

The British Columbia Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program

Literacy for Women on the Streets

Written by

Lucy Alderson and Diana Twiss
Capilano College

Researched by

Lucy Alderson, Jane Ireland and Diana Twiss Capilano College
Catherine Minchin, WISH Drop-In Centre Society

In collaboration with women at the WISH Learning Centre
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Literacy for Women on the Streets

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"In here, we aren't working girls or drug addicts, we are just learners. It's like as soon as you come through the doorway, we get along, people are nice to each other and we are just people."

-Participant – comment made at end of evening

1. Introduction

Literacy for Women on the Streets was designed as a participatory action research project to examine the impact of literacy activities on the lives of women working as sex-trade workers in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Many women at WISH inspired the research project and we all learned a great deal in our collective efforts to create literacy and learning opportunities in the [WISH \(Women's Information and Safe House\) Drop-In Centre](#).

From the beginning, we all knew that this was worthwhile, important and groundbreaking work. We also came to understand the deep-rooted stereotypes society has attached to women working in the sex-trade and their impact on women's self-concept and learning. At one of our research reflection discussions in the spring of 2003, we generated a list of myths about women's learning. These myths affected every aspect of our project from funding to learning.

Myth 1

Women who work in the sex trade are just objects, they have no minds.

Myth 2

Women who work in the sex-trade and/or who use drugs are not "ready" to learn.

Myth 3

Street involved women are not interested in building their minds or getting pleasure from thinking, reading, discussion or analysis.

During the two years of our research project, we found the opposite. Many women were hungry for learning. Many women were looking for a way to explore themselves as sex-trade workers, mothers, learners, junkies and artists outside of the relentless cycle of the street. The Learning Centre opened both a physical and a mental space for women at WISH. By the spring of 2003, women were organizing events, setting up meetings, publishing a monthly newsletter and using the computer for email, research and their own writing. Women were demanding learning challenges and arranging practicums in the Learning Centre as part of an additional transitional pre-employment program. Women were also recommending policy changes to the WISH organization through the Women's Advisory Group and getting involved in community issues through other consultative processes.

Our intention is to describe the research and share the two-year tale of our experiences and findings so that funders, literacy and community development workers, and women living and working on the street will feel confident embarking on literacy programs together.

DeeDee Martin wrote the following poem in 2001. The poem captures the essence of why we are all collaborating on this literacy journey. It is a symbol of her determination to create possibility in her life and her belief in women on the streets of the Downtown Eastside.

The Courage to Find Wings

*Sometimes at our
worst moments
of hard times
somehow we
find wings to
pick up and fly
with out a doubt
with out a teardrop
glittered look in our eye
we produce the wings
of strength
to once again pick up
and fly after so many tries
we still have
the courage to
find wings*

1.1 History of the Project

The [WISH Drop-In Centre Society](#) is a registered non-profit agency that offers a safe haven for high-risk, street involved women sex trade workers. WISH operates out of the First United Church at the corner of Gore and Hastings Streets in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. It has a large living room area which contains couches, mattresses on the floor, a television and area where women may obtain make-up, sundries and towels for showering; a foyer where food is served and tables are available; a washroom with showers; and the use of a boardroom for the Learning Centre (three evenings a week) and public health nurses (one evening a week). The facilities are not adequate for the numbers of women requiring the use of the Drop-In Centre and for the different activities occurring each evening. However, despite the cramped quarters, there is always a sense of welcome, safety and acceptance throughout the Drop-In.

For a few hours a night, WISH provides hot meals, showers, clothing, personal hygiene care, and a place to watch television, connect with other women, relax and sleep. WISH offers a variety of on-site services in collaboration with other service providers such as the following: On-site Health Service, Safety Night and Outreach through a variety of connected providers. The Centre promotes non-judgmental support and advocacy. It is open six nights a week from 6:00 PM to 10:00 PM every night except Saturday. The Society has been in existence since 1987 and has grown from an organization serving a dozen sex-trade workers to serving about 60 women per night in 2001. In the past two years, those numbers have doubled.

In 1999/2000, WISH board members approached Capilano College to consider setting up a literacy program for women at the Drop-In. The Community Development and Outreach Department of Capilano College was already partnering with the Carnegie Community Centre to do literacy work in the Downtown Eastside (DTES). In 2000, WISH and Capilano successfully sought National Literacy Secretariat funds to undertake a participatory literacy needs assessment with sex-

trade workers in the DTES, funded through a cost-shared grant. The needs assessment found that women using the Drop-In Centre had various levels of literacy and educational backgrounds. We learned that women are not involved in literacy activities because of poverty, abuse, addictions, and victimization. They did not access other community education opportunities because they felt unsafe, judged or unwelcome because of their work in the sex trade and active addictions.

In 2000, the partners were not able to secure funding for further literacy work at WISH and Capilano College supported a "shoe-string" learning program in order to keep the program alive while both organizations looked for project funds. In 2001, the two organizations received approval for *Literacy for Women on the Streets*. In addition, the project was able to attract financial support from the Vancouver Foundation. The Vancouver Foundation provided two-year project funding for the operation and community development focus of the WISH Learning Centre. This allowed us to extend the literacy research project for an additional year and observe further outcomes in women's lives.

During this time, the WISH Learning Centre also received additional funds for materials, trips and events from VanCity Credit Union's Community Programs, funds from the Ministry of Advanced Education such as the Learners Talking to Learners Grant and other small funds.

2. Literature That Guided Us

When we began the literacy work at WISH, there were many questions and few resources that spoke to the context of a crisis centre for women working in the sex-trade. Many resources are written for literacy projects that assist women in recovery but almost nothing that addresses women whose lives are based on the street. No one in the literature discusses the challenges of learning when you are high, sleep-deprived or in withdrawal. We found nothing that talked about women on the street using learning as part of their personal harm reduction plan.

Women who use the services of the WISH Drop-In Centre are a group who struggles with a multiplicity of social issues: substance abuse, violence, poverty, homelessness and poor health are the major ones. Separation from children, social isolation, mental illness, being in conflict with the law, low self-esteem and underemployment are others. An initial literature review showed us that there is a dearth of literacy research for this group of learners. While there is research that examines the effect of many of these issues on learning, we did not find any material that examines the cumulative effect of these issues on learners. In addition, there is little information or curriculum materials designed for female sex trade workers. In working with this group, we were looking for information and ideas that would help us provide safety, acceptance, challenge and opportunities for increased self-esteem, within the context of chaos, grinding poverty, violence and substance abuse. How do you support learners who have been traumatized and continually face violence?

Researchers have examined the effect of many of these factors on learners, dealing with individual aspects of the issue we explore in this project, which is the cumulative effect of all these factors on learners. Jenny Horsman (2002), Betsy Trumpener (2000) and Bev Sochatsky (2002) have each developed curriculum materials and ideas for working with women who have experienced trauma; men and women affected by homelessness; and women in conflict with the law, three

characteristics we often find in women we work with. Despite the fact that the activities suggested in these texts needed modifications for our group, the effect of these works was one of encouragement. We were encouraged by the fact that others are taking the learning needs of marginalized people seriously and working to reshape the way we deliver literacy instruction so as wide a group as possible can benefit from learning. The fact that they were carving out new territory and integrating art, music, cooking, crafts, and healing with literacy instruction, encouraged us to keep working and researching to find things that worked for women at WISH. The works cited above have helped us to frame our understanding of this issue and will certainly help us to support learners in the next stage. These texts, published during the course of this research, were each helpful in offering a boost of optimism, hope and ideas.

Other publications illustrate that many researchers are beginning to examine the multiplicity of issues that affect the learning of marginalized women. For example, L. Selme (1998) in her unpublished master's thesis, "The literacy education of federally incarcerated women" concludes that there is a multitude of factors at play which impact traumatized women's ability to participate in education. Therefore, it is not just the fact that they are in prison that causes difficulty with learning, it's all the things that brought them there in the first place and the events that surround them while they are incarcerated which compound the issue. In her study she revealed the complexity of factors which impacted women's education in a correctional setting, debilitating crises, disruptive change, confusion, frustration, anger, and death to name a few, and called for a change in literacy approaches starting with relevant learning materials and strategies.

Jenny Horsman (1998 and 2000) worked with learners who were similar to the learners in the WISH Learning Centre, in the sense that many, if not most of them have experienced sexual or physical abuse at some time in their lives. Horsman's conclusions and insights about the impact of violence on women's literacy learning

and program participation framed our discoveries about how to look at what can be done in program development and in terms of practitioners' involvement that would enable women to learn better. These texts gave us direction and an understanding of the complexity of the issue of learning for the women in the WISH Learning Centre. Horsman contends that because so many women experience violence and have suffered traumatic experiences, we must approach our literacy classes with sensitivity to the effect that has on their learning. According to Horsman, one of the main things we need to think differently about is the prevalence of violence. We also need to consider the extent to which and fact that so many people, especially women are affected by violence. And, we need to consider and respond to the fact that many of the adult learners who show up in our classes have been traumatized at some point in their lives. This trauma deeply affects learners' ability to feel safe in situations, to trust people who get close to them, and to want to reveal themselves; all critical elements in learning situations.

