



All or Nothing – For Teachers

Have you noticed that some adult learners have a hard time thinking realistically about their education, their goals, and their lives? Seeing their lives from the long view, making connections about how they got where they are, and getting clear ideas about where they are going can be challenging.

These disconnections often have to do with past or present experiences of violence: being abused, disempowered or humiliated has tremendous impact on perceptions of self worth, and in turn, on a healthy sense of entitlement.

Some people might also have difficulty staying grounded in reality during conversations about goals because the stakes are so high. For example, a woman who is being mistreated at home may have an especially urgent need for success in her program. She may need to improve her education, and her confidence, to believe that she can cope alone and get a job. This powerful need to succeed may make success even more elusive as it adds more anxiety and stress—closing down the brain.

One thing that all these cases tend to have in common, though, is that people get into a lot of black and white, 'all or nothing' thinking. They are going to fail and quit, or they are going to ace everything and finish in 6 weeks. This unit has to do with loosening up that thinking, supporting their creativity and self esteem, and pointing to possibilities that might be somewhere in the middle of 'all' or 'nothing'.

Students who are stuck in "all or nothing" mode may:

- Aim too high: Learners might express goals that are far too lofty, and may lack a sense of realism about the time or the actions that would be needed to move toward them.
- Aim too low: People may consider the life they want so out of reach that there's no use, or may not even be able to imagine what they want, and they express no goals, or ones that are far too humble. They may strenuously avoid conversations about goals, making themselves look "unmotivated".

- Formulate goals just to please a teacher, counsellor, or others. Many of us who have experienced violence are extremely adept at figuring out what others want to hear, and saying it to stay out of trouble. A more authentic voice is a result of learners feeling safe, and like they can bring their whole selves to learning. On the other hand, people may not ask for help when they really do need it.
- Sabotage their own success, out of skewed perceptions of self worth or of what is actually happening. For example, a student may not open an acceptance letter from an educational institution due to their absolute certainty that it is a rejection letter. He throws it in the garbage, to spare himself the pain.
- Have trouble connecting to moments beyond the present: they may not seem to believe in a future, and may not seem to care about consequences (think of all those missed deadlines!)
- Have a complicated relationship to CONTROL: learners may seem to believe they can never have control and act like a victim; insist on total control; switch between total control and total helplessness in an instant; ask permission for everything, and take no initiative; look for someone else to blame as a way to regain a sense of control; or explode angrily when it seems others are trying to control them

What can I do to Help Everyone Learn?

1. Hang on to belief in the future and the possibility of change.

- Help students to see gradual change in their success at their studies, and in their lives.
- When people express a goal, help them break it into smaller steps. Identify possible concrete actions they could do now, then a wee little while from now, and a bit later... make sure these steps are really doable, to help build experiences of success.

2. Back off a bit

- Give people time: encourage them to remember that they do not have to decide everything, or even anything, right now.

- Give people space: try not to look to students' successes to help you feel good about your work. They have enough to do! Look for other places where you can be "fed."

3. Keep guiding toward middle ground

- When you hear 'all or nothing' thinking, try to probe for any possibilities that might lie in between the two extremes... (For example if a learner says "I'm going to quit my job OR just roll over and take my boss' abuse", you can wonder with them if there might not be something they could do to stay employed AND stand up for themselves...)
- Look for opportunities to explore 'middle ground' and help students, volunteers, and staff move out of 'all or nothing' ways of thinking: we may not be perfect parents, teachers, or students, but we aren't dreadful either. Over time we can learn to notice and record small increments of change; perhaps we can map the change in some fun way, with a collage, a graph, or a journal to show the change over a week, a month, or a year.

4. Have some fun

- If appropriate in your program, you could hold a dreaming dreams party! Create a playful and fun time to explore dreams (like coming in costume as the person you'd like to be in 10 years)... these are dreams for ourselves, our children, for the world... to live in peace.
- Create holistic curriculum that encourages students to express themselves in many different forms including music, visual arts, and movement, as well as words.

Where can I find more information and ideas?

On www.learningandviolence.net.

In the Impact of Violence on Learning:

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/impact.htm> especially "Lost Hope and Dreams" and "Not Enough".

In Helping Others Learn:

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm>

The Poster in the Teachers' Room of this Student Kit: "Helping Myself Learn" at

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/changing.htm>