

# Women, work and learning: the impact of violence in workplaces and training sites in South Africa

Dr Jenny Horsman

## Acknowledgements

I hope through this paper to add my voice to the many who continue to work for freedom in South Africa. Although I take responsibility for any errors in my writing, I did not come to this analysis alone. Far from it! Too many people to name here have engaged with me over the years, in research studies, practical projects, and workshops, helping me develop my understanding of violence and learning issues; I thank them all.

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## An invitation

This paper is intended to continue the 'conversation' begun through my talks, seminar and informal follow-up discussions in Pretoria, Durban, and Cape Town in February 2009. This was my second visit to South Africa: I had given a lecture and led a day-long workshop in Cape Town at the Learning Cape Indaba in 2002, at the invitation of the Division for Lifelong Learning of the University of the Western Cape (UWC). In 2009 I was delighted to have the opportunity to return at the invitation of SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority), INSETA (Insurance Sector Education and Training Authority), Durban University of Technology and UWC. I was particularly pleased to be invited by a national body as part of a series of discussions focusing on work and learning, at a time when questions were being asked about what would support effective learning for women in the workplace, whether their training

is formal or informal. I hope that these presentations and this paper may be a catalyst for far-reaching change which supports more effective learning in workplaces, training sites and broadly defined education.

In order to make this paper as interactive and useful as possible, you will find 'invitations' in *italics* scattered throughout. They invite you to stop, to reflect, to go to sections of the website [www.learningandviolence.net](http://www.learningandviolence.net), and to decide how you can take on the issue in your own context. Along with many project partners, I have been building the website over the last few years in the hope that it will reach people whom print publications do not reach, and that it will provide a resource to deepen the understandings and knowledge shared in workshops and presentations. It is a place to gather information on interesting research and practice on these issues wherever they are created and I hope the site will eventually be filled with resources from around the world. It is intended to draw together practitioners and researchers who are developing more nuanced knowledge of how violence impacts learning, and how to address these impacts and support successful learning in many different settings. The concluding invitation is for you to work out how you will explore the impact of violence further and address it in your own life and work. I hope your innovative research and/or practice will be featured on the site one day.

## Who am I?

I am an educator with experience of teaching adult literacy students, graduate students and students in many stages in between those levels – including students with 'learning difficulties' in high schools and students learning English as children, youth and adults – in England, Sierra Leone and Canada. I have written curricula and designed and delivered training for students and educators in diverse settings, including workplaces, schools and colleges (Horsman 2000a, 2001b). I am a sociologist and a researcher who became curious about adult literacy learners' difficulties with learning and began to question the impact of violence on learning. Over the last 20 years I have become more and more fascinated with finding ways to support learning in the face of these impacts. I've carried out

a series of research studies, across Canada, locally in my home province of Ontario, and in New England in the US, as I continue to try to learn more about the complexity of these issues and how they play out in educational sites and workplaces (Horsman 1997, 1999/2000b, 2001b, 2004, 2008). The most recent study was as part of a team examining an innovative pre-apprenticeship training for women survivors of violence entering a non-traditional trade (Quartaro *et al.*, in press).<sup>1</sup> I will draw from that study, and from my other research studies and projects to put findings into practice, in this paper. I have also found practitioner research projects especially valuable for their potential for supporting local change initiatives and investigating the effect of making small practical changes. I have been part of a team leading several such studies involving educators from different regions of Canada and the US (Morrish *et al.* 2002, Norton (Ed.) 2004, Battell *et al.* 2008).

When I came to the issue of violence and learning I thought I was drawn only by my desire to support learning, to understand why many adult literacy students have difficulty learning, and to build on the disturbing, yet interesting, finding of my doctoral research: that experiences of violence in childhood had contributed to difficulties with learning for all but one of my interviewees, and were continuing to shape their participation and struggles in adult literacy classes (Horsman 1990). When I began tutoring an adult literacy student who had an exceptionally good memory and yet was having enormous difficulty learning, and who frequently seemed as if she was not really present as we worked together, I realised I had to understand more. Eventually I came to see that I was so compelled by this subject not only because I wanted to help others, but also because it was my own issue (Horsman 2006a). As I have understood my own past experiences better, I have been able to write and speak in ways that are more inclusive and not only about those 'other' people we educators want to 'help'.

## Who are you?

In my talks I asked participants to put their hands up so that we could all see 'who' was there. In a smaller group I would have asked people to say their names and used some form of activity to help people to say a little about themselves. I might have asked them to pick an object that provides a metaphor to share a thought or connections

<sup>1</sup> This was an innovative training programme funded by the government of Ontario. It was based on the premise that if women are able to obtain well-paid work they are more likely to be able to free themselves, and their children, from living with violent husbands, boyfriends or family members. Research on the programme was funded by the Canadian Council on Learning.

with the theme of violence and learning, or says something about themselves as a learner or an educator. Whatever the precise activity, it is a way of bringing people into the room, helping them to become more present, a first small step to help people to feel more comfortable in the setting. If we were working together longer I would focus on taking that further to create community.

In this setting I also want to encourage us all to notice the different experiences that have shaped us and the roles we carry out, which will influence how we understand what we are going to hear. I never ask directly who has experienced violence. I don't want to diminish whatever safety people are feeling, however limited that may be, by requesting that people reveal open wounds or things that may feel shameful. Sometimes, though, I do ask if anyone in the room has **not** been touched by violence in their own lives, their family, or their workplace. Usually nobody, or only one or two people, put up their hands.<sup>2</sup> I am often hesitant to ask even that, as that too must remind people of past or present hurt. However, what I like is that it helps us recognise that this is a broadly relevant issue, while at the same time it avoids putting people in the difficult position of choosing whether they will reveal their own direct experience of violence or feel they have betrayed themselves by remaining silent. All these questions also help me to know something about who I am speaking to; they help me to invite a connection with listeners through the stories and details I choose to tell.

### *An invitation:*

*Think a little about all of your locations and identities. Are you an educator, in formal or informal settings? Are you a student or learner, formally or informally? Do you take courses? Do you teach yourself how to do new things? Are you a therapist, counsellor or social worker, formally or informally as a helper, listener, community member, or member of a religious community? Are you a researcher, formally or informally? Do you gather information to make sense of your world? Do you make policy or write curricula? Are you a librarian or gatherer of information and resources which you share with others? Notice all of the different roles you play – the hats you wear – which may shape how you hear the issue of violence and learning and how you might address it.*

<sup>2</sup> This is true in Canada, the US and in South Africa, where a participant in one of my talks asked the group to put their hands up if they had not been affected by violence. I noticed during my visit that many people in South Africa assumed that Canada is free from violence; I think several hardly believed me when I spoke of disturbing levels of violence in Canada, even if they are lower than South African levels.



