

CREATING INNER AND OUTER *SACRED SPACE*: AN ADULT LEARNER PROGRAM'S
WHOLISTIC APPROACH TO SUPPORTING LOW-INCOME WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN
IMPACTED BY VIOLENCE

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

ROANNA C.F. YANGCO

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Critical and Creative Thinking Program

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Approved as to style and content by:

Peter Taylor, Associate Professor
Chairperson of Committee

Lorna Rivera, Assistant Professor
Member

Peter Taylor, Coordinator Critical and Creative
Thinking

ABSTRACT

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June 2004

Roanna C.F. Yangco, B.A., Swarthmore College
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Professor Peter Taylor

At our Adult Learner Program, we have identified that women who have experienced violence need various supports in order to effectively learn upon their reentry to school. Using three broad definitions of violence, I have investigated the impact of violence on low-income women's learning at our literacy program. We have found that if our program supports transformation of the inner and outer *sacred space* of a woman, then she can gain the qualities she needs to learn throughout her time at our program, but for lifelong learning. "Sacred" in the sense used here denotes something worthy of respect.

This paper documents the curricula, activities, and transformation of the *sacred space* that our Adult Learner Program has given attention to, especially during the past five years. Our curricula include activities that acknowledge that the essence of a human being is comprised of four inseparable aspects: the mind, body, spirit, and emotions. Using the First Nations' medicine wheel, we have developed lessons that "bring the whole person to learning (Horsman, 2000)." The curricula also focus on empowering learners through cultivating a greater *sense of self* (understanding the interconnectedness between the four aspects of the person) and developing a *sense of place* (establishing the self with a supportive community). We explored ways to construct a *sacred learning environment* for the women in the program. By catering to all the senses in the classroom, we wanted to create an environment, which we felt our learners were

worthy to be in. We took on the challenge to transform a *sacred space* that reflected the value we knew our students possessed.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this synthesis project to all of the women I have taught at the Adult Learner Program. I especially offer tribute to Mary C. who truly believed in herself and recognized the value of lifelong learning. Everyday I am inspired to further analyze what promotes transformation of each learner, including myself.

I also present this synthesis in honor of Elizabeth Morrish, coordinator of the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project. Despite her untimely death, I still felt the presence of her spirit that carried me through this sometimes-challenging work. She inspired me to have confidence in my own sense of self and place. I know her spirit will continue to encourage my development of methods that foster transformation in both inner and outer *sacred space*.

BUTTERFLY

Butterfly
Emerging from the chrysalis
Explore this bright new world.
Free to fly
Each moment of now
An instant of choice
Easily accepted.
Destination assured.
Freedom

- Brenda Cornish

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The support of family and friends throughout my educational journey in the Critical and Creative Thinking program has undoubtedly made this synthesis project come together. My synthesis advisor, Peter Taylor, guided me through this project and asked many essential questions that led to further analysis and clarity in my thinking. Lorna Rivera, my synthesis reader, inspired a deeper level of thinking and frequently told me, “You can do it!” Since 1999, Char Caver, my colleague/friend and I collaborated many days and nights to expand our understanding of the transformation process of the inner and outer *sacred space*. Her profound insight and love for this topic has stirred and enhanced my own ideas. Elizabeth Morrish, Jenny Horsman, and the other women from the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project facilitated my movement towards an understanding of violence and its impact on women’s learning. I thank them for “taking on the challenge” with me. Donna Bivens and Sr. Noel Doyle improved my understanding of the foundations of the *Loves Herself Regardless* class. Mary Frangie, my synthesis “buddy,” provided encouragement during those moments of “low productivity.” She consistently asked questions and urged me to “get to the point.” Rebecca Freed, my editor and friend, was not only my emotional support, but also my “extra set of eyes.” I thank Elisabeth Anderson, who listened to and challenged my ideas in this paper. I am also grateful for her help with the frustrating process of formatting. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the women of the Adult Learner Program who have “loved themselves” enough to return to school. You have inspired me in my own journey of lifelong learning.

To all my family and friends: Your time, effort, kindness (especially those who cooked for me), unconditional love, encouragement, and affirmation were the motivation I needed to propel me through this project. Thank you very much. *Maraming salamat po.*

CHAPTER 1

MOVING TOWARDS AND UNDERSTANDING OF VIOLENCE

Mary asked so many questions. She wanted to learn and had so many aspirations to “go further” in life. She came to The Adult Learner Program wanting to get her GED, go to college, and manage her own family day care service. After attending classes for a few weeks, she found, however, that her “door” had only been cracked open; she realized her opportunities were endless with an education. She came almost every day to class and was excited to learn. She loved to tell stories and share them with everyone. She told them so eloquently and vividly. Since coming to Project HOPE, her writing skills significantly improved in sentence structure, organization, and clarity.

A few months after she joined our program her attendance waned. When she did go to class, she was physically there, but we could tell that she was not “mentally present.” One day I gave my class an assignment: *Write about an important aspect of your life. It can be an entire autobiographical account from when you were born to the present or one event that has had an impact of your life. There are no specific rules for length or style. Share your story.* Writing, which she had always been eager to do, became a frustrating task for Mary. She complained that I was pushing her to write and she had nothing to write about. Mary used to give me at least a two-page essay, but now it was a struggle to even hand in a paragraph. My image of Mary, a strong-willed woman who was always anxious to learn, had faded. I was disappointed and frustrated with her because she lost her desire to write. I blamed myself for not being able to connect with her. I tried to offer suggestions to stimulate her writing so it would return to its original structured and vibrant form. I pleaded with her, “write about food, Mary, you love to talk about food. Describe your family gatherings - all that food - what was the taste, the smell, the talk going on while the meal was being prepared, the conversation at the dinner table? Write down those stories you love to tell. That's all writing is, Mary, telling those stories!” She couldn't do it.

I wrote a “suggestion list” for Mary so she could expand on the few sentences she handed in. I was willing to work with what little she gave me. I offered encouragement and told her how I admired the writing she had given me at the beginning of the year. I emphasized that I *knew* she had the talent and ability to write a beautiful essay. I wanted her to know that I did not want to push her, but I knew she could do better. I never got to give Mary the letter. The next day we found out that she had been murdered. At her funeral, we learned shocking news about the violence Mary experienced: Her son murdered her. We had no idea she even had a son, nor did we know he was threatening her. Her trust and faith in God always masked her problems. I remember our last conversation about that writing assignment. I told her I was frustrated her writing was not like it used to be. I asked her how her “life was, in general,” hoping I could make sense of the problem. As always, she replied, “I'm truly blessed.” She always said that, so we never knew anything was ever wrong. It was the usual façade she wore to cover

her fear. It never occurred to me that there was a reason for her writer's block. I finally realized that her fear had caused her silence (Teacher reflection notes, 2000).

Background of the Research

In 1999, I came to the Adult Learner Program (ALP) as a novice teacher/AmeriCorps volunteer. I was so impressed by this unique place. The ALP resides in a multi-service center/shelter for single mothers and their children located in Dorchester, Massachusetts. It is just one program that exists at this multi-service center. The center also maintains a food pantry, family day care business training, a transition-to-work program, housing advocacy, daycare, and neighborhood development program. The ALP serves women of the shelter, as well as those in the surrounding neighborhoods, many of which are in danger of becoming homeless, are currently homeless, or had experienced homelessness in the past. We offer three educational levels: Adult Basic Education (grade levels 0-4), Pre-GED (General Educational Development) (5-8), and GED (9-12). The women are between the ages of seventeen and sixty-six. This agency, as a whole, does its best to fulfill the needs of the women and children that it serves.

As a new teacher, I struggled to understand my students' lives. I noticed attendance was an ongoing challenge for the women. I realized that there were so many obstacles they had to endure while trying to learn. The women often had sick children who could not attend day care so they had to stay at home because no family members could look after their children. Paying for a babysitter rarely existed in the women's budgets. Other women constantly battled their own health issues, which prevent them from regularly attending classes. Some were forced by welfare to work while attending school. The limits on welfare also put constraints on the length of time that the women were allowed to attend school. Other barriers such as homelessness, transportation, and abuse would interfere with their attendance. Family members held many

demands for the women and they held high expectations for themselves. However, what I learned then and can assert now is that the women who come to the ALP are a determined group. They are strong-minded and willing to return to school as adults to finish their high school education. They have chosen to attend this demanding full-time program and they want to succeed.

Ever since Mary's death, I have wondered how violence influences the lives of the women who come to Project HOPE's Adult Learner Program. I saw how Mary's learning was blocked because she felt the overwhelming pressure from her son's threats. In this research study, I wanted to establish a sufficient working definition of violence, one that encompasses all of the complexities of violence that affect low-income women (Chapter 2). I hoped to identify the impacts of violence on the women in our literacy program (Chapter 3). Using this knowledge I wanted to influence the design of a comfortable learning environment that facilitates a lifelong desire for learning (Chapter 4). Finally, I looked to making our experience known beyond our program (Chapter 5).

In 2000, shortly after Mary's death, the Adult Learner Program received a three-year grant (called the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project [WVAE]) sponsored by the Women's Educational Equity Act (under the U.S. Department of Education) to study the impact of violence on women in adult education programs. World Education, a nonprofit organization in Boston, Massachusetts who coordinated the grant, chose the ALP as one of six sites in the New England area to participate in the research project. I was one of the two coordinators of this grant for the ALP. Char Caver, the other coordinator from the ALP, and I participated in several workshops (coordinated by World Education) with the other grantees and Jenny Horsman (author of *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence, and Education*). In these workshops, we

discussed the meaning of violence, identified how violence affects the women in our literacy programs, applied and shared new pedagogical methods based on our acquired learning, and produced a Source Book entitled, *Taking on the Challenge*, for other adult literacy practitioners. My knowledge of the impact of violence on women's learning began and grew immensely during these workshops. My opinions and views presented in this study have been heavily influenced by the discussions in those workshops and informal conversations with the other practitioners involved with the project. While the actual grant has ended, this issue has become part of our everyday considerations for the structure and curriculum of the ALP.

Taking on the Challenge was produced to encourage other practitioners to engage in conversations about and help their learners begin/continue talking about the impact of violence on their own learning. Many educators may not be cognizant of violence's impact on their adult learners. However, in Jenny Horsman's extensive research on women, violence, and education, she presents that, "[a]necdotal evidence, collected during this study and previously through my work from wide numbers of literacy workers and learners, suggests the incidence of women in adult literacy programs who have experienced trauma may be far higher than in the general population (Horsman, 2000)." Given this data, there is a definite and immediate need for this discussion to take place.

Audience

Since this study focuses upon women in adult literacy programs, I believe it is crucial for adult literacy practitioners to think about their learners histories – not only their past educational histories, but their life histories. I also consider this research important for any educator - academic, vocational, or extracurricular. In order to help facilitate students learning, teachers must understand and acknowledge how violence exists in their learners' lives. It is also

important that teachers understand the effects of violence on learners. They must be aware that the effects of violence can be manifested in various ways in the classroom. However, I acknowledge that there might be some resistance from teachers to think about this issue.

First of all, violence is simply not an enjoyable topic. It conjures up disturbing images, hurtful memories, and feelings of hopelessness because of the pervasive nature of violence that exists in our society. It seems too overwhelming to even begin a discussion.

Second, I recognize that some teachers might not be responsive to talking about the impact of violence on their learners because they do not believe it is their job to provide therapy for a student (Horsman, 2000). They do not feel it is their place to offer this type of “emotional” support, but rather they must teach only “basic skills” so the students can gain stable employment. Perhaps they do not want to “cross the line” and get involved with matters that may be too personal. Others may argue that they have counselors in their program that can deal with the issues.

Finally, I realize that some teachers may have already formed common misconceptions about their learners because of these manifestations of violence. I remember in our monthly reviews of students, teachers would mention that students would stare out the window, sleep, incessantly talk to other students during class, have problems concentrating, eat, or read magazines during class. For example, I recall one colleague of mine a few years ago that spoke about a “lazy” student in our program. She maintained that during class that day, this student had not done her homework and was daydreaming in class. While the student very well may have been “spacey” during class, I do not feel the teacher’s conclusion that “daydreaming equals laziness” is just. I do not mean to claim that these actions are “acceptable behavior” for students. However, I do ask that teachers consider the reasons underlying their students’ actions.

Perhaps the student's mind was occupied with how to feed her family, how to get to the daycare in time to pick up her daughter so she will not be charged extra fees, how to deal with her child who is having behavioral problems in school, or how to get her GED in the next sixty days before her welfare runs out.

In her National Institute for Literacy Leader Fellowship Report, Janet Isserlis suggests her method of beginning a workshop about violence and learning:

I've asked them to think about whatever it was they had to do that day to get themselves to work – bring kids to school, take public transportation, maybe deal with a stalled engine, a missed connection, problems with childcare providers, inclement weather, whatever. I've asked them to think of times they sat in meetings worried about getting a parking ticket, about the health of a parent or child, a deadline, a lost phone number – any number of common stressors and distractions that affect people on a daily basis. Working from this point, I've then asked people in workshops to consider the effects of childhood sexual abuse, or political torture, or the stress of living within an abusive relationship, or worries about family members in other countries in trying to understand how great a challenge learners can face in trying to stay present to learning (2001).

I agree that it is important to help teachers reflect on their own personal experiences and acknowledge how distractions manifest in their emotions and actions. In fact, many instructors and trainers, who provide staff development for teachers about learning disabilities, create situations where the teachers will have to put themselves in their students' "shoes" to experience learning with a disability. Then they are able to better relate to these students by acknowledging what promotes and inhibits their own thinking. Therefore, they will understand the factors that impact their students' learning. I believe this can help teachers make connections with their students, which they never may have considered before.

Defining Violence

As a major part of this research study, I have been trying to identify an adequate working definition of violence. Throughout my past discussions with others about the meaning of violence, I have been challenged to distinguish between violence and trauma, violence and

oppression, and violence and stress. I believe trauma, all types of oppression, and stress are forms of violence. I feel that the word violence is strong and one that people often try to avoid using. However, I believe we should not discount the word because violence against women is a critical issue. Violence against women is ubiquitous and rampant. In a research report, the World Health Organization reported that:

Violence against women and girls is a major health and human rights concern. Women can experience physical or mental abuse throughout their lifecycle, in infancy, childhood and/or adolescence, or during adulthood or older age. While violence has severe health consequences for the affected, it is a social problem that warrants an immediate coordinated response from multiple sectors (2000).

