a significant impact on students' understanding of the issue and some strategies they could use to address it, and showed increasing improvement in the two Essential Skills at the heart of the study. While the number of students was relatively small, the range of participants suggests that the material is effective for colleges and community programs and all levels of students. Anecdotal evidence leads us to conclude that the value of addressing the impact of violence on learning is ongoing and cumulative – as success leads to further success. The participants from the pilot, particularly those in the college setting, report extensive gains that they are able to carry with them into their new courses, and as they see the value of their new attitudes and strategies, they are able to strengthen their confidence and ability to learn effectively still further.

Bringing together the often-divergent conversations around learning and violence had a significant impact on students, broadening their understanding of how their past and present situations of violence influence their experience of school. Students usually feel that they must leave all their experiences and memories at the door, to come to and join in the learning environment. These pilot courses suggest that providing students with a learning environment in which they can be themselves, and educators with opportunities to learn the value of encouraging students to bring their whole selves to learning, may allow for more success than many students dare to believe is possible.

Some students came to this pilot course vaguely bothered, others acutely concerned, by a sense that their learning was difficult if not impossible, but had little language to help them reflect on and make sense of their experiences. Students felt isolated and alone with their experiences, rarely able to make sense of their struggles to themselves let alone explain them to others. We heard students talk about their challenges to stay engaged in learning, to connect with the ideas and activities, to feel confident they could learn, and to believe that they belonged amongst their peers. They talked about their struggles to connect to the lessons, the teachers, their classmates. The opportunity to explore these experiences and how to mitigate their impact on learning did help students begin to substantially strengthen their Essential Skills as they learned strategies for success in the classroom.

The a-ha moments for students occurred with every new unit of the pilot course. For example many students had never considered that the “spacing out” that they experienced in school had any connection to past experiences or to how they were managing currently in the classroom. For example, one student realized that she had spaced out much of her life but never realized that this was what was happening or had the words to explain it. For many of these students, this unexamined phenomenon was not something they considered they could change or improve. As they learned that they were not alone in this experience, and gained tools to bring themselves back to the moment, they began to see their focus, concentration and problem solving skills improve. Through recognizing their commonalities with others, they were able to begin to connect with their classmates and their teachers in new ways.

In another example, one man’s original analysis of his thinking skills was all in relation to his adulthood experience of trauma, noting that his thinking was slowed because of both the anxiety and fear that he’s coped with since the violent event and the medication he now takes. As a result of the course, he began to look back at his childhood and make connections between bullying he experienced and some of the difficulties he had with learning. He said he was a harsh judge of himself, and the bullying left him with a legacy of negative self-talk. Another student who is legally blind came to see that perhaps much of his struggle with learning and literacy could have been explained by his experience of violence and trauma, not simply his low vision. As a result, his confidence grew through this knowledge that his learning difficulties could be externalized by his experience, and he was able to say “I’ve got skills—how can I help others in my community?” New understandings open possibilities for new strategies and new ways of relating to others.

For some students, part of their motivation to engage in this course was to become a resource in their community while others seem to have surprised themselves with the leadership role they have taken on since participating in the course. One student, who has no Internet access at home, has requested a copy of the kit on DVD or USB memory stick to ensure that she can continue to use it herself and show it to others in her home. She already shares the resources broadly with friends and members of her community at Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre (PARC). With the support of staff she plans to teach an introduction to the kit at PARC in the near future. We hear that other students are sharing the material with friends and with their faith communities. These stories not only illustrate the value of the materials in that students continue to use them and to want others to have access to them, but also reveal the way the learning from the course is helping students to continue to develop their Working with Others Skills.

It would seem that the potential of these materials to enhance Essential Skill learning is still unfolding, and we are continually delighted by hearing about new uses and connections the students are making. Anecdotal data collected after the close of the course continues to reveal new information on the ongoing impact of the course. For example, even students who dropped out appear to have learned important skills through their short participation in the course. We heard from a community worker in contact with one student that although she couldn't complete the course, she continues to revisit the kit whenever she finds classes or group interactions a struggle, and the resources are helping her to stay with her learning.

