



Learning and Trauma

In this issue of ELMO News, we bring you an in-depth interview with Dr. Jenny Horsman, an educator and researcher based in Toronto, whose work focuses on the impact of violence on learning.

In September 2009, I contacted Dr. Jenny Horsman and asked if I could interview her via e-mail about her work on the impacts of violence on learning. Jenny e-mailed me back with so much valuable information that I decided to devote an entire ELMO newsletter to her response. She warned me that she couldn't bear to write new answers as she had written about most of it previously so she borrowed from various handouts and articles to create a patchwork that would answer my questions.

-Emily Hunter

1. Please tell me a little about yourself and your work



Dr. Jenny Horsman

For a book chapter I wrote the following – then decided it wasn't relevant - so I can't resist drawing from it to answer your question!

My doctoral research began my journey into the impact of violence on learning and educational approaches to support learning in a context of violence. I heard from 19 of the 20 women I interviewed for my doctoral research, about the various forms of violence they had experienced as children and adults. They talked about how the violence had affected their attempts to learn as children and wondered about how it might still be getting in the way as adults. Although I had then been involved in the adult literacy field for more than 10 years in three continents, I had heard nothing about violence being a central factor contributing to adult illiteracy.

A student in an adult literacy group I was leading said, "things happen to children that shouldn't," and later called me up to apologize, gradually turning silence into a torrent of need and stories. I tutored her for nearly ten years, in the process learning much about the complexity of learning in the face of violence. That began many years of weaving research studies into projects to put the learning into practice, deepening my understanding, and my conviction that addressing the impact of violence in all education is a fundamental necessity. Along the way I came to understand that my own unknown story, glimpsed mostly through fragments of body memory, was braided into my resolve that my life work will be to try to ensure that this issue is addressed. I gradually understood the need to recognize the interweaving of all forms of violence including sexual abuse, racism, sexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and the way these frameworks foster further violence, interpersonally and systemically. In spite of the resistance I received from some educators, and the endless challenge to find funding to continue the work, I have continued to write, research and teach on these issues. I do this in the hope that literacy workers (and all other educators) will come to see this issue within the scope of their/our work as educators and that this issue will be addressed in classrooms and institutions.

2. Please explain how violence affects a learner's ability to learn.

Hidden Impacts of Trauma

The experience of violence may mean that students or teachers struggle in silence. If we can talk about this we can learn new patterns, such as how to stay present enough to learn (or teach).

All or nothing

Often someone is either trustworthy until they make one mistake, and then the literacy learner gives up on them forever. There is no middle-ground for the learner – either they are doing brilliantly or they are failing. Students start with huge enthusiasm, then quit when they are faced with the day-to-day slog of learning.

Presence

It may be very challenging for students to be present enough to learn. Questions to consider are what distracts and what helps a student to be present enough to learn? How can we help learners explore presence in the classroom while also honoring their decision to leave when they need to?

All or nothing and presence both underlie other issues raised here.

Living with crises

If crises are what is familiar in a learner's life, then calm may be difficult to cope with. Continual crises may distract from learning and make it hard to be present. How can we help students to focus?

Trust and boundaries

If people who should have been trustworthy weren't, then a lot of energy may go into figuring out who to trust. How can teachers become trustworthy and build trust in the classroom?

Telling

If every time a student is asked to write or talk about their life they have to decide how much to tell – whether they will be shamed or have to look after the listener – this takes energy. Students need space for joy as well as telling. The challenge is to create safety in the classroom and to make it safe for those who want to tell and those who want safety from hearing about violence.



Learning can be challenging for those who have experienced trauma and violence.

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Setting Goals

Judith Herman describes trauma as being caused by events which “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning” (Herman, 1992:33). This leads to complicated relationships with control, connection and meaning in the classroom.

Control

This is complicated terrain because students don't like being controlled, but also feel uncomfortable and mistrustful of being in control. Again there is an all or nothing relationship – either the student must be in complete control or the student feels a lack of control. If students stop attending classes they may be exploring taking control.

Connection

Connection is necessary for communication. It is important to recognize that it may take a lot of work and a long time to build connections.

Meaning

If learners lose a sense of “meaning”, does this contribute not only to a loss of goals and meaning in life, but also in finding meaning in words, or print in general? Journal writing can be a place where learners can control their words, gradually connect with others and place new meaning on their experiences. Exploring control, connection and meaning can lead to possibilities of imagining a future and slowly move towards goal setting.

In brief, this is how I often suggest we need to address these impacts:

It can take time and patience to build an atmosphere of trust and support in a learning environment.



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Acknowledge that violence is widespread

Normalize, but don't condone violence. Provide resources to help people make changes if they choose.

Name the impact of violence on learning/memory/change

Break silence as an organization with NO pressure on students/clients to disclose either the violence they've experienced or the impacts. Normalize these impacts!

Develop curiosity about behaviors

Avoid judging them. Consider how they might have helped with survival. What might their effect on learning be now? What might support change where needed?