Because of the severity of the effects of violence, the word should not be ignored or avoided due to its strong connotations. I will explain my point of view using various definitions and beliefs about violence.

As I mentioned before, my goal was to find a definition that included all of the various forms of violence that impact low-income women in adult literacy programs. I realize that as I read more material, speak further with other colleagues, and experience life, my definition of violence will take different shapes. In a recent conversation I had with Jenny Horsman, she reminded me that there is no single definition for violence – it can take on different meanings for those who experience it (Personal Conversation).

Many people understand violence as “physical force that is exerted to injure or hurt (Webster, 2003).” This is the type of definition one will find when consulting various dictionaries. It focuses loosely on violence as an insidious physical force that results in injury. Does this mean that people who experience violence show scars, bruises, or have broken bones? Since I did not find a definition that extended beyond “physical violence” in the dictionary, I consulted other sources. The American Psychological Association presents this definition of

violence: “Violence refers to immediate or chronic situations that result in injury to the psychological, social, or physical well-being of individuals or groups (American Psychological Association, 1993). This definition focuses more on the effects that recipients of the violence might experience. It designates violence as a “situation,” which could imply a person, financial status, living condition, etc. I appreciate this definition because it acknowledges that violence affects more than the physical part of a human being. I hope to form a definition of violence that shows the impact on the “whole person” (see Chapter 2).

In a recent discussion with my colleague, Char Caver, she suggested that in many therapeutic models, violence is viewed as a “violation of the self (Personal Conversation)” The etymological roots of the word *violate* are from the Latin, *violare*, which means, “to violate, treat with violence, outrage, dishonor” (Harper, 2001). A woman who experiences violence is stripped of her honor. In turn, she loses her *sense of self* (see Chapter 3). For many of the women in our program, they have been “violated” so many times by other people and systems. They have lost their sense of self, which we recognize as “self-esteem” or “self-confidence.”

Susan Heald, a researcher on the impact of violence on learning from the University of Manitoba, came to the ALP to discuss with us the meaning of violence. During our discussion, she offered her definition: “violence is anything that holds you down (Personal Conversation)” I have kept this definition for the past few years because I feel it is broad enough to incorporate the many barriers that disrupt women’s learning. In Dr. Lorna Rivera’s dissertation, *Learning Community: An Ethnographic Study of Popular Education and Homeless Women in a Shelter-Based Adult Literacy Program*, she states that the women in a shelter-based program encounter poverty-related barriers to their education. Rivera’s core assertion is that these barriers “prevent the women from becoming ‘fully human’” (a term used by Paulo Freire) (Rivera, 2001). If

something prevents someone from becoming “fully human,” isn’t it “holding a person down”? I believe that because violence prevents someone from developing, flourishing, or growing as a human being, it can be defined as “anything that holds you down.” Poverty prevents the women students from growing and achieving their full potentials. They are stifled by limits on welfare, childcare, transportation, food, and all of the basic human needs that are required for one just to *survive*, let alone *succeed*.

Today one of the women in our program, Pam, a 44-year old single mother with five children, had to leave our program. She was so excited to learn. In her home country, Jamaica, her family could not afford education. When she came to the states, she had to care for her children. She came to our program because not only did she desire to learn, she wanted to obtain her GED to get a job. We really enjoyed having her in the program because, despite her low cognitive and basic skills level, she always had a good attitude when she came to school. She stayed for almost a year, but with little to no money, she was in dire need of a job. She claimed that she couldn’t even get a cleaning job without her GED. She looked everywhere. Finally, last week she got hired as a home health aide (Teacher reflection notes, 2003).

Due to a lack of money in her home country, Pam was not able to receive an education. When she moved to the U.S. seeking a better life for her family, poverty inhibited her “ability to achieve her full potential” yet again. She was “held down” by not being given the opportunity to learn basic reading and writing skills. I do not discount that she learned survival skills, street smarts, and gained life experience. However, she does not possess the very basic skills most people need to succeed in our society today.

“Another way to approach the conception of violence is through the lens of nonviolence, since the latter involves the self-conscious renunciation of the former (Jackman, 2003).” I find this suggestion extremely helpful because I agree that it is important to gain some perspective by asking ourselves, “what does it feel like to be calm, at peace, and to have a clear mind?” In an interview, Johan Galtung, a leader in peace studies, eloquently stated, “To understand peace and violence we need to consider basic human needs--for survival, well-being, freedom and identity.

Development aims to promote those needs: violence insults them: peace preserves them (1997).” This is another way of saying that violence attacks and harms a person’s *sense of self*; peace “preserves” one’s *sense of self*. Dr. Martin Luther King, in his “six principles of nonviolence,” declared, “once the spirit of nonviolence is internalized, goals like domination, conquest or retaliation no longer drive behavior.” Instead, he added, “we cultivate virtues like love, truth, commitment, respect and courtesy, courage, self-discipline, hard work, honesty and social responsibility (The King Center, 2002).” Using these descriptions of nonviolence, we can declare what is *violent* to be the opposite of King’s stated virtues: *hate* rather than love, *falsehood* rather than truth, *indifference* rather than commitment or social responsibility, *insolence* rather than respect and courtesy, and *deceit* rather than honesty.

During the WVAE project, we often talked about violence as having “layers.” I began this research project thinking of violence in terms of “layers” of violence. Similar to an onion and its layers, I saw that there are the more obvious forms of violence like physical abuse. Such acts of physical abuse are war, domestic abuse, or those forms of violence that are more visual. However, until a few years ago I was unaware of the “hidden” forms of violence. Jenny Horsman identifies several “hidden forms,” such as emotional abuse, oppression, racism, poverty, illiteracy, sexism, ableism, and homophobia (2000). In her research with factory workers in Malaysia, Heng theorizes that much of the violence against women often remains hidden because “many of these violations are accepted as common social practice, especially in cultures where male domination is taken as the norm (2002).”

During the course of this semester, I have wondered if my definition of violence could be described as a “ripple effect of violence.” Although certain acts may seem physically violent or causing harm to a person, they do, in fact, prevent one from developing, flourishing, or growing

as a human being (as Paulo Freire framed the issue). I believe that anything that prevents a person from becoming “fully human” can be considered “violent.” Therefore, I regard those systems that create and/or perpetuate poverty, such as welfare, as violent. We have seen countless times when women had to leave the ALP to get jobs because they have been cut off from welfare. Some have to leave school because they can no longer afford even a bus pass to come to school. Because they have no money, they are restricted from the freedom to learn, explore new ideas, and pursue their personal aspirations.

In turn, this creates a “ripple effect” of violence in which one act, no matter how small or seemingly harmless, produces huge waves that are detrimental to the everyday growth of each student. If a person’s *sense of self*, freedom, or peace is taken away or disturbed, I believe they have been violated. Violence cannot be measured because it varies according to each person who experiences it. While I have observed the effects of the visual forms of violence amongst my students, I feel the hidden forms of violence are more prevalent. The effects of violence are manifested in various ways that affect the student’s ability to concentrate in class, retain information, focus on homework, and perform well on tests.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE LEARNING

Scientific Theory: How violence affects the brain

“Today it is generally accepted that the memory system is made up of networks of related information, and that activation of one aspect of such a network facilitates the retrieval of associated memories (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Leichtman, *et al.*, 1992 in van der Kolk, *et al.*, 1996).” Therefore, it seems likely the reverse can occur - trauma or stress can inhibit encoding, storage, and retrieval of new information. In his research on trauma and cognitive science, Bessel A. van der Kolk found that:

In our PET neuroimaging studies during exposure to traumatic reminders we found increased activation in the right hemisphere (thought to be dominant for evaluating the emotional significance of incoming information and regulating the autonomic and hormonal responses to that information). In contrast, Broca's area (in the left inferior frontal cortex) had a simultaneous significant decrease in oxygen utilization (1998).

Writing is an arduous task because it requires skills such as comprehension, language production, memory, and attention. I always wondered why my students could talk for hours about the subtle differences of mangoes from different countries, but when I asked them to write five sentences about any subject, they froze. In order to write, people must allocate a great deal of energy towards their work. With speaking, it is easy for a speaker to “establish common ground” with her audience (Matlin, 2002). However, writing expects that the student be able to convey her feelings in a very structured format. To have a chance at success in this world, the women must learn the written and communicative skills of the “language of power” instead of the “linguistic form” of English that she knows, such as Black American English or a Creole form of English (Delpit, 1995). This means she must write according to the demanding rules of Standard American English. “Writing is a task that requires virtually every cognitive

activity...attention, memory, imagery, background knowledge, metacognition, reading, problem solving, creativity, reasoning, and decision making (Kellogg, 1996 in Matlin, 2002).” I suppose this is why my students feel so overwhelmed by the essay portion of the GED test. With so many cognitive tasks happening collectively, there is so much room for error while writing. In addition, students with learning difficulties may have trouble with perceptual-motor skills, which are “tasks that combine visual or auditory skills with writing (Matson, 1988).” As trauma affects attention, memory, and comprehension, it has also been proven to affect language production:

[D]uring activation of a traumatic memory, the brain is ‘having’ its experience: the person may feel, see, or hear the sensory elements of the traumatic experience, but he or she may be physiologically impaired from being able to translate this experience into communicable language. When they are ‘having’ their traumatic recall, victims may suffer from ‘speechless terror’ in which they may be literally ‘out of touch with their feelings’ (van der Kolk, *et al.*, 1998).

In a lecture entitled, “The Effects of Trauma on Learning,” van der Kolk added that this interference of the frontal lobe must be removed in order for learning to occur again. He suggested that teachers do activities that shift the activity from the limbic system to another part of the brain (2002). He emphasized that in order for students to encode new information, teachers must discover and experiment with methods that “calm them down.” This “calm” atmosphere will allow for optimal retention of information and productive learning.

Non-Western and First Nations’ Beliefs: Understanding The “Whole Person”

From the First Nations (native) peoples of Canada, Jenny Horsman learned the teachings of the medicine wheel. She applied them to her own theory of education. Horsman recommends that the teacher be aware of the “whole person, which needs to be present for learning” (2000). I believe the model of a person, as a “whole,” is a philosophy that should be considered by all teachers. It avoids separation of emotions from actions or decisions. It is a theory that has existed in native cultures and Eastern society for centuries.

Western society has *separated* the idea of a person into segments (Shieh, 2002). If one is experiencing physical ailments, then one consults a medical doctor. If one encounters troubles of the mind or emotions, then one confers with a psychologist or psychiatrist. When the spirit is damaged, one might seek religion for spiritual guidance of the soul. Many western philosophers have reinforced this idea by claiming that the “realm of truth” is found by freeing the mind from emotions. Socrates defended this notion, as the ancient Greek view promoted that the mind was the “rational part of the soul (Brook & Stainton, 2002).”

Rene Descartes acknowledged that the mind and body are separate entities. In his *Meditations*, Descartes wondered, “Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without these (1641)?” Emotions and feelings have an impact on the mind, however, these, according to Descartes, are due to the desires of the body. Like his philosophical predecessors, Descartes wished to be solely a “thinking” being because emotions and feelings obscure evaluative thinking. Consider his famous quotation, “I think, therefore, I am.” In Descartes’ opinion, the fact that he *thought* was the basis that he existed as a person. Does he suggest, then, that he is not a feeling being? According to the quote, it becomes apparent that he does. Several non-western traditions would oppose Descartes philosophy because they emphasize that a person should not be divided into parts. Webster defines holistic as “relating to or concerned with integrated wholes or complete systems rather than with the analysis or treatment of separate parts (2004).”

I was so drawn to Horsman’s application of the theory of the “whole person,” I wanted to further explore the philosophy behind it. The First Nations’ medicine wheel explains the “four realms of human existence” (mind, body, spirit, and emotions) (See Appendix I). Different tribes interpret the medicine wheel in various ways. For the Plains Indians, the *body* is located in

the north of the medicine wheel. The animal that represents the north is the deer, which symbolizes kindness and gentleness. The color of the north is white. The *mind* is found in the east. The eagle of the east represents new beginning. The color of the east is yellow. *Spirit* is positioned in the south. The buffalo, which signify abundance, are the animals of the south. The color of the south is black. *Emotions* are arranged in the west. The bear is the symbol of the west because of its propensity towards introspection. Red is the color of the west. In order for the “whole person” to function, these four elements must be balanced (Thunderbird, not dated).

This idea of the “whole person” as consisting of the mind, body, spirit, and emotions does not solely exist throughout First Nations cultures. “In Chinese philosophy, while each of these components of a person is recognized, a person is never reduced down simply to one of those parts (Shieh, 2002).” The four components of the person in Chinese philosophy are known as mind, body, spirit, and *qi*. *Qi* (“chi”) is similar to *prana* in Indian medicine, *huna* in Hawaiian medicine, and *ki* in other Asian medicines. It is the life force that sustains human beings. It is provided “from the food we eat, the air we breathe, and from our environment (Shieh, 2002).” All of these elements of the person are connected.

Separation of the “Whole Person” in School

In school, teachers told me to always consider the facts, and only the facts, when writing essays for science, social studies, and even literature. In retrospect, I realize how mechanical and unrealistic it is for teachers to ask students to separate emotions from the evaluation process. “By ignoring the influences of feelings on thought and action, such programs promote a view of school as a factory, whose purpose is to install knowledge in students’ minds (Weissglass, 1990).” I recall classmates in my *Group Dynamics* class last year struggling with the final paper, which was a reflection paper on our experience and impact of the class on our lives. For them,

the dilemma of writing this paper was the new concept of writing feelings, expressing emotions, and doing an introspective evaluation. I remember in college being faced with a new challenge of writing about my feelings and using them to evaluate concepts and theories.

