





*Creating Environments
to
Support Learning
for All*

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Introduction

As co-facilitators in the VALTA Project, Judy, Mary and I share a belief about addressing the impacts of violence on learning through acknowledging the presence of violence and through using creative approaches to support holistic learning. We also believe that no education setting or practice can disregard the presence of those who have experienced violence and that education and training at all levels must recognize and address the impacts of violence on learning. We have come to see that addressing violence and learning creates programming that is effective and interesting for all participants.

We had less clarity about what applying these beliefs would look like in the design of the VALTA course and workshops¹¹ but had many insights from previous research and practice, including my research studies on violence and learning (Horsman, 1999); projects which put the learning from that research into practice in adult education programs, especially the New England project (Morrish, Horsman, and Hofer, 2002); and Mary and Judy's explorations of using art, movement and singing to invite women into learning about themselves (Norton and Murphy, 2001).

As we came to put these insights into action in the VALTA Project we continued to explore the nuanced balance of ingredients that support learning for all. We wanted to model and explore approaches which might be useful in literacy programs so that when VALTA participants considered changes to try in their programs, they would have experienced these approaches themselves. In this chapter, I describe some of these approaches and our reasons for introducing them. In later chapters, you'll read how VALTA participants introduced similar approaches in their *Changing Practices* projects.

¹¹ As described in Chapter One, the VALTA Project included an online course and four two-day workshops. The first workshop introduced the course. The second concluded the course and introduced the research in practice phase of the Project. Research in practice was also a main focus in the last two workshops.

Creating a Safer Environment

Acknowledge Violence without Telling the Detailed Stories

I came into the VALTA Project with a fundamental belief in the value of acknowledging violence—without telling detailed stories of violence—as part of creating a safer learning environment. By acknowledging that many people in educational settings (facilitators as well as students) have experienced violence and that such experiences will affect learning, there can be a possibility of greater presence and more integrated learning. The fear that violence will be spoken of in detail can lead to closing down, absence, terror, or a choice not to participate at all. Recognizing the presence of violence and its impact on learning breaks silences, which are often long held. It also creates the possibility of moving from the slippery and dangerous territory of self-blame, shame and embarrassment about educational failure toward ground from which to begin reflecting about the self, learning from violence, opening up to the possibilities of change, and participating successfully in desired learning.

As discussed in the first chapter, Judy, Mary and I were clear throughout the VALTA Project that it is crucial to keep the goal of supporting learning central at all times, to address issues of violence in ways that make it more possible to focus on successful learning, and to avoid sliding into therapy or into detailing experiences of violence in the classroom. We continued to explore ways to create a balance between telling and not telling about violence, and about what that might look like in the VALTA course and workshops as well as in literacy programs. Our desire was to create a safer learning environment where there was no pressure to hide anything, but where relaxing into learning was possible.

Before the Project started, we encouraged participants to think about counseling or other resources to support them if they needed to speak fully about their own experiences, or about the impact of course material. We normalized the possibility of needing support as nothing to be ashamed of and as something to be considered ahead of time and prepared for. We wanted to give the message that there is no shame in having experienced violence or in finding that the powerful feelings of the experience return, even when one thinks it has been thoroughly addressed. We were influenced by Tanya

Lewis' (1999) theorizing which challenges the idea that we can never "get over" violence and "leave it behind" and instead suggests that we work to "live beside" our past experiences, knowing there is always the possibility that a current experience may easily slip us back inside difficult memories. As facilitators, we wanted to model the idea that it is important to find a place to tell where one can be heard supportively rather than silenced, closed down, or not truly heard because those listening close down and are unable to listen well.

Throughout the course and workshops we tried to create environments and ways to talk about violence without participants experiencing pressure to tell or listen to personal stories. This careful balance was met with enormous appreciation by one participant, in particular, who had experienced violence and knew firsthand about its impacts. Although eager to address the issue of violence and learning, she was extremely anxious at the beginning of the Project, worried she would be expected to talk about her experiences and open up memories from which she wanted to distance herself. In practice, we noticed that during the workshops some participants spoke generally of having experienced violence and that details of their experiences were sometimes shared in exchanges during breaks, when participation in the conversation could be by mutual agreement and those who didn't want to participate could easily avoid joining in.

The challenge to acknowledge violence in a safe way was compounded, given the purpose and focus of the VALTA Project. We wanted to examine violence, what constitutes violence, and how it operates in society and affects learning. Of necessity, we would be speaking, reading, and watching images of violence. To open up content about violence as safely as possible, we selected materials carefully. For example, when showing a video, we chose to play as little as possible of explicitly violent images while still making clear points about the nature of violence. In the first workshop, before we introduced difficult content, a therapist facilitated a session about how to protect ourselves emotionally in the face of violence. We also warned participants about the content and invited them to pay attention to what they needed to do to take care of themselves. The therapist attended portions of the course workshops and was available to participants if they wanted to talk with her. Throughout the Project, when we introduced images and materials that opened pain and the possibility of despair, we also offered creative and life-affirming exercises in an attempt to balance pain with pleasure.

Encourage Self-Care

During the course we encouraged participants not to simply tough it out when something was difficult, but instead to be gentle with themselves by passing whenever any round or activity felt too risky, and taking a break when they needed to. We hoped this might lead to an awareness that when we make ourselves endure we sometimes expect others to put up with things as well. We invited participants to figure out what they needed and tried to foreground our interest, availability and caring as facilitators, to notice and check in with a participant when it felt appropriate, and to encourage participants to talk with us if that would help them determine what they might need to take