Changing Literacy Programs to Take Account of Violence - Brief Notes
Jenny Horsman

Introduction to thinking about discourse

Discourses about education and violence shape what is seen as legitimate literacy work, and so make it hard to change education to recognize the extent of violence and the effects of violence on learning. Seeing our language and practices as discourse offers a tool to get outside a focus on what is 'right' and draws attention to examining how certain discourses open and close possibilities for re-conceptualizing adult literacy work to support learning for all.

Discourses about Violence

Silence
Discourses about violence silence talk, it is seen as 'wiser' not to talk, it 'serves no purpose.' Literacy workers have to learn to create a space that names the presence of violence in many women's lives, without the talk feeling threatening to survivors of violence.

Can of worms - violence issues are seen as too difficult, too specialized an area, not to show the need for training, but to suggest that the field can not take it on.

This isn't violence - the widespread nature of violence, leads to a sense that 'this is just the way it is' or this is acceptable amongst this or that ethnic or religious group, so nothing can be done.

Silence is not neutral - the suggestion that it is wiser not to open up talk about violence operates on the assumption that doing nothing is safer. But silence gives a message of complicity with the dominant messages of society that condone violence. Posters, pamphlets, reading materials for students and teachers, workshops, ground rules about violence, and responding clearly to violence and to the pressure to 'get over it' can all break the silence.

Naming violence is not disclosing - there is often fear that naming violence will open up detailed stories of violence, but when there is acceptance that violence is present, counselling supports are available, and students realize they would find it hard to hear accounts of violence from each other, most students prefer to limit what they share.

Medicalizing Violence
The aftermath of violence is spoken about primarily in medical terms. This sets the scene for an approach to issues of violence in education that is clearly focussed on diagnosing who has a problem and referring them for 'help.' This approach leads to a focus on the diagnosis of an ailment, and a frame that 'normal' students can cope with the education system, those who cannot, must have something wrong with them. They need to change, but the education system can remain the same.

'Dealt with' - there is pressure for workers to have 'dealt with' whatever violence they have experienced, which parallels pressure on learners to go away and heal if violence is getting in the way of their learning. This makes it unacceptable for workers to be 'triggered,' and so encourages them to avoid opening issues of violence for fear of raising their own issues.

I'm not a therapist - reminds literacy workers that there is a clear divide between literacy and therapy and that emotional and violence issues belong on the therapy side of the divide.

Living beside - taking part in a literacy program can be a place to explore possibilities of living beside trauma, but if literacy workers have learned the medicalizing discourses well, then workers and learners will seek to show they have left violence and its impacts behind or risk the judgement they are not 'ready' to be there.

Canaries in the mine - those who have experienced violence are like the canaries, offering a warning that the levels of violence in society are toxic to us all. It is not they who must return to 'normal' and accept future possibilities of violence, but society which must change. With this understanding, survivors, whether learners or teachers, can honour their experience of trauma and impacts on the self, rather than seek to deny and hide them.

Discourses about Education

Violence as a barrier to learning

This discourse separates out those who have experienced violence and conceptualizes them as 'other,' maintaining a concept of the normal student who has not experienced violence. Students who have experienced violence may be seen as having 'special needs,' or needs which should be addressed outside the education system, while the educational system itself can remain unchanged.

The severed head

Western educational systems do not often invite the whole person into the learning process. Success in this system is often gained at the cost of balance of the whole self.† For those who have experienced violence and already feel fragmented, this further severance may be particularly costly. Those who have sought to create a space in literacy programs to draw the whole self into the learning process have been able to do so only when they can find a space outside the discourses of 'proper teaching' and 'acceptable outcomes.'

Drawing the line

Various pressures lead some teachers to feel that they have no option but to counsel. But if they do so, they take on the work illicitly, without resources, office space, supports, time and with the risk of being blamed for 'crossing the line' into therapy. Institutions benefit from this unpaid, unacknowledged work, while teachers can be framed as the problem.

What is missing?

In various settings, instructors experienced the challenge of taking up issues of violence given the specific lack of resources students and teachers experienced, the lack of institutional support for their work, and the outright hostility of some colleagues or the subtler resistances. Structural constraints such as attendance policies and waiting lists for places in programs increased the challenge.

Safety is fundamental

A focus on safety can support learning in a variety of ways, making it feel safer for instructors to open the 'can of worms,' knowing how to approach this work while maintaining a safe environment for teachers and students. A discourse of safety can open talk about what might be required to maintain a safer learning environment and what exactly it might look like in each context.

Integrating New Discourses

When literacy workers imagined the possibilities of shifting discourses and creating spaces for new practices, they spoke of constraints within their own institutions and within government discourses. Teachers might feel the constraints from the administration, but administrators were clear that they were limited by provincial or state constraints and policy change was needed at that level.

Provide legitimacy for new discourses

When literacy workers can take part in special projects it creates the possibility to explore the unknown and to launch into unlikely experiments. Funding can pay for and legitimize talk about new possibilities, allow for new collaborations, support a focus on creating beauty in the classroom and make it possible to try out new curriculum such as learning about learning, self-empowerment, writing and creative arts. It is only within such a space that new models can be generated to demonstrate the 'success' of shifting what counts in education and provide a basis for challenging policy.

Draw new lines between teaching and healing

Project funding also creates the time and space to explore building connections and collaborations with therapists and healers, and integrate the creative arts into learning opportunities.† Instead of trying to draw a line to divide these areas of work, literacy workers need to be able to explore drawing new lines to link work that is connected within each person, and imagine new programming and new collaborations. This offers new insights and supports to take the tensions and worries of the work of taking up issues of violence and learning.

Where to from here?

A key question now is whether the literacy movement will be able to build on the discourses which support diverse possibilities for teaching in ways that recognize the widespread nature of violence and the impact of violence on learning. Change is already occurring in many individual literacy programs. As new discourses become more broadly recognized, the simple divide between literacy and therapy may shift. Addressing the impact of violence on learning may seem less of a 'can of worms' and more enticing, offering the potential for creating nurturing spaces for workers and learners alike.

What will allow discourses of violence and education to shift radically in order to create the necessary, widespread change in the whole terrain of literacy work?