The students who continue on in Academic Upgrading and adult literacy courses in the community and those in the *Redirection Through Education* and *For You* programs maintain contact with their pilot course instructors and the researchers, often telling enthusiastic stories about the details of how their experience in the pilot is continuing to contribute to learning and change in their lives. The nature of a small study such as this, done in the college and community setting, allows for the benefit of informal follow-up. As we complete this report, anecdotal data that is finding its way to us, along with the formal data collected during the course, leads us to conclude that the learning gains for students using the student kit are remarkable. We are convinced that by addressing the interactions between learning and violence and the impacts in our communities of learning, other programs and courses would see increased success in all learning, including the Essential Skills. In the absence of this approach too many students are giving up on themselves and their ability to learn; making courses such as this one available in various educational settings would enable many more to achieve their learning goals.

Closing reflections from one course instructor

We close with the reflections of one of the course instructors who co-authored the student kit material and is deeply familiar with the impacts violence has in learning environments. These reflections, while not a part of our data collection, relate very closely to our findings, and thus we hope will encourage others as they consider this topic, the implications of our research, and the potential for future work in this area:

As with much research dealing with violence, ethical issues such as the imperative to confidentially tend to complicate reporting. And as with much work aimed at the human heart, such as developing self-esteem, the results are hard to quantify. In this course, however, the gains made by learners were both clear and stunning. One learner, whose guardedness and humourless defensiveness made it a struggle even to stay in the room at first, ended up connecting to many people with playfulness, self-respect and tender-hearted

gratitude. This learner sang a song at a public event to launch the online tools which began: “how could anyone have ever told you/you were anything less than beautiful? less than worthy?” This sense of people accessing compassion for self and others, and developing the capacity to laugh at the self and its totally understandable but terrible habit, echoed across the experience of all participants. Addressing how the impacts of violence have affected our lives and learning introduced the salves of “not alone” and “not crazy.” To varying degrees, people were able to add the phrase, “not my fault.”

Throughout the course some learners were teasing out the connections between extreme trauma and invasive memories—beginning to see how what they had perceived as normal or “just my personality”—and learning. Learners began with ideas that told them, “I will never be free; I am broken” and progressed to saying something like, “I could be the author of this life; I could be ready to undertake this work.” This was affirmation that it is possible to have the chosen life that these students are seeking, and provided clear feedback that such is exactly what was received.

Finally, and I feel this is central to the course’s accomplishments, some learners enacted very blatantly a tendency that is common to those who have experience violence: participants compared the severity of the experience of violence to those of others. Some learners doubted a sense of belonging in a course for others who’d had it worse. Through experience gained in the course, the violence students had experienced was finally, definitively named “violence,” and then the fact that seeing it as not so bad is a coping mechanism became clear to these learners. Not only that but many other learners named, though working with the content of the course’s judging unit, the fact that this tendency to compare oneself to others is in itself a commonality among people trying to learn in the aftermath of violence.

It is in those A-ha! Moments that opened for learners the possibility of turning some of the energy that has heretofore been consumed by surviving toward the project of learning. The first step is feeling like one deserves a life of one’s choosing. During our course, one learner, whose very body was broken by long ago and recent violence got a new apartment, in a better neighbourhood. “It is nice,” this student told us all. “I’m decorating...I’m making it even nicer for myself. Because I’m artistic, I’m good at deciding how to set things up.” Other learners cheered in congratulations, fully apprehending what a victory had been so hard won.

7.0 References

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8.0 Appendices

8.1 Helping Yourself Learn Informed Consent Form

8.2 Helping Yourself Learn Information and Background

8.3 Focus Group Question Guidelines: Opening And Closing Focus Groups

8.4 Questionnaire/Rubric - Thinking About Your Skills

8.5 Writing Guidelines For Observers And Students

8.1 *Helping Yourself Learn* Informed Consent Form

Purpose of Our Research

The purpose of this research is to look at what you learn if you participate in the course “Helping Yourself Learn” either at George Brown College or at Parkdale Project Read. The course explores the impact of violence on learning and how to learn successfully in spite of tough experiences. We will be looking particularly at whether the course helps you improve your thinking skills and how you work with others. This research is part of a larger project called “Web-based Tools to Support Effective Learning and Teaching for Survivors of Violence.” You can learn more about the scope of the project by visiting [xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](#) and looking in the project background section.