Why is it important for teachers to recognize each learner as a “whole person” or “whole individual”? “Dispositions can be rooted in habits, policies, motivations, desires, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, understandings, values, or other factors (Tishman, 1995).” Tishman suggests that it is important to recognize our ways of thinking. To acknowledge one's own “thinking disposition” is to admit the spirit does, in fact, play an important role in shaping the mind. It is a natural occurrence, since all four aspects of the whole person are interconnected. In Gallo's article, “Educating for Empathy, Reason, and Imagination,” she adds that, “education bears a responsibility for the development of the whole individual - values and voice, disposition and capacity - to imagine and to reason well (1994).” I point out that Gallo's definition of “whole person,” although different from the First Nations tradition, does not separate a person's spirit (value) from her body (voice). Neither does she disconnect a person's emotions (dispositions) from her mind (capacity). In other words, she reinforces the critical interconnectedness of the four aspects of the person. During the educational process, if any of these connections are broken, then the student will not be given the tools to develop into a successful thinker. For example, if one holds a specific thinking disposition about a certain topic, but does not believe there is any value to her opinion, then it will be very difficult to give a critical evaluation of that topic. In addition, it will be a challenge for that person to be confident in voicing her opinion. Therefore, it is important for teachers to encourage individual expression of ideas and consideration of where those ideas originated.

Curiosity, wonder and a desire to understand deeply are also fundamental dispositions for successful thinking. Highly important, too, is the capacity for a modestly skeptical and

independent approach to judgment - a capacity whose roots lie in self-esteem and courage, since its exercise requires a self-trusting standing apart, in which one risks the consequences of self-initiated questioning and challenging (Gallo, 1994).”

All four elements of the medicine wheel are mentioned in this statement about the characteristics of a learner who is both critical and creative. “Curiosity,” “wonder,” and “desire” could be characterized as parts of the mind, emotions, and spirit. An “independent approach to judgment” is the function of the mind. It is important to note that Gallo adds that the roots of good judgment “lie in self-esteem and courage,” stemming from the spirit and emotions. With these three aspects of the “whole person,” only then can the body act comfortably and take action to ask questions and offer challenges.

How Violence Affects the “Whole Person”

The idea of the whole person emphasizes that all four aspects of the person need to feel safe. In addition, each aspect of the person can be affected by violence. For example, if the body is harmed by violence, then the person might have a negative self-image of their own physical body. If the spirit is damaged, then the person might experience feelings of worthlessness. When violence injures the emotions, a person might suffer from anxiety or stress. Violence that impairs the mind might cause a lack of confidence in a person’s own educational ability (See Appendix I) (Horsman, 2000).

People of First Nations cultures, as well as those of Buddhist and Hindu religions, are continuously striving towards “wholeness.” Their culture says, “[d]isease occurs when there is imbalance, or blockage, of the body’s energy flow and can be caused by trauma, or disharmony in the physical, emotional, mental or spiritual levels (Herbert, 1996).” So First Nations people often engage in meditative ceremonies to “heal the body and re-balance its electro-magnetic energy (Herbert, 1996).” Mindfulness meditation, in Asian cultures, is a dominant method of

establishing balance between the mind, body, spirit, emotions, and qi. In balancing these elements of the person, the four elements are healed and the person achieves a state of peace. Another means of attaining peace is Qigong. Qigong is a self-healing art that combines movement and meditation. These are only a few examples of how certain cultures approach peace and healing.

As a teacher, I have to be mindful of the whole person. Jenny Horsman offers several possible “hidden impacts of trauma” that may be present among our learners (2000). I will present an example of a student for each of the “hidden impacts” after each explanation.

All or nothing

Many teachers are able to recall a story of a student who would often give up after the first step of a math problem, the opening line of an essay, or relinquish efforts on an entire test because the first question “stumped her.” Horsman explains that “there is no middle-ground” for these women (2000). Prior negative experiences in school have damaged the whole person, specifically her spirit and mind. As a result, she feels worthless and unsure of herself in her ability to learn, retain, and carry out new skills acquired in school. Lourdes, a 47 year-old African American woman has been a learner in our program since 2000. She has started and stopped in the ALP about three times due to health problems, including cancer and depression. She often self-deprecates and says, “I’m no good at math!” or “I’m never gonna get it!”

At the beginning of most math classes, Lourdes is ready to work. She has all of her books, homework, and learning tools ready and waits patiently. One day, I was lecturing about comparing decimals. She diligently took notes and asked questions for clarification. Each student, including Lourdes, did examples on the board. When it came time to work individually, she looked at the first problem, tried it, and seemed to forget the steps of comparing decimals. She threw her pencil down and said, “I can’t do this!” It took some time for the assistant teacher and me to calm her down and even look at the problem (Teacher reflection notes, 2003).

When this school year began, Lourdes seemed anxious and determined to learn and achieve her goal of getting her GED. However, it was apparent that the scars left from the previous life experiences (i.e. school shame or derogatory comments from family or friends) on each aspect of her “whole self” were too thick to allow faith in her ability to achieve.

Lack of Presence

Mary, the woman whose story inspired my participation in the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project, exhibited a gradual retreat from the learning activities and the program. Like Mary, some learners are very attentive and exhibit full participation and engagement in activities at first, but later on begin to withdraw, “space out,” or not even come to class. The concept of “presence” has to be explored as well, when addressing attention capacity for learning. It is known to many teachers that a student may very well be sitting in the classroom, but her attention is not necessarily focused on the lesson. Adult learners who have experienced trauma in some form, need time to develop trust and boundaries in any new environment (Horsman, 2000).

I have experienced women who “test the waters” of the classroom before engaging in any discussion or activity. However, teachers must be cognizant of the fact that these “inattentive behaviors” might only be temporary. There is no “formula” for figuring out whether “lack of presence” is “testing the waters” or a result of violence. One suggestion to determine the cause of a learner’s “spacing out” or sporadic attendance is to gather a detailed account of her past educational history. In addition, teachers can understand a student’s actions by maintaining close communication and regular “check-ins” throughout the school year. In our Adult Learner Program, each student has access not only to her teachers in each individual subject, but she also

can seek guidance from our full-time educational counselor or her academic advisor (a teacher that focuses on her educational progress in the program).

Living in Crisis Mode

Students who are living in “crisis mode” have acquired the skill of surviving in situations that are continuously chaotic. They have learned to reasonably manage the constant crisis, however, since their cognitive capacities are occupied with “management,” their learning is often distracted. Horsman also mentions that a “calm” atmosphere might be equally or more challenging for the student (2000).

I frequently see Jacqueline to visit our educational counselor. She is a busy 27-year old Dominican woman with four children. She is currently fighting for the custody of two of her kids. This chaotic routine usually happens during morning break and lunch. Sometimes she even goes in to see her after school. I realize that it is good Jacqueline feels safe to consult our counselor. However, the staff has begun to worry if an “educational counselor” is not enough to support her in all her needs. In my class, I feel Jacqueline is moderately attentive and participates in discussions and activities. It is important to mention that I only teach her once a week (a special class called Learning Strategies). However, I have heard that, in her basic skills classes, she dissociates and seems distracted during the lessons (Teacher reflection notes, 2003).

Issues with Trust and Boundaries

If someone or something has driven a form of violence upon a woman and taken away her freedom, peace, or sense of self, then it may be very difficult for this woman to trust others. She will often “test” the boundaries of relationships with teachers, other students, and administrators. Arlene, a 33-year old immigrant from Jamaica, took some time getting adjusted to the program. Her actions truly exhibit those of a woman who needed to “test the waters” before fully including herself into the ALP community.

Arlene came to our program in September 2002. On the day of orientation, she arrived in a bright red outfit, red headband, red shoes, gold rings (at least one on each finger), gold necklaces, gold bracelets, and at least 10 earrings in each ear. Every day she wore a matching outfit with several pieces of jewelry. I was impressed to learn that not only was she attending our full-time ALP program, she held two jobs and was taking classes at a

community college as a requirement for a promotion at one of her workplaces. She professed a passion for writing and poetry and seemed enthusiastic to begin classes at the ALP. However, I was surprised to learn that during the school day, she would often claim she was lost during an exercise, could not find the paragraph in reading, did not understand the essay assignment, did not know where her next class was, or could not remember certain teachers' names. Despite managing all of her educational, personal, and workplace activities, she would really push for and demand the individual attention of each staff member in the program. Although she liked poetry and writing, she refused to share her writing. She detested any group activities and sometimes declined to participate in class. As Arlene's academic advisor, I struggled to devise a strategy to help her become a more independent student. I felt the entire year was a struggle. However, one day it seemed she came out of her shell. She would read her essays in writing class, arrive in class on time, and participate in group activities. I do not believe it was any one thing that caused Arlene to change. She did begin to articulate her feelings about being around new groups of people. She said it made her nervous to be in big groups and be surrounded by strangers. By the end of the year, I vividly remember when Arlene stood up in front of the students and staff of the ALP and proudly read her poetry. She finally trusted us and felt comfortable. Even though this is Arlene's second year in our program, I feel it is important to mention that she fluctuates between "comfort" and "uneasiness." Occasionally, she slips back into her "helpless" mode, which requires attention from a staff member. However, I, at least, feel more comfortable bringing this to her attention so we can work together towards creating a safe environment again (Teacher reflection notes, 2003).

Silences/Disclosures

I feel Mary's story exhibits how students can remain silent. Horsman notes that a student might feel shame because of the poverty, physical abuse, racism, oppression, or any form of violence that she has experienced (2000). This can create silences in not only writing assignments, but also in any other subject. This may also be because the violence has caused shame and loss of "sense of self" in the first place. A person who has experienced violence will be tentative in taking any for fear of feeling any more shame.

Based on my education and experience in the WVAE project, I have found that with time and an environment consistently sensitive to the "whole person," my students have been able to establish enough trust and become comfortable with the learning atmosphere. It has then been possible for them to devote sufficient cognitive capacity for learning not only the basic skills

required to obtain their GED diplomas, but also discover more about their individual needs, interests, and aspirations. Knowing these theories of the impact of violence on learning, I have found it necessary to evaluate our curriculum and program design. It is crucial that changes be made to accommodate students and help facilitate their learning.

CHAPTER 3

WORKING ON THE INNER SACRED SPACE

For the Adult Learner Program, a curriculum is not solely comprised of classes and ways of teaching. Rather, a curriculum is our philosophy, which is established in our mission statement:

We, the staff of the Adult Learner Program, commit ourselves to:

- ❖ **Create** a learning environment of mutual respect and acceptance of all
- ❖ **Facilitate** and **nourish** the growth of the students both personal and educational
- ❖ **Encourage** the continuing journey of lifelong learning
- ❖ **Empower** women through education to take ownership of their lives

Through this commitment we espouse a holistic approach to adult education.

This mission statement asserts that in order for each student to learn we have to provide classes that support the women through their education from various standpoints. As we have experienced, it is not surprising that many women who come to our program have been “held down” in some way that has affected their educational journeys. Therefore, it is apparent that they require more supports than just guidance in education.

Creating Inner Sacred space: The Spiral Cycle of Finding the Self

Learners come to our literacy program all at different stages. They are at different levels of self-awareness and self-esteem. Some women come to our program wanting to get their high school diplomas, but they lack a sense of confidence in their abilities to achieve this goal. Some possess a certain degree of trust in their own abilities, but have not yet found a connection with others or a sense of belonging. We all need supports to carry on the work that we do. In a recent synthesis presentation, entitled “My CCT Guidebook: Keeping the Critical and Creative Thinking Momentum Alive,” Mary Frangie, a fellow CCT student, spoke of validation as a primary force driving her to feel confident in her ability to think creatively and critically. She

inspired us to “recall a time when you were validated by someone else.” I remembered my experiences these past few years as a teacher and a student. I would have found it very difficult to persist in this challenging field for the past five years if I did not have the support of the Adult Learner Program team. Likewise, if I did not have the encouragement of friends in and outside of the Critical and Creative Thinking Program, I am not sure my own motivation could carry me through this synthesis.

At our Adult Learner Program, we have found that women need three major supports in order to become persistent learners in the educational process. Women must possess some degree of a *sense of self* because they need this confidence in order to reach their goals. They must also make connections or feel a *sense of place or belonging* with others so they feel they are not alone in this challenging work. These two phases are essential for creating inner *sacred space*. Women also need to create a *sacred space* for themselves so they can feel safe during their educational journey. These three elements do not come in linear order.

Since women possess varying degrees of these essential foundations, we feel that it is a spiral process to acquire a sense of self and place. A spiral is a continuous curve that has a fixed center point. The fixed center is the optimal place where we are constantly striving to be. At the fixed center we have a firm confidence in ourselves (*sense of self*) in our ability to take on anything. We also are certain of the supports that provide a *sense of place* to motivate us throughout the task. Also at the center is a *sacred space* that we have designated for ourselves to do our tasks. It is important to note that not everyone has the same fixed center. This fixed center also changes for each person during various stages in her life. For example, one may feel she needs to retreat from a community that has offered support in the past because she needs to explore her sense of self at that point in time. At different points in our lives we are drawn away

from the fixed center of the spiral. We lose faith in ourselves because someone has given us negative feedback. A close friend moves away and we lose that intimate connection and support from that person. Those with more power or money take our *sacred space* away. Although these circumstances may cause us to drift from the fixed center of the spiral, we can also move back toward the center as we feel more grounded in our *sense of self*, *sense of place*, and *sacred space*.

Cultivating a Sense of Self

At some point in our lives, we will ask ourselves the questions, “Who am I?” and “What is my purpose here on earth?” When we ask these questions we search to define ourselves and find meaning in our lives. This knowledge and understanding of ourselves is the essential foundation needed to carry us through tasks. In a recent collage activity on goals Patricia, an 18-year old immigrant from the Dominican Republic, defined herself solely by her body:

In learning strategies class, I asked the women to use pictures to show their educational goals. Patricia’s collage had pictures of slender models, pieces of artwork, and an island paradise. She pointed at the pictures of the models and said that they represented the beauty that she has and wants to maintain. She stated that when she receives her GED, she would go on a vacation to the island paradise. She would also buy several pieces of artwork as her “reward” for finishing her high school degree (Teacher reflection notes, 2004).

Patricia, when asked to state her goals or examine her attributes, did not discuss her academic abilities or goals. Rather, she emphasizes her physical features as strengths or areas needed to be improved. She identifies with her body and beauty before her brain. Patricia did not depict any academic goals in her collage. She did verbally state that one of her goals was to “get my GED,” but this was only a secondary goal. Achieving her GED would help her obtain material items like artwork or a vacation to a beautiful island. To help support her throughout her

educational journey, she pointed to the pictures of the models. Her beauty would give her the advantage she needed to succeed in life.

We have observed that when learners do not have a *sense of self* or only define themselves in parts (i.e. not as a *whole person* – body, mind, spirit, and emotions), they lack direction and persistence in an activity or task. They experience varying degrees of feeling lost or displaced.