*Prof. Shirley Walters introduces Dr Jenny Horsman at the seminar in Cape Town*

*Ask yourself (gently) about the influence of violence on your life and those you know and love. Notice how those experiences too shape your openness to hearing about the impacts of violence and how to address them, your sense of hope and despair... and how your experiences push you towards and pull you away from potential action for change. Think too about your allies: can you draw together your own community to help you reflect on how you will address the impact in your own life and work? Who might help you explore this difficult topic further? Can you draw together a group of co-workers who might read this paper along with you and discuss what you might want to do next? Remember that although the challenge is huge, each one of us can only do the part of the work that we are able to do, starting with our own workplace, community, or family.*

## Not about the other ...

When we think about issues of violence it is important that we recognise that few of us can have been entirely free of violence or its implications in our lives, although we may have experienced different degrees of violence. In my talks and workshops I always try to model creating a safer learning environment so that participants can experience some of the elements I am talking about. I want them to be as present as possible, to be open to learning in spite of the emotional content of any talk about violence. One of the essential elements of this safer environment is knowing that there will be no telling of detailed stories of violence, which may trigger strong

painful memories for those who have their own stories. Instead I argue that it is the acknowledgement of the impact of violence that is critical in an educational setting to enable many people to learn. When it is not acknowledged, many may feel the shame of needing to conceal the impacts and the anxiety of fearing what might be said when. Moreover, the detailed tellings need a good empathetic listener who can pay full attention and where possible provide continuity of connection, neither of which are easy to provide in the immediate learning setting.

I also try to model a warm and accepting approach and to build a relationship with the group. It is far easier to be open to learning when there is no fear of judgement, and when we connect with others in the room, both the 'teacher' and fellow learners, and with the ideas presented. I encourage listeners to bring their whole selves to their learning, hearts and bodies as well as minds. I always encourage participants to look after themselves, to leave the room when they need to, to get some fresh (or smoky) air – whatever will help them return to learning. I also provide modelling clay, pipe cleaners and stress balls so that participants can experience using these things to help body and mind to stay together, to help them stay calm and grounded, and so support learning. Many who fiddle with these things are surprised by the positive impact on their ability to focus. Some people always fiddle with something, doodle, or jiggle their legs, knowing that this is crucial for them to pay attention; they are often delighted to have some more choices of things to play with and enjoy the creativity of these resources. Some, of course, find the opposite: that things to fiddle with are distracting rather than helpful. I am always delighted when people discover the power of this simple addition to a learning environment, perhaps discovering the value for others, even if not for themselves.

### *An invitation:*

*Think about how you will take care of yourself while you read this paper. Notice your feelings as well as your thoughts. Notice when you need to take a break, to discuss it with others, or to read more. Think about how you can create community to deepen your understanding and assess how to address these issues.*

*Try picking up something to fiddle with – as you read this paper, and perhaps also as you listen in the next lecture, meeting or class you attend – and see if it helps or hinders your focus and concentration. If you are responsible for a meeting or class, try setting up a situation where things to fiddle with are available, self-care is a priority, and the impact of violence on learning is acknowledged. Notice what follows, and see if it changes the process and/or the product created.*

## Drawing from research and practice in Canada

In this paper I am drawing from research and practice in Canada, and from conversations and learning from other countries. I have been reading much and listening carefully prior to and during my trip to try to understand the different dimensions of violence and their impacts on life and learning in South Africa. However, I haven't yet had the opportunity to carry out research in South Africa, and I have not lived in South Africa, so cannot fully comprehend the realities of daily life in this country. My hope for this paper is that you, the reader, will draw from it what applies in the South African setting – and your own particular context within it – and continue to explore how to develop and deepen an understanding of how to improve learning in your setting.

### The danger of dismissing ...

One of the major impacts of violence can be a sense of helplessness, a feeling that there is nothing we can do to stop it, to build strong connections with others, or to create a better future. It is hard to believe that change is possible and it is easy to dismiss arguments that something can be done to make a difference. You may find yourself thinking nothing is possible; you may justify yourself by thinking that I don't know your reality, that my approach can't work, that my research hasn't 'proved' there is a problem, that violence didn't really do you any harm, or that you are not in a position to make changes. If those thoughts cross your mind after you read this paper I invite you to notice them, to wonder about those thoughts and feelings, to question whether they too are part of the impact of violence. I invite you to look for even the tiniest of spaces where you **can** do something, the smallest pieces of what I suggest that **are** applicable, and try some small intervention, some small way of doing something different.

Through earlier workshops and informal research I have seen how hard a challenge it is to respond to the impact of violence on learning in a society where everyone is traumatised, where violence strongly impacts everyone's lives. In such a setting it is difficult to find allies and build connections to take on this work. Too easily we slide into competition, conflict, anger and despair. We may feel overwhelmed, thinking that the task is simply too big. When we learn to see that "slide" as part of the impact of violence, it may become easier to withstand it, and to keep looking for small steps forward that we can take on, wherever we are located.

## What violence?

When I speak about violence I am referring to the full range of violence, including the historic legacy of systemic violence, racism and poverty, such as that perpetrated by colonialism and the apartheid system. I also include the current day-to-day and personal experiences of all forms of violence, which appear to be the legacy of a country that has grappled with such intense violence at a state level and found violence necessary to overthrow the government that mandated such violence. The impact of the threat of violence is also significant, and we cannot ignore how much effect it may have on learning, particularly when people have to travel to and from class in fear. It is likely that many sit in class with a sense of anxiety about the possibility of violence erupting in class, or fear for their safety on their journey home.

I find the most useful definition of violence is given by Parker J Palmer, who says: "By violence I mean any way we have of violating the identity and integrity of another person" (Palmer 2004:169). I want to recognise that violence occurs in all aspects of life (the home, workplace, public places, and in society broadly) – and to all peoples (children, youth and adults, of different ethnicities, abilities, genders, ages) – and to recognise the interplay of systemic and individual violences. I want to reveal the violence of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, ageism and classism and the way all such prejudices also foster and give permission for further violence. I also want to acknowledge the impact of violence on further violence, turned both outward and inward, which results in addictions, self-harming and suicide, as well as hurting, diminishing and violating others. Such further violence often begins as a way to ease the pain of trauma, to feel better, but leads to ongoing cycles of more and more violence and pain.

The emotional loss and crisis of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the huge numbers of orphans, and the ways in which this disease is also tied to and intertwined with systemic and individual acts of violence are also relevant here, particularly in a South African context where the HIV/AIDS pandemic is fuelling a growing crisis. Finally, there are other events which are traumatic and can lead to similar impacts, even though there may be no perpetrator or no obvious perpetrator. The trauma resulting from traffic accidents, falls, health problems and surgery can also lead to learning problems. Although I think it is valuable to acknowledge trauma broadly, I have chosen to use the term 'violence' rather than 'trauma' in my work. I am concerned that the more medical term 'trauma' takes our attention away from the perpetrators of so much trauma, and makes it easy to get caught in medical frameworks for responding to trauma.

I think a medical response is a particularly problematic approach for responding to the impacts on learning. It can easily lead us to want to diagnose problems and apply labels to disorders; it also allows us to carry on organising educational institutions, workplaces, training courses and classrooms as if most people have not experienced violence and are already learning to their best potential. With such an approach I believe we miss an opportunity to strengthen learning possibilities for all and to develop communities of creative and successful learners.