Taking Part in the Study is Voluntary

It is up to you if you want to be a part of this study and course. You may choose to stop participating at any time. You can choose not to answer any questions in the research. If you decide not to participate in or continue in the course once it has started it will not impact your standing or participation with anyone involved in the research at George Brown College or Parkdale Project Read.

What Will You Be Asked To Do in the Research?

You will be asked to take part in a free course that meets for 10 weeks, 2 hours per week. You will take part in two focus groups (1.5-2 hours each), answer two questionnaires (.5-1 hour each), and write in a learning journal (15 minutes each) about what you’re learning during the class. There will also be a member of the research team writing observations about the learning in the course, commenting on the effectiveness of the learning tools and students’ gains in essential skills. If you consent to participate in the research then you are consenting to allow the researcher to make observations during the course that will be used in the research findings. All of information will help the primary researcher understand how the teaching tools are helping you learn. You will be given time to respond to the questions and do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

Benefits and Risks

Your involvement in this research will help strengthen the tools and teaching approaches so that other students can learn more about how violence has affected their learning and improve their skills. By

participating you may learn about yourself, learn strategies that help you become a stronger learner, and improve your group skills and thinking skills. You may also benefit from knowing that you will have helped other students and teachers.

One potential risk is that reflection on the past can be painful or upsetting. You will be given details on our research and be able to decide to participate or not. Your participation is voluntary and you can choose not to answer any of the questions or to withdraw from the research at any time without being asked the reasons for your withdrawal. Also, there will be people to support you during and after the research (people to talk to or refer you to more support) if you find that you are having a hard time because of the information of the class. The Parkdale Project Read support contact is Johanna XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX and at George Brown contact is Chris XXXXXXXXX. According to the law, disclosure of information about violence that may impact vulnerable persons will be reported in the appropriate manner.

Withdrawal From the Study

You can withdraw your consent at any time during the study without telling anyone why. Your decision to stop participating or to not answer any of the questions will not affect your relationship with anyone from the project or your participation or standing at George Brown College or Parkdale Project Read, now or in the future. If you withdraw from the course, you may request that all the information gathered from you will be returned to you.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Your identity and information will be kept protected and confidential. When you participate in the focus groups, we will ask that the group agree to keep everything said in the class confidential and that those who cannot commit to this not to participate. All of the information you give as a part of the research (the focus group responses, the questionnaires, and the learning journals) will be collected from you by the primary researcher (Lee Delaino) and only seen by her or her advisor, Jenny Horsman. Also, the written observations of the instructors are a part of the research and thus will be kept private and confidential. No identifying information about you will be used in the research report or anything written about the data. We will keep all the information we gather in a secure, locked storage space in room XXXX at George Brown College, St. James Campus, and your name will not appear anywhere in the research report.

How will this research be used?

We will address the idea of gains in essential skills during the exit focus group. Key elements of the report will be on the website and students will be informed where they can find this information. Students may also request an exit interview from the primary researcher in which their participation can be discussed and any notes or findings related to their individual participation may be addressed.

Researchers

Lee Delaino will be leading this research process. She will be advised and assisted by Jenny Horsman. There will be a researcher in attendance during the course. Johanna Xxxxxxx (at George Brown College) and Chris Xxxxxxx (at Parkdale Project Read) will be in attendance during the course as a part of the research team, making observations as noted above. If you have any questions about the research or your role in the study please feel free to contact Lee Delaino at XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Ethics Board Contact

If you have any questions or concerns about ethical issues in the research, please contact XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

CONSENT FORM

I, _____, consent to voluntarily participate in the research study, "Considering the Impacts of the Pilot Course titled 'Helping Yourself Learn' on the Essential Skills of Thinking and Working With Others" conducted by Lee Delaino and Jenny Horsman and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I have understood the nature of this project and understand that I can withdraw from the project at anytime without penalty and do not have to give any reason for withdrawal.

I consent to:

- Participate in the Pilot Course "Helping Yourself Learn" and the research project
 - Participate in the:
 - focus groups (2)
 - learner questionnaires (2)
 - written learning journals (each class)
- (check each box for yes)

I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Print Name: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

(Participant Copy)

CONSENT FORM

I, _____, consent to voluntarily participate in the research study, “Considering the Impacts of the Pilot Course titled ‘Helping Yourself Learn’ on the Essential Skills of Thinking and Working With Others” conducted by Lee Delaino and Jenny Horsman and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I have understood the nature of this project and understand that I can withdraw from the project at anytime without penalty and do not have to give any reason for withdrawal.