A *sense of self* requires an understanding of one's own values and beliefs. Confidence in expressing one's own voice is also an important aspect of having a *sense of self*. Knowing one's self includes an awareness of the abilities and limitations that she possesses. Establishing a sense of self will help balance the mind, body, spirit and emotions. At our Adult Learner Program, we are striving towards an environment that helps each woman gain or restore her *sense of self*.

Developing A Sense of Place

In a longitudinal study entitled, "Supporting Persistence in Adult Literacy," John Comings and his colleagues found that very few adults persevere in literacy programs (2003). He emphasizes that adult learners come to literacy programs needing multiple support services. Besides basic supports like shelter, food, transportation, and childcare, Comings also highlights the need for teachers to find classroom techniques that build a community of learners so students can provide support for each other. He also stresses that a literacy program needs to offer a place for learners to express their emotions. These components will help learners prosper through their educational journeys.

This community of learners offers them a *sense of place* or a *sense of belonging*. A *sense of place* is a spiritual or emotional feeling that is evoked by the physical environment or surroundings. A *sense of place* signifies belonging or acceptance within a community. Human

beings naturally seek a *sense of place* because it offers reassurance. For example, friends or family can provide comfort and security. This, in turn, can affect one's feelings of self-worth. We all can probably remember a time when we wanted to gain the acceptance of a person or group of people. If we received this acceptance, then we felt grounded, safe, and worthy to be part of that community or with those particular people. We want to be loved. If rejected, then we experienced low self-esteem, disappointment, and disorientation. This comfort can be the familiarity of a physical environment because we associate the place with the people who were present there. For some, a sense of place could be established in a chair or bed, but it could also be a room, a house, or even a larger and more open space like a field or ocean. Gaining a sense of place often leads to investment in the larger community. If an individual feels part of a community, then she can feel free to contribute her thoughts, dreams, and ideas to the group.

We often find that places of worship, like churches, temples, and synagogues provide a venue for one to find a sense of self. For many, these places symbolize love, generosity, peace, and comfort. People come to these places to find the reassurance that will help them get reoriented or "back on track" when they are disoriented.

A sense of place provides the foundation a learner needs before engaging in self-exploration, development, and contribution to the community. How can we help learners achieve a sense of place? Norms or guidelines should be established at the beginning of each school year to build the foundation of a sense of place. The learners in the classroom should generate these norms so they feel ownership of the guiding principles. Whenever new students join the classroom, these principles should be revisited for review or revision. This year, one of our classes established the following guiding principles:

We would like our classroom environment to be consistently filled with:

❖ **"Essential Silence"**

- ❖ **Women who contribute ideas and thoughts**
- ❖ **Respect for each other's ideas and differences**
- ❖ **Teamwork**
- ❖ **Staying on track**
- ❖ **Readiness (Turn in homework neatly and on time)**
- ❖ **Women who show effort and remain positive**

A sense of place is being in a safe environment where each woman knows that she is connected to the others in the program. She can feel free to bring her voice into the room because she knows that what she says will be heard and respected by others. This sense of place is that safety that each woman requires to grow and learn.

Positive Transformation

How do we know that the women are, in fact, developing a more secure sense of self and establishing a sense of place in our program? The butterfly is our symbol that exemplifies how the women are transformed throughout the year. Like the caterpillar that takes months to undergo metamorphosis before becoming a beautiful butterfly, the women in our program show change over a period of time. The caterpillar also expends a great deal energy while enduring the process of transformation, but with determination and cooperation from Mother Nature's environment, this change is possible. While we may not notice immediate changes or effects, by the end of one semester or school year we witness a positive transformation amongst many of the women.

Last school year, Shawna, a 36 year-old mother of two from Dominica, claimed that she was so shy and nervous when she first came to school. She admitted that she used to sit in the corner for class because she felt safer. She felt so sad at school because she was not used to being in this new environment with new classmates. She said she was so sad she did not think she would even learn anything. This year is the second year she has been in the program. Shawna is often selected as the spokesperson of our ALP when potential funders come to visit the agency. In her speech, she proudly tells people that she is still in the program and is, in fact, learning a great deal. Recently, Shawna was also elected vice president of the student council. This year, she has also made the greatest improvement in writing, reading, and math assessments. Shawna is now known

as the one who is very outspoken and up front about almost anything (Teacher reflection notes, 2004).

Shawna has now emerged as a butterfly and developed into a leader in the program. Because she has dedicated the necessary time, energy, and openness for personal transformation, she has continued her fruitful journey towards the fixed center of her spiral cycle towards finding her *self*.

In *Phenomenal Women*, a publication of writings by the women in the Adult Learner Program, one learner writes (2001):

I really feel this good feeling about the way things are going this time around. I've been in a few different GED classes and none were quite like this. I know I'm going to be just fine with putting myself back together. I have so many goals in 2001 and I'm going to be 30 years old and I want so much not to struggle and hustle. I know life is a struggle but I want to get to a point in my life where I'm comfortable and proud to be me, not someone else. I've always wanted to be someone else instead of me because I was never the most confident person when it came to certain situations. But today I LOVE ME! I LOVE BEING ME!

Why is there a need for transformation?

Upon their reentry to school, the low confidence and seemingly damaged self-esteem of the women in the Adult Learner Program is readily apparent, as I have described in vignettes throughout this paper. "Van Waters found that each woman prisoner in her study had been conspicuously humiliated in her community; before rehabilitation could take place, each had to be assured of her own personal worth (Van Waters, 1995 in Stino & Palmer, 1999)." To feel successful, confident, and worthy, human beings need validation. This point proves especially true for those who have experienced negative criticism along their educational journeys.

At the Predischarge Education Program (PREP) of the Department of Defense Schools, Pacific (DOD), they describe returning students to have "unpleasant memories of past high school experiences, "hostility toward authority," "a feeling of helplessness about how to broaden

career opportunities,” and “a fear of failure (Knowles, 1984).” I cannot ignore the impact of school shame and violence (physical, emotional, and institutional) on the women in our program. These emotions are expressed both verbally and through body language. Countless times I have observed women who seem as if they are daydreaming, spontaneously cry or have an outburst, refuse to participate, or “act out” towards others in class. In the beginning, since I had little experience with teaching, I assumed it was merely a “behavioral problem” or simply the student's personality. However, I have gained more insight over the past four years and have learned that the women’s actions were a result of some sort of “overwhelming fear (vanderKolk, 1996).”

Participatory Education: Working Along the Spiral Cycle of the Self

To accommodate returning students who possess this “overwhelming fear,” the PREP found that a “warm, caring, atmosphere” was necessary to facilitate learning (Knowles, 1984). They also suggest an individualized participatory curriculum, which involves each student in the decision-making about the subject matter and format of instruction. For the past few years, this practice, called andragogy, has been a learning process. Andragogy acknowledges that women come to our program already possessing a great deal of life experience, which is a resource for learning. In addition to this, the women are valuable as whole persons and teachers should respect their readiness to learn and be present in the classroom. In andragogy, each woman holds the power and ability to choose her own path. It verifies that each woman is a worthy human that maintains a mind, body, spirit, and emotions. For example, if the class denotes “stress” as a topic of interest in a science class, then the teacher will acknowledge it as an important direction that the class should go.

It is affirming to know that our participatory style of teaching at the ALP is documented and proven to be effective with adult literacy learners in other settings like the PREP program. Although I teach in a group setting, I do incorporate individualized instruction in my classes. While I provide a framework of basic skills they are required to learn for the GED test, my students participate in a group decision-making process to determine the subject matter through which we cover these skills. Participatory education permits a learning environment that not only contains relevant material, but is also enjoyable and comfortable for our students.

For example, I asked the women in my pre-GED reading class to bring in books they wished to read throughout the year. As they brought in the books, I compiled a list of summaries and handed them out to the women. From the list of summaries, the women chose a book to read. While the book they chose may not be on any prescribed reading list in high schools, I find much value in the fact that the women are excited to read this book. I took on the challenge to develop GED-style questions from the chapters and so the women can work on their comprehension skills.

Although I am pleased with the women's enthusiasm for the book, I am still concerned that the students might be too dependent on me to provide questions of critical thinking that are necessary for reading comprehension. Ultimately, I would like the women to develop their own comprehension questions from the book. However, I have learned that in order to gain a greater *sense of self*, women need to be empowered through their own individual work. I often wonder, "When am I helping, and when am I enabling?" I noticed the PREP program advocated that, "the inquiry method is the most thought-provoking and least threatening way to promote greater depth of thinking or finding alternative ideas (Knowles, 1984)." In agreement with the PREP program's opinion, I also believe that if the students were able to devise their own

comprehension questions about the book, this would demonstrate their grasp of the meaning of the book. More importantly, it would be an exercise of higher-order thinking skills. My hope is that the learners will begin to engage in their own questioning process. Therefore, my next step in my reading class will be to review not only the answers to the questions on the worksheets, but the style of writing the questions themselves. With practice, I predict the women will not only learn mechanics of GED-style questions, but they will connect with the process of inquiry.

I do not want to discount that the women do, in fact, have questions in mind about the books. As andragogy states, the women do come to our program with life experience, questions, and ideas. I believe that my students simply need support in building the confidence in their ability to produce their own questions. This increase in self-assurance will boost the spirit and lead to an even greater sense of independence. All of us, although at different stages as lifelong learners, are continuously traveling towards the fixed center on the spiral of finding the self.

I recognize that not only is andragogy in the classroom new for some teachers, but it is also new for students. I notice that my students are used to rigid learning environments where the teacher is the “voice of authority.” I feel it is important to point out that sometimes students are uncomfortable with the freedom and openness of the participatory classroom, especially those who come from cultures, who severely punish those who disobey authority. As the PREP program stresses *flexibility* as virtue in the adult literacy classroom, I constantly strive to find a balance between sufficient structure and freedom in the curriculum. However, as described above, if the process of inquiry is taken step-by-step, the students will become more comfortable with it. Likewise, the women will hopefully grow more accustomed to a more relaxed style in the participatory classroom.

Overview of Curriculum Structure

Our unique curriculum has three essential classes that provide a foundation for learning: Health, Loves Herself Regardless, and Learning Strategies (See Appendix II). They are our “core curriculum.” The principles of these classes overlap. In accordance with our wholistic approach to adult basic education, we continuously seek ways to include the “whole person” into learning. These classes concentrate on “inner work:” introspection, reflection, and contemplation about *sense of place* and *sense of belonging*. In examining the inner self, the women are able to understand, accept, and love themselves. This is the beginning of transformation because they can acknowledge their strengths and recognize those areas that need work. Transformation of the self is sustained by increasing self-esteem and self-confidence. In building this “sense of self,” women are also better able to understand, accept, and love others. Once they begin to do this, they build connections and support networks with each other. The curricula of these classes establish an atmosphere that is supportive and safe for women. As a result, they will feel more able to grasp the concepts of reading, writing, or math.

Health

The health class concentrates on building healthy attitudes, not just concerning the body, but the whole self. One of the objectives of this class is to raise consciousness about the “whole person”: mind, body, spirit, and emotions. We wish to encourage women to investigate new perceptions and attitudes that reflect a wholistic model of the self (See Appendix III). In a group setting, they learn about healthy attitudes regarding the whole person. To remind them to be healthy in mind, body, spirit, and emotions, the women wear a red ribbon each Wednesday for the health class. Some women choose to wear their ribbons every day.

As a student at our program, each woman is given a full scholarship to the *Healthworks Gym* located at another shelter/multi-service center in Dorchester. We go as a group to the gym twice a month. The women are welcome and encouraged to go at their own time. They are given incentives (self-care products, clothing, or other exercise items) from our program as well as *Healthworks*, to go to the gym as much as possible. At the gym, the women are given individual cardiovascular and weight training programs. They also have extensive training about nutrition and prevention methods for heart disease, breast cancer, osteoporosis, and other conditions, which affect women, especially African Americans. They are also required to do regular reflection and freewriting on their journeys to becoming more fit. These classes are particularly helpful because the teacher, gym consultants, and guest lecturers provide the women with resources regarding their personal health issues. They also encourage women to seek help for themselves.

The women say that they enjoy the health class because it teaches them how to live a healthier lifestyle. They feel empowered because they learn important facts that they can share with their families. Knowing that they can share new knowledge with their families gives them confidence that compels them to continue their educational journeys.

Loves Herself Regardless

The Women's Theological Center (WTC) of Boston originally created the Loves Herself Regardless program specifically for black women to have a "place" to share thoughts, feelings, and emotions. They wanted to build a community of learners that practiced would support, trust, and be accountable to each other. Some of the initial objectives of the program were to discuss topics such as internalized racism, cross-cultural differences and connections, class oppression, and sexuality. In 1996 volunteers first introduced the program to our Adult Learner Program on

an occasional basis, as their time allowed. However, in 1999, the ALP established Loves Herself as a once-a-week class. This class primarily concentrates on providing the women with a place to build self-esteem, self-awareness, and increase self-care. While doing this process work on the “inner” mind, body, spirit, and emotions, the women develop leadership skills. This class is strategically placed during the first period slot on Monday mornings. We know that our learners are coming back to school after weekends that are frequently filled with busy, chaotic, and even traumatic events. We call this the “weekend effect.” Sometimes women arrive having not had any sleep, food, heat, or shelter of their own over the weekend. We cannot expect them to retain information before releasing these tensions from the “weekend effect.” As we know from our WVAE project, we have to “calm the learners down” so they can learn.

In an essay one student wrote, she describes her impression of the Loves Herself Regardless class:

[The] Loves Herself Regardless [class] offers students the opportunity to build their self-esteem, self-awareness, self-care, and leadership skills. The class is a combination of several things. The women involved in this group share with one another their happiness and sadness, and advice with each other. We express our feelings on paper and verbally. We also use a brain dump technique that involves writing what we want to release and any thoughts that may get in the way of our learning. It helps us to stay in the present moment (Student writing, 2004).

