



Building Strong Relationships with Learners

In this issue of ELMO News, we bring you an in-depth interview with Kate Nonesuch, an educator, writer and researcher based in Victoria. Kate says that her goal is “to write down everything I know about teaching before I retire”. Kate was interviewed by Emily Hunter, Literacy BC Project Manager.



Kate Nonesuch

I. Please tell me a little about your work as an adult literacy educator.

Like many, I came to adult literacy in a roundabout way. As a young woman I had a couple of unsatisfactory stints in the K-12 system, a year and a half teaching English to adults in Barcelona, and 15 years of feminist activism in Ottawa in the 70's and 80's.

For the past 25 years I've been living on the west coast of Canada, where I got my start in adult literacy. For most of that time I was a classroom instructor, mainly at Vancouver Island University, the last years at VIU's storefront literacy program in Duncan, where I further developed some interests of mine: making learners part of the teaching team; acknowledging the role of emotions in learning and teaching; paying attention to issues of violence and racism and their effect on learning.

For most of my years in adult literacy, 70% - 100% of the students in my classes were First Nations and that was a strong place of learning for me. Holistic education has been only a minor stream in the Western tradition (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf School, Ashton-Warner), but it was the stream I was always most comfortable in, and which animated my teaching from my earliest beginnings. However, when I started working

with and listening to First Nations educators in BC and across Canada, I began to understand that holistic education, rather than being a minor stream, is really the whole river, and would like to acknowledge my debt to their thinking.

About six years ago I stopped teaching and have been working on various research and writing projects. My goal is to write down everything I know about teaching before I retire. You'll find some of my work at www.nald.ca (search "nonesuch").



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2. In January of this year, I attended a 'trial run' of your workshop, "What's Your Message?" which focused on the messages practitioners send consciously and unconsciously to learners. Can you briefly tell me why you chose this particular focus for your workshop and why you believe its so important.

Over the past many years, buzz words in literacy have been “empowerment,” “learner-centred teaching,” “active learning,” and “giving learners responsibility for their learning.” It is easy to pay lip service to these ideas, while acting in the same old way. Even when we make many changes in our practice to try to put these ideas into practice, we may sabotage our efforts by the unconscious messages we send at the same time.

3. In the workshop you present five strategies for promoting good relationships with learners: listen, say how you feel, be clear about what you can do/will do and what you can't do/ won't do, make your teaching transparent and don't give advice. Can you explain what each of these strategies might look like in an interaction between a practitioner and learner?

Listen

There is no better way to show respect to a learner than to listen. If you listen, learners will teach you how to teach them. You'll be surprised. And when you're surprised, you're not bored. That's a good thing if you've been doing this job for a long time.

Say how you feel

Your feelings will show, whether you say anything or not, but most learners (like the rest of us) will assume that your feelings have something to do with them. This assumption will have negative repercussions in your relationship. For example: I'm in the middle of teaching and the learner asks me to explain something again (still doesn't get it after the third time); I'm about to start the explanation when I notice the clock and suddenly remember that I have to cut this session short for an emergency meeting about a crisis in the program.

All my feelings about the meeting come over me--worry, anger, confusion, wondering what's going on, etc. These feelings show on my face or in my body--tight lips, far away look, hunched shoulders, sweaty palms, etc. If I give a hurried explanation and rush the learner out, he will likely assume that I am angry with him because he asked for more explanation, and that I think he is stupid, and that he may be stupid; he will think twice before he asks me for help again, and all my work to establish a safe atmosphere for him to ask questions will vanish.

The strategy for maintaining good relations with the learner is to say how I feel. So I try it. “Oh, I'm sorry I forgot to tell you. I'm going to have to leave early today. There's a big meeting coming up, and just the thought of it has made me upset, as you can see. Give me a minute to calm myself down, and we'll make a plan. I want to be sure you get some help with this question; I'm really glad you asked for help now, and didn't go home to be frustrated with it there.”

I can take a minute to settle myself and then the learner and I can figure out what to do so he gets the help and I get to my meeting. My relationship with him is stronger rather than weaker: we have worked together to solve the problem of when/how to give him help; I have shown that I'm human; and he doesn't get the false idea that I think he is stupid or that his questions are a bother.