At WISH, we also recognize that violence is a tool that women use. Many women have developed aggressive street persona as a way to survive the street. Rarely does the literacy literature mention violence as something that women participate in. These coping strategies bring violence and aggression into the WISH Drop-In and Learning Centre. It is both a challenge to work with the individual and create safe learning settings for other women. Understanding aggression as self-expression and finding ways and environments to transform aggression in street women is critical to developing literacy programs for this group.

Sex-trade workers share many of the experiences that are described in the literature but they are further stigmatized by their drug addictions and work in the sex-trade. There are many public places where the women do not feel safe or welcome. Even in women's centres many feel judged by other "non-working" women. For years, police and judicial systems did not address the systematic disappearances of women in the Downtown Eastside. Many people do not believe that women are ready to

learn until they have dealt with their addictions and chosen a new way of life. We believe that literacy, learning and self-expression have a strong role to play in the lives of women at WISH. We hope this research will begin to map this territory and be helpful to other programs across the country.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Research Project

Literacy for Women on the Streets was designed as a participatory action research project examining the question, "**How can literacy activities empower and stabilize the lives of women in the sex trade?**" The project involved both the delivery of a literacy program at WISH as well as a process for identifying and documenting how literacy activities could be a positive force in women's lives. We wanted to find out what kinds of literacy activities work for women who are dealing with poverty, substance abuse and violence. What skills are women interested in learning? What kind of a learning environment is supportive? How can literacy play a vital role in healing and survival?

We knew from observing and working with the women that their participation in the learning centre made a difference in their lives. We hoped the research project would give women at WISH an opportunity to tell the broader community about the importance of learning in sex trade workers' lives. We also believed that other organizations would be interested in understanding how to develop effective literacy programs with women dealing with poverty, violence, prostitution, addictions and instability.

The original objectives of the research project were to:

1. Identify and document ways that women can actively engage in participatory research activities
2. Collectively explore and document the literacy activities that help to empower and stabilize the lives of participants at WISH
3. Identify and document factors that contribute to learning such as location, delivery and types of activities offered
4. Identify how participants can play an active role in addressing issues of concern with partner groups and literacy facilitators
5. Engage women in collaboratively producing a final report of the research results

Through the course of the project we also planned to do the following:

6. Explore developing partnerships with agencies such as the BC Centre for Disease Control, Ministry of Children and Families, and the Canadian Bar Association and other community organizations in order to create literacy opportunities within these service organizations
7. Seek out additional resources for continued work in these areas

The following chart outlines how we integrated the research activities into the literacy program at the WISH Learning Centre.

<u>Task:</u> RESEARCH	LITERACY ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up a Steering Committee to guide the research which includes women using the services at WISH, community partners, and facilitators 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research variety of ways to gather information for research project • Collectively develop a process to document the effect that literacy activities have on the lives of women • Regularly document the success of the in-the-door activities using variety of methods • Discuss and document barriers that inhibit learning • Discuss and document factors that contribute to learning • Develop and document a literacy program for sex-trade workers 	<p>1. Entry Level Activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectively develop a variety of in-the-door activities to attract women into the Learning Centre: for example, crafts, card and letter writing around holidays and major events, journal writing, creative writing, videos with discussions, field trips, health and safety information sessions, workshops with agencies such as the Canadian Bar Association and the BC Centre for Disease Control around topics of concern to women in the sex-trade
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to document process using methods determined above • Continue to refine and develop research gathering process 	<p>2. Practicing Skills through the Development of Literacy Projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore interest in planning and producing one or two literacy projects such as a book of poetry, a photo essay or a newsletter of women's writings to engage women
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for women to assume leadership roles in the research component of project, such as guide a focus group in discussion of relevant topic • Document process 	<p>3. Exercising Leadership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide regular opportunities for women to address issues at WISH through participation in the Women's Advisory Group • Look for ways to create leadership opportunities for women in the literacy project: teaching skills, sharing information, giving support to others, assisting with the set up and take down of the room, working with community partners to develop ways of reaching out to women in the sex-trade
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection on the entire process • Write draft version of final report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectively revise and edit final report of research findings

3.2. From Proposal to Reality

In 2001, no one realized how the increasing disappearances of Downtown Eastside sex-trade workers would finally be linked to the chilling evidence found at the Picton Farm in Port Coquitlam. Sereena Abbotsway wrote this poem for her missing sisters in the spring of 2001. By the next year, she too was missing and eventually her DNA was discovered at the Picton Farm.

In memories of my sisters

*These years have passed
Since you all are gone
We all miss and love you*

*We all miss you deeply
When you all went missing
Each and every year*

*We all fought so hard to find you
But now it only slightly eases the pain
That not one of you have been found*

*You all were part of God's plan
He probably took most of you home
But he left us with an empty spot*

*But I know that some of you are in heaven
Looking down at us
But I know you are in heaven and at peace*

*But when the days are coming
To say good bye
It's hard not to cry or laugh*

*We miss you women
And that's true
But they are great memories
Of you*

*In loving memory of
All the women missing
In the dtes
Sereena*

The overwhelming context of women's lives changed the way we approached many aspects of the Learning Centre: activities, facilitation, decision-making, planning, conflict and ultimately, the way we conducted the research process. Although the project was conceived as participatory action research, we found it difficult to assert the research priority in a systematic and ongoing way with women in the Learning Centre. Our commitment to creating leadership and self-determination in the Learning Centre meant that we followed the fluctuating context of women's lives.

As a result, we found ourselves in a strong collaboration with women about many priorities - literacy, learning, violence, the Missing Women, creating a voice in the WISH organization, and many other issues that played a critical and current role in women's lives. Although the project did not follow the rigorous definition of participatory action research, we were able to achieve many participatory instances in the research process. We also learned a great deal in our efforts to do collaborative inquiry and analysis with women in transience, addiction, poverty and homelessness.

The reality of the Downtown Eastside also impacted Capilano instructors and WISH staff. Stress leaves, staff changeovers, and the cumulative impact of running an under funded crisis centre had an impact on participation and continuity of the research project. However, we reminded ourselves regularly that this was part of the research territory and we adapted as best we could.

3.3. Research Steering Committee

Initially, we formed a Learning Centre Advisory Committee made up of community and college members to help guide both the research and ongoing activities of the WISH Learning Centre. We were unclear about how we would bring both external and internal members of the Learning Centre together, but felt the urgency of getting started. This group helped launch the Research Project but it soon became clear that the decision-making role should sit with the monthly Women's Advisory

Group (WAG) meetings which were open to all women at WISH. Participants in the Learning Centre facilitated these meetings and minutes were recorded and distributed throughout the centre.

Over the two years, women greatly increased their capacity to reflect as a group and not just as individuals. However, we continued to struggle with asserting the research as a priority discussion. Framed as "research", many discussions were a turn off to women. However, if the reflections were designed as activities, women were much more interested in the process. For instance, when we all decided to create a poster of our first year's work for the *Portraits of Literacy Research Conference*, women were excited about participating. We learned to create opportunities for reflection in an informal as well as formal way. We also wrote down the many spontaneous conversations we had with women about learning.

3.4. Documentation

There were several practices that we systematically used to document the experiences of the two-year research period.

1. Sign In Sheets

During each of the three evenings the WISH Learning Centre is open, we have a sign-in sheet for women to sign or at least mark an "x" or use their street name. We used this method to describe the quantitative aspect of women's participation at the Learning Centre. Although not foolproof (some women did not sign in, some women use more than one name), the sign-in sheets tracked individual attendance.

2. Instructor Logs

Each instructor/facilitator also wrote a report after each evening, noting the activities, responses, well being of women, and issues. These reports were posted on an electronic conferencing system allowing the instructors to share

information and store it for future analysis. These reports allowed us to look back in detail on the development of the Learning Centre and the development of individual women. We have also kept a record of what "flopped" and our speculations about why a certain activity failed to engage women.

3. Women's Writing and WAG Minutes

Women have also been accumulating a body of work. Women have kept minutes of the WAG meetings, the group has published a somewhat monthly WISH Newsletter since last year (15 editions), two grant proposals have been written, and women have posted their creative art and writing on the walls of the WISH Learning Centre. These materials offer a great deal of information about what is happening in the lives of women who work in the sex-trade.

4. Participant Questionnaires

Two sets of questionnaires were created to gather comments from participants about their learning and their thoughts on the WISH Learning Centre. The first questionnaire was distributed in May/June 2002 and the second in May/June 2003. The questions used will be shared in a later section.

3.5. Reflections

Year One

At the end of the first year, we used two opportunities to analyze our first year's findings. In the spring of 2002, we heard about the *Portraits of Literacy Research Conference* scheduled for July at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. We wondered if women at the WISH Learning Centre would be interested in creating a poster for the conference so we brought it up at the next Women's Advisory Meeting. We explained that no other literacy project with sex-trade workers would be there. Women were interested in having their experiences be part

of the conference. In order to communicate the importance of the Learning Centre on a poster, we generated three questions for women to respond to over the next few weeks.

- a) **How would you describe the WISH Learning Centre to someone from the outside? What do you do there? How does it feel?**
- b) **If the WISH Learning Centre weren't here, what would you be doing?**
- c) **What two things would you change about the WISH Learning Centre?**

We discussed these questions with women and they either filled out the questionnaires themselves or we worked on them together. We then grouped all the answers under each question and looked at them together. The responses were compelling and demonstrated to us all how important the Learning Centre had become for some women. We arranged the answers on the research poster and added poetry, drawings and other decorations.