4. Can you recommend resources (that support your work and/or are useful for teaching learners with diverse needs?

I do want to send you to www.learningandviolence.net because everything I have found that has any relevance to how to teach in a context of violence is on that site – or extracts are at least. I'm always looking for new resources. I can only encourage your readers to explore the site – to come back often – to join the forum – to ask their questions there.

In the "learning processes" section there are some articles and extracts from books that I find very thought-provoking – particularly the work by Peter Levine and Maggie Kline and Michael and Renate Caine – oh and Bruce Perry...all thought provoking in their recognition that violence affects how the brain can cope with anxiety and new experiences – and of course school and adult learning centres are full of both!

Create safer learning environments

Free of judgment, shaming, echoes of violence – amongst students, between students and teachers, and even directed at self. Intervene to reduce violence in the learning setting – however subtle.

Create conditions to support learning

Feed emotions, spirit, body and mind. Feeling joyous and hopeful, valued and valuable, well-fed and watered, capable and smart: all of these support learning.

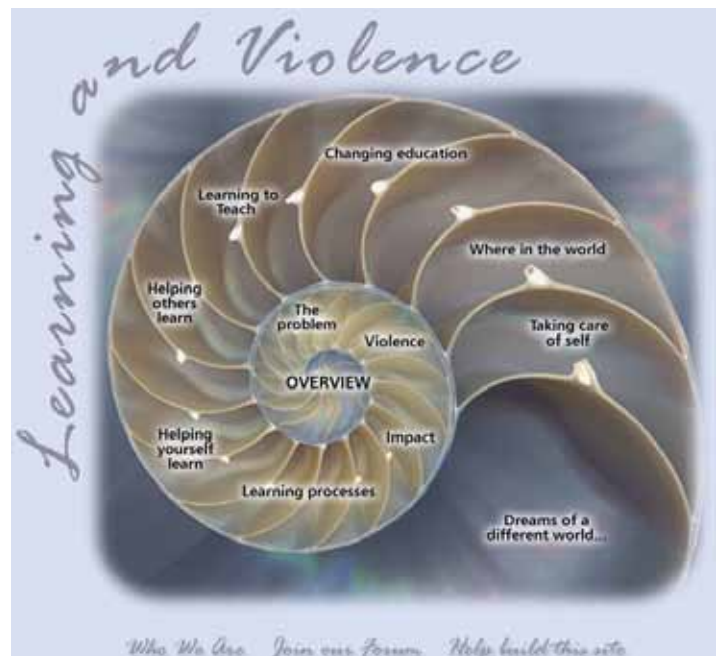
Create connections

Build trust, create community, and connect to counseling, creative and self-care resources for self and students.

Create curriculum

Support bringing the whole self to learning and to acknowledge the presence of violence and its impact in many of our lives.

But there is much more to say about what each of these would look like...you will find a lot more information on www.learningandviolence.net in the "helping others learn" section and in the new information sheets I wrote for Literacy BC and several other coalitions. View them at www.literacybc.ca/Research/violence_learning.php.



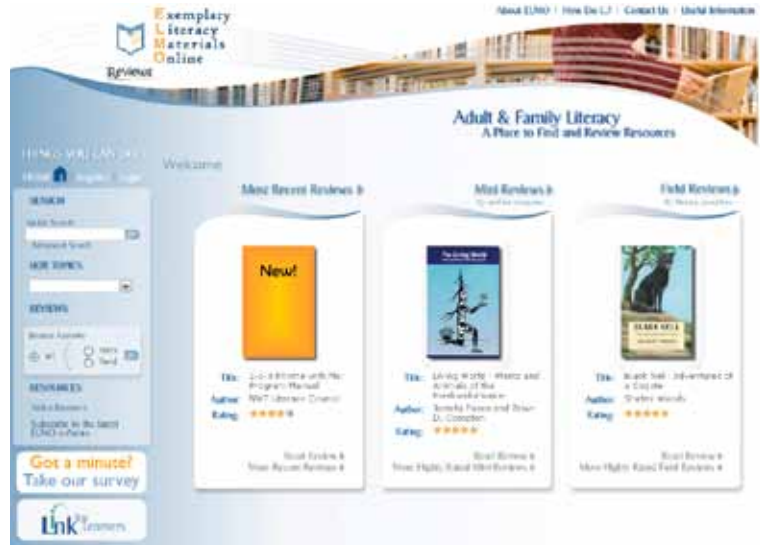
ELMO Reviews Contest

In December, we invited you to e-mail us with your three favourite resources that you used with learners in 2009.