#### *An invitation:*

*Visit the Violence section of the learning and violence website at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence.htm>. There you will find assumptions about violence and also a rich array of resources revealing the broad range of violences, both the unique specificity for particular peoples in specific parts of the world and for our common human experience. A cartoon leads to the easy-to-read sections on violence at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/easytoread/easy-violence.htm>. Take a look if you want to get a sense of the range of violences and see that you – and your country – are not alone in experiencing violence. Think too about what is missing. Do you know of resources that reveal aspects or understanding of forms of violence unique to the past and present of your country?*

*You might also choose to read more about the problem of violence and learning by visiting the Problem section of the site at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/problem.htm>. There you will find several articles that may help you understand or convince others that the impact of violence on learning is a problem we all need to address.*

## How much violence?

As I began to think about speaking again in South Africa and read more about the disturbing levels of violence here, I thought these high levels might make it a little easier to recognise it as a key issue in relation to women, work and learning and to focus on developing adequate ways to address it. Easier, that is, than I find it in Canada, where I am often told that levels of violence can't really be high enough to require us to change education. Instead it is often suggested that those who have experienced violence need to go away and heal, to make use of therapeutic resources. When they are 'healed' and can cope with the educational system as it is, they can return and continue their learning. I always argue that is not good enough, that levels of violence in Canada are too high, and



*Dr Jenny Horsman delivers the keynote address*

that that 'solution' is inadequate. Education can in itself offer a site of healing. There is nowhere in society entirely free of violence where we can go away and heal; we need to heal through our inner process of reflection and healing work, and education can be a key element in that journey. We do not simply 'get over' violence, get healed, and return to 'normal'. Violence shapes us and strengthens us at the same time as it creates challenges to learning, and these changes don't disappear no matter how long and intensively we work on our healing. Instead, they become part of the fabric of who we are. In every classroom, workplace and educational site, many will have experienced violence, even in countries where levels of violence are a little less acute than in South Africa.

I was relieved to hear that in South Africa the high levels of violence are being widely acknowledged, and to hear many people talk about how fundamental it is to address this limit to freedom. In a country where many people paid a high price to struggle for freedom it seems particularly ironic that freedom continues to be elusive, limited by fear of violence, experiences of violence, the aftermath of violence, and the ongoing impacts and reverberations of violence in life and learning.

Where levels of violence are extremely high, it may seem that we must put all our energy into trying directly to end violence.

Although educational programmes seeking to prevent violence are definitely necessary, they are not sufficient. If we only focus on such programmes, the aftermath of past violence will continue to have an impact on society, and I believe that impact contributes not only to low self-esteem and to learning failure, but also to ongoing cycles of violence. We need interventions which are both systemic and individual. This is possible if we work within systems of education and training, changing both far-reaching policies and day-to-day practices, and reaching a large proportion of the population. When students of all ages have the opportunity to participate in respectful, peaceful environments, where they can learn in community, developing curiosity and understanding about their own and other people's struggles to learn, they can begin to experience success, increased self-esteem and greater connection with others. This can help the process of healing wounds created through violence and other traumas.

Over time the experience of learning success can create a new cycle, growing the seeds of belief in a future, developing a person's potential to obtain and keep employment, to move out of poverty, and to take steps on a career path. Addressing the ongoing impact of violence on life and learning is a crucial way to intervene in cycles of violence. Even though such interventions may look either too subtle and too small (when we think about teaching practices in individual classrooms) or too huge and impossible (when we envisage transforming entire educational and training systems), change is needed at every level. In a context of overt, disturbing and widespread violence, changes at the local practical classroom level, at the broad policy and curriculum level, and every level in between, have the potential to create profound and lasting transformation.

Surprisingly, I have found acknowledging the impact of violence on learning often seems to be harder than acknowledging the experience of violence itself. In many discussions I have been told that it is disturbing to recognise that even the aspects of self that we may seek to keep free of the impact of violence are shaped by it. One person told me how angry she was initially when she heard me raising this issue; she realised that she wanted to believe that her educational life was separate from and unmarked by the violence that shaped her home life. She had continued to believe in this divide even when she experienced overwhelming evidence that violence was limiting her success in education. Perhaps too it is disturbing for us to recognise any of the ways that the impacts continue to live on, long after the violence has passed. Generally, I think, we want to believe that if we can end exposure to violence – remove children from violent homes and place them with foster families, provide shelters or refuges for abused women to flee to, topple unjust governments, end wars, even ban violent television and movies – the problem will be addressed.

However, there is growing evidence that the impacts of experiencing violence live on long after that violence ends, continue to surface in a myriad problems and different forms of violence throughout life, and persist into future generations.

When violence is too widespread it can lead us to believe we can do nothing to make a change and that subtler interventions are useless. If we are repeatedly in crisis we can be caught in reactive mode, simply responding to each immediate crisis. But as soon as the crisis passes, we have to notice whether we are participating in the violence, perpetuating violence in an attempt to 'clamp down', responding to violence with violence, or creating spaces and possibilities for an alternative to violence – an environment of peace. Have we become so overwhelmed and stressed by violence that we are participating or complicit in it by maintaining silence or avoiding addressing it? Or are we finding ways to deepen our understanding of the impacts of violence and learning to address them? When we don't seek to develop safer environments for learning, we remain trapped within a culture of violence.

## Learning and change

If workplaces are going to survive in an era of rapid change and globalisation,<sup>3</sup> organisational change is usually recommended. But for workplaces to change, workers have to be able to change. Change requires learning – learning about the changes necessary, learning to adjust to change, and learning to work in a changed environment. It is common to speak of 'learning organisations' but it is the people in the organisation, open, willing, and able to learn, who create a learning organisation.

When workers are unable to learn and to change they are trapped in the situation and easily judged to be poor workers who are not motivated or committed. Many may not be willing to try formal training. For those who find even informal on-the-job training too stressful, the idea of electing to take part in classroom-based learning may be entirely too daunting to imagine. Consequently many workers may be unable to advance in their workplace or to move forward in a career, and their workplace or organisation loses access to their potential. When workers are caught in this cycle, organisations, and consequently the country, are unable to benefit fully from these workers. When people are trapped and unable to learn and make desired changes in their lives, past injustice and inequality are preserved.

<sup>3</sup> Much could be said about the violence involved in globalisation, and in responses to it, but that would be another paper!

It is sometimes tempting to assume that interventions need only be made in approaches to training in order to support successful learning. However, it is important that training sites and workplaces collaborate so that both can offer comparable learning opportunities. Where training programmes address the impact of violence on learning but workplaces do not, workers will be prepared to enter workplaces which are not ready to accommodate and support them. In my recent research study of an exceptional training course, women who had experienced violence were prepared to enter a non-traditional trade through a training which included an outstanding array of supports, including a flexible response to needs and strong relationships with trainers and between students. In this setting women were remarkably successful; unfortunately the preference for hiring men limited the numbers of women hired, and those who were able to achieve employment found the workplace was far from conducive to their continued learning. Several felt isolated and alone, with little acknowledgement of their needs, as they sought to put their classroom learning into practice and continue to learn about the practical realities of the workplace in an unwelcoming male-dominated environment. Many workplaces need a change of culture if women, particularly those who have experienced violence, are going to find a place that supports their participation in learning. It is not sufficient to train women as if men's workplaces will accept them, leaving workplaces unchanged.