At the Conference, the poster was presented by one of the instructors and a volunteer. We asked workshop participants to write back to women at WISH and these comments were read out loud at the Learning Centre. During the research conference, we also hosted Jenny Horsman and Mary Norton at the WISH Learning Centre so they could share their response to our project and talk about the work they were doing with women in Edmonton and Toronto.

In addition to the research conference, we also were required to submit a report of Year One to the Vancouver Foundation. The information from the questionnaires, our group discussions and the instructor logs produced several important themes such as the importance of safety to women's learning, learning and harm reduction, and the momentum created by collective action. The document *Including Our*

Voices July 2002 discussed these emerging themes in detail. This document was distributed to funders and shared with WISH staff, board, volunteers and participants.

Year Two

The analysis that we did in year one gave us a clearer idea of what to do as a literacy program and also how women were using us and the Learning Centre for their needs. We wrote more about these themes in our instructor logs throughout the year and in the spring of 2003, we coded our logs using these themes as well as some new categories that emerged in the second year. The themes that guided us were as follow: learning about women learning, instructor modifications, skills women want or need, creating a collective voice and becoming leaders/self-determination.

We also used several activities to do collaborative reflection. Although there was less enthusiasm for a second questionnaire (no tangible reason, like a research poster), we invited women to respond to the main research questions. We acknowledged that there was reluctance and gave each woman a new journal to thank her for her time and energy towards the research project.

- a) **How can literacy activities empower and stabilize the lives of women in the sex trade?**
- b) **What are the things that help women learn?**
- c) **What are the things that stop you from learning?**
- d) **What effect has learning had on you?**
- e) **What can people do to make learning enjoyable?**
- f) **Any ideas about what it's been like to have this room open?**

Once again, we used the cumulative responses to generate further discussion. Out of these responses came some of the myths that we documented at the beginning of this report. Women were interested in comparing the myths about sex-trade workers and learning to the body of work that was evident on the walls of the room and in the publications and activities of the Learning Centre. Women could see how wrong the myths were as they were surrounded by their own art, writing, and analysis.

Although women were interested in submitting short writing pieces and discussing the impact of the literacy work at WISH, no one was willing to write the final report and that was left to the Capilano instructors. This was no surprise to us as we could see how eager women were to get on with their own learning.

4. Research Findings

Introduction to the Findings

When we began to write this research report, we felt like it was one of those stories that can only be blurted - that defies an organized, easy format. Each research finding has a great deal of detailed explanation behind it, partly because of the street context and partly because of the incredible courage and fortitude of women's desire to learn. In the end, we created three parts to the research findings.

Part One of the findings highlights women's personal journeys in learning and the trial-and-error experiments made by instructors during the project. Part One serves as a response for project objectives #2 and #3 (which may be found on page 10). We captured both ingredients for success and some of the learning challenges under the following headings:

1. Getting women in the door
2. What makes women feel safe?
3. Self-expression and healing
4. Women, learning and harm reduction
5. What skills do women in the sex-trade want to learn?

Part Two highlights what we discovered when women took charge of the learning agenda as a group. It is a response to project objective #4. Through many collective initiatives women dusted off old skills, learned new ones and exercised new powers in the organization. We provided details of three initiatives taken on by women at the Learning Centre:

1. Creating the WISH Newsletter
2. Planning events and trips
3. Organizing the Missing Women's Committee

These activities demonstrated women's leadership skills and enabled women's voices to be heard throughout the WISH organization.

Part Three highlights the variety of challenges that we as literacy instructors experienced conducting the research and working in a chaotic learning environment. We divided the challenges under the following headings:

1. Changing the Way We Teach
2. Working with Chaos
3. Reframing Conflict
4. Working with Grief
5. Defining and Measuring Success

4. 1. Learning about Women Learning

"[Learning] will give us strength. People don't think I am capable of paying attention to things like current events. Lots of guys think that because we're street workers, we have no minds. [Learning] will give me knowledge and power and I can throw stuff back at them. They look at me differently because I have knowledge."

-Participant – response from questionnaire #2

4. 1. 1. Getting Women in the Door

Everyone in the project shared the challenge of participation. As instructors, we spent a great portion of our preparation time organizing learning activities that would draw women into the Learning Centre. We learned to develop activities that a woman could just "slip in to" while also providing extra challenges for women who were ready for more. We worried about too much literacy and not enough literacy. Women also described the factors that competed with their desire to be in the learning centre: needing to make money, needing to sleep, needing to use, and juggling their boyfriends' agendas, to name a few.

We found that women's participation took many patterns. Many women dropped in occasionally as they needed help or came to check out the activities in the room. Often, women came intensively for a particular period. Other women came regularly every couple of weeks to keep in touch with us, and get involved in the activities for a night. Gradually over the two years, we began to get a few women who came weekly. These women became a core group, which made many more things possible. For instance, the consistent energy of a few women has created the WISH Newsletter that many women contribute to and read on a monthly basis.

From our sign-in sheets, we concluded that:

In Year One:

- Over 300 women came through the Learning Centre.
- 55 women participated in Learning Centre activities on an occasional to regular basis.
- 24 women made it a regular part of their routine to be part of the WISH Learning Centre.

In Year Two:

- 340 women attended the WISH Learning Centre.
- 75 women participated in the project's activities on an occasional to regular basis.
- 30 women made it a regular part their routine despite health, homelessness, addictions and poverty barriers.

The transience of women's participation was one of the greatest challenges of creating a literacy program at WISH. Especially in the early months, it felt like "Day One" over and over. However, we persisted and gradually our conversations with women, their eagerness to be learning and our courage to "try anything" resulted in a vibrant Learning Centre. In Appendix A, we have listed the activities we did during the project. They are categorized as Entry Level, Skill Development and Leadership Activities.

After we completed the research reflection in year one, however, we all realized that the approach we had developed together **was working**. This approach was a combination of non-threatening but interesting "in the door" activities with opportunities to learn new skills and participate in collective decision-making. We worked hard to make the learning experience relaxing, fun, and enjoyable while also challenging and meaningful. It was the comments in the first questionnaire and the resulting discussion that told us what was important and why. Learning about women's learning at WISH helped us all to be more effective in the second year of the project.

4.1.2. Finding out what makes "safe"

For those women who live on the streets or in single hotel rooms, having a space that is calm and inviting is paramount for their reflection and healing. According to women, the WISH Learning Centre is:

"A place where you can relax and feel safe."

"A place where you could be relaxed and learn at your own pace,"

"A place where women in the sex trade can learn reading, writing, arithmetic, creative writing, computer skills, [and] to function as part of a group to HELP others learn to be sociable."

"A place where I can talk and share my own opinions and fantasies".

--Collection of participant responses from a questionnaire #2

Women's expression of what makes "safe" is a significant finding for this project. We realized that attempts to involve the women in activities designed to bring them into decision-making roles must first address the issue of safety in a non-threatening, non-judgmental, safe and realistic way. Most of the women who use WISH are living in conditions of extreme poverty and violence. The need to clothe, feed and house themselves is often their only focus as it can be a full-time occupation just to meet those basic needs. Women's self-esteem is often permanently low and many have trouble focusing and concentrating for long periods of time. Many do not believe they can learn. Many do not believe that they have anything important to contribute. Many women do not trust anyone who is seen to be in a position of authority or control.

Given this situation, we felt it was important that women who came to the WISH Learning Centre experience acceptance on a weekly basis, regardless of whether they are withdrawn, happy, sad, angry, have just been beat up, are sick, need help, need to help, want to be busy, are using, are not using, etc. Although we initially worried about the level of traditional learning going on in the Learning Centre, the choices we offered have built a safe environment for being and learning.

Sometimes, the Learning Centre is the only place in a woman's life where she can relax.

"At the WISH Learning Centre I am able to be me without anyone passing judgment on me, utilize my teaching skills, use the computer, talk of stuff that is bothering me and receive constructive criticism and suggestions, relearn my creativity, work with others."

-Participant-response on questionnaire #2

The entry-level activities undertaken to date have proven effective at introducing women back to learning and also highlighting and building on skills they already have. The activities allow women to try a variety of skills out in non-threatening and playful ways. For instance, making the panels for the wall hanging allowed women to create their own panel as well as use skills to determine how much material would be needed for the wall hanging and organizing the placement of the panels. Candle making showed women that they could read and follow instructions and teach themselves a new skill. All of the activities have shown women that they can start and finish something successfully. Even knitting and crocheting calmed and focused the women and gave them something to do with their hands. It also brought back memories and connections, as many were originally taught the skill by someone in their past.

The entry-level activities also allowed for women who were scared or afraid that they could not do certain things to try a fun activity and succeed at it. Many of the women noted that when learning was fun it was easier. They saw learning as fun when there was no pressure and when it was interesting. For many of the women, starting slowly and keeping it slow, interesting, and fun, is often the key to addressing many of the issues raised about their fears.

Women need to feel safe in the Learning Centre and an important piece of that safety is knowing and trusting the instructors and staff who work there. Initially, learning can leave women feeling quite vulnerable and exposed. So along with

feeling physically safe in a learning environment, women talked about how they need to feel emotionally safe.

