

Who will hear? Who will see?

The Impact of Violence on Learning: A Historical Journey

Jenny Horsman



This is a story of a journey involving the head – my coming to awareness of the prevalence of violence, its impact on learning, the inadequacy of traditional conceptualizations of violence and education. It includes my analytical work to re-frame and articulate effective approaches to support women’s learning.



It is a journey involving the heart and emotions. Hearing tales of violence was shocking, almost unbearable. At first I wanted to make others take notice of the extent of violence then, realizing how many have already tried to stop violence by raising awareness, I settled in to explore how to support learning in the face of violence. I continue to fight despair as I try to convince educators, funders and policy makers that the impact of violence on learning must be addressed in all educational institutions.

I am heartened by educators who have travelled the same road, who join me in the insistence that this issue must be addressed, who change their own practice. Yet, I still struggle to make more change happen, and faster. Over recent years, I have realized that my fury over the fact that so few are prepared to hear and see the impact of violence is fuelled by my own childhood hurt that was not seen, by my fear and grief that was not heard.



It’s a journey involving the body. I learned about the importance of supporting students to bring their whole selves to learning and to explore how to draw on and draw in the wisdom of the body. I came to see that as educators we, too, need to bring our whole selves to teaching. I began to explore what memories were locked in my body that kept me distant from my self and others.



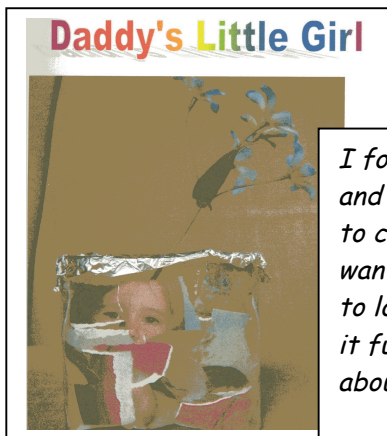
It is a journey involving the spirit. I first supported educators in my classes to express their understanding in diverse ways, and finally began to give voice to what I have learned through head, heart and body in visual form as I reconstruct my childhood photos and tell new stories. I begin to bring together my analytical work on issues of violence and learning, and my own personal journey.



Chapter 1: "Things happen to children that shouldn't"

For me, coming to a conscious questioning around violence and how it might affect learning began with interviews in rural Nova Scotia where, while exploring literacy practices in women's daily lives, I heard eloquently from most of the learners about the violence they had lived through as children and adults. In that study, I wrote about violence as the backdrop, the context within which they sought the promise of literacy. (Horsman, 1990) But I was beginning to question whether violence should be in the foreground as the primary reason women failed to learn to read and write as children.

My questioning was given a second nudge on returning to Toronto. I was leading a women's literacy group where we were reading about a hard childhood, and one woman said "things happen to children that shouldn't." When she called me later to apologize for speaking as she had, I said she could say anything in our group, not realizing that this was the beginning of a relationship I had no experience to handle. She had never told anybody about the abuse in her background. My acknowledgement that it was fine for her to speak about it eventually led to many years of tutoring where we read together, mostly from the *Courage to Heal*, as we explored the impact of violence on her life and looked for healing directions. Watching her learning processes I began to question how violence had affected and was still affecting her learning and what might be done to support her learning more effectively. I began to write about our work together and to insist that educators must pay attention to the violence in many learners' lives. I began to question what others knew about the impact of violence on learning.



I found a picture of me taken in kindergarten... By ripping the photo and pasting different pieces inside of the glass container, I was hoping to convey how the incest tore me apart both mentally and emotionally. I wanted to capture how it felt to be suffocated inside a container, able to look out and see the glory of the world, but unable to participate in it fully. The walls of the container silenced my efforts to speak out about the incest as a child.

I placed an egg in the glass container as a symbol of the beauty and promise of new life. There is a flower growing out the egg and bursting through the foil covering the container. This flower is a sign of optimism, resilience, and growth. (Lambert, 2004)

In 1995 I wrote:

...questions about **why** these adults could not learn as children and what approaches and programs are appropriate need to be asked. If these adults are to have a genuine chance to learn to read, the links between illiteracy and violence cannot be ignored. (1995:208)

Chapter 2: Acting out, Spacing out, and escaping into the mind



Blending In

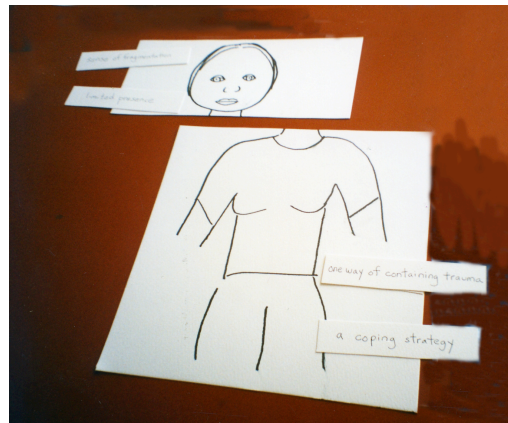
My school reports said: "must speak up" "daydreams too much." When you are focused on disappearing it's hard to ask questions, to be seen or heard, to actively engage in learning. I was the good, quiet child trying not to offend. (Horsman, 2005)