## How does violence impact learning?

### *An invitation:*

*Think about what you already know about the impact of violence on learning. Write for five minutes about what you have seen, heard and noticed about how violence affects participation in workplace learning and training (or in education more broadly). You can draw from your own experience, that of your friends, family, colleagues and those you teach or supervise. Try to write uninterrupted for a few minutes, not a list or point form, but just write, keeping your pen moving. When you have finished, pull out or highlight the most compelling or important sentence or idea in what you wrote.*

*Take a look at some of the sentences that others have pulled out from their writing at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/impact/Resources.htm>. If you have an opportunity to talk with others about this issue you could use this activity to ground your discussion in what you all already know about these impacts. You could read your single sentences out loud as a way to begin talking about what you can do together to address these impacts.*

## Anxiety

An important pervasive impact that can affect the possibilities for learning is heightened anxiety. While many of us experience anxiety when we take on something hard, in the aftermath of violence, anxiety, for some of us, can become paralysing and can lead to avoiding new situations and new challenges – perhaps the new job, the training to learn new approaches or skills, the move to a new location, or even the escape from a violent situation. Some of us may become particularly resistant to change and avoid trying anything different. Recent brain research sheds some light on this tendency. Trauma, especially repeated trauma, increases anxiety. After repeated trauma it takes less and less to trigger an anxious response. We now know that in the face of trauma we prepare for fight, flight or freeze, and in this state, part of the brain (the neo-cortex) needed for higher order thinking and analysis will close down. Instead of flowing there, blood flows to other parts of the brain and to the muscles we may need instantly to fight or flee the danger. The part of the brain responsible for language is dampened.

Over time, when trauma occurs over and over again, the response that was designed to help us flee from a predator and to keep us safe, becomes maladaptive, damaging our health and trapping us in the fear reactions that are triggered over and over again. Even a pleasant surprise, something exciting or new, can be registered as danger, causing the analytical thinking portion of the brain to close down. This helps to explain why the gang member may furiously ask, "Are you looking at me?" A mere look is provocation and the response is violent. The look may actually feel life-threatening. Similarly it may explain why some children are unable to settle and exhibit 'fight' behaviour, so often labelled as oppositional defiant disorder, or conduct disorder, or are quiet and invisible, trying hard to draw no attention at all as any attention can feel terrifying.

We need a state of 'relaxed alertness' to learn best: "Complex learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat associated with helplessness." (<http://www.cainelearning.com/files/Wheel.html>). The anxious reaction to anything perceived as threatening has implications not only for teaching approaches to support learning for all, but also for how to organise and administer all processes associated with learning. Even the layout of the building, or the registration procedures new students have to go through as they begin in a programme, may help to confirm for a potential student that she cannot learn. Perhaps her brain shuts down as she looks for the correct classroom, and by the time she arrives late and can hardly hear the instructor, she is sure she does not belong there. As students try to cope with their level of anxiety, they may start and

stop many times; if this leads them to be judged as not serious, or as ineligible for funding – having had their chance – their potential for success is immediately limited. One particularly important aspect to consider is accreditation processes of all kinds, as tests, exams, and even interviews are all likely to raise anxiety levels particularly high. In an early research study I heard a revealing example of a student who repeatedly missed tests from one of the instructors, Evelyn Battell:

She thought she pretty much had sorted out her childhood but math has brought it back BIG TIME. She is going to keep a journal – she’s very articulate and observing. We are talking a lot as she struggles but the struggle is really extreme and I’m worried (Horsman 1999: 81; 2000b: 75).

Many attempts to learn can trigger anxiety. It is easy to see how anxiety can be compounded, making it harder and harder to learn. Perhaps I am new in a workplace, and the supervisor is watching me carefully. Or I am a woman in a traditionally male workplace. Here too I know I will be watched critically. In either case being scrutinised can lead to more anxiety and less competent work, proving the validity of questioning the competency of the worker that led to the observation in the first place. Perhaps that sense of being watched critically, and the feeling of being unable to trust anyone, echoes old violence and diminishment. When these echoes, or triggers, are in the foreground, they can easily lead to a downward spiral, to more and more difficulty learning, trouble remembering, and a growing inability to cope in the workplace. That can lead to illness when the body can’t cope with the tension, and that too can lead to more criticism and more tension, and poorer and poorer work, a downward spiral of more and more tension and less and less adequate work.

#### *An invitation:*

*Take a look at the section of the website which introduces learning processes and explore some of the resources about brain research you will find there: <http://www.learningandviolence.net/learning/psychother.htm>. This section will take you to websites and downloadable articles by some of the most exciting authors studying the brain and the impact of trauma.*

## Presence/dissociation

The worker or student who doesn’t seem to apply herself, who is judged as lazy, not serious or not motivated, who is often late or misses classes, tests or work, who is clumsy and walks into

things, or knocks things over, who seems to have a bad memory, particularly when it comes to priority tasks, and not to be really paying good attention, may be someone who has developed the ability to dissociate. This survival skill is the ability to keep the body in place while the mind and spirit leave, perhaps to watch from a distance, or to take a complete break. I have described this pattern earlier:

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, this 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. Women may feel hazy as if intoxicated, experience blurred vision or hearing, body numbness, a feeling of leaving the room with birds flying by or cars passing, or they may experience a complete gap in time. This “absence” may feel pleasurable, it may be terrifying and lead to panic and difficulty breathing, or the person may have no awareness that time has passed when they return to the present (Horsman 2006b: 184).

When violence is a repeated experience, this pattern of dissociating can become ingrained; so ingrained in fact that we may be unable even to recognise how well developed the skill of separating mind and body has become. We may not realise that we are generally not present in our own bodies, and, if it has been a lifelong pattern, we cannot know what being fully present would look and feel like. Embarking on the journey to learn to be more fully present can be a challenging, complex and rewarding task.

This is perhaps one of the most complex, fascinating and sad outcomes of violence as it can decrease the joy to be found in all the senses, and can have a long-lasting impact on successful learning.<sup>4</sup> Though the myriad layers and degrees of presence are complex, some very simple tools can make it easier to stay present enough to learn. Tools such as focusing on the breath, rubbing one’s hands on one’s thighs, or rubbing the palm of one hand with the other, can

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, in the right circumstances some of us with dissociative patterns may also have excelled in school through focusing on the mind at the cost of the rest of self. Sylvia Fraser wrote about this as taking the “severed head” to school” (Fraser 1987: 120), seeking to bury emotions and self-hate through putting together a “rational and successful person” she could respect (ibid: 130).



all bring mind and body together. The modelling clay, stress balls, and pipe-cleaners introduced earlier can also be enjoyable ways that help many of us to stay more present. However, it is important to notice too that when old memories or current stresses make allowing the mind to slide away seem the only possible course of action, this should not be judged; it was learned as an essential tool for survival and may still seem the only option long after life-threatening danger is past.