4. 1. 3. Self-Expression and Healing

Many women use the Learning Centre as an avenue for self-expression. Participants come to pick up paper or notebooks to use as journals. They might choose to use the nightly journal question on the whiteboard or write about more important topics to them. Some women come to the Learning Centre to write because it is the only space where they can reflect or be in a peaceful mood. While working in a group is encouraged, women who choose to do solitary writing and reading are respected.

Women use the activities or the arts & craft materials to express their feelings of the day. Women paint picture frames to give to their children in foster care, or write poetry dedicated to a friend or lover who has died, or create a healing picture of their heritage for themselves. Often our discussions in the Learning Centre involve the recounting of these important events and the group or the individual hearing the story will affirm the woman's pain and courage to continue with her life.

In some cases, women will bring their indecision or their "failures" to the Learning Centre. We all try to provide a realistic and encouraging framework for an individual to view her experience. Other participants might share their own experiences to give a woman some perspective on her issue. Staff and volunteers might ask the woman more about the experience to see if she has ideas about dealing with it in the future. Listening and witnessing women's experiences is a key function of the Learning Centre and it seems to provide women with an encouraging breath of reflective air. Many women's lives are a series of intense, traumatic and chaotic experiences. But what is striking about women is their determination to process their experiences and to seek out positive environments where they are seen as valuable individuals despite their past abuses, their work in the sex trade and their complicated addictions.

Establishing a non-judgmental learning space where you can "*learn something new every time*" or "*be cared about*" or "*let my creative writing come out*" [participant responses from questionnaire #1 and 2] is essential for those women who are trying to heal themselves.

4. 1. 4. Women, Learning and Harm Reduction

In discussions, women explained how their own harm reduction strategies are intertwined with their learning and their participation in the Learning Centre. The Learning Centre at WISH is one of the few places where women can be active in their addictions and active in their learning. Most education centres, treatment programs and even jail offer upgrading but only when women are detoxed. For some women, their period of substance use is short, for some it is 15 years and for others it is life long. At WISH, women are able to use the Learning Centre as an avenue for creative self-expression and learning despite their addictions. Some women told us they began to experiment with reducing their use of drugs or alcohol while using the Learning Centre as a place to stay out of trouble or be busy and productive.

In the first questionnaire we asked women, **If the WISH Learning Centre were not here, what would you be doing?** Women replied:

- *"Wasting my time watching TV, being bored."*
- *"I'd be at home watching TV or fighting with my neighbours."*
- *"More than likely I would be doing crime on the street. Definitely I would be contributing to my heroin and cocaine habit."*
- *"I wouldn't stick around WISH as long, and go back on the street."*
- *"The old things I used to do, criminal offenses, steal cars, shop lift. I used to go to the other centres and get angry – take staff members by the hair, leaned on their hands – used to do mean things."*
- *"I'd be out doing the wrong things."*

Many women obviously use the Learning Centre as a distraction or an alternative to drinking and taking drugs. Our core volunteer tutor in the Learning Centre noticed that over the first year, women have begun to talk about their learning histories and they are discovering how they like to learn. She has also noticed that women used to go and fix and not come back. Now, those same women fix and come back to finish their projects.

Many women use the Learning Centre to experiment with their ability to skip drugs or contemplate new futures. Sometimes women will gain new resolve from an event in their lives, such as pregnancy or grandparenthood, and they use the resources of the Learning Centre to get involved and be supported in their tough times. Many women are finding new abilities to focus on activities in the Learning Centre from computer work to art projects to crocheting. This ability to focus seems to reassure women that they can still do things, still learn things, still contribute, despite the difficulties brought on by years of substance abuse.

Dealing with boredom and keeping busy is a difficult issue for women when the WISH doors close. There are many women who just come in to the Learning Centre to pick up paperbacks and take the word-finds and crosswords for the day. We try to find ways to challenge women who are clearly literate but have no way of exercising those skills. We have asked those women to write book reports, research articles for the newsletter and participate in the difficult policy decisions of the organization through the WAG. We have also brought in job postings, encouraged individual women to apply and assisted them in developing a resume.

In this past year alone there have been several women who embarked upon addiction management. Some went in to detox, others withdrew on their own, and others just reduced the amount they used. Some were successful and others found that events overwhelmed them and they binged. We were struck by the fact that whatever happened, women continued to come into the Learning Centre and

process their experiences with all of us. Many women offered supportive comments and suggestions and shared their own struggles. As instructors, we affirmed women's courage to risk change and tried to draw out the successful aspects of each woman's experience. As a group, we always tried to create an air of non-judgment so that women who had been boasting the week before about being drug-free would not be ashamed to come in if they went back to using.

We asked questions like "How did it feel to be off heroin for two whole days? How did you do that? How did you spend your time? Did you know you could do that?" This processing seemed to have many positive impacts on the way women framed their harm reduction experiments and their picture of themselves. We also celebrated women's announcements about abstinence. For instance, one woman told us it was her 10th anniversary of being off heroin and her 3rd month of being off crack. She had been coming to the Learning Centre since it started but none of us knew this. This information made her a valuable resource and role model for other women.

4. 1. 5. What skills do women in the sex trade want to learn?

Over the two years of the research project, this question lead us to many places. When women first come to the Learning Centre, they may or may not tell us what they want to learn. When women arrive with a clearly stated need, it is usually:

- I want to learn how to type
- How do you use a computer?
- I have to fill this out for my worker
- I want to get my GED
- Do you have any information on diabetes?
- I need paper to make a poster for this event
- Do you have any books to read?
- I want to apply for disability

When women come for immediate help, it is usually a functional literacy need. It is only through participation and a slow conversation that the potential of the Learning Centre becomes clear to an individual woman. Then we may hear about her dreams.

Given the opportunity and encouragement women will also reveal their skills and strengths. Some are accomplished artists, craftswomen and writers. Some women are good at organizing information, materials or people. As instructors, we knew it was important to recognize women's skills and highlight them. We asked women to take on roles or made room when they told us they were going to take on a teaching or organizing task. Many women end up peer teaching in the Learning Centre and sharing their knowledge with all of us. We hired several women to teach beading and other crafts.

It became clear to us that women who came regularly to the Learning Centre were on an upward spiral of self-esteem. As women's involvement in the Learning Centre increased, so did the sense of their own abilities. We witnessed this spiral of increasing self-esteem over and over again. Women came to the WISH Learning Centre looking for kinship, distractions, entertainment, stimulation and to try out rusty skills. As they participated, they felt better. Because they feel better, they would try more activities or try something more challenging.

*"The more we learn, the more we are empowered to help ourselves. I have a better liking for myself, therefore I am willing to try other things that will further better myself so I can help other people as I have been helped."
-Participant – reflective discussion on affects of learning*

We also began working closely with the Women Helping Women Transition Program (WHWTP) at WISH. We referred women from the Learning Centre who identified a need and desire to create change. WHWTP is an alternative work/life skills program for women at WISH. Women get paid an honorarium for their work

and they receive counseling and other supports to deal with health, legal, welfare and addiction issues. We also developed a literacy practicum for women who wanted to do their work hours in the Learning Centre. This included the development of a learning plan with instructors.

By the second year of the research project, we noted that we had at least two sets of learners in the Learning Centre. We continued to attract women into the Learning Centre who needed listening time, crisis assistance and help with activities. We also had a core group of women who were eager and ready to learn. This group had become quite demanding. Many of these women were enrolled in the WHWTP and it was clear to us that we did not have enough one-on-one tutoring time available. As instructors, we did our best to add challenge to activities, to invite these women to teach others, and we tried to spend extra time with them before the Learning Centre opened. Several women came to the Carnegie Learning Centre for extra tutoring where one of the instructors also works part-time. We also encouraged women to take part in other educational activities in the neighbourhood. However, not every woman is ready to take a step outside of WISH and we tried to create as much challenge within the organization as possible.

The women at the WISH Learning Centre set the agenda for their own learning experiences. The project was based upon the idea that using a participatory education approach enables

*...a group of people to name **their** world, recognize their potential to create experience, and begin working to fulfill that potential, as individuals and communities. It is learning to see new, more life-giving choices and developing the confidence and skills to act on them.*

We provided support for women's learning in many ways. However, when women began to set their own agenda through the Women's Advisory Group, both individual and collective learning took off.

4. 2. Women Taking Charge

When we asked the question "How do literacy activities empower and stabilize the lives of women in the sex-trade?" we didn't realize how much would be accomplished through the agenda women set for themselves in the Women's Advisory Group (WAG) and other collective work.

Since the establishment of the WISH Learning Centre, a dozen new initiatives have emerged from the Women's Advisory Group Meetings. These initiatives were a source of meaningful learning opportunities while also producing concrete results. Initiatives included the following: planning trips and events, writing grant proposals for more literacy activities, creating a WISH Newsletter written and published by women, establishing a Missing Women's Committee, requesting that staff and volunteers at WISH are identified by nametags, assisting in the development of A Place of Grace (a two-day alternative gathering place for women on income assistance "cheque day" and the day after, initiated by a former sex-trade worker and addict who began working the street at 11 years), suggesting that WISH job openings be posted in the Drop-In, establishing the annual Literacy Picnic, planning memorials for women who have died, representing WISH in the February 14th Women's March Planning Committee, and debating the finer details of who is entitled to use the services of WISH (transgendered, hungry women not yet in the sex-trade).