Learning Strategies

Learning strategies is a class specifically designed to inform women about metacognition (reflecting about one’s own process of thinking) how it can enhance their educational journeys. Women work towards a deeper understanding and appreciation for how they learn through an exploration of the multiple intelligences. They also discuss the “language of thinking,” and examine how various synonyms of *think* can inspire the mind to go down a different path of thinking (i.e. *imagine* a story vs. *analyze* a story). By observing their thinking dispositions, the

women become aware of how self-confidence and self-worth affect their ability to learn and retain information (Tishman, 1995). One concept, which was new to some women, was thinking about what time of the day they were most alert. After keeping daily logs of their regular routines and their energy levels during the day, they were able to pinpoint the most effective time to plan their studying. Some women admitted that they were not able to do homework during this peak attention time, however others were able to make changes in their lives to dedicate this time towards studying. Since women tend not to put their needs before others' wants, this is a foundational step towards self-care, self-advocacy, and self-love. This class provides a forum for women to discuss how they learn and think. In sharing their ways of learning and thinking, they build upon the knowledge that they already possess.

A Sample of Classroom Techniques

There are three specific activities we use in the classroom to help the women gain a greater *sense of place* and *sense of belonging*. They are also helpful because they set the basic math, reading, and writing drills aside for a designated length of time. Especially for the more visual and bodily/kinesthetic learners, these activities definitely lead to a different, and perhaps deeper, form of expression. Freewriting, affirmations, and making collages are wonderful tools because they allow each student to engage in self-exploration and introspection. In doing these activities, learners are often more able to analyze their body, mind, spirit, and emotions through a new perspective. We use these three techniques in all three of the core curriculum classes.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a tool we often use to help the women “calm down” before learning. As we learned in the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project, freewriting is what learners need to do before they can engage in the complex cognitive tasks required of them each day at

school. Freewriting consists of sustained writing for a set amount of time. It entails that the writer not pick up her pen for the entire duration of the exercise. If her mind strays, then she will simply follow it, because eventually she will arrive back at her topic or go to the direction where she perhaps should have been. The unique effect of freewriting is that it calms the mind, but it also makes it more attentive to one's own voice. She becomes in touch with herself, therefore allowing her to understand and make connection with others at the same time.

Furthermore, writing is an uninhibited exploration of the self. Freewriting requires one to be a reflexive thinker, while simultaneously freeing the mind and bringing subconscious thoughts to the surface. As the learner centers her thoughts and reflects on her spirit, the four parts of her "self" are brought to equilibrium, much like if she were to practice mindfulness meditation. Since meditation requires a certain comfort level, then writing is a more accessible activity for learners because they can choose whether or not to share it with the group. The beauty of freewriting is that it is an exercise that does not necessitate proper grammar, punctuation, or spelling. This is especially important for the women in our program given that these aspects of writing are the most challenging and are often the cause of writer's block.

There are two types of freewriting that we primarily use: journal writing and "brain dumps." Although they are two different methods of freewriting, they possess the same intentions - to calm each student down and help her focus on the class. The brain dump is used at the beginning of the Loves Herself and Learning Strategies classes. Each student receives a paper with a picture of a brain. Below the brain it reads, "I [student writes name here], release all that is not a priority in this now moment." On the back of the paper, there is room for the student to write what she needs to "release" in order to learn for the day. By doing this, she acknowledges that her emotions are part of her and that she cannot separate from them.

However, she knows that she will have to channel her energy away from her problems in order to learn.

Each writing class begins with five minutes of freewriting. Prior to freewriting, we have to establish the appropriate atmosphere. We turn on relaxing and peaceful music. We light a candle or the students light candles at their table. I provided each student with a journal to keep all of her freewriting. It is common practice for teachers in the ALP to use inspiration cards to help the women focus prior to starting class. One type of cards we use is *Angel Cards*. Each has a word on it, which contains a value, ideal, or characteristic. For example, there are cards with words like openness, synthesis, love, power, tenacity, vision, creativity, etc. A small bowl with these cards is passed around the room and each learner picks a card. When we use these cards in class, we always remind the students that *Angel Cards* come to a person for a reason. This word is the virtue that the person will “maintain” during that class or even for the rest of the day.

Affirmations

Affirmations are statements that consist of “powerful words” meant “to train the mind (Blyth, 2002).” They are positive sentences that a person repeats over and over to herself. By repeating this sentence several times each day, she will begin to internalize the meaning of the affirmation. Eventually it will become part of her and she will begin to live and breathe what it says. For example, during a leadership conference, one student spoke of her experience with affirmations:

Bonnie spoke so proudly and freely to the audience today about her fondness for affirmations. She is a 48-year old African American mother of three. She easily becomes anxious and frustrated in class, especially when she cannot find her homework or understand a concept. She is quick to give up and project her anger onto others. Moreover, she often cannot tolerate criticism. She explained to the workshop participants that the goal of this affirmation activity was to ‘love yourself.’ Furthermore, she made it clear that if the affirmation is said with confidence, then it will come true. She shared her two favorite affirmations with the audience and asked them to memorize them: 1) ‘If you

don't take care of yourself, then you can't take care of anyone else.' 2) 'I accept myself just as I am.' She even quizzed the participants and gave prizes (lottery tickets which she bought herself) to those who could repeat the affirmations (Teacher reflection notes, 2004)

Bonnie has truly begun the process of transformation. In teachers' meetings we still speak of her as "rough around the edges" and we sometimes find her "difficult to get her to calm down," especially when criticized. However, we observe that she "shows up" to the *Loves Herself* class, participates in other classes, and makes a constant effort towards the homework. Bonnie's actions prove that she is trying to regain control in a very positive way. She is now cognizant of her struggle with anger management and has made a *conscious decision* to make a change. As I explained before with the image of the butterfly's metamorphosis, this transformation will be ongoing for quite some time because her self-worth seems to have been damaged so badly. We learn from her affinity for affirmations that perhaps there were many times in her life when she was not affirmed. She was not validated by others and told that she is a "worthy person." However, in some way, she is aware of this because she understands that she must "accept herself as she is." She also acknowledges that she must learn to take care of herself first. She cannot give in to other's requests, demands, or desires. Bonnie rarely misses a day of school, and she especially tries her best not to miss the *Loves Herself Regardless* class.

Because of the success in using affirmations in the *Loves Herself Regardless* class, I have asked the students to bring them to the Learning Strategies class. I believe that affirmations are an essential element for setting goals and embarking on the path towards achieving them. They give students extra "brainpower [which shows them that they] have a choice of how [they] want to think and be (Blyth, 2002)."

Making Collages: Not Just “A Nice Art Project”

Of the many skills I take for granted, writing is close to the top of my list. Yes, I sometimes procrastinate, feel frustrated, or get writer’s block when I am required to write papers, but after a few moans, groans, and solitaire games, my writer’s block usually crumbles and I am ready to write. Unfortunately, for the adult literacy learners in my class, writer’s block is often relentless and unyielding. As a writing teacher, I realize that writing stirs much anxiety in the classroom. I have made it a priority of finding new ways to “unblock” my students and make writing less scary for them.

One of the most effective means of demolishing the barriers to writing has been collage. In Deborah Barndt’s article, “Naming, Making, and Connecting – Reclaiming Lost Arts: The Pedagogical Possibilities of Photo-Story Production,” she reminds us that “a visual environment...is part of the ideological landscape that surrounds us and forms us, and within which we work (Barndt, 2001).” Since it is such a familiar environment (for those who are capable of seeing), photographs and drawings are less “threatening.” I have observed my students to not feel as intimidated and anxious while making collages as compared to writing an essay.

Collages serve as an entry point to the process of learning. In my experience as a teacher, they have served as an aid for expressing feelings which learners have had trouble revealing verbally. They have an incredible value as a device for reflection and exploration. For example, one GED essay topic asked the students to discuss the many roles that they play. I invited the women to look through magazines and find pictures that portray their duties and feelings toward the different roles they play for their families, friends, and selves. I remember one woman, in particular, who most often would have trouble putting one sentence on the page. She found a

picture of a woman with arms like elastic bands, which were being pulled in several directions by various people. She wrote that the picture described her feelings exactly, “[l]ike rubber bands pulling to their limits and on the verge of snapping.” This speaks so vividly of how the women often feel. They are used as objects and pushed, pulled, and bent until they feel broken. Not only are their bodies attacked, but their spirits are also put down more and more. The vicious cycle of impairment continues as their emotions are affected and later their minds. The collage not only reactivates the writing process, but it also frees the body, lifts the spirit, liberates the emotions, and unblocks the mind.

Collages are also extremely helpful for goal setting as well. In all of the core curriculum classes, goal setting is an important but challenging task. Horsman states “issues of control, connection and meaning are central to literacy learning as they are integrally connected to the tasks of setting goals, increasingly a central aspect of how literacy programming is being organized (2001).” Although goal setting may prove difficult and need special care, it is an essential element for gaining a deeper *sense of self*. By creating a pictorial representation of a *self* that can achieve goals, the women are able to give meaning to what they are working towards in their educational journeys. They see the goal and then connect with it. After creating a goals collage, we encourage the women to put this collage in a special place where they will see it every.

The profound evidence in the benefits of collage making is in the way that it creates a comforting community. Numerous times I have witnessed the women eager to share their collages with the group. It is almost contagious - when one woman begins to talk about her collage, then many take the initiative to reveal their products, too. They find comfort in shared experiences and welcome those that may be different. Barndt articulates that the “process of

imaging and writing our own diverse histories counters any homogenous representation of community and feeds new ways of connecting (2001).” This notion fits perfectly in our continuing effort of creating a safe space for our learners. It helps establish a trusting environment and allows for the development of a *sense of place*.

After discussing the value of collage making in a workshop for adult basic educators, I received a comment on an evaluation form that stated, “nice art project.” Upon hearing this comment, I was saddened that the participant had not fully understood the worth of this tool. It is not just “a nice art project;” it is an opportunity for learning, a community builder, and creative expression. Collage can be used to explore our understanding of an issue, reflect on and what we have learned about an issue or topic, or express our dreams and feelings. For some people these may seem like simple tasks, but for other learners, especially those who have perpetually been put down, oppressed, and victimized, it is not an effortless undertaking. Barndt summarizes my feelings and experiences in using collages as a “process itself that offers the richest moments for transformative learning, and the greatest possibilities for reclaiming the powers to name, to make, and to connect (2001)” I have actually seen collages aid in the transformation of my students. In a final essay, one student wrote, “In the past I really felt that I could not succeed, but now I know I can...and go beyond what I ever dreamed of doing.”

Summary

Freewriting, affirmations, and collages have several important virtues. They help learners dream and “go beyond” what they thought were their limits. They also utilize the multiple intelligences, which are crucial for reaching all learners in the classroom. Finally, they help to establish a safe and sacred community in which the women can feel comfortable to

explore their *sense of self* and *sense of place*. In the following chapter, I will consider the aspects of a *sacred space* that continue to “bring the whole person to learning.”

CHAPTER 4

CREATING SACRED LEARNING SPACES

What does creating a *sacred space* in the classroom have to do with helping students learn? During a curriculum training that I attended, the facilitator affirmed that the design of the learning space is an important part of the curriculum. At our Adult Learner Program, we realize that we cannot solely focus on the inner space of a person. For example, if our curriculum concentrates on self-esteem classes, but neglects the classroom space, how would this affect our mission to bring the whole person to learning? The Women, Violence, and Adult Education project inspired us to think of ways to “create a safe space” for the learners. If we strive to “bring the whole person to learning” in our curriculum by providing classes like Health, Learning Strategies, and Loves Herself Regardless, then we should also think about ways to create a space that supports the “whole person” – one that feels safe for the body, mind, spirit, and emotions.

Women and the “Right to Take up Space”

In Webster’s Dictionary, one of the definitions of *space* is “sufficient freedom from external pressure to develop or explore one's needs, interests, and individuality (2004).” In her paper, “Moving Forward: Approaches and Activities to Support Women's Learning,” Jenny Horsman quotes Si Transken who says, “I take up space because it is my right to take up space (2000).” Most often women do not feel as if it is their right to take up space. For women, “taking up space” means having power, freedom and opportunity to achieve, succeed, or thrive in this world. Historically, women have been told they do not have the right to own property, pursue the education or career of their choice, or participate in voting or politics. Moreover, they

were *property* of men. Women have been deemed incapable of power, more so (which we define as *ability*), to manage property or even make decisions concerning their own bodies. Even today, women who have to rely on welfare lack the right to choose their own path. We have observed many women start our program and almost immediately leave because they are required to take a job or do “community service.”

In one writing class, a learner claimed she always wanted to write songs. However, her mother always told her that she could not write and that she was only wasting time. From that moment on, she shied away from writing anything. She also professed that not only did her mother not encourage her desire to write, she never received any praise for anything she did. She added that she never received positive acknowledgement for anything or from anyone. She no longer felt the power, ability, right to participate or “take up space” in any writing activity. This occurrence created a long period of shame, silence, and feelings of worthlessness. She no longer felt worthy to make a contribution in this world with her writing.

How can creating a *sacred space* have an effect on learning? If an environment can give comfort and reassurance to a learner, then she can feel grounded in the physical space. Webster’s definition of space resonates with us at the ALP because we use this principle to guide our design of the outer space of the classroom. As explained earlier, there are many reasons why students must feel free from anxiety or stress in order to learn. I believe the physical environment can either create added anxiety or help relieve stress. If an environment is cramped and not cared for, learners will not have the freedom to discover, as Paulo Freire states, their “needs, interests, and individuality.”

In an article entitled, “Sacred Spaces and Safe Places,” Jim Mueller explains that the hayloft in his family’s barn was his secret escape. “I would go there to get away from my

brothers and sisters and be in a quiet place...I discovered here a healing solitude, a place where I could offer my self to my self, a place in which I felt okay to be me.” Mueller also describes that his “brother’s sacred space was his ’64 Mustang [which] provided a place for him to be nurtured (1996).” *Sacred spaces* promote growth, healing, and safety.

At the Adult Learner Program, we feel the women must have a place where they can tend to their own needs. They need to feel that they are worthy to offer themselves to themselves. It is also important that they realize that it is acceptable to take time for self-care. We intend for the space we created to provide a “healing solitude” for our learners so they can come as they are and do something for themselves comfortably. Mueller adds that his *sacred space* would offer a “sense of transport to the divine (1996).” While we do not expect that the classroom space provide the women with a “heavenly” experience, we do want our classroom to be a place where students can freely engage in introspection.