#### *An invitation:*

*You can learn more about how dissociating or spacing out can feel at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/impact/spacing.htm>. There are pictures that show what spacing out can feel like, and quotes from a variety of people, as well as a chance to experience it. Scroll down the page to find the different elements.*

## Control, connection, meaning ...

In the aftermath of violence, control, connection and meaning all become complicated terrain. Each of these words can hold many meanings. These concepts begin to be complicated areas of experience because they are central to the moment of apparently life-threatening violence. At that moment all control is taken away from us, and we are at the mercy of overwhelming force. We feel utterly isolated; even when others are sharing the experience, we are disconnected from them. It seems that life will end. After the violence is over, each area may continue to be a difficult minefield, holding tension and reminders of those unbearable moments. We may want total control, or feel we can never have control and slide quickly from one to the other. We may feel isolated and remain alone, or spend all our time seeking the company of others, yearning for real connection, perhaps switching between extremes – alone or in groups. We may insist that everything we do must be meaningful, or we may feel there is no meaning in life and have no sense of a future; like the other areas, we may move quickly from one alternative to the other. Each of these elements can continue to play out in complex ways long after the violence that formed them is far in the past, and can have a profound effect on learning and participation in formal or informal education.

#### *Control*

After the violence is over, control remains a particularly complicated area. We may fear that we may not have any control, feel helpless and continue to behave as if we can never have control – continuing to be a victim – or we may insist on total control. We may switch in

a moment from total control to total helplessness. We can see these patterns in workplaces and classrooms. We might notice the person who seems to feel they have no control over anything, who asks permission for absolutely everything, and takes no initiative. One student I worked with always shrugged and said, “Whatever!” or “I don’t care,” when she was feeling particularly helpless and unable to have any impact on whatever she was feeling; she just had to endure. Others always look for someone else to blame: “It’s not my fault ... she did it.” In a way such allocation of blame elsewhere is a means of regaining a sense of control. Trying to stay in control of every last detail is the more direct way of maintaining control. This attempt to stay in control can lead to angry explosions when control is impossible.

We all know managers or teachers who drive those who are working or learning with them crazy by holding on to every last detail, wanting everything done in exactly the way they want to do it. Of course if any of the people working or studying with such a manager or teacher have also been through violence, then conflicts can erupt. Conflicts can become violent when both people want to stay in control and cannot bear to be controlled. Much of the violence that erupts in schools and schoolyards may be an outcome of this cycle. Decreased confidence and ability may be the result when a worker or student who anxiously tries to do things ‘right’ experiences the person who needs to always be in control as not trusting them, judging them as not good enough, seeing their idea or approach as ‘wrong’. When people have no control over their own work, many will get more and more incompetent and feel stupid. The explosively angry person may create a terrifying situation for students, colleagues, or those they supervise, particularly if these people’s prior experiences of violence are evoked and they become anxious or dissociate. In such a situation few people will be able to open to learning, to take risks, or to experiment in the ways needed to pave the way for new learning and change.

#### *Connection*

The challenge of connection can mean that many people feel isolated, lonely and disconnected from humanity. In a study of youth I interviewed a teenage girl who had one brutal experience of violence. She had previously been an honours student and I expected her to be articulate about what had changed and why she had dropped out of school. Instead I found that she could tell me very little. I gradually came to understand that she felt disconnected from her classmates, from the teacher and from the lessons. She couldn’t really articulate why, but she couldn’t see any reason to be in class any more. Finally I realised she had become disconnected from herself. That sense of disconnection can lead to the loner, and

for those already set apart by race, class, poverty, gender, sexual orientation, disability or age, that sense of isolation can become stark. A feeling of being utterly separate from the rest of humanity can contribute to further violence. It may contribute to the desire for belonging that lures many into gangs, and it is far easier to attack or kill someone you feel absolutely no connection with or compassion for.

There is value in trying to create connections in a workplace or training centre, to build trust and create community. Community enhances the possibilities for successful learning, yet it is not easy to create a strong community when people are isolated – perhaps even from themselves – and have little trust of themselves or others. In fact attempts to strengthen connection and develop a sense of community can easily be more divisive. For example, take the office party, where often people soften the edge of anxiety with alcohol and say and do things they would avoid in the workplace. For those who feel uncomfortable in such a setting, the attempt to create community may increase rather than decrease the sense of isolation.

When I interviewed women who had taken part in the pre-apprenticeship programme for women in or leaving violent relationships, I was struck by the fact that none of them had been eager to join a course for women only. They all had images of the 'bitchiness' of women and saw them as rivals rather than allies. However, with time and active community-building, it became clear that learning in community had become a supportive and important part of what was valuable about the course. Many also spoke particularly vividly about the power of the positive relationships they developed with the coordinator, instructors, mentor, and other support people. Such connections and the faith of the coordinator that each individual could learn brought several of the women back to the classroom when they were tempted to give up on themselves and the programme.

### Meaning

One of the most disturbing consequences of experiences of violence or trauma is how it translates into a sense that there will be no future. Without a belief there will be a future, there is nothing to work towards or for. Children who have experienced trauma frequently believe they will not live into adulthood. Lenore Terr studied a group of children who were abducted. The children, almost every school-age child from the community of Chowchilla in California, were returning home from summer school when their bus was hijacked and all were kidnapped. After nearly two days in captivity, they managed to escape.

The immediate reaction by the authorities was that the children were fine, unharmed. But Lenore Terr's study, which included interviews five years later, showed that even this one incident of trauma left the children feeling a sense of 'futurelessness'. The children left school early, didn't expect to live to be adults and could not take the series of actions that would lead to a future, even if they held onto a dream. Lenore Terr describes two girls from the kidnapped group who married at ages 15 and 16, and continues her account:

A third girl married a couple of years later, several states away, when she reached fifteen. These girls' mothers or sisters had not quit high school in order to marry. The girls themselves appeared to have lost the ability to pursue a lifelong goal or to become committed to a series of life-enhancing projects. Their sense of futurelessness had taken material form (Terr 1990: 290).

Through this research Terr makes vividly clear the impact of trauma on a sense of meaningfulness in life and the ability to plan for the future. I have been mesmerised by this study. It leads me to believe that if one incidence of trauma can lead to such a change for an entire group of children, robbing them of the ability to set goals and imagine a future which they can work towards, then the endlessly repeated incidences of trauma in childhood which often characterise sexual, physical or emotional abuse in the home must be even more devastating to the ability to dream and plan for a future.

This loss of meaning then makes sense of why violence can so easily continue. If there is no future then why not take risks, why not take drugs or commit crimes? Arguments that risky behaviour will rob you of a future are unlikely to be effective with those who do not believe they have a future anyway, or who feel so bad about themselves that they are not sure they want a future. When we add to this picture the numbing effect of dissociation, which may mean that the thrill of risky behaviour helps a person feel more fully alive; of low self-esteem, which may make looking after oneself seem barely worth bothering with; and of lack of confidence, which may take away the strength to resist going along with classmates or friends' bad behaviour, it is clear why many forms of violence, from the most subtle to the most extreme, inflicted on the self or the other, may continue unchecked in the aftermath of violence.