I consent to:

- Participate in the Pilot Course “Helping Yourself Learn” and the research project
- Participate in the:
 - focus groups (2)
 - learner questionnaires (2)
 - written learning journals (each class)(check each box for yes)

I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Print Name: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

(Researcher Copy)

8.2 *Helping Yourself Learn* Information and Background

The pilot course: **Helping Yourself Learn** and the Research Study: **Considering the Impacts of the Pilot Course called “Helping Yourself Learn” on the Essential Skills of Thinking and Working With Others**

Background Information

The pilot course “**Helping Yourself Learn**” has been created as part of a two year project that developed web-based learning tools so that students and instructors can understand more about the impacts of violence and learning. This pilot course will serve as the focus of a new research project that is looking at how the learning in the course also helps students increase their essential skills in the area of Thinking and Working With Others.

The pilot course starts **MAY 24** and will meet once a week for 10 weeks (2 hour classes) (**TUESDAYS 12:30-2:30**) We will provide transportation support (tokens to help travel to a from class) and all of the learning supplies you might need during the course. You will use computers and the Internet as well as participate in small group and individual activities, writing and reading exercises and discussions. If you choose to participate in the class you will also be a part of the research project.

The information will be collected in a few different ways:

1. Focus Groups: you will be asked to participate in a focus group at the beginning (**May 26**) and again at the end of the course. The focus group will be a discussion about how you use learning skills in school, life and work. The focus group should last about 1.5-2 hours and will happen on the first day of the course and the final day of the course.
2. Questionnaire: You will be asked to fill out a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the course to give you a chance to self-assess your thinking and working with others skills. The questionnaire should take about .5-1 hour and will take place within the first or second day of the course and again at the end of the course. (**May 26** at the end of the focus group)
3. Journal entries: You will be asked to take 15 minutes at the end of every class to reflect in writing on your learning. These will be gathered from you by the primary researcher at the end of every class or every other class at the least.
4. Your teachers will also be writing in a journal that will reflect on how the learning tools are working and how it is impacting your essential skills.

All of the documents, the focus group notes, the questionnaires and the journal entries done by you and the instructors will be collected from you directly by the primary researcher (Lee Delaino) and will remain confidential and stored in a secure office in a locked file. (Room SJC XXX)

If you would like to participate:

1. Participating in the course and the research is completely voluntary. You can withdraw from the class at any time or choose not to answer any question without explaining why. Choosing not to participate in the class or withdrawing will not impact any of your other classes.
2. Your responses to any activity or assignment for the class will be kept confidential and your actual name will not be used in any of the research material. We will ask everyone who participates in the class to respect one another's privacy by not sharing anyone's personal information.
3. If you choose to participate there is an Informed Consent Form explaining the project and your rights. We will ask you to sign that form if you take part in the course and research study.

If you are interested in participating, please see Lee Delaino and she will discuss this information with you and answer any questions you might have.

- **Lee Delaino**
- **XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX**
- **XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX**

8.3 Question Guidelines for Opening and Closing Focus Groups

Introductory Focus Group

Today we’re going to spend about 1 ½ hours together talking about learning. We’ve already talked a bit about the purpose of the research when we met individually, but just to remind you: you will be taking part in a course that looks at how hard times in people’s lives can have an impact on learning. Our research will look at how the information given in the course might also develop learner’s thinking and working with others skills. For the research you will be asked to participate in this focus group and one more at the end of the course. Also, you will be asked to reflect on your learning in writing at the end of your classes. Does anyone have any questions about the information that we’ll be gathering for our research?

Before we start with the focus group topics, let’s talk a little bit about the ground rules for our discussion:

You should be assured that information you share will be kept private and confidential by the project staff and your information will be kept secured and safe by the researcher. Because this is a focus group, we cannot guarantee confidentiality within the group, but we ask that it be a group agreement to respect one another’s privacy and ask those who cannot commit to it to not participate. Please note, as mentioned in the informed consent form, according to the law, disclosure of information about violence that may impact vulnerable persons will be reported in the appropriate manner.

You are also free not to answer any question that you choose not to, and you do not need to explain why. You may simply say, “pass.”