Sacred Learning Environments

In a recent curriculum workshop, one literacy teacher spoke about one of her students who said that the classroom reminded her of home. The teacher was not entirely sure if this was a good or bad thing, so she asked her where home was. The student replied, “Beirut.” As the teacher looked around the room, she realized that she had not really noticed the dilapidated condition of the room. Two important issues arise from this example. First, we all react differently when we are in various spaces. Teachers’ schedules are often so filled with daily tasks that it is easy neglect learning environment. So most of us have been able to “cope” with this somewhat chaotic environment. It might feel like a safe space to us because we plan what others will learn, we know what to expect, and we have support from our colleagues. Second, we know that this unstable environment is temporary. At the end of the day, we go home to our

homes and *sacred spaces*. For women who have or are currently experiencing violence, a disorganized and unkempt classroom might exacerbate the chaos in her personal life. If her home *and* school environment were both chaotic, then coming to school would not be “temporary” disorder as we experience it. Her entire day would be filled with disarray and volatility. So, if a woman is constantly reminded of her war-torn home country, how can she feel safe? How can she learn new concepts, feel free to imagine possibilities, or explore her full potential?

As part of the WVAE project, we were lucky to receive a great deal of money to use for making improvements to our program that would address the needs of women who have experienced violence. We immediately knew we wanted to examine our ALP learning space. In an article written in the *Washington Times*, Ann Geracimos reports that Marcus Horne, a student at Idea Public Charter School in Washington D.C. suggested that the school add a fireplace to improve the learning space in the library’s quiet room:

While some people might see the well-appointed room as a needless and expensive bit of luxury, today's farseeing architects consider it as an example of how good school design can affect the way students learn. Studies show student performance is directly affected by the quality of a building's physical structure, according to the Washington-based Sustainable Building Industries Council and local architect Leon Chatelain, whose firm did the \$1.8 million charter school makeover, finished just a month ago (2004).

Indeed, some people may think a fireplace is a frivolous expense for a school. Why do hotels or homes have fireplaces? Is it not because they want people to gather together and feel welcome and comfortable? Is it such a radical idea that schools put effort and money into making learners feel welcome and comfortable? Perhaps money should be spent on more books, learning tools, or new technology. However, if a learner does not feel comfortable or safe to learn, then more supplies to help her learn will not be much help. Giving her a dictionary or

another writing textbook will not necessarily make essay writing any easier if the source of the frustration lies elsewhere.

There are many reasons why a fireplace might be a beneficial addition to a learning environment. A fireplace provides warmth and relief from bitter winter days. I have heard some women in my program complain that their homes do not have sufficient heat. They attest to struggling with homework during these cold days. From my experience, living in an old apartment, the thin walls and deteriorating windows rarely protect me from the biting wind. Some days, doing work proves a great effort because my brain functions are occupied with keeping my blood flowing throughout my body rather than writing or researching. I wonder if having a consistently warm place to study would cause less procrastination and enhance productivity.

In addition, a fireplace also provides extra soft lighting, which can be beneficial for studying. The red, yellow, and orange flames can counteract the harsh and overpowering white fluorescent lights. This can positively influence students' productivity and learning because it will reduce eyestrain and potential headaches.

The smell of wood burning is enticing and can surely soothe the body so the brain can concentrate on learning. For some, fire also represents hope, strength, and healing. These are all qualities that one needs in order to achieve inner peace to facilitate learning.

Another change is the adoption of brighter colors used inside and outside the buildings. It makes a more interesting environment to be in. It's not busy, but it's not dull either," says Mr. Chatelain, who has 30 years of experience designing schools. "[The concept] goes back to respecting students. They feel better about themselves in such a place. If you want them to be an adult, give them an adult environment (Geracimos, 2004).

As Chatelain affirms, creating a beautiful space for learning does reflect the value and respect a school should have for its learners. At the ALP, we wish to create a "*sacred space*" for

learning because we believe that each woman in our program *is sacred and has every right take up space*. Our understanding of the word “sacred” is analogous to one of Webster’s dictionary definitions meaning “worthy of respect (2004).” Do the spaces of adult literacy programs reflect the value and worth that the administration and staff have for their learners? Many adult literacy programs, usually due to lack of funds, have a “make-do space (Horsman, 2000).” In fact, I am not familiar with any spaces in the Metro Boston area that were specifically created and intended for adult literacy learners. One literacy program I know of used to be a high school. Other literacy programs share space with elementary schools, YMCAs, Boys and Girls clubs, and, like ours, multi-service centers.

The agency, in which our Adult Learner Program resides, was formerly a convent. Our main classroom was the chapel for the sisters who lived there. Like many buildings in Metro Boston, the convent is old. The chapel that is now our classroom was beautiful prior to renovation, but the walls, shelves, and altar collected dust and dirt over the years. The carpet was dark and had not had a thorough cleaning. The curtains were also dusty, dark, and did not allow sunlight to enter the room. The walls were a light mustard color, which may have originally been white. Electrical sockets are few and far between in the classroom, so extension chords were stretched from wall to wall throughout the classroom. The chairs were unstable and many had rips. At the time, we tried our best to make the atmosphere comfortable given our budget. We added halogen lamps, round tables to hold discussions, and brought in plants to add “life” to the atmosphere.

Catering to the Senses in the Classroom

“What can you bring to your setting to create beauty and comfort – to feed the senses, create a ‘special’ place which belongs to the students, help students to feel a sense of worth,

create joy and build hope (Horsman, 2000)?" A good start to designing a learning environment is to think about catering to each of the senses. This will help "bring the whole person to learning" – mind, body, spirit, and emotions. Light and color have been proven to have a powerful effect on our inner feelings. As explained before, softer lighting generally creates a feeling of safety and warmth, whereas the intense lighting of fluorescents can make a person feel exposed and uncomfortable. For those with epilepsy, fluorescent lights even cause seizures. In Brady's research of physical responses to light and color, she writes:

Evidence from studies collected by Dr. John Ott and Jacob Liberman suggest that the eyes are not merely for vision alone, but are actual extensions of the brain and receptors of light for the vital functioning of our body's nervous and endocrine systems. (Brady, website)

Given this evidence, it is apparent that colors influence our emotions and perceptions towards an environment. For example, we chose to paint our classroom a soft orange or peach color. Peach is a color that "lends a cheerful mood to a room" and "flatter[s] skin tones and harmonize[s] with many other colors (Simpson, 2004)." A color that "flatters skin tones" and creates "harmony" amongst the other colors is the type of welcoming environment that we wish to create. It complements the diversity of skin tones in our classroom, as well as our mission to create a sense of place and harmony within our program.

Another way to add color in the classroom is to bring in plants and flowers. Not only are plants visually stimulating, but they are also helpful in creating an environment full of life and growth. Plants are essential for life on earth because they help us breathe. People retreat to gardens for rejuvenation, rebalance, and meditation. Many escape to these natural sanctuaries because of stress or anxiety. The plants help maintain our physical health and can positively affect our mental health as well. They bring the beauty of nature into the classroom. If we add plants to our classrooms, then there will be a free flow of oxygen in our *sacred space*. Oxygen

stimulates our body's functions and will support our learning process. We want our classroom to be a sanctuary for the women.

Aromatherapy uses natural oils to stimulate physical and emotional well-being. They restore the balance of the mind, body, spirit, and emotions. They are used to heal the whole person from dis-"ease" and imbalance. Pleasing scents can surely soothe the body so the brain can concentrate on learning. We always try to use subtle fragrances from incense or candles to fill our classroom. Specific aromas are also used for healing and to stir memory. These certainly can be helpful for our students, but most of all, we use scents to calm our students so they can learn.

There is always a full pot of coffee or tea available in the kitchen. We also try to keep basic snacks stocked in the kitchen. During the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project, we brought breakfast every Monday morning. This complimentary breakfast coincides with the *Loves Herself Regardless* class on Monday mornings. Since this class' primary goal is to encourage the women to attend to the needs of the whole person, it is fortunate that they can nourish their bodies each Monday morning. Since the project has ended, we have to find other means of providing food for the women. Occasionally, Dunkin Donuts will donate pastries, bagels, doughnuts, and other breakfast items to the program. Some of the women have even taken it upon themselves to bring snacks for others in the program.

Edith, a 24-year old single mother of five from Puerto Rico, showed a pattern of being absent on Monday mornings, the day of the *Loves Herself Regardless* class. In our discussions at staff meetings, we concluded that perhaps it was just too difficult for her to be with herself and dedicate time for herself. Foremost, she seemed to resist anything that had to do with loving herself. Although her struggle was exploring her *sense of self*, she found comfort in the community of learners. She would bring a plate of sandwiches for the class at least once a week. I believe this was her way of showing her commitment to the class and her desire to create a *sense of place* (Teacher's reflection notes, 2001).

In many cultures, food plays an important role in gathering people, developing relationships, and maintaining community. Not only does it nourish the body, but it also cultivates a *sense of place* where people feel belonging and love. This is especially important for those who may not be ready to love themselves.

Music is an integral part of our classroom. It is powerful in its healing effects on the whole person. First Nations cultures believe that “sound vibration connects the mind, body, and spirit, and makes the physical body whole (Herbert, 1996).” Knowing this, we have incorporated music into our everyday classroom environment. For some classes where students work individually, meditation music plays softly under the steady flow of the water from a fountain. We always include music when asking the women to do freewriting. We also experiment with a variety of musical styles because we know that music impacts each woman in a different way. For freewriting, we use more mellow, soothing, and calm instrumental music that occasionally contains nature sounds. While students are working in their workbooks or writing an in-class essay, I play Classical (Mozart) or Baroque (Bach) music to help “align” the brain waves and stimulate mental alertness. Sometimes I play the violin in class for special projects, like collages or specific writing assignments, so the women can experience the sound waves in a more intimate manner. When the students are in a “transition time” between classes, we play more upbeat music with drums and words to encourage movement and help them feel revitalized before the next class. It is also important to note that the same kind of music can affect a person in a different manner according to her mood or feelings at that moment. For example, a powerful work, like the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony can be energizing when I am cleaning the house or driving on an open road. However, if I am writing a paper or sitting in traffic, that same piece can cause stress and anxiety.

We continue to use music in our classrooms because the women have said that they enjoy having it. In fact, at times when the day becomes too hectic, I forget to put on relaxing music for freewriting. If I do this, at least one will either ask me to put the music on or she will simply get up and turn it on herself. During one freewriting/art activity when I played the violin, the students were asked to draw a picture or freewrite whatever their emotions were at the time. Many drew pictures of themselves on the beach or in other relaxing situations. Some wrote poetry acknowledging their current obstacles, but also included their desire to overcome them. They were asked to say one word or phrase about the exercise at the conclusion of the class. In different ways, they all said the same thing: they felt relaxed, calm, and peaceful doing the activity. I remember being touched by the way the music helped them achieve a higher degree of introspection. I was apprehensive going into the exercise because I was not sure how the students would react to the classical music I played. They did admit that it was a new experience “to listen to that kind of music”, but they expressed their appreciation for the opportunity.

The Transformation of the Sacred Learning Space

Taking into account this knowledge of catering to the senses, we decided to look at how we could incorporate each detail into a complete transformation of the classroom. When we received the grant from the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project, we knew that we had to “take on the challenge” of transforming the women’s lives. Before we could help facilitate the transformation within the women’s lives, we intuitively knew that this change needed to begin with redesigning the learning environment. Our premise is that a clean, comfortable, and friendly atmosphere will foster learning. We believe that what is on the outside will reflect on the inside and vice versa. If the physical space is beautiful, then it will generate positive emotions and the students will feel worthy of being present in a beautiful place. We

want our students to feel the same qualities that the space represents: beauty, worthiness, abundance, and self-care. This promotes self-worth and self-esteem, which we believe, is a core principle of our program. If our students feel self-worth because we have provided an enriched learning environment and special classes that boost self-esteem, then it will carry on to the other areas like reading, writing, and math. This will provide the foundation to help the women overcome any barrier.

In the spring of 2000, we began transforming our classroom. Prior to working on the physical space, we asked the students to imagine what their ideal classroom would look like. Through a guided “visioning exercise,” the women dreamed of water fountains, plants, comfortable chairs, coat racks, and new paint for the walls of our new learning environment. When summer arrived, a few teachers and students gathered to make the visioning dream come true. We decided our first task was to repaint the walls. We chose a soothing and soft peach tone to add natural brightness to the room. The lighter walls offered a pleasant contrast to the dark brown wood of the altar at the front of the classroom and the doors as well. We polished the wood to restore the original luster that had been covered by years of dust and dirt. We removed the dark maroon curtains from the windows so light could freely flow into the room. Our former director brought in a stained glass picture she made, which we placed in the center of a large window in the main classroom. We added new halogen lights to counteract the harsh fluorescent overhead lights. At the time we did not have the funds to change the carpet, so I rented a rug cleaner from the local drugstore. New plants and flowers were added to give “life” to the room. We took out the old bookcases and cabinets that cluttered the room and sorted through the years of accumulated books and papers. We only kept the essential materials, which allowed for a more spacious and open learning environment.

Pictures were donated by the *Art Connection* to create a gallery in our classroom. Most of the pictures depict women from various cultures. They are truly an artistic representation of the beauty and diversity that exists in the Adult Learner Program.

We do have to remind the women to share the responsibility of taking care of the classroom. During the orientation process for students, we inform them of kitchen cleanup duty where they take turns caring for the kitchen. Again, like the teacher who became used to the classroom that was falling apart, some women are accustomed to working and living in chaotic environments. We reiterate that each woman must give attention and care to her individual learning space in the classroom (her table, chair, bags, etc.), not only to create her own area that is worthy of respect, but also to respect the shared area of the classroom.

Impact of the Transformation

The women have grown to honor and love the space of the classroom. One year, women even took turns bringing in flowers to celebrate their table as a sacred place in the classroom. This was part of a larger activity in the Loves Herself class called “honoring centers.” Each woman would bring in sacred objects of meaning and beauty in their lives.

One learner, Lucy would stop by the flower shop every Monday morning to make her table beautiful. She said that she wanted to keep her table exquisite because another student would always bring in beautiful objects as well. So she brought in a tablecloth she no longer used at home so she could see it every day when she came to school. She would often say how she appreciated seeing that tablecloth every morning. She said it reminded her of when her daughters would bring flowers to her daycare service (Teacher reflection notes, 2004).

Many of the women say that they really cherish the “honoring centers.” They enjoy bringing in objects that have sentimental value.