### All or nothing

Each of these impacts can also play out quickly shifting to the opposite, from total presence to complete absence, from total control to utter helplessness. The behaviour that is harder to find is middle ground, the space between all and nothing. Middle ground is the one thing that is rarely present in a situation of violence:

You will live or die; you will be safe this time or under attack. In violent relationships it is often a life of extremes, with violence followed by 'honeymoon' periods. One person I interviewed years ago described the torture she received at the hands of her husband one minute, followed by roses bought at great cost in the middle of winter the next. It has always stayed with me as a vivid example of all or nothing. There is little middle ground in violent relationships, few shades of grey, so in the aftermath of violence, middle ground may remain unfamiliar territory. Yet to learn new things takes regular practice, and through careful persistent effort, gradual change can come about. When we cannot see the middle ground it is harder to persist and continue to have faith in the possibility of change. We are more inclined to give up. If we are not succeeding instantly and totally, we may be able to believe only that we are failing. We may begin a course convinced that this time we are really going to do it, study hard, succeed, but quickly become discouraged when we are not doing perfectly from the start.

## Not the 'other'

Finally it is important to recognise as we look at a few of the impacts of violence on learning that we are not describing some strange 'other', a person different from ourselves – our clients, our students, the other workers – who experiences these impacts, but instead we need to include ourselves, our friends and our community in the picture. The descriptions of the impacts of violence and how they play out in life and learning are descriptions many of us know ourselves. As well as describing others we know, work and learn with, they describe us as educators and learners, as managers and employees. The impacts unfold, not in isolation in individuals, but in interactions and relationships. There is always a 'dance' of connection and disconnection as these behaviours in the aftermath of violence shape perception and possibility. We may make up stories of the 'other' to help us feel we don't have a problem; we are the professional, the helper; we are in control. It may feel easier to examine the other rather than ourselves, but change is more likely to come when we recognise ourselves as well as the other in these descriptions and begin to acknowledge and address the impact of violence on learning and teaching as allies and fellow travellers with those we seek to 'help'.

### *An invitation:*

Look at the animation that opens the Impact section of the website: <http://www.learningandviolence.net/impact.htm>. Explore more of the different impacts in that section. Each one has its own multifaceted patterns and variations.



*Shakeel Ori, Director Co-operative Education, DUT facilitates the discussion at the seminar in Durban*

*Reflect on your concerns about the issue of violence and learning having read this far.*

*Think about what you could do to investigate the impacts further and explore how what you have read so far applies in your context.*

## What can we do to address the impact of violence on learning?

What can we do to create an environment to support participation, learning and change in workplaces and training? Our primary focus as educators must be to support learning. We must not slide into becoming therapists, although we can work collaboratively with therapists, counsellors and other local or traditional healers to help learners to explore their own history and engage with learning. When we take on and directly address the impacts of violence on learning, we are less likely to hear the detailed stories of violence or feel we must take on the role of therapist. There are some key things we can do to support learning and so make it possible for people to work towards the changes they hope for in life.

## 1. Acknowledge the impact of violence on learning

One of the most important things we can do is simply to acknowledge not only that violence is widespread, but also that it affects learning. In many ways this is fairly obvious. Of course it does. How could it not? Violence affects the self and all aspects of life. However, given that we have tended to ignore its impact on learning and continue as if there is no impact, it is particularly important to name it and acknowledge it in educational settings, both formal and informal. It is the absence of recognition that leaves far too many people with no explanation for their struggle to learn besides the judgement that they are stupid or lazy or not motivated. Just naming it is transformative. I often hear from people what a difference it has made to them to have an explanation for their struggles. For example, I received a note the other day from someone who read my book *Too scared to learn* (Horsman 1999/2000b) many years ago:

*Too scared to learn* was vital to my healing. I was always trying to go back to school. I would start and then get wiped out by fear. Your book released me from years of being told and believing that I was profoundly stupid. I didn't act stupid, I WAS STUPID.

I work with survivors now. I can't tell you how many times I mention your book. My hope is that if they have the knowledge they too can start to see they are not stupid – that it is directly related to the trauma and how they were not able to learn in the way schools provide the education (Personal correspondence 2009).

Far too often the impact of violence on learning is like the elephant in the room; we can all see it but few people want to acknowledge it is there. Acknowledging does not mean trying to work out who has experienced violence, or putting medical labels on the behaviour. Instead it means accepting the behaviour without judgement and providing learning environments to support all learners. When supportive learning environments are the norm, none of us will have to try to change to cope with an environment which reminds us of past violence and undermines our sense of safety. Supportive safer learning environments help everyone to learn.

One way of acknowledging the impact and creating a supportive learning environment is simply to start a class by saying something like: "Many of us may have been through tough times. What we've gone through may have got in the way of our learning as kids, and still get in the way now. In this class we recognise that nobody is stupid, but our past experiences of schooling might have made us believe we are. We know that how we work together can make it harder or easier to learn, so we will always be looking for ways

to work together that help everyone learn." If we've begun a class by making it possible to speak of the impact in this way, then, if someone misses a whole chunk of a class because they dissociate, or space out, they will be less afraid to say they have missed some material and can find out exactly what they missed. If someone's distress is triggered by something that seems innocuous, like the smell of banana, they won't have to lie to get out of the room. They can simply say what is bothering them. The acknowledgement makes anything more 'speakable' and makes it a collective responsibility to try to support everyone to learn. The person who is distressed doesn't have to remain alone with her problem; other students and the teacher might open the window, get the banana peel out of the room, and ask the student what else she needs to be able to stay present to learn. Perhaps she may need to take a break, but she is likely to be able to return quicker to her learning than if she had to wrestle alone with feeling bad.

In my recent research study I learned about a beautiful example of acknowledging, witnessing, and providing support to cope with the various ways the impacts may play out in the classroom. In the pre-apprenticeship programme I studied, a counsellor was included as one of the supports provided in the programme. Initially she offered the women counselling appointments at the end of their day in class, but she soon found that women often didn't show up. Rather than judging the women, she realised the plan must not be meeting the women's needs well. So she sat in on their classes to get a sense of what was happening. She soon found she was seeing that the women's behaviour (as the aftermath of violence) got in the way of their learning. She taught women how to help themselves stay present in the moment and how to ground themselves when they found themselves 'spinning out of control'. They learned how they could come back to their breath, or to their hands on their thighs, to help them to stay connected to their own body. Women spoke of the value of seeing her witnessing their struggles, offering them a warm supportive smile, and rubbing her own thighs to remind them of the tricks they had learned to steady and focus themselves.