History of the Women's Advisory Group

The Women's Advisory Group was initiated by the WISH organization to be a vehicle for communicating the issues and thoughts of women who use WISH's services. It is a critical component of the organization's vision for self-governance and a place where women can develop leadership and decision-making skills. The Learning Centre was seen as a logical place to hold the meetings and Capilano staff were originally asked to facilitate the meetings so that women could talk openly about their thoughts and concerns about WISH.

We have experimented with formats and locations for the WAG meetings. Initially, the meetings were held in the WISH Learning Centre. But because the WISH Learning Centre room can only hold about 20 women, we held the WAG meeting in the church gym for several months. On WAG nights, dinner was served in the gym and the meeting started right away. This served to publicize both the existence and purpose of WAG and increased participation. The meetings were chaotic, yet fruitful. However, some women were frustrated that the main Drop-In room (the room with the couches, make-up and television) was not opened until the meeting ended. They wanted to rest, or use the make-up and shower services in order to get ready for work. After several months of using the gym, the WAG decided to return to the Learning Centre and invited everyone to keep coming.

Quality of Participation

Including everyone's voices is a challenge at WISH and participation in the WAG continues to be up and down. However, women who do attend have become more skilled at conducting meetings, taking minutes, initiating new ideas and advocating for themselves. We have also developed several literacy strategies to solve three problems that kept recurring in the meetings: following an agenda when everyone wants to talk **now**, getting input from a broader selection of women, being heard in the WISH organization.

Waiting for your turn to speak is difficult for some women and has resulted in women just walking out. We experimented with giving women a chance to talk right away, but this frustrated other women who had been patient already. In the end, we introduced a minutes sheet and encouraged everyone to take minutes of the meeting. There was also a place for individuals to write their ideas or concerns down. If the meeting didn't get to a specific item before a woman had to leave, then someone else would read the item and it would be recorded in the minutes. This process was mainly successful and it also was helpful to the minute taker because a variety of different views of the same conversation were recorded.

There were definitely some discussions that required broader input from women before we felt comfortable making a WAG decision. We developed a method of collaborative decision-making by recording the discussion on flipcharts and letting people know exactly when we would make the final decision. For example, when we wrote a Learners-Talking-to-Learners Grant, we brainstormed ideas for two weeks (six evenings), then researched ideas for three more weeks (obtaining information about costs, and other critical details) before making the final selection about the activities we wanted to pursue and writing the grant. This permitted more women a chance to be part of the process and we ended up making decisions with much more information. Once a decision was made, we all tried to respect it and move on to the next step.

Although the establishment of the WAG was part of the WISH Board's strategic plan, implementing a process to collect, review and respond to women's input had its ups and downs. We all worked to improve the flow of information back and forth. At one point, women at the WAG refused to comment on an issue until they had heard back from the Board on their other suggestions. This has resulted in the minutes being emailed to all Board members, the WISH newsletter being handed out at all Board meetings and the Executive Director responding in person with the Board's response to WAG suggestions. Women had found their voice; they wanted to make sure it was being heard.

Collective Action and Skill Development

The initiatives women chose to develop provided many opportunities for women to affirm their skills or learn new ones. The following three examples provide a description of how skill development was woven into action.

4. 2. 1. Creating and Publishing the WISH Newsletter

At the February 2002 WAG Meeting, women suggested that WISH have its own newsletter. Everyone at the meeting agreed and 7 women immediately volunteered to put the first issue together. The group asked women to submit poetry, articles, bad date info, drawings and updates on the cutbacks. One woman had taken a computer course and volunteered to be the editor. She has also produced some beautiful hand-drawn covers for the issues.

To date, women have published 15 issues. The deadlines for publication are flexible and we are moving towards a publication every other month. When we have enough material for at least four pages, the editor puts it together. We all encourage women to submit their writing and we assist women to use the computer to input their material, design the page with graphics and choose a font that matches their writing. It has been an excellent way for women to get introduced to the computer or improve their word processing/desktop-publishing skills. When a woman has a strong opinion about an issue or a situation, we encourage her to publish it in the Newsletter. Women have written about police harassment, decriminalization of prostitution and poverty. Women also use the Newsletter to share good news, inform each other of events in the neighbourhood, print jokes and draw cartoons, and share short stories. The Newsletter even has its own Advice Column.

Staff members are then responsible for photocopying the issue and, since we purchased a long-arm stapler, everyone gets involved in collating, folding, stapling and handing out the latest issue. The Newsletter is well received by everyone at WISH. There is a great deal of pride about having a women-produced WISH newsletter.

Women have been quite clear that they would like this to be an internal communication for WISH, not distributed to other organizations. It is acceptable for women to share the newsletter with their friends (especially if they have something

in it!). The WISH Board asked permission to give the newsletter to funders and the WAG decided that was a good use.

4. 2. 2. Planning Events and Trips

Creating fun and educational special events has always been popular at the WISH Learning Centre and more and more women now take part in both the planning and actual participation. During the research project, we planned parties, Learner Events including movie trips, excursions, and visits to museums and the art gallery. Women became terrific at budgeting and finding low-cost or free ways to complete a trip. At one point in the development of a Learners Talking to Learners Event, we had to tell women that if we did not spend the \$600 we would have to give it back! Women became so good at assessing the best deal for refreshments at movies that they took this out of the instructor's hands completely. Because it had been done "inefficiently" women gently but firmly told the instructor that, "*You're not going to do this part anymore.*"

Planning trips and events has become an opportunity for women to take charge and show their leadership. They also help women to see and participate in a group process. When we described the list of skills in the Learners Fund report, they included:

- brainstorming ideas
- research over the phone, on the computer and in person
- assessing choices
- developing a budget
- deciding participation
- publicizing the movie trips
- planning transportation
- speaking on behalf of the group to gain discounts for refreshments
- looking out for each other during the trip
- walking each other to the bus
- taking pictures
- checking expenses against the budget
- writing up experiences
- answering questions on the Learner Evaluation

- word-processing written experiences and preparing the disk
- completing final budget and deciding what to do with remaining \$\$

The trips and events were a positive experience for women at WISH. The outings gave women something special to look forward to and it was a successful, group-planned experience. It gave women a chance to show off their organizing and research skills. Most of all, it was fun, an alternative to street life and a chance to be "normal". Women clearly enjoyed going out as a group. They create a source of group identity and pride in their accomplishments. This past year included a trip to the Museum of Anthropology and a drive through rural Langley to a historic farmhouse. These experiences were discussed for hours afterwards. They became the source of in-depth writing and reflection and the photographs were shared with many other women.

4. 2. 3. Organizing the Missing Women's Committee

By January 2002, women's anger at the continuing disappearance of Downtown Eastside sex trade workers mobilized into the formation of the Missing Women's Committee. Women at WISH wanted to start doing something proactive about the appalling situation of 50 missing women and no apparent leads. Many women had their own theories about what was happening based on their experiences and the information they heard on the street. Members of the committee felt that sex-trade workers' lives were worth more dead than alive as all the energy was going into identifying women after they were dead. Nothing was done about preventing women from being killed like circulating colour pictures that the police had of known suspects. Women said their knowledge was not being recognized. They wanted to contact the *Vancouver Sun's* investigative reporters who had exposed the conditions that prevented the police task force from being effective for so many years.

The Committee made several observations about who they believed was involved in the serial killing of prostitutes and several recommendations were sent to the Board of WISH concerning internal safety measures and possible courses of action to speed up the missing women's investigation. Soon after, the activities at the Picton pig farm in Port Coquitlam swept into the news and the RCMP and local police began a full-scale investigation into the horrendous activities that had been taking place for so many years. The Missing Women's Committee and the WISH Board and staff played a strong role in ensuring that critical information was passed on to the police while establishing firm ground rules for women's protection.

At the same time, the Committee held several memorials for women who had been murdered and for women who had died for other reasons. These remembrance ceremonies were critical for everyone to begin to process their grief for friends and family and to deal with the trauma of finding out what had been happening to so many women in Port Coquitlam. Committee members helped to coordinate these memorials, prepare mementos and cards for visitors and spoke about their friends during the ceremonies.

The events at the Port Coquitlam farm terrified women and many were afraid to go to work. We talked about this a great deal in the Learning Centre and throughout WISH. Women urged each other to work in buddy systems, while others swore they were only going to go with their regulars. Women talked about how they wished they could find other work. We kept newspaper articles on the Missing Women's Investigation and showed women the websites that had been established. Women came in to the Learning Centre to tell us pieces of information they knew or suspected and asked whether and how they could go forward to the police when they had outstanding warrants, etc. We assisted women to find out their rights. Sometimes, women just wanted to tell someone what they knew so they did not have to hold it inside. One woman approached us after a WAG meeting and told us about being stalked by a man who had held her for two days. We helped to make a

safety plan for her the next 24 hours, but later we found out she was murdered that night.

Several women went on to take leadership positions in neighbourhood coalitions like "Breaking the Silence Against Violence Against Women" and the Downtown Eastside Women's March held annually on Valentine's Day for the missing or murdered women. These women conferred with the WAG at WISH and brought information about the strategies organizations were taking together. In February 2003, many women from WISH assisted in the Women's March as security, speakers and helpers.