Arlene really loves the “honoring centers.” She always says its one of her favorite activities. She brings a picture of her grandmother because she is a positive influence on her learning at the ALP. Arlene seems to be aware that she needs something to encourage her throughout the day when learning becomes challenging. She also realizes

that by bringing in this revered picture of her grandmother, she is also honoring herself. She is affirming that she is worthy of positive energy and success. (Teacher reflection notes, 2004)

The women have stated several times that they enjoy this opportunity for personal expression and creativity. Even the quietest students in the group are quick to say that they feel good about their honoring centers. They each bring a part of themselves to the table, which is openly received and respected by the rest of the group. Like Lucy, who wanted to bring in flowers because her table partner would bring beautiful objects too, the learners know that if everyone at the table participates in the “honoring center,” the table will be all the more beautiful. In class one day, Arlene even said that, “if the people in your group don’t cooperate, then your table looks lousy....your table shines when you have collaboration.” They have the opportunity to share their objects and their group’s honoring center during class. This activity is one true example of how space can have an enduring effect on one’s *sense of self* and *sense of place*.

The honoring centers in the classroom are one activity that is easily transferred to each woman’s personal learning space. Most of the women have been able to take this concept of creating a *worthy* space for learning at home. Some, like Lucy, are able to realize that the reason for designing this “place of respect” is so they will learn to respect themselves and think of themselves as “the best.” In planning their learning spaces at home, some women have acquired new furniture, like bookcases, desks, or side tables. They bring candles home and play their own relaxing music as they do their work. Some have even decorated their desks with fresh flowers. They enjoy preparing their own learning environment with symbols that represent worthiness and accomplishment:

Lucy shared her goals collage today in Learning Strategies. She was proud of her goal to become a lawyer. She said that the pictures encouraged her to keep working as hard as possible so she could reach her goal. She even shared that she hung her collage on top of

her sacred learning environment so she could look at it every morning when she does her freewriting (Teacher reflection notes, 2004).

Some women in our class cannot even conceive how to make their personal space special. One woman who lives in a shelter claims she did not know how to create a special place for herself in her room. Since she did not possess her own space, she did not even know that she had a choice to design a special place of her own. So what can those women, who are homeless or simply cannot have a space of their own, do about creating *sacred space*? Some women have struggled with creating *sacred space* because they simply had no idea how to create space within a place that they did not own or one that was constantly filled with other people.

Brenda, a 20 year-old soft-spoken immigrant from Haiti, found a way to create a sacred environment at work. She said that at home, there was always too much noise at all times of the day. However, she realized that at work she could find a quiet space for at least part of her night shift. She knew that it was not a large space, but she recognized it as her own for that small amount of time when she would sit and freewrite or do her homework.

Finding a space of one's own and having the resources to make it beautiful is not always easy. However, we try to help the women understand that space can be developed with imagination and creativity. We also try to reinforce that making an area worthy and beautiful is an ongoing process.

We know this because the transformation of our classroom's sacred environment is ongoing. We are continually adding new elements and taking away those that no longer meet our needs. Since the end of the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project, we have had to find new ways to financially support the beautification of our classroom. We encourage our donors to consider contributions not only to the women in our program, but to the classroom as well. Although we are aware of our limited resources, we always keep the learning space in the forefront of our minds as a place that needs constant care and attention, just like our learners.

Challenges During the Transformation: The Power of *Sacred Space*

There were definite barriers we encountered during this endeavor. As we began our renovation during the summer, other workers in the agency asked us why we were doing this. They watched us curiously, but none offered to help. I wondered if they thought we were wasting time by using our summer vacations to do this work. I questioned if they were curious about how we got the money to purchase the paint, putty, tools, new chairs, lamps, and pictures to transform the learning space. I also speculated whether they even thought we had the right to renovate or alter the space. Some even got angry with us when we had to temporarily move some of the classroom furniture into the hallway. Some of those same people asked us if they could have our furniture. Protecting our space, our right to take up space, and the material possessions that we wished to remain part of our room was a constant battle. This one encounter is reminiscent of the ongoing power struggle within the agency to determine who has the right to occupy and transform the ALP space.

Now, after the transformation has begun, we notice that everyone in the agency wants to use our classrooms for meetings and gatherings. It is an ongoing reformation as we continue to make our *sacred space* beautiful. Another added challenge to this transformation is when the other groups that use the classroom do not care for or participate in the upkeep of the space. This leads to more battles of power between the various departments of the agency because then the issue lies in responsibility. Whose responsibility is it to clean and sustain the beauty of the space? The reason others want to use the space in the first place is because it represents beauty, worthiness, abundance, and care. However, it is sometimes apparent that the others, especially those who did not take part in the transformation process, do not revere the space like it should

be. It would prove a great discussion for the agency as a whole to gather to discuss the meaning of the *sacred space* and what it means everyone to share the responsibility of maintaining it.

CHAPTER 5

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN CREATING INNER AND OUTER SACRED SPACE

This project has inspired me to carry out the mission of transformation on so many levels. As I have mentioned previously in this paper, transformation of the inner and outer *sacred space* is a continuous process. If we want our learners to persist in their journeys towards understanding themselves, then we also need to generate new ideas, teaching methods, and activities for the students to explore their inner sacred space. After thinking about all these requirements for *sacred space* and establishment of a *sense of self and sense of place*, I cannot dismiss the need to identify how other cultures might view these as an aspect of being “fully human.” I also truly believe in the power of inner and outer sacred space and would like to support other programs in transforming their environments. Not only have I observed the transformation of the inner and outer sacred space of our students and program, but I also have experienced a transformation and deeper understanding of my own self.

Searching For Other Ways Of Creating *Sacred Space*

We are becoming a visually nomadic people, hunting and gathering information. For better and for worse, once insurpassable boundaries no longer exist to the same degree. Without traditional boundaries to define our own place, it becomes more difficult to nourish a sense of home and personal space. We must define it, then, in mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical terms.” (Brady, 1996)

Creating *sacred space* can be done on many different levels. In the quote above, Brady affirms that the meaning of space should be establish in the mind, body, spirit, and emotions. Therefore, we must facilitate safe spaces for each part of the whole person. I wonder if “mental space” is enough? Is it impossible to create a beautiful and safe “mental space” if there is no model for a physical safe space on the outside? Creating space in the mind could be assisted by meditation. Producing a *sacred space* within the body could be through exercise, stretching, yoga. If one

wants to generate a *sacred space* within the spirit, she might want to do this through meditation or prayer. Creating space in the emotions through writing can help a learner “calm down” and facilitate the learning process. Since affirmations have clearly been an effective technique for students to explore their emotions, we will continue to incorporate affirmation-writing activities in the classroom.

Conversation and dialogue brings the learners’ voices into the classroom. Because their presence is acknowledged, they begin to feel they are “worthy of being heard.” As a result, the women begin to feel more confident and gain a sense of empowerment. When conversations and dialogues occur, women not only are able to speak their ideas and thoughts, but they can listen to their own voices, allowing them the opportunity to make their own interpretations. In turn, others offer supportive listening and feedback in response to the speaker’s feelings and views. This allows for a broader perspective and collection of views when the women are ready to engage in introspection. When they are encouraged to communicate with each other, this dialogic process creates a greater sense of community (place) among the learners. Conversation and dialogue facilitate positive growth and transformation in the inner and outer *sacred space*.

Although we have used many of these “non-traditional” methods in our core curriculum classes throughout the past five years, I believe there is still a need to explore more ways to use these. I often find myself struggling to find a balance between using innovative techniques in the classroom and teaching basic skills. When the Department of Education puts so much focus on the “end result” and “numbers,” the pressure is on the teachers to quickly and efficiently improve basic skills (e.g. Did the women get their GED or improve their reading, writing, or math skills?). However, it is fruitful to remind other teachers and myself that these unique approaches are crucial for effective transformation of the self. They are the foundation of personal growth.

Only after one begins (or at least desire) to understand herself can she begin to be present in the learning environment.

Exploring Human Beings and Their Need for Space

As stated previously, we feel that each woman in our program deserves a *sacred space* so she can learn, create, imagine, and explore. However, does one really need space to become fully human? In a piece of freewriting Professor Rivera shared with me, she asks, “Are people who live in crowded environments throughout the world – i.e. the poor – less likely to realize their human potential? Are they less than human because they are poor?” After reading this, I asked the question, “Who constructs the idea of space?” I believe those with power in this country value individual space and one’s own material possessions. Power usually designates who can even have space. For example, men determine that women cannot enter a mosque. Money, another form of power, also affects the space that one occupies. The ideal of the “great American dream” in the United States is to work one’s way up from owning nothing to owning more material possessions, including property. For many women on welfare, the government determines how much she can or cannot have. Welfare will declare if she can have a house, food for her children, childcare. Does this mean that if one does not have her own personal space then she is not worthy or is not valued? In a recent conversation I had with Jenny Horsman, she affirmed that U.S. media creates an ideal of what life should look like. Those who cannot live up to this ideal, then they are viewed as not having value. In turn, they feel as if they have no worth or value. However, she also added, “If you have little when everyone has little, too, that doesn’t hold the same meaning (personal conversation).” Later in her freewriting, Professor Rivera added, “What matters most are the supportive, loving, trusting relationships we develop

with people in our lives.” I agree with her because I believe human nature pulls us towards those places and other people who offer a *sense of place*, safety, and emotional support.

Looking back at the spiral cycle of finding the self, I reaffirm that the “fixed center” of the spiral is different for each person. I have observed at our Adult Learner Program, that part of “finding the self” comes through being connected with others. Some of the women do not have spaces of their own, but while they are in shelters, they find comfort and connection with the other women in the program. I noticed, that two students who recently received Section 8 housing and moved into their own homes have left the program. One moved to a home that is far from our program. The other stayed in the neighborhood. I wondered why the other student quit school despite finding housing in the neighborhood. Couldn’t she dedicate her energy and time to learning now that she had a space of her own? I realize she is at a point on the spiral cycle where she probably needs to get accustomed to her newly acquired *sacred space*. Perhaps she also needs time to define her *sense of self* in her new home. So perhaps people who live in situations where everyone has little material possessions are able to realize their human potential. Through hope and the support of community they can help each other explore the possibilities of their potential.

What Does It Mean to be “Fully Human?”

In this paper, I determined that violence is no longer present when a person is able to explore her needs, interests, and desires without being “held down.” In my future research, I would like to further this exploration of what it means to be “fully human.” I want to delve deeper into our spiral cycle of finding the self because this is what we have found to transform women in our program who have experienced violence. In guiding them through steps towards finding a *sense of self*, *sense of place*, and designing a *sacred space*, many women have shown

glimpses of their capacity to overcome or manage barriers and learn. I wonder, however, if this spiral cycle can carry across all cultures. I think about who constructs the idea of space anyway? Different cultures' ideas of *space* and *self* will dictate how their people understand a deeper meaning of themselves.

By engaging in a further conversation with teachers of other cultures, I believe I can begin to comprehend what it is that cultures determine to be factors that promote a greater *sense of self* and *place*. I am interested in traveling to other countries to find other models of wholistic education in adult literacy field. For example, in Canada, the Stardale Literacy Program recognizes that First Nations people need culture-specific tools for learning. They use the medicine wheel as the basis of their curricula because it contains their worldviews, values, and ways of life. They also recognize that many women in their program, like ours, reside in poverty and abusive situations. According to their vision statement, the women need to move “[t]oward empowering their lives, their families, and their communities, thus overcoming systemic barriers (McPhaden, 2000).” Their mission is similar to ours in that they understand the need for women to honor themselves before embarking on their educational journeys. I believe collaboration with this agency and any other wholistic literacy program will lead to a greater understanding of how to support women in literacy.

Encouraging Other Programs to Create a *Sacred Space* for Their Learners

Adult basic education programs are not usually granted money from funders or the Department of Education that is specifically designated for improvement of the learning environment. Because of this, the classrooms in these programs do not usually have the most updated technology, nicest furniture, and cleanest environments. Programs need to propose changes in the funding policies. They need to advocate for money that can be allocated for the

improvement of the classrooms of adult literacy learners. By creating a *sacred space* for their learners, programs can show learners that they are “worthy of respect” and deserve a beautiful, safe, and comfortable environment in which to learn. At the workshops Char Caver and I present at literacy conferences regarding our work with the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project, we often talk about this issue of creating a *sacred space* for the women in our program. We tell other programs about the grant we received from World Education and our decision to dedicate the bulk of the money to redesigning the classrooms. We also share our ongoing and struggles of the maintenance of the space. We reveal the constant challenge with control of the space that we have created for our students. However, our goal is to show that we value the women in our program and we strive to care for the space to the best of our ability. By sharing this idea with other programs, we hope that they will be inspired to find creative ways of improving their learning spaces. We wish that these programs also show learners that they are worthy of the time and effort it takes to prepare a beautiful space.

Recognizing My Own Sense of Self

The Critical and Creative Thinking program has really inspired me to continue the work I have explored in this synthesis project. Understanding and analyzing the inner and outer *sacred spaces* of our learners and our physical environment is process work. Since individuals have different backgrounds, experiences, awareness of sense of self, and learning styles, we need to offer various methods for learners to engage in self-reflection. This process work regularly needs to be revisited and evaluated to best serve the needs of the women. Through this project, I also recognized that I cannot do this work alone. As we learned in the Women, Violence, and Adult Education project, practitioners *should not* try to tackle the work alone. I have enjoyed sharing knowledge and insight of creating inner and outer *sacred space* with my coworkers and

other adult literacy practitioners. We need to analyze the multitude of ways to create *sacred space*. By discussing this work with others, I have been able to “tease out” the theories of how to help women gain a sense of self and place.