Does anyone have any questions or concerns?

I want to start with something called “essential skills” ---these are the kinds of skills that people need to do well in work, life and school. We’ll talk, too, about your experiences of learning,

So before I ask the first question, I want to give you a chance to think about two of these “essential skills” a little bit. I’ll start by giving you a definition of the two skills we’re going to talk about “thinking” and “working with others.”

The definition of thinking skills can seem a bit difficult to understand, but it mostly has to do with how you find information, how you make sense of that information,

and how you make decisions. How you think also adds to how well you organize yourself when you need to get something done. Give some thought to your daily life, work or school and how you organize your thoughts, use information, and make decisions. Where and how do you use these skills?

1. When things are going well and I'm "thinking" well, how does it look?
2. What can make it hard to use these skills? How would you describe it when its hard? Do you ever feel as if your brain just closes down and you can't think? If you do can you say more about what that feels like?

Working with others has to do with how you work in a number of different situations: independently, with a partner or a team, or in a leadership role. Whether it is for work, school or your everyday life, working with others to get the job done is a good skill to have. Think about your work, school or everyday life and when, where, how you have a chance to work with others. Where and how do you use these skills?

1. What does it look like for you when working with others is going well?
2. What can make it hard to use these skills? What does it look like when working with others isn't going well?

Finally, we'd like to talk a little about how you think your life experiences have an effect on how you use these skills. We'd like to hear if you ever think about whether your thinking or ability to work with others is blocked or difficult because of hard times in your life now or in your past.

My questions would be:

1. Do you think there are times or situations where you learn better than others?
2. What do you think makes it easier or harder for you to learn?

Final Focus group:

As you remember, our research is looking at how the learning that you've done over the past 14 weeks might impact some of your essential skills. We'll be covering many of the same questions from the opening focus group and I'd like to remind you about the ground rules for our participations today:

You should be assured that information you share will be kept private and confidential by the project staff and your information will be kept secured and safe by the researcher. Because this is a focus group, we cannot guarantee confidentiality

within the group, but we ask that it be a group agreement to respect one another’s privacy and ask those who cannot commit to it to not participate.

You are also free not to answer any question that you choose not to, and you do not need to explain why. You may simply say, “pass.”

Does anyone have any questions or concerns?

If you remember from our previous group discussion we talked about the essential skills of “thinking” and “working with others”

The definition of thinking skills can seem a bit difficult to understand, but it mostly has to do with how you find information, how you make sense of that information, and how you make decisions. How you think also adds to how well you organize yourself when you need to get something done. Give some thought to your daily life, work or school and how you organize your thoughts, use information, and make decisions. Where and how do you use these skills?

1. When things are going well and I’m “thinking” well, how does it look?
2. What can make it hard to use these skills? How would you describe it when it’s hard? Do you ever feel as if your brain just closes down and you can’t think? If you do can you say more about what that feels like?

Working with others has to do with how you work in a number of different situations: independently, with a partner or a team, or in a leadership role. Whether it is for work, school or your everyday life, working with others to get the job done is a good skill to have. Think about your work, school or everyday life and when, where, how you have a chance to work with others. Where and how do you use these skills?

1. What does it look like for you when working with others is going well?
2. What can make it hard to use these skills? What does it look like when working with others isn’t going well?

Finally,

Given what you have learned about how violence impacts learning, how have you developed strategies for learning related to thinking?

How have you developed strategies for learning related to working with others?

Can you tell us anything more about your sense of yourself as a learner? Do you think there are times or situations where you learn better than others? Do you have a sense of what factors make it easier or harder for you to learn?

Closing Focus Group: Teaching Myself to Learn

Additional questions to add/combine with the opening group

Has this course helped you stay with your learning? Understand when your learning is challenged/blocked.

Do you recognize why you have blocks in your learning and how to cope with those blocks?

What makes it easier for you to learn?

Thinking Skills:

How do you approach problem solving?

What strategies do you use to solve problems?

How do you react when it is difficult or not going well/working out the way you'd hoped?

How do you use your memory in your daily life?

When it is difficult and when does it go well?

Do you have strategies to get out of difficulty when you find yourself blocked?

Working with Others Skills

What is working groups like for you?

How do you view your contribution to the group?

When it is difficult, what strategies have you developed to manage that?