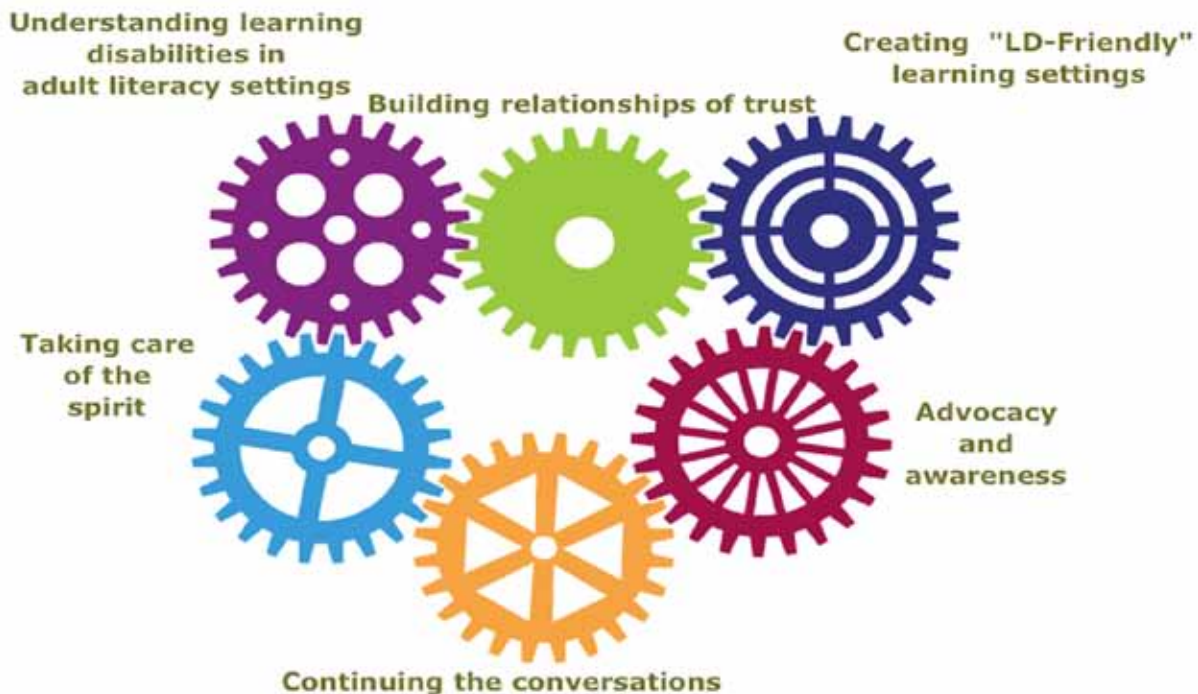
Thank you to everyone who participated in this contest. Congratulations to Corey Walker and Judith McLean, who both won \$25.00 Chapters gift certificates.

Stay tuned for the next ELMO Reviews Contest in Spring 2010.

In the meantime, please visit www.elmoreviews.ca and tell us about **your** favourite resources.



Visit our new Whole Life and Learning Disabilities Project Website: www.ldandwholelifelearning.ca



As we mentioned in our May 2009, newsletter, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) announced funding for a new professional development initiative called “The Whole Life Approach to Learning Disabilities in Adult Literacy Settings.” Literacy BC in partnership with the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, is hosting this project.

Our goal is to support adult literacy educators and learners to work with and through learning disabilities in their learning settings. We want to harness the knowledge of the adult literacy field in BC, bring forward new research and ideas, offer training and discussion, and develop tools and strategies for diverse social, cultural and economic settings. Please visit www.ldandwholelifelearning.ca, check out resource lists, participate in our on-line training and discussion, and follow our blog.

New resources to borrow from Literacy BC's Provincial Literacy Resource Centre Library

At Literacy BC's literacy resource centre you'll find an extensive library of literacy resources. Anyone in BC can borrow materials, at no cost, by mail.

Some resources on Violence and Trauma:

Too scared to learn: women, violence and education. (1999) Jenny Horsman.

Drawing the line: dealing with affective issues in literacy. (2001) Jenny Horsman.

Violence and learning: taking action. (2004) Mary Norton, editor.

Moving research about addressing the impacts of violence on learning into practice. (2008). Evelyn Battell et al.

Read a great mini-review on ELMO for the Learning and Violence website <http://www.learningandviolence.net>.



Literacy BC's library is full of great literacy resources.

For other new resources that you can borrow, go to www2.literacy.bc.ca/resources/newresc.htm or search the online catalogue at www2.literacy.bc.ca/catalogue and order your materials online.

Add your voice

Visit www.ELMOreviews.ca and add your voice! You can add a resource, comment on a review, or write a review.

- **Add** a resource to the database that you think others in the literacy field should know about – book, website, or audio-visual.
- **Comment** on someone else's review – what was your experience with the resource?
- **Write** a mini-review – your opinion, short and simple, and star rating of a resource.

If you are someone who is working directly with learners, you may also be interested in writing a field review.

Contact library@literacy.bc.ca to learn how.

Thanks to ...

Ningwakwe Learning Press and **Orca Press** for donating books.

Have an idea for a future ELMO Newsletter?

If you have any ideas for future newsletters – themes, resources, people to interview – we would love to hear them!

Contact us

Please contact us for more information, for help using the website, to send us your reviews, borrow resources, or to give feedback. We particularly welcome feedback on the site in order to improve it.

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