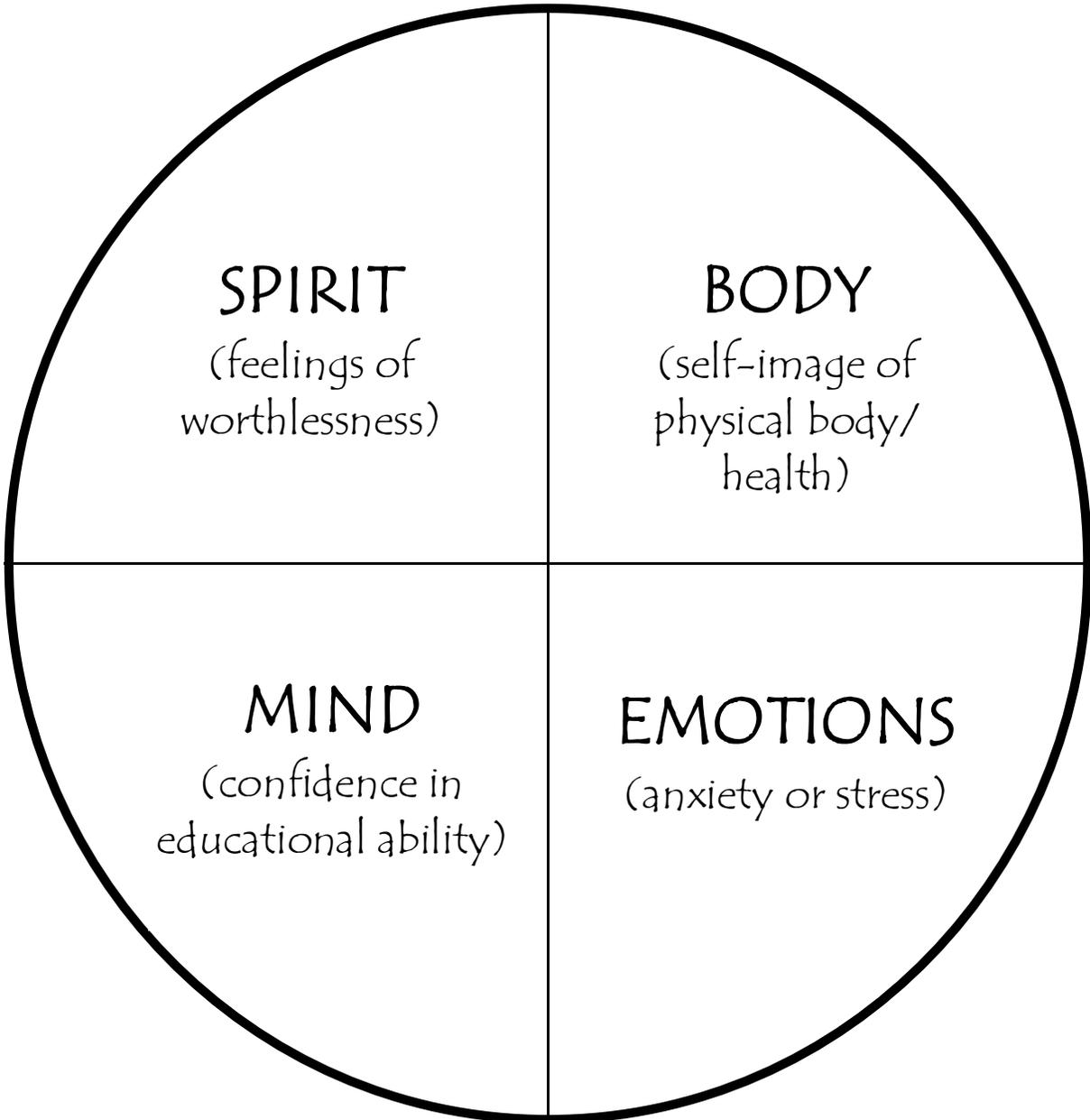
I cannot overlook the effect that this work has had on my own personal growth. In identifying what teaching strategies we use to help women find “meaning” to their lives and create a greater *sense of self* and *place*, I have found that I have gained a deeper awareness of my own self. I also recognize the relationship between the *self* and *belonging to a community*. As we tell the women that a certain level of self-love and self-acceptance must come before the love and acceptance of others, I also realize how this growth needs to continue in my own life.

Along with self-acceptance comes the need to trust in myself enough to take risks and follow dreams that were not originally in my life plan (which had always been heavily influenced by others like my parents). When I did the *Artist’s Way* morning pages, I realized that my thoughts always drifted towards doing more hands-on physical labor type work like carpentry. I believe now that there is a way to combine these two interests of mind to work. There are literacy programs, such as *Youthbuild* and *Job Corps*, which train young adults with a trade while helping them obtain their high school equivalencies. However, I would like to establish a literacy program, specifically for women who want to learn carpentry. Trades often provide greater hours and benefits. For example, a woman who works as a carpenter would be able to set her own hours. She would be able to work during the day, when her children are in school, and return in time to see them come home. Acknowledging where my intuitions and visions lead me have empowered and offered me a greater *sense of self*. Now, more than ever, I am compelled to follow my dreams of learning carpentry and developing my own wholistic literacy/trade program for women.

As I envision this dream of a new literacy program, I am excited to think about what future possibilities are possible. After training these women to be skilled carpenters, perhaps there will be funding for other literacy programs to renovate and transform their own sacred learning environments. Then the women can demonstrate to others how transformation of the outer *sacred space* can reflect the metamorphosis of an individual's *sense of self*.

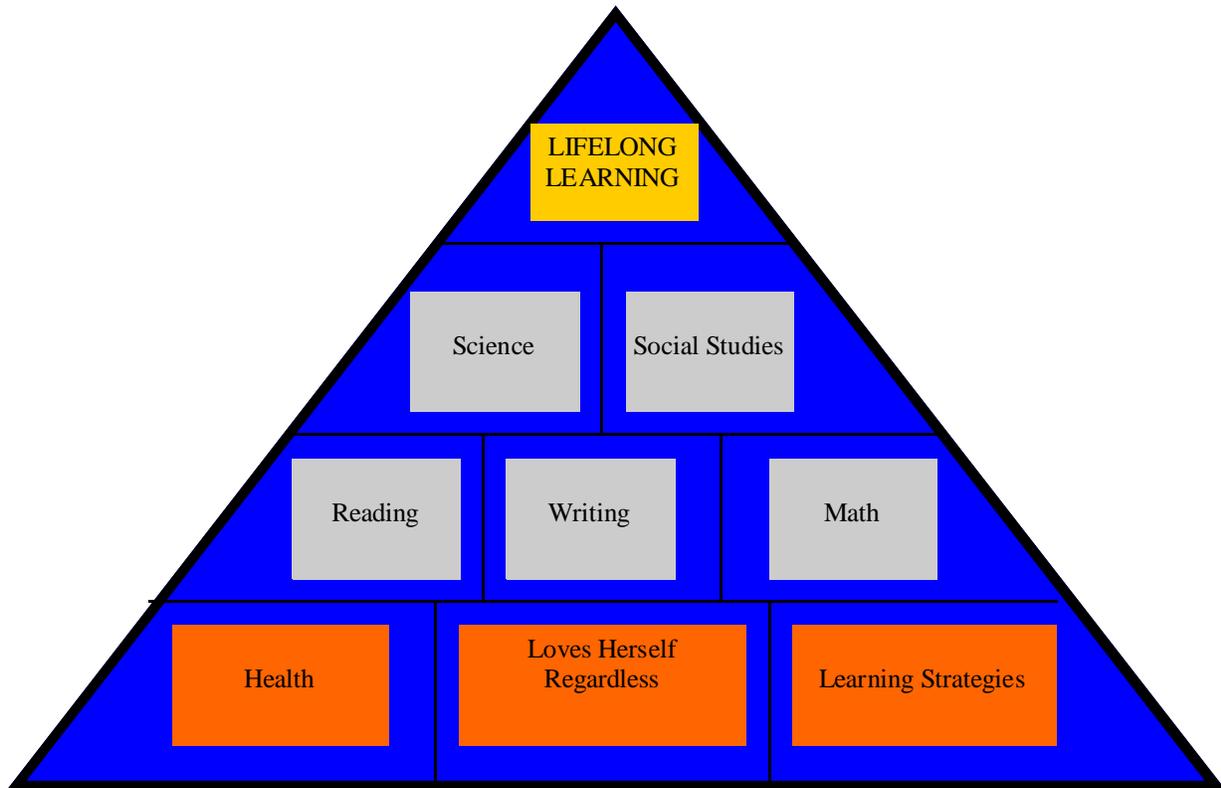
APPENDIX I

MEDICINE WHEEL



First Nations Medicine Wheel
*depicted by A. Yangco based on model from Jenny Horsman
Last modified: April 1, 2004

APPENDIX II: Curriculum Pyramid



APPENDIX III: Sample Lesson Plans

Health Unit 1, Lesson 1: Bringing the Whole Person to Learning

Written by: Anna Yangco and Char Caver

Rationale for this unit:

- ❑ We believe that self-esteem is the foundation for lifelong learning and transformation. Our working definition of self-esteem is the amount of pride we have in ourselves. It has been our experience that without unconditional positive self-regard and understanding of the value of the “whole person,” the learner is less likely to persist with their educational endeavors.

Objectives/Goals:

- ❑ Raise consciousness about the “whole person”: mind, body, spirit, and emotions.
- ❑ To encourage women to investigate new perceptions and attitudes that reflects a wholistic model of the self.

Materials:

- ❑ Journals for freewriting
- ❑ Writing prompt cards (body, mind, spirit, and emotions)
- ❑ Music (relaxing CDs for freewriting)
- ❑ Large circle divided into four equal quadrants
- ❑ First Nations medicine wheel
- ❑ Self-care bags or candles

I. Warm-up: Freewriting

- ❑ To calm them down so they can free their minds to learn.
 - ❑ To focus the students on the topic.
1. Provide learners with writing prompt cards:
 - a. **Body**
 - b. **Mind**
 - c. **Spirit**
 - d. **Emotions**
 2. Each woman will pick a card and write for five minute on the aspect of the person they chose.

II. Group Activity: Element Groups

- ❑ To encourage movement.
- ❑ To allow for group work.
- ❑ To practice oral communication.
- ❑ To use group decision-making.

1. Women will get in groups according to the part of the person they wrote about. Each group will:
 - a. Share freewriting with each other.
 - b. Collectively define that part of the whole person.
 - c. Based on their definition, select an object from the *object table* that symbolizes that element of the whole person.
 - d. Write team definition on a *quadrant* of the whole person (medicine wheel).
2. Teams will present their element to the entire class:
 - a. Post definition on *quadrant* on the board. Teams will “build” the whole person.
 - b. To help visual and bodily kinesthetic learners understand that element of the whole person, the group will also present the object they chose to represent their element.

III. Follow-up: Building upon students’ knowledge

1. We will provide the students with “working definitions” of body, mind, spirit, and emotions.
2. **We will also give the students the First Nation’s Medicine Wheel.**

IV. Checking Understanding/Assessment

- ❑ To revisit objectives and make sure we have met them.
 - ❑ To make sure women understand concepts before moving to the next lesson.
1. On a blank medicine wheel, women will write down one “new learning” that they have gained about each of the following: mind, body, spirit, and emotions.
 2. We will collect these medicine wheels and return and revisit in **lesson 2**.

V. Closing Activity

- ❑ To bring closure to the day.
 - ❑ To prepare for homework assignment.
1. We will give each woman a candle or *self-care bag* (with soap, lotion, shampoo, etc.) to take home.
 2. On a card, each woman will write one way she will use this “gift” to take care of her body, mind, spirit, and emotions.
 3. Each woman will share this with the class.

VI. Homework

- ❑ In their journals, the women will write about how they experienced “taking care of their whole selves.” They can write using the gifts from class or about other experiences as well.

Department of Education Curriculum Frameworks used:

Habits of Mind:

- ❑ Self-Awareness
- ❑ Confidence
- ❑ Respect

Strands and Standards:

- ❑ Perception and Attitude
 - From the activities in this lesson, students will discuss a wholistic model of the self.
 - Through this model, the women will reflect on the four parts of the self that need to be balanced in order to maintain well-being.

Health Unit 1, Lesson 2: An Extension of *Bringing the Whole Person to Learning*

Objectives/Goals:

- ❑ To continue to help build confidence and understanding of the “whole person” concept.
- ❑ To gain acceptance and greater respect for the mind, body, spirit, and emotions.

Materials:

- ❑ Compiled list of “new learnings” from lesson 1
- ❑ Music
- ❑ First Nations’ medicine wheel
- ❑ *Lifestyle Assessment*
- ❑ “What do you want to change?” Checklist

I. Warm-up: *Creative activity for review*

- ❑ This is one way to review and assess the understanding of the “whole person” concept.
 - ❑ To use creative means to demonstrate understanding (for bodily/kinesthetic and visual learners)
1. Class will review compiled list of “new learnings” from lesson 1 as a prompt for creative activity.

2. With clay or drawing paper and markers, women will create an image or symbol of their understanding of the mind, body, spirit, or emotions.
3. Women will share their representations with the whole group.

II. Individual Activity: Lifestyle Balance Self-Assessment

- To engage in a reflection on “practices that contribute to or detract from a state of well-being.”
1. Each woman will complete a “Lifestyle Assessment.”
 2. Each learner will take each factor of the self-assessment and examine how to balance the mind, body, spirit, and emotions in that area. For each check mark (shows where there is imbalance in that area) the women have to determine where that factor might fit on the “whole person” model.

III. Follow-up Group Activity: Building upon students’ knowledge

- To create connections among the group.
 - To encourage group work.
1. Each learner will share with small group where she put each factor on the “whole person” model.

V. Checking Understanding/Assessment & Closing Activity

- To bring closure to the day.
 - To prepare for homework assignment.
1. Take five minutes to freewrite and reflect on the whole person model. How has your thinking changed?
 2. Then the women will share or talk about what they wrote.

VI. Homework

1. Use journal to keep an account of your lifestyle for the next week.
2. Set up two sections: How I spent my time; What I Eat and Drink
3. For the next 7 days, eat, drink, and act as usual. Don’t try to eat healthier or exercise. Your goal is to find out how you live now.
4. Jot down the following:
 - a. How you spend your time
 - b. What you eat and drink
 - c. When you have a cigarette or drink, if you smoke or drink
 - d. Most importantly, how you feel (at these times) and what is motivating your actions
 - e. Are you or just bored?
 - f. Stressed out?
 - g. Having fun with friends?

- h. Be as specific as you like, but it is especially important to keep track of everything you eat and drink.

Department of Education Curriculum Frameworks used:

Habits of Mind:

- ❑ Self-Awareness
- ❑ Confidence
- ❑ Respect

Strands and Standards:

- ❑ Perception and Attitude
 - From the activities in this lesson, students will discuss a wholistic model of the self.
 - Through this model, the women will reflect on the four parts of the self that need to be balanced in order to maintain well-being.
- ❑ Behavior and Change
 - Since the women are assessing their lifestyle, they are examining how their behaviors affect their health.

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