Instead of setting appointments for the end of the day, she would catch a woman's eye if she saw her having difficulty, then walk out of the room so that if the woman wanted to meet right then she knew she could follow the counsellor and talk to her. The counsellor found that women often needed only a few minutes of connection to help them return to their learning. Over time she found the women were more likely to be able to settle and return quickly to their learning even without talking to her. What seemed to be particularly important was seeing the counsellor notice that they were having trouble and realise that they might need support. Unlike the critical watching (mentioned earlier) to see if or when someone will make

a mistake, this supportive observation provided a sense someone cared and wanted them to succeed, a safety net to make it possible for the women to dare to continue with a difficult challenge.<sup>5</sup> This model reveals one effective way to minimise the amount of lesson content that women will miss because of their struggle to be present in the face of anxiety and reminders of past or present violence. Often we are tempted to suggest that people should just get over it, or that they should leave their past, or their emotions, behind when they come into the training programme. But that doesn't generally work; the past continues to colour our day-to-day life and learning, staying with us even when we try to will it away. It can make it hard to stay present to learn, and stop us learning successfully unless we acknowledge it and learn to move from anxiety to relaxed alertness, fully present to learn.

## 2. Create safer learning environments

The last time I was in South Africa someone told me that most people in South Africa don't feel safe and have never felt safe. Given that we know that we learn best in a state of relaxed alertness, we need to explore how to create enough safety for people to be able to let down their guard to stay present enough to take the risks necessary to learn and open up to possibilities for change.

Safety must include the bare minimum of physical safety. Not only is safety in the classroom or workplace important but also safety on the way to and from work or class.<sup>6</sup> Yet safety includes more than physical safety; it also includes emotional safety. It is only when we are safe from critical judgements that we are free to experiment, to take risks. For women in non-traditional work environments, physical and emotional safety may be rare. In my recent research I was horrified to hear that one of the women had received a high voltage electric shock and had been fortunate to survive. She was absolutely clear that one of her male colleagues had set her up to be hurt, had insisted that he had already turned off the power, and blocked her way to check for herself. Later he told their boss that she didn't bother to check that the power was off, and that it was only a minor shock. When I interviewed the new worker, even though she

<sup>5</sup> This model of counselling is described in detail at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm> in the pop-up window on Working with a Counsellor.

<sup>6</sup> The 2001 Human Rights Watch report of girls' experience of schooling in South Africa shows the horrifying lack of physical safety in schools and the failure to address this violence adequately, creating a further lack of emotional safety. The report is available at: <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2001/safrica/>.

was absolutely clear that it was her responsibility to check that the breaker was off, and she is a strong, determined woman, she said she had felt unable to withstand her senior colleague's insistence that he was looking out for her. Now she explained she is watching her back, worried about further attacks, and sure that this environment where she feels no sense of safety is taking its toll. She feared she would begin to make more mistakes as she became more tense and anxious, worried about what might happen next.

In the aftermath of violence many of us feel fragmented and disconnected even from ourselves. In the face of this experience, holistic approaches can be an extremely effective support for learning. Creative approaches such as arts, movement and music can support positive emotions, draw the spirit into learning, ensure that the body can support learning rather than block it, and can help those who believe they do not have a capable mind discover what they can do. Many traditional creative arts can be a powerful source for learning, not just as a fun addition to the real learning, but as a fundamental element in the learning process.

The learning environment itself can also be a space that supports the whole self and develops safety. Conditions that make learning easier will include an environment that nurtures emotions such as hope and joy, feeds the spirit, helps each student to have a sense of self-worth, provides comfort for the body and invites the mind to engage playfully. Such an environment will also provide space to opt out when necessary. For example, a comfy chair in the corner of the room can offer breathing space for a student who cannot be present at any point. When I taught in a class with a chair set up in this way, I was fascinated to see that women having trouble focusing would retreat to the chair, perhaps with a quilt pulled up to their chin, looking as if they might be unable to take part for the rest of the day. But to my surprise, minutes later I would find them back in the circle, taking part in the class. By having the opportunity to stay in the classroom, but detach from the class, women were able to explore middle ground – avoiding the 'all or nothing' of remaining in their seat trying to take part, or fleeing the classroom entirely. We don't need a lot to be able to be ready to learn, but what we need is often vital to be able to return to learning. Little things, such as using instruments to draw the group's attention rather than shouting, flowers, music, comforting lighting, and healthy snacks can all make a substantial difference to the potential for learning.

## 3. Avoid shame and escalation

A fundamental part of a safer learning environment is freedom from the fear of being shamed. All too often in education, training and workplaces, people believe they can push their students or

workers to greater excellence through humiliation and shame. I still remember the English teacher when I was a child who held my essay upside down in front of the class, the better to reveal my appalling handwriting to me and to everyone else, while she berated me for my poor work and my messy handwriting, hoping in that way to compel me to work harder. Instead of working harder I felt stupid, and my mind unfailingly closed down when I sat in her class. At least 40 years later I can still feel and see that day in the classroom, yet in comparison with the ways many students are bullied and shamed by teachers, it is a relatively minor incident. In my research I hear many stories of humiliation. In one focus group I reported on in *Too scared to learn* (Horsman 2000a: 181-182), the students mused about the humiliation they all experienced in school and wondered where the teachers learned such an approach; they quickly concluded that, just like themselves, these teachers probably learned humiliation in their own homes.

A particularly remarkable teacher I interviewed many years ago described the powerful effect of avoiding shaming students labelled with behavioural problems. Over many years of working with such students, he had learned how fragile they were, what poor self-esteem they had, and how little they could bear to be controlled. He described what a difference it made to the levels of conflict and violence that erupted in the classroom when he was careful to find a place of alliance with the students. Instead of criticising their behaviour in front of their peers, he invited the student out of the room if he needed to speak to them. He spoke too about the difference when he stood side by side with a student and pointed out the problem they both needed to find a solution for, rather than confronting the student face to face and criticising the person, seeing the problem as part of the student.

As I discussed earlier, in the aftermath of violence control can become complicated terrain. This can be particularly difficult in situations such as school and workplaces where there are many rules and regulations, and the attempt to stay always in control and the attempt not to be controlled ever again can lead to huge clashes. When confrontation and shaming is carefully avoided, then escalation into further conflicts will decrease.

Another lovely example of avoiding shaming is the approach of an organisation called LOVE<sup>7</sup> that works in several cities in Canada with high school students who have experienced violence as perpetrators and/or victims. This programme does not select the students

<sup>7</sup> The effect of this programme is described in more detail in the report from my research study (Horsman 2004). For details of how they work, visit their website: [www.leaveoutviolence.com](http://www.leaveoutviolence.com)



*Samuel Isaacs (Executive Officer of SAQA) and Shirley Walters*

because they are a problem, but instead frames them as the experts on youth violence because of their experience. Instead of trying to remediate their skills, the programme seeks to train the students in public speaking and print and photojournalism so that they can educate others on the issue of youth violence. Interviewing students from this programme, I was startled to hear them speak as wise experts, extremely knowledgeable on the issues, no longer caught up in violence. As they explained to me, they no longer needed to be part of a gang – LOVE was their gang; they no longer needed the high of drugs, as they experienced instead the high of walking into a school to give a talk, or saw their own work in print.