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Be clear about what you can do/will do and what you can't do/won't do

It used to be that I hated that moment when a learner said to me, “I’ve been writing poetry since I was 13, and I’ve got a big binder with all my poems in it. Would you mark them for me?” I dreaded reading them, because I expected them to be really bad poetry, and depressing. I didn’t want to do it, but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings by saying no. So I took the binder and it sat on my desk for a long time, and every time I looked at it, I felt guilty. When the learner asked me if I’d had a chance to read them yet, I felt cornered, and I wished I had said no in the first place, but I couldn’t say no at this point, after having taken the binder...

Now, I’ve figured out several things about that kind of incident. Probably the learner doesn’t really want the poems marked—she asked me to mark them because I’m her teacher and that’s what teachers do. Probably she just wants me to know that she’s written them, and wants me to be aware of the subject matter of the poems. So how much am I willing to do? What can I say? “That binder is a big accomplishment! I’m impressed.

But I don’t have time to mark them all. If you pick out your three best poems, and bring them to me, I’ll find a time to read them and talk to you about them.”

Being clear about what I will do gets me off the hook of guilt and procrastination; being clear lets the learner into the picture as a participant, rather than a (im)patient waiter, and improves our relationship.

Make your teaching transparent

Much of our work is invisible to learners. At worst, they see us as people who know everything and get paid well for showing up for short days and short years and bossing them around. At best, they think we’re wonderful people who have all the answers and are helpful and patient and don’t do anything between sessions with them. Think of all the work-related tasks you do when you’re away from students, both paid and unpaid hours.

Think of all the reasons you have for using one textbook rather than another, for choosing one kind of exercise over another, for bringing in a guest speaker, for going on a field trip. If you let your learners into the reasons behind all this, they come to understand some of the complexities of teaching and learning; reading seems less like magic and more a set of concrete skills that they might be able to master. If you do two different kinds of activities to teach the same skill, and discuss the relative merits of each with the learners, you make them part of the teaching team. They are in the position of evaluating the strategies, instead of being tested and found wanting. They can begin to think of their own learning in relation to each of the strategies. They are in the driver’s seat, just where you want them.

Don't give advice.

When you give advice, you give some other messages along with it: “I know better than you.” “I have the right to tell you what to do.” “You are too stupid, naive, lazy, etc. to figure out what to do.” “I’ll take care of you so you won’t have to think.” You never want to send those messages to learners, but it’s hard to give advice without including them.

So what can you do when someone says, “What should I do?” You can ask a question, such as: “I’m not sure. What are your options?” “How would you like it to turn out?” “What have you already tried, and how did it work out?” All of these questions give the learner a chance to think about and articulate the problem and the possibilities, and come to a solution for himself. That’s how I’d like it to be.

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4. Can you explain what you mean by "BEFOR you listen...get ready to listen!"

People who have learned about active listening won't be surprised by anything here. **BEFOR** is my acronym that helps me remember various aspects of being a better listener:

- an open **B**ody posture;
- appropriate **E**ye contact;
- **F**ollowing the learner with nods and "uh huh's"
- getting myself **O**n the level with the learner, not towering over him
- **R**elaxing, not fidgeting or looking at my watch.

And I know if I want a full answer, I have to get ready to listen BEFOR I ask, "How's it going?"

Here's a link to an article Kate wrote that plays with many of the themes in her workshop:

Putting Learners in Charge of Making Decisions. RaPAL Journal (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy, Lancaster University), Spring 2005, p. 19. www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal/journal/RaPAL%2056.pdf

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Brain-based learning: the new paradigm of teaching. (2008) Eric Jensen. www.elmoreviews.ca/product_view.php?id=513

Learning to listen, learning to teach: the power of dialogue in educating adults. (2002) Jane Vella. www.elmoreviews.ca/product_view.php?id=604

The other sixteen hours: the social and emotional problems of dyslexia. (1997) Michael Ryan. www.elmoreviews.ca/product_view.php?id=537

Teaching with emotional intelligence: a step-by-step guide for higher and further education professionals. (2005) Alan Mortiboys. www.elmoreviews.ca/product_view.php?id=543

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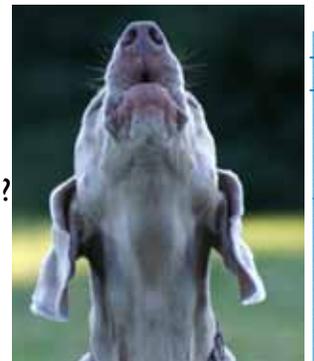


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