Sex Trade Workers and Leadership

Clearly, the voices of sex-trade workers are essential for initiating solutions to violence, discrimination and alternative opportunities. Women have proven that they have both the capacity and the vision to participate in the debate. At WISH, women have created their own vehicles for discussion through the Newsletter and the monthly WAG meetings. Women have stepped up to decision-making roles, whether it be deciding on the refreshments for an event or speaking at a local demonstration. By following and supporting the agenda women set for themselves at WISH, the Learning Centre was able to reinforce women's forays into leadership and collective empowerment. The results were that women, as a group, set higher goals for themselves. In addition, individual women became more assertive in their lives and more confident in their self-expression. Currently, two women involved in the Learning Centre are planning to publish books with the assistance of WISH and Capilano.

There is no doubt that women are ready to provide leadership in the organization. However, the constraints of women's lives mean that "consultation" and "decision-making" needs to take a different shape. The collaborative, on-going process for coordinating trips in the Learning Centre meant that all women did not have to be

present at each meeting for the event to be researched, planned and implemented. A more fluid and flexible consensus was eventually reached but it did not happen in one designated session. This has implications for creating more flexible ways of incorporating women's knowledge and analysis into the operation and leadership of the WISH organization and the larger political sphere.

An honorarium is also a means by which women are able to designate their time to decision-making and consultation rather than the sex-trade. The issue of paying women honoraria has created much debate within the WISH organization. Many factors influenced the way people felt about honoraria, particularly the fact that the organization uses dozens of volunteers from outside the neighbourhood to help run its services. The literacy research project landed in the middle of this debate and it was decided that the only honoraria the literacy program could issue was for instruction. Also, each woman's access to instruction honoraria was regulated to one honoraria per year. This meant that the research project was unable to consider honoraria for research reflection activities. This probably would have made a difference to participation in the second year of research reflection, when other individual learning priorities and collective projects were taking a higher priority for participants. However, WISH as an organization is reflecting on the honoraria issue. Currently, they are supportive of paying women to consult in a new safety and violence project being held at WISH.

4. 3. Instructor Challenges

There is no doubt that instructing in the WISH Learning Centre is challenging. In many ways, what we face is typical of community-based literacy programs everywhere: we have a broad range of learners and we operate from temporary quarters with not enough resource materials. However, the quantity and quality of issues is intensified by the dramatic fluctuations in women's lives and the daily traumas they experience as sex-trade workers and poor women. Having a majority of learners who are active in addictions is different than embracing a few. Finding relevant, meaningful learning activities for women whose schooling experience varies from grade four to college is a huge challenge. We also had to create a literacy program that embraced chaos, conflict, grief and hope.

When we began the literacy research program, we had two instructors employed by Capilano College and we operated the Learning Centre two nights a week. When we were successful in attracting community development funding from the Vancouver Foundation, we added a community development worker to the team. This position allowed us to open the WISH Learning Centre three nights per week and keep the Learning Centre active during the summer months when college staff were absent. The community development worker was hired from the staff at WISH. Her interest in the literacy program and her warm rapport with women in the Drop-In contributed to many new successes in the program. Thus, we have a team of three: two college instructors and one community development worker who run the Learning Centre three evenings a week.

Three Capilano instructors have worked at WISH over the two-year project. One instructor took a leave from the project in January 2002 in the first year of the research project, after being involved in the original needs assessment (1999 -2000). The second instructor began working at the WISH Learning Centre in late 2000 and has worked in the Downtown Eastside for many years. The third Capilano instructor joined the project in April 2002. Previously, she has worked in a variety of

literacy programs in the Lower Mainland. Each instructor brought different strengths to the project and each woman has faced her own personal challenges at WISH.

4. 3. 1. Changing the Way We Teach

When women walk in the door, the regulars and semi-regulars always ask "What are we doing tonight?" They now have a major expectation and are expecting to be stimulated. This is very exciting!!

-Instructor – Weekly Report

In any learning environment, instructors have to think carefully about the activities that they want to do and do a considerable amount of planning to ensure success. Instructing/facilitating at the WISH Learning Centre is no different in that manner. What is different however is the way we need to modify activities, or the things that we have to consider when we are planning or facilitating activities at WISH.

As noted earlier in the report, the first things we need to consider are ways to make the Learning Centre safe and welcoming for street women. Each evening the Learning Centre is open, we transform a stark boardroom into a warm, inviting learning space and then take it all down at the end of the evening. Assembling the Learning Centre requires rolling the computer cupboard in from the room next door, hanging our felt banner on the door, placing chairs around the table, writing the activities on the white board, making tea, and arranging the evenings activities on the table. Whenever possible we bring in flowers or something beautiful for the table and work to keep the energy in the room calm. As women enter the room they are greeted and welcomed.

Each evening, we try to plan learning activities that consider a broad range of skills. We usually start with a hands-on element to draw women into the room. Each activity can be taken to several levels. Women can do the activity, or if their interest

is higher they can read the materials developed to complement the theme. Women are also invited to engage in discussions that stem from the activities. Some women choose not to participate directly but they often eat their dinner and talk with other women who are working on the planned activity. We have noticed that there is a need to "check things out" and observation is a safe way to do so. Women don't "have" to do the activities planned – they are more than welcome to come into the room and participate in any way that works for them.

We have developed strategies to motivate women to try a new activity and keep them involved, strategies that we wouldn't use elsewhere. We have developed these strategies for several reasons. First, women's attention spans can be relatively short. They may be there once, one time only and we have to work with them on the learning issue they raise. Or, they are regulars, meaning they come to the Centre on a regular basis and are expecting something new and something challenging. So we try to think of ways that will make an activity meaningful on a one-time or continuous basis. An example of this is the novel study we did. Rather than obtaining a class set of novels, we photocopied a few chapters at a time. As women joined the novel study group they received a chapter and put it into a duo tang. Each week they received a couple of chapters that we read aloud and discussed. The duo tangs were kept in the storage cupboard with the agreement that when we finished the novel, and women had all the chapters of the book in their duo tang, then they could take the entire package home. We had between 2 and 7 women participating in this weekly novel study evening, and two women finished the novel and took a copy home.

Another strategy is the way we motivate women to participate. An example of this is the way we arrange for women to leave with something tangible in hand. For instance, we invite women to participate in an activity and if they decide to do it, they will receive a journal that goes with the activity. Or, the activity is producing an ornament or a headache remedy that can be taken away. Women need to have a

reason for doing something, even for learning, and often the chance of obtaining a nice item, or a gift that they can give to someone else, or even sell, is a reason for them to do the activity.

The strategies for motivation and participation are things we developed when we had a clear sense that we wanted women to try something. However, we have learned how to strike a balance between giving women space and pushing them to try new and challenging things. Kate Nonesuch from the Reading and Writing Centre, a storefront Learning Centre in Duncan BC, (part of Malaspina University College) talks about the notion of instructors "Getting Out of the Way" so learning can occur. Oftentimes, instructors and facilitators are far too present in the learning environment, thus tipping the balance of power entirely in their favour. When this happens, learners who have been marginalized and victims of power imbalances withdraw and have no voice and no space in their own learning. Women in the Learning Centre at WISH are sensitive to this, and we work hard to give them power over their learning. Learning when and how to support and push women was critical in our development as effective literacy instructors in the WISH Learning Centre.

*"I'm learning the pace of the place, and getting a feel for how much I can push things. Now that they seem to know me as "the teacher" or the "literacy person" I feel that I can push a bit more than I did at the beginning."
-Instructor- Evening Reports*

We have observed that when we've pushed women to do an activity, good things occur. If we were to challenge women every night, it would cease to be the relaxing place that it is. Therefore, the challenge and the pushes have to be subtle and carefully undertaken. The nature of the resistance has to be gauged and the instructor then determines whether to continue to challenge or to let up. At times women simply need a great deal of encouragement or at least proof that they are capable of doing the activity.

"I was wearing a bead bracelet and necklace and the women liked them, but no one wanted to make one. Thought it was too hard. I assured them that it was just threading a bead, and that the beads were much larger than the other beads we had worked with. Still no one bit. So I made one for D. . . . Took about five minutes Then I made one for M. . . . After I made her bracelet, she came over to the table and started working on a ring to match. Then I made one for K. then P. By this time the women realized they could do these themselves and started making them

Instructor - Evening Reports

One of the things we needed to shift from was the idea that we needed to do "Literacy Work" each night. We have learned that we needed to broaden our understanding of literacy and learning and see what ways that could fit with women's learning needs.

"I need a purposeful activity each evening that I am there. Something fun, creative and literacy based."

-Instructor - Evening Reports

The purposeful activity gives meaning to the learning activity. Many of the crafts we make become gifts for children and friends or decorations for their own spaces. Overall, we try to create a learning culture in the Learning Centre, where reading, writing, thinking, speaking, drawing, planning, and so forth abound.

Working at the WISH Learning Centre has not only had an effect on the participants, it has deeply affected the instructors as well. We have had to examine our practice as literacy instructors and look deeply at what constitutes literacy instruction, success and support. While this report is not about the instructors, our experience certainly cannot be removed from the equation. We are planning to elaborate on these experiences in a future publication. The learning materials we developed during the research project, the way we learned to best support women and women's own reflections will form the basis our next project "*Life's Miracles: Start with a Dream*", a collection of learning materials by and for women at the WISH Learning Centre.