Particularly important if further violence is to be avoided is a way of providing space for exploring control and avoiding confrontation. A balance of structure and openness can help to ease the anxiety of surprises while avoiding the clashes around control. The teacher who is controlling leaves no space for the students to explore control. In contrast, where structures are developed that do leave space for the students to take control, they can learn about a middle ground. A lovely example of this is one I heard of during my national research study. Two teachers in a college paired their classes and provided two contrasting settings for learning: they called one the 'inhale room' and the other the 'exhale room'. In the inhale room there was always something new to take in, always something being taught. In the exhale room, students had the opportunity to do work they wanted to do, to complete an earlier assignment, or to write what they chose. If a student in the inhale room complained about the content of the class, they always had the option to leave; if they were in the exhale room with nothing to do, they were clearly ready to take in something new. In this way the clash of wills was avoided and students could learn to assess what they needed to help themselves advance in their learning.



*Joe Samuels, Deputy Executive Officer of SAQA, facilitating the discussion at the seminar in Pretoria*

#### 4. Avoid judgement

To create a climate for learning it is important to create a space that is free of judgement of the self and the other. If we can learn to observe with curiosity, and encourage the students we work with similarly to observe her own behaviour with curiosity, there is more space for learning. We must avoid getting caught in judgements that lead us to believe we need to diagnose who has experienced violence and put medical labels of syndromes and disorders on them. Instead we must simply look at how best to support their learning. I frequently tell students that one of the most effective ways they can support their own learning is to become a detective, trying to plot exactly what is happening when they struggle to learn and when learning feels easier. Careful observation with curiosity rather than judgement by teacher and student alike can support learning. In that way it makes it easier to spot what elements enhance learning and what blocks or diminishes it.

If we can avoid using energy to criticise and judge, to beat with words and judgements such as 'stupid, lazy, not motivated', then more energy is available for creative solutions. One student I worked with could not understand why she so often missed the appointments that were set up around the myriad problems her daughter experienced. Susan knew that when she missed appointments this

led to judgements that she was not a good mother, and she was desperate to avoid repeating this pattern. But the more anxious she was, of course, the more her brain closed down, and the worse her memory seemed to get. Once we talked about why her brain might be failing her, she could begin to look at her patterns and come up with creative solutions. When she began to put sticky notes with the meeting dates on the corner of her mirror or her front door, and to name the fact that because she got anxious she often missed the appointments, she was able to stop berating herself for her stupidity and to shift the old pattern.

We need to notice when we are telling ourselves a story about the other or the self, a story such as "I'm so stupid," "I always do that," "She's late because she doesn't care," "I can't change," or "He often misses work because he's not committed." Such judgements often seem like facts, but they are stories we make up to explain what is happening. If we can avoid telling ourselves critical stories as far as possible and instead try to ask why, with pure curiosity, then the picture changes. For example, if I notice you often come late to class I might ask you if you have a sense of what that is about, rather than assuming I know that it is because you are lazy, or not committed. One student I interviewed who was drug-addicted told me that she came late to class every day for a term, frequently still high and still wearing the clothes she had been partying in the night before. Every day the teacher praised her for simply getting to class, saying how proud she was of the student that she showed up when clearly it would have been so much easier not to bother, to go home to sleep. When the student told me the story she had become an extremely successful student, close to graduating, and she argued that it was that freedom from judgement that eventually helped her to make a change in her behaviour and begin to get off the drugs.

During the research study I carried out with youth, my research assistant observed that the students were telling us that it is only if adults believe the best of students that they are ever likely to see that best. Students were certain that if teachers judge and respond to the behaviour they see, they will certainly never see what other behaviour might be possible. In the aftermath of violence not only young people, but all of us, need to be seen, heard and valued, more than we ever want to admit.

#### *An invitation:*

*This is only a quick introduction to some key aspects of how to address the impacts of violence on learning. To learn more about what you or students and workers can do to support their/your own learning, go to <http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpself.htm>.*

*A particularly important part of that section is the material about what to do when you feel bad. There is an extremely powerful exercise to do when we are overwhelmed. You can find that at <http://www.interactivistlearning.com/Jenny/ContainerExercise.html>.*

*If you are helping others to learn there is a lot of useful information at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm>. You can click on everything in the classroom and learn more. There are a series of books at the bottom of the page which I think of as the cornerstones for addressing the impact of violence on learning. You can read more there. Although this is set up as an informal adult classroom, the ideas introduced here apply to workplaces and children's classrooms as well.*

*In Appendix B there is a simple checklist of what addressing the impact of violence on learning can look like.*

## In conclusion

We must acknowledge the impact of violence on learning. If we do so we can break the silences and isolation of the experience of struggling to learn in the aftermath of violence. We need to create collaborations and avoid confrontations. We need to find gentler ways of interacting with ourselves and each other. We need to move to less judgement and more curiosity about why we do what we do: how did it serve us and help us survive during experiences of violence, and how might it get in the way of learning now?

We cannot continue with 'business as usual', either in workplaces or in training and educational sites. We need to make changes to support learning. Violence affects learning in every setting. In some ways that is simple and obvious. But if we really take it on and recognise it, we must address it in every educational site, in places of formal and informal learning. Then the challenge is huge. It becomes an enormous and complicated task. But if we don't address it, not only will learning failure continue, but violence in subtle and not-so-subtle forms – directed inwards to the self or outwards to the other – will continue to escalate.

In South Africa you are at an important juncture. What will you do? You may feel that addressing the impact of violence on learning isn't stopping violence. I don't agree. When we act to take into account the impact of violence on learning, we intervene in cycles of violence; we begin to create more possibilities for peaceful interactions; we start to change a culture from one of violence to one of peace.

When I prepared for my trip to South Africa, I looked at the SAQA website and I noticed that the vision for SAQA's work is that education can play a role in redressing inequality and that education can support the "full personal development of each learner". I believe that if you find ways to address the impact of violence on learning you have the potential to meet those goals and to create lasting change – for all.

### *An invitation:*

*How will you take up the issue?*

*Think about others who might join with you to take on this issue. How will you encourage them to join you?*

*What is one first step you can take to begin to address the issue in your context?*

*Explore the Dreams section of the learning and violence website at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/dreams.htm>. Here you will find some people's thoughts about what it would look like if we addressed the impact of violence on learning, and how that addressing might intervene in the ongoing cycles of violence.*

*If you go to <http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/wherwrlld.htm> you will see where in the world researchers and educators are addressing the impact of violence on learning. I hope you will soon be sending in information about the way that you are taking up the issue and the difference it is making.*

*If you register for the forum <http://www.learningandviolence.net/forum/>, you can also tell us about things you are trying out and the questions and insights you have as you plan and prepare and take on this issue. I hope to see you there.*

*I have started a separate theme area for you to continue the discussions begun in my talks. I do hope you will join in and make sure it becomes a place of connection, in order to strengthen local approaches and teach those of us outside South Africa about the resources and understanding you develop about how best to address the impacts of violence on learning in your context.*

*Last but not least, don't forget to go to the section on taking care of ourselves at <http://www.learningandviolence.net/takecare.htm>. It's important not to let that slide if we are to be able to work in this area for the long haul, supporting gradual and enduring individual and societal change.*



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