My questions led me to carry out research across the country, hearing from therapists, counsellors, and others working in the violence against women field, from literacy workers and learners in British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, Alberta, Manitoba, Nunavut, Ontario, Quebec and Prince Edward Island to learn about the impact of violence on learning. I heard about dissociating (or spacing out), acting out, and those who escape into the mind, leaving the messy body - the site of betrayal - behind. I speculated with therapists about what might make it possible to "choose" one strategy over another – wondering about the impact of personal violence layered with the violences of racism, classism, homophobia, the stigmas of poverty, of the disabled body or mind. I questioned the difficulty of escaping into the mind when everything in school suggests your mind is inadequate. I investigated hidden and not-so-hidden impacts on learning (Horsman, 2000, 2004a, 2004b).

The Severed Head

I am thinking about fragmentation and how violence and trauma fragment people - alienate and separate us from ourselves.

There is deep loss here but there is also survival. Compartmentalizing, disassociating, spacing out, absence (as opposed to presence) help us cope. They can also be obstacles to learning. (Richardson, 2004).



When I learned complicated concepts through reading, these helped take me out of the emotional reach of my family of origin... Learning to read and write well meant I could also hide my shame with words: obfuscate my real, gritty poverty experience by writing the perfect sentence, the well-formed paragraph... How does the learning hide and reveal, make meaning more relevant and make it more detached, impersonal and academic? ...I have often chosen to hide in the text, to protect myself from being truly seen... (Robinson, 2004)

Chapter 3: What will you see? Avoiding the medical trap...



Blurring

Dissociating or spacing out creates one version of distortion and absence. Framing the aftermath of violence in medical terms creates another distortion, another absence - preserving the illusion that violence is a rare occurrence that does not need to be addressed in education and invalidating the voices of survivors. (Horsman, 2005/2006)

Hiding



Through the research I came to see that to maintain silence about the extent of violence in society, or to understand these experiences solely in terms of pathology and ill-health, is insufficient. Medical approaches lead to a focus on the individual and to diagnosis of an ailment. We are expected to learn and teach as though we are not victims of violence, and to erase the experience of violence, in spite of the ongoing profound effect it has on shaping identity and meaning (Lewis, 1999). Although medical categories can reveal impacts of violence, they also conceal elements that don't fit the pattern of the syndrome, trap women in the need to "get over it" and get better, and divert attention from political and social questions about violence. This contradictory potential creates pitfalls for educators who, as they draw on medical conceptions that help them to recognize the impacts of trauma on learning, may become complicit in framing trauma as an individual health problem and obscure the need for change to the education system.

Seeing survivors of trauma as canaries in the mine, who offer a warning that the levels of violence in society are toxic to us all, reminds us that it is not victims who must return to "normal" but society that must change. It seems self-evident that it is a different experience, with much greater impact, to walk down a street and hear racist taunts, if you have previously been attacked and raped on that street than if you haven't. Being told by your male teacher you can't do math because you are a girl obviously has a greater impact if you are also being sexually abused at home by your father who tells you that sex is all you are good for. Combined violence makes street, school, and home places of diminishment and danger and compounds the likelihood of school failure. Yet in the medical model prevalent in North America, heightened perception of "minor" violence by those who have experienced major violence tends to be judged as a symptom of pathology, rather than as an indicator of how each experience of violence increases fear, decreases a sense of safety, and adds a new layer of experience shaping the self and affecting attempts to learn in educational programs.

It is not helpful for educators to see students who have experienced violence as wounded or sick souls who need to go away and "heal." Only if we value survivors, respect their/our ability to learn and teach and recognize the strength which made surviving trauma possible will survivors - whether learners or teachers - be able to honour experience of trauma and its impact on the self, rather than seeking to deny and hide it. (Horsman, 2006)

Chapter 4: Bringing the whole self to learning and teaching: Silence/voice Absence/presence

My research has led me to argue that educators need to break silence about the impact of violence on learning, to make it “normal” and everyday, because in any educational class many will have experienced violence and may find these experiences impacting on ability to learn at any given moment. If this struggle is not acknowledged, each individual is left seeking to hide their difficulties in order to avoid being judged as unmotivated or not a serious student.

Whether we have experienced major trauma or not, most of us frequently let our thoughts and senses wander from the present moment, only noticing when something shifts our attention and brings us back. If we are particularly excited, scared, or bored, we may find our thoughts relentlessly elsewhere. For those of us who have experienced trauma, the process of separating or dissociating may become a complex pattern of degrees of absence, brought on by subtle reminders of earlier trauma as well as by current fear or anxiety. We may feel hazy, experience blurred vision or hearing, body numbness, a feeling of leaving the room with birds flying by or cars passing, or a complete gap in time. This “absence” may feel pleasurable or terrifying and may lead to panic or difficulty breathing. New and nuanced discourses are needed to explore presence in ways that recognize impacts of abuse and support educators to conceptualize new classroom practices that enhance possibilities for learners to remain sufficiently present to learn new material while avoiding medicalizing, disciplining, preserving invisibility or shame.