How do you feel about working in groups or attending group settings?

8.4 Questionnaire/Rubric – Thinking About Your Skills

In school, as well as work, being strong in certain skills can contribute to our success. Complete this self-assessment to help you understand your strengths and areas for improvement.

Instructions:

Read the “I can...” statements and give the answer that BEST describes your abilities. Remember that giving the BEST answer means what you do most of the time. You can think about work, school or life when you answer these questions.

WORKING WITH OTHERS

Working with others successfully can look like a lot of things: you might be used to leading or following others’ lead. Both of these are needed in groups and are equally important. How we communicate with others is very important to consider when we are working in groups. How you give information, ask questions, and handle feedback are all a part of working in a team. Use this questionnaire to help see how you feel about your skills:

I can...

	YES	SOMEWHAT	NO
Work well on my own.			
Work with a team or group to follow instructions and organize tasks.			
Ask for support when I need it.			
Do my part to help my team finish our tasks.			
Recognize other people’s strengths.			
Give helpful feedback to others in the group.			
Receive feedback from others to improve my work.			
Treat people respectfully, even if we disagree.			
Avoid losing my focus even when I find the people I am working with difficult.			
Be encouraging to others to let them know they are doing a good job.			
Resolve conflicts with others.			
Take on a leadership role when needed.			
Follow others’ lead when needed.			
Total:			

THINKING

The ability to think in situations like a classroom or work can mean a lot of things: problem solving, organizing your thoughts and tasks, and making decisions are all a part of thinking skills. You may not often consider if you are a good thinker or not, but use this questionnaire to see how you feel about your skills:

I can....

	YES	SOMEWHAT	NO
Recognize problems that need solving.			
Use my understanding of past situations to help solve problems or make decisions.			
See what the options are when a problem needs solving.			
Make a decision when I think I have all the information I need			
Feel comfortable taking a guess when I don't know something.			
Find the information I need to complete a task.			
Use appropriate strategies to help me remember or find information for getting tasks done.			
Get organized to get the things I need to do done.			
Understand whether a piece of information is important or not when it comes to getting my work done.			
Recognize when I need to take a break from learning if it gets difficult.			
Find a way to stay with my learning or return to it quickly after a break.			
Total:			

DEVELOPING YOUR STRENGTHS

Now that you have given some thought to your abilities in the area of Thinking and Working with Others, give some thought to what your strengths are and what areas you could grow in.

Look at all the “Yes” answers you gave above, and write a little bit about what you feel you are good at (for example: “I am good at talking to people and making them feel good about themselves.”):

STRENGTHS:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Now, look at the “Somewhat” and “No” answers you gave earlier and write a little bit about what you think you can improve on in the area of Thinking and Working With Others. (For example: “I could ask for more help when I’m not sure what to do.”)

AREAS FOR GROWTH:

1.

2.

3.

4.

8.5 Writing Guidelines For Observers And Students

Observer reflection on student learning/guided learning journal entry for participants

To be used daily for observers.

Observer reflection guide:

1. Observe how/when the **activities** for participants' contribute to students practicing and performing essential skills (thinking and working with others. Pay special attention to activities and resources to make them stronger and more appropriate)
2. Observe how/when the tools in the **student kit and the teacher kit** contribute to the students' use of essential skills (thinking and working with others—please reference definitions and criteria used in the rubric for student self-assessment. Observations about the kit should reference the potential to hone the kit to address these essential skills)
3. Reflect on student gains in thinking (decision making, problem solving, etc) and working with others skills (please reference criteria in the rubric for student self assessments) Note as much nuances as you can about the changes you see in how students are thinking about these skills, and performing them differently

Student guided learning journal: (reminder: these and all the journal entries will be taken up by Lee Delaino and should be retained by the students until Lee collects them.) Any of these questions can be singled out to be more relevant to the lesson. Observers are encouraged to propose questions in language relevant to the lesson and the group of students.

1. What makes working with others difficult for you and what might make/has made it easier when you work with others in a group?
2. Do you have strategies to help you stay with your learning if it gets difficult and your mind closes down, you space out, or your mind wanders?
3. What helps and what makes it difficult for you to organize your thinking and get tasks done? What sorts of thoughts go through your mind when you try to start on a difficult task? What can help you with the parts that you find difficult?