4. 3. 2. Working with Chaos

Instructing at the Learning Centre is amazingly rewarding work and it is also exhausting. We often work off the top of our heads, planning for a variety of instances and responding quickly to what is presented. We have a storage cupboard in the Learning Centre equipped with the basics: arts and craft materials, resource books, and other supplies and we try to replenish it regularly. It is often challenging to maintain a flow of activity or constant energy in the room, as there can be interruptions and disruptions at any time. And every time we need a different item from the cupboard, we have to unlock it. We cannot leave it unlocked let alone open for items may and have vanished. We are constantly being asked to swing between flexibility and a clear learning intention.

"I remember one night, it was pretty chaotic. A. was trying to do the final paste-up on the newsletter, it was the Monday before cheque day so everyone was on edge and darting in and out of the room. A new woman was trying to do the evening activity but she was so sick that she kept throwing up in the garbage can. She really wanted to finish the activity so she just kept throwing up and coming back to the table. People started to leave because the room reeked. Finally, I just moved the garbage can out of the room, opened the window, poured her some mint tea and helped her finish the activity she was so determined to complete."

-Instructor - Evening Reports

It was important for all of us to get familiar with this chaos and to recognize how to work with this environment. Although it was crazy from a classroom point of view, it was not necessarily out of control. We realized that it can be stimulating to women to have many things happen at one time. "Chaotic but busy and productive" was different than "frenzied and hostile". It was also easier for women who were shy to just ease into the room. Women seemed to love the buzz of activity and when everyone's hands were busy, we learned that it was often a good time to bring up a discussion item or to check out a new idea. We came to recognize this happy busy-ness sensation and make the most of it. At the same time, we had to relax about how supplies were being used. We bit back comments about glitter glue going all

over the table and started bringing a plastic tablecloth. We found out that anything can be used differently and not to become attached to the "right way". We had to recognize that anything we put out on the table was fair game and that it was much more important to encourage women in their creativity than end up with all the craft tools at the end of the evening.

We also needed to plan for a wide variety of possibilities due to the unstructured nature of the Learning Centre and the fact that we don't know who will be in on any given evening. There were numerous instances where the activities planned were not entirely successful due to lack of interest, a different grouping of women, or a different kind of energy in the room. For example, one evening a much-loved craft activity was planned. Women just started working on it when an announcement was made about a Beauty Night being held at the Downtown Health Clinic a few blocks over. The room emptied out in minutes. Or at women's request an activity was planned, but on the night the instructor arrived with the materials, most of the women who had requested the activity were not in that evening due to illness. We tried not to see these experiences as "failures" but as conditions of our literacy work. Instead, we looked forward to those other chaotic events that were so positive. For instance, one woman came into the Learning Centre just as clean up started and was desperate to make a Christmas stocking for her cat. (Felt Christmas Stockings and other decorations were the evening activity). She quickly worked at her stocking, frantic at first but then relaxed as she got into it. Knowing she kept the instructor late, when she finished she looked up and said,

"Thanks for staying to help me finish this, I forgot how much fun it is to make something with your hands."

Instructor – Weekly Reports.

4. 3. 3. Reframing Conflict

Conflict, violence and aggression are so much a part of women's lives at WISH. In the Learning Centre we knew that we had to come up with new ways to approach conflict that would respect individuals and respect the safe environment of the Learning Centre. We knew that our "authority" positions were both powerful and meaningless. At any moment, we could represent a powerful figure to any particular woman. We also knew that if women chose to be physically aggressive, there was not much we could do.

We did not want to occupy an authoritarian role in the Learning Centre but we did want to negotiate some common agreements about how everyone and our resources would be treated. Instead of "dealing with conflict" in the Learning Centre, we talked about the purpose of a calm atmosphere for learning. We never questioned women's feelings or right to be angry but we did appeal to women to exercise self-restraint or take a personal argument out of the room. This often worked and other women in the room asserted their right to have a positive learning space. Often, women apologized and we went on to talk about how hard their week had been or what extra difficulty they were trying to manage.

Sometimes though, the conflict was aimed directly at instructors. Usually, the trigger was scarcity of resources or the fair distribution of materials.

Dealing with Scarcity

Dealing with scarcity was a terrific challenge for all of us at the Learning Centre. It brought up "policing issues" for instructors. It embarrassed women if we asked them to leave a few cookies for others. Sometimes, it meant that tools were stolen even before the evening's activity could start! We went round and round on this topic and eventually found a few strategies that minimized the impact of scarcity. For example, when we did aromatherapy for health, most women were enthusiastic and wanted to combine essential oils for many symptoms. At first, we bought glass

bottles and had to limit how many each woman could get. This caused an enormous argument with one participant when we changed the number the next week, for she didn't think it was fair that she only got one bottle last week, and the next week, women each received two. We solved this problem by getting free film containers from a photo store allowing women to have as many bottles of aromatherapy potions as they wanted. The policing ended and we were able to support women in their interest and enthusiasm.

Most women don't have enough of anything and so getting as much as you can or getting there first is a strong coping strategy. On the other hand, women often shared things with each other in a most generous way. Women gave each other clothes, extra food, support, a place to stay, and good advice. As instructors, we also had to learn how to be generous without being a constant source of money or attention. Experience was the only teacher.

We also found that some women carried an enormous amount of anger in them and would project this onto others, particularly others who got in their way. There have been several instances where an instructor had to stop a woman from taking too many of the materials. This invariably ends up in a negative encounter that affected everyone present in the room. After months of struggling with this pattern, we finally learned that if we address the woman's need, what it is that she needs at the time, rather than focusing on what she can't have, then the situation gets diffused. For example, one woman regularly comes into the Learning Centre primarily to obtain writing materials and get paper. While she's there she often helps herself to items that are on the table, such as markers, special paper, cards, booklets and journals. It has been made clear to her and everyone else, that some things such as lined paper, pencils and pens are there for the taking, while other things are for the evening activity, thus need to stay in the room. When she helped herself to such items, the instructor intervened and the conflict began. The last few times this happened, the instructor focussed on the woman's need to have special markers to

draw with and special paper and directed the conversation to trying to accommodate that need. As soon as the woman heard her need expressed by the instructor, her usual abrasive reaction melted into a quiet response of thanks. Take note, instructors are trying to anticipate the best response to such behaviours in split seconds with numerous things going on around them. Also added to the stress is the fact that other women are watching to see how the instructor will react! It took months of getting it wrong, and being told off by the woman, before the instructor hit upon the reply that worked. And it worked like magic.

Whenever we could, we learned to get on a participant's side if possible in the conflict. Sometimes that was not possible and then we needed to figure out how to follow up with women after being embroiled in a conflict. Because our community development worker was also a WISH staff, she came up against this issue more. Her insight into conflict helped us to see the positive aspects of this interaction.

"A conflict can also make you closer. It's like the two of you have been through an experience together. You have that as your history and you are bonded by it."

-Community Development Worker – Weekly Reports

Her approach was to stand firm at the time of the conflict - for instance if a woman arrived too late for a shower in the Drop-In and started an argument about the policy, she would just uphold the rule at the time. However, following this argument, the community development worker would be completely approachable and respectful to the woman to facilitate a new start. This worked well, especially when WISH is the woman's only source of food and resources. It gave everyone a chance for a new start and a stronger rapport. Often this process ended with apologies or a deeper understanding of each other's intention.

4. 3. 4. Working with Grief

Working with street-involved women means working with grief. Becoming part of women's lives means sharing the loss of children, the loss of health, the humiliation and trauma of beatings. It also means being left in the wake of their deaths. It was hard not to worry all the time about women especially with more and more women going missing. In our own bodies, this showed up as sickness, stress, sleeplessness and sometimes dread.

"I remember coming back after being away for two weeks at Christmas. I purposefully asked WISH staff if anyone had died or disappeared over that time. When it seemed like no one had, I relaxed. Later I overheard someone talking about M. being dead. It turned out she had died early in December from heart failure in the hospital and no one had gotten around to telling us. She was someone that came every week to the Learning Centre. She was 31 years old."

-Instructor – Weekly Reports

The memorials were important. We learned a lot about woman at their memorials because their whole lives were present. Sometimes, we were able to offer a woman's poetry or artwork to her grieving family and friends. As instructors and participants and WISH staff, we also turned our sadness and anger to making change. It caused the development of the Missing Women's Committee and the increased participation in the Women's March. We continued to advocate for more resources and options for sex-trade workers. Currently, there is a campaign to build a facility with 24-hour services available to women in the Downtown Eastside.

4. 3. 6. Defining and Measuring Success

We are just beginning to create an analysis of success as instructors at the WISH Learning Centre. We work within a constantly changing environment. For that reason it is difficult at times to have a sense of progress. We have learned to define progress in a broader way, for example a woman's ability to stay focused or to function with the group, or to come on a regular basis. We now have a core group

of learners who come regularly to the Learning Centre full of expectations of being stimulated and learning something. We have also created collective structures like the newsletter and the WAG and some history as an active Learning Centre.

Success is a difficult thing to define at the WISH Learning Centre. As instructors, we have a sense when we are successful and we certainly know when we aren't successful.