Recognizing the whole person offers new potential for increasing the possibility of presence, as well as new dangers. Canadian First Nation educators explained the version of the Medicine Wheel where each quadrant represents one part of the whole person - body, mind, emotion and spirit. I found it challenging and exciting to look at “the person” in terms of these four aspects and to imagine processes in which each aspect is fully engaged in creative learning, where literacy is holistic, part of “healing” not only of the individual but of the educational process. I have learned it is crucial to create a safe environment for learning. Inviting students to bring their whole selves also asks them to let go of internalized tactics developed to increase their safety, which split mind from body, emotions, and spirit. Bringing more of the self to learning makes more of the self available for learning, but also permits more hurt. The value and the danger of being present in the learning environment increase.



Wooden Throat

Finding my own voice to "speak" about my childhood has been a circuitous journey. My escape took me first into fantasy, reading novels, then to literacy teaching - anxious about how others could survive without such escape. Analytical work on literacy issues eventually led me to violence and learning, to holistic teaching and finally to a recognition that I was estranged from my body, from my senses and my story. As I journey to reclaim my self I have discovered that images hold a power to bring me into the picture, to tell my story to myself as well as to others. (Horsman, 2005)

Chapter 5: Imag(in)ing Change



Changing the Story

This was the first photo I played with, beginning my visual journey. When I stepped myself out of the frame by accident it felt exciting and the image seemed "right." I began to realize that changing the past visually held power to change the present. (Horsman, 2004)

Throughout this journey I face the challenge to have this issue acknowledged and recognized, to find funds and support. I am repeatedly told by reviewers that, in Canada, violence cannot be as major an issue as I suggest, and that, without statistics to prove violence affects learning and reveal the extent of the impact, this is not a priority issue. But I continue to dig for supports and allies on my journey.

I want to challenge the literacy and wider educational field to break silences about violence and address the impacts on learning. We must design new, creative curriculum and discover ways of working that normalize the challenges many learners and workers bring to their learning and teaching. Holistic programming - drawing in body, emotion and spirit, as well as mind - offers possible ways forward. It needs to be recognized as a legitimate part of education and explored further. The creation of links between literacy organizations, organizations offering counselling, other resources for healing, and grassroots organizations challenging violence, could support learners and educators and lead to new program models that take account of violence and support learning.

Within literacy learning, there is potential to move away from diagnostic models that pathologize those who have experienced trauma and instead, support learners and workers to claim their power and question the concept of "normal life." Change is already occurring in many individual literacy programs (Horsman, 2005).¹ As new discourses become more broadly recognized, the question of how we move from change at the level of individual classrooms and literacy programs to broader institutional, bureaucratic and conceptual change remains. It is only when discourses on the nature of learning and teaching in the face of widespread violence and trauma move into the mainstream that the diverse possibilities for teaching all students in ways that recognize violence and its impact on learning will be widely explored and developed.

Winds of Change

This installation in a window includes driftwood, beads, crystals, dragonflies, and a photo of me in motion. The journey to delve and unearth the impact of my past on the present, like the journey to get the impact of violence on learning widely recognized in policy and practice, has been slow and arduous, rich and fulfilling, as elusive and fleeting as dragonflies. Sometimes I lose hope that I am creating meaningful change, at other times I can see and feel the movement. (Horsman, 2005)



Acknowledgements

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Photo Credits:

Page 1: I created the drawings on page during psychodrama retreats led by Liz White 2003 and 2005.

Page 2 *Daddy's Little Girl* – Liz Lambert, class portfolio, 2004. Text box is a quote from her term paper (Lambert 2004)

Page 3: *Blending In* – my photo, 2005. *The Severed Head* – Lena Richardson, class portfolio, 2004. Text box is quote from her class portfolio (Richardson 2004). Second text box is quote from Janine Robinson's term paper (Richardson 2004)

Page 4: *Blurring* – photo created in 2005. *Hiding* – photo created in 2006

Page 5: *Wooden throat* – photo created in 2005

Page 6: *Changing the Story* – photo recreated in 2004. *Winds of Change* – photo of an installation created in 2005

All my photos are layered and worked in Photoshop, some beginning with family photos others with digital images.

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ⁱ In New England workers in different programs explored change as part of World Education's Women, Violence and Adult Education project (Morrish, Horsman & Hofer, 2002). In Alberta a similar project took place where literacy workers studied the issues and carried out action research projects (VALTA, 2004). In Ontario, Parkdale Project Read continues to explore how to strengthen all aspects of the program for all students recognizing many have experienced violence (Parkdale Project Read, 2003).