



Old Patterns – For Teachers

A classroom - especially an upgrading classroom for adults - is a place of change. Maybe you are aware of some learners in your class who want to make significant changes in their lives, and see education as leading to gains in economic and personal security, self-esteem, parenting capacities, and overall quality of life. Perhaps the shifts they want to make are so fundamental (such as overcoming addiction), and all that blocks them is so huge, that their problems seem intractable. Or maybe you yourself are also working on changing some of your habits, to take better care of yourself and your life.

Many old habits can get in the way of successful learning. You may have watched as learners repeat the same old behaviours again and again - the student who can never get to scheduled appointments or take what she needs with her, the student who is always late, the student who consistently winds up in the same insecure housing situations or abusive relationships, when it seems there were chances for it to be otherwise. It looks like they're making "choices" to keep their lives messy and even dangerous. It can be immensely frustrating to try to teach and support them when it seems as if they are almost intentionally sabotaging themselves.

If you look at these choices with curiosity and without judgment, a quite amazing truth appears: many habits were formed a very long time ago, and were not really "chosen" at all. They were strategies - survival tactics and ways of coping in the face of violence. Addictions, eating too much or not enough, physical forms of self-harm such as cutting, invisible forms of self-harm such as vicious self-talk: all these are things people did because they had to do something, and otherwise had little power within their experience of violence. Perhaps the one who is always late used to be afraid of leaving the house every day, and now, even though she knows there is no immediate threat, she is stuck in the pattern of triple checking everything in the house before leaving, in an unconscious procrastination. But all others see is that she misses lessons. Perhaps the addict grew up in an unbearable situation and has learned to numb his pain and anxiety with his drug of choice but it looks as if he just likes to party and doesn't care about being sober for school.

Students who struggle with old patterns may:

- often arrive late to class, and stop and start courses again and again
- have trouble trusting other students, the teacher, or even trusting their own knowing
- miss class because they escape into alcohol, or recreational or prescription drugs to get relief from unbearable anxiety or painful memories
- not ask for the help they need, not think they deserve attention or assistance
- constantly and vocally put themselves down, scolding themselves and apologizing for mistakes
- disclose personal things about violence in writing assignments or class discussions, bring "drama" to the class in the form of phone calls and emergencies

Too much violence can also lead to a more permanent escape from the real world into 'craziness', a fragmented self, and a diagnosis of mental illness.

What can I do to help everybody learn?

1. Help them find the resources they need

- Provide contact information for the local resources—including counsellors, indigenous elders, shelters, abusers' courses, addictions and substance abusers programs, survivors' groups, and other support groups.
- Bring counsellors and local agency staff you respect into class at the beginning of a group. Assume all groups will include students who are struggling with old patterns of self harm/self sabotage—make sure people know the resources in case they want to use them.

2. Develop curiosity about behaviours while avoiding judgment

- Consider how behaviours that get in the way of learning may have once helped with survival, and how you can gently support somebody when they want to try to change old patterns. Try never to say "You should..." and suggest knowledge of what another person needs, what they are ready for, or how they should tackle something.

- Make your space free of all shaming and echoes of violence, including that directed at self. Intervene to reduce violence, however subtle.

3. Help learners to take on their own self-care

- Include self-care as part of the curriculum. Help students to learn to take care of themselves when they feel bad or overwhelmed. Encourage them to think about how to set their own boundaries and take care of themselves at home too.
- Provide conditions for self-care. Where possible include healthy snacks and drinking water for everyone in the program.
- Create a learning environment that nurtures all parts of the self. For example think about sounds, sights, physical comfort, emotional safety, and ways to provide inspiration and nurture the spirit.

4. Normalize needing help

- It is ordinary; most of us need help at some point in our lives. If you make connections with many different resource people and bring them into the classroom you give this message.
- Help students to understand connections between violence, trauma, addictions, and all kinds of self harm. Tell them about resources and programs. Encourage them to explore these when they are ready.

Where can I find more information and ideas?

On www.learningandviolence.net:

In the Impact of Violence on Learning, <http://learningandviolence.net/impact.htm> especially “Acting out” and “Escaping into the mind”.

In Helping Others Learn: <http://learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm> especially “Working with counsellors”

In Taking Care of Self: <http://learningandviolence.net/takecare.htm>

In Helping Yourself to Learn what to do When you feel bad
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpself/whenyoufeelbad.htm>

In Learning to Teach:
http://learningandviolence.net/lrnnteach/reflprac/but_how_can_i_teach_her.pdf