The writing activity went over like a lead balloon. No one at all wrote. Many looked at the sheet, read the activity, smiled and then moved on. "...Too tired to write. . . . will do it next time I can't think of anyone I can't think right now. . . etc." I think the question and the activity were good, but I'm thinking that the large space available for writing the response may lead some to think that you have to fill the whole sheet in. I'll try it again in a while with half a page and a small space for the reply.
-Instructor - Evening Reports

And by contrast,

"The mandala's that I brought in for colouring were an absolute hit! We pulled out all the markers and pencil crayons we could find, filled the table and the women got started. . . . When you hang out together and colour, a relaxation takes over and stories start to come out. XX.'s one great story teller.
-Instructor - Evening Reports

The most successful evenings we have are the evenings when women are engaged in learning and when women are taking charge of their learning. This is occurring more and more in the Learning Centre.

Looking for success and progress is a human trait in educators. But the pitfall is that you can become attached to your expectations as women make progress, attend regularly and appear enthused about their learning. When women suddenly stop coming or get heavily back into drugs, it is easy to feel disappointment as literacy instructors and to wonder if we are making any difference. What we learned in

conducting this research project is that women rely on our evenness about their chaotic lives. They thrive in our curiosity about their roller coaster successes and failures, particularly with addictions, but they do not need one more judgment. When we continue to see women as champions of their lives and active learners in all situations, it breathes optimism into their self-concept.

There is also a fine line between acceptance and underestimation. We found that it was critical to keep seeing the enormous potential women possessed while also being supportive, curious observers of their actions. Remaining focused and calm and encouraging in the face of women's difficult lives is an effort for all of us working at the WISH Learning Centre. It means draining off our despair in debriefing sessions and journal writing and creating positive life-affirming activities in our personal lives. We also learned to share the small and large indicators of "success" that we encountered with women, as well as the funny situations that inevitably happened at the Learning Centre. Above all, women's courage and creativity continue to affirm that we are all involved in an important and transforming initiative.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion of this report must begin by revisiting the myths women generated about sex-trade workers and learning. These myths were lived by women at WISH, shaping their daily experiences and access to learning. We must ask ourselves how this study changes our collective understanding of this issue and our willingness to provide literacy programming to street women in the future.

Myth 1

Women who work in the sex trade are just objects, they have no minds.

Women in the sex-trade in the Downtown Eastside have active minds and important thoughts. The voices of women sex-trade workers are voices our society needs to hear. The women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside come from towns, reserves and cities across the country. Many women's lives were determined by their experiences in their home communities. We need to understand how poverty, discrimination, sexual abuse, learning disabilities and societal betrayal make drugs and street life a viable option for young women in this country. Women at WISH have poured out their experiences through writing, poetry, advocacy and art. Their eloquence has demonstrated to us how important literacy and learning opportunities are to everyone and, in particular, to women who have so few resources.

Myth 2

Women who work in the sex trade and/or who use drugs are not "ready" to learn.

During this research project, we found that sex-trade workers are ready to learn. They are also ready to create, to teach and to organize their community. But clearly, learning institutions are not ready for sex-trade workers. Women described how important it was to have a space at WISH where they could be active in their learning while they were active in their addictions. Women articulated how

important it is to be in a non-judgmental environment that matches their definition of safe. Until institutions and society change their views of sex-trade workers, literacy programs belong where women already feel safe. This requires literacy instructors and funders to accept the challenge of doing literacy work in new ways with new community partners.

Myth 3

Street involved women are not interested in building their minds or getting pleasure from thinking, reading, discussion or analysis.

Over the past two years, the WISH Learning Centre distributed hundreds of donated books, dozens of journals and reams of writing paper. Women published 15 newsletters and debated the politics of gender, the use of prescription methadone and the role of governments in maintaining or eliminating the social safety net. Women at WISH were thrilled to have access to the internet, using it as an instant source of information on every subject ranging from Hep C to Inuit legends. Being involved in street life and the sex-trade can be a temporary experience for women or a lifetime occupation. Women at WISH told us that it is important to nourish their desire for knowledge, discussion and debate and that we learn from the stories of their lives.

The research findings provided a picture of the way sex trade workers used the WISH Learning Centre to empower and stabilize their lives. Women gravitated toward the Learning Centre when they needed reflective time, when they needed something else besides the street. The constant presence of the Learning Centre and the welcoming environment ensured that learning was always there for women when they could make time and when they were ready. It was also important that the Learning Centre was something women could return to, without judgment.

Collectively, we were able to turn the Learning Centre into a place for women to grow as individuals and for the group to take on new initiatives in a supportive atmosphere. Women's ideas, suggestions, leadership and collective knowledge were honoured and appreciated. Women's experiences as sex trade workers, addicts, mothers, poor women, writers and artists was valued and highlighted.

The research project provided everyone with a broader view of what makes learning safe for street-involved women. Without their candid feedback, we would not know how much kindness, respect, encouragement and a non-judgmental attitude meant to women who have no other place to learn.

The WISH Learning Centre opened both a physical and a mental space for women in the sex-trade in the Downtown Eastside. While organizations have tried to provide food and health services to women, they have not fed their minds or their spirits. The Learning Centre provided a space for women to exhale, to experiment with their learning and to use literacy as a process for healing, self-reflection and harm reduction. By following and supporting the agenda women set for themselves at WISH, the Learning Centre was able to reinforce women's forays into leadership and collective empowerment.

Clearly, the voices of sex-trade workers are essential for initiating solutions to violence, discrimination and alternative opportunities. Women have proven that they have both the capacity and the vision to participate in the debate. In many communities across Canada, people are experiencing gashes in the social safety net. Growing support for welfare reform and a shrinking role for governments in all aspects of community life have created a new population of poor, homeless and disenfranchised Canadians. The women at the WISH Learning Centre remind us that this growing population of marginalized citizens has both literacy needs and leadership capacity.

Dee Dee Martin's poem encourages us to use "The Courage to Find Wings". Her words inspire to find the courage and resources to meet the needs of literacy learners in shelters, crisis centres, food banks and drop-ins across the country. We hope that the information shared in this research project provides insight and reassurance that such projects are both possible and transforming.

Appendix A

Lists of the Activities Undertaken

Entry level activities

- Aromatherapy
- Making natural body lotions and potions
- Making tissue paper and modge podge candle holders
- Decorating paper mache boxes
- Making covers for day timers
- Decorating brooches
- Dyeing, carding and felting wool
- Designing t-shirts and buttons for Prevention Against Violence Against Women week
- Making postcards and multimedia cards
- Making quilt panels for a wall hanging for the Learning Centre as well as panels for loved ones
- Making candles and plaster of Paris candle holders
- Mask making
- Halloween quiz
- Pumpkin carving
- Games playing (Trivia, Scrabble, Sequence)
- Beading jewelry and pouches
- Making holiday cards and Christmas decorations
- Cookie decorating
- Decorating picture frames
- Painting mandalas
- Knitting and crocheting
- Making and decorating fans
- Writing and decorating cards for loved ones
- Self-portraits Frieda Khalo-style

Skills activities

- Journal writing
- Oral story telling
- Creative writing: short stories, reflections, poetry
- Reading and writing exercises
- Word puzzles and crosswords
- Computer skills: typing, introduction to the mouse using games, using WORD, using graphics, etc.
- Study skills, how to prepare for the GED

- Research skills: finding an apartment, researching a new medication, obtaining materials
- Taking minutes
- Internet skills: email, research
- Resumes and cover letters
- Reading aloud and identification of new words, vocabulary development
- Making posters and announcements for WAG meetings
- Participating in workshops: Breaking the Silence Against Violence Against Women, What Do the Provincial Cutbacks Mean for Me?, RCMP Special Sessions on the Picton Investigation
- Making a personal budget
- Filling out tax forms
- Development of a WISH Pictionary game
- Individual learning plans
- Layout and desktop publishing
- Developing the ability to relax around learning
- Social skills
- Giving and receiving support
- Developing Concentration
- Participating in a group setting
- Self evaluation, self reflection
- Project completion

Leadership Activities

- Planning and decorating a Christmas party
- Planning, facilitating and speaking at women's memorials and creating memorial brochures
- Teaching: Preparing and leading a class in a craft activity such as beading or instructing internet email and research skills
- Peer teaching: showing a newcomer how to start a project (embossing cards, making a bracelet) how to use the computer, sign up for hotmail, or researching rental housing
- Assisting to maintain an atmosphere of calmness in the Learning Centre
- Negotiating and resolving conflicts that occur in the Learning Centre
- Welcoming and orienting new women
- Participating in Women's Advisory Group meetings and initiatives: attending, speaking, joining a committee, reporting back, asking for accountability, working with other members of the organization on issues (staff, board, other volunteers), taking minutes, typing minutes, co-facilitating, distributing minutes, encouraging peers to raise issues
- Creating and publishing the WISH Newsletter: writing articles and poetry, researching issues, reviewing a book on poor-bashing, designing the cover and inside pages, soliciting announcements from other members of the

- organization, stapling and folding, distributing the Newsletter throughout WISH
- Applying for a Learners-Talking-to-Learners grant, (a Provincially funded literacy activity): brainstorming ideas, researching possibilities, developing a budget, coordinating movie outings, publicizing the trips, writing up experiences, completing the group evaluation and preparing a financial report
 - Participation in the conference "Portraits of Literacy": deciding to participate by sending a group poster, reflecting on personal participation in the Learning Centre, reflecting on how the Learning Centre could improve, designing and decorating the poster
 - Participation in the Research Project: assisting with questionnaires, filling out questionnaires, participating in discussions about various topics that arose with the research project, providing feedback and suggestions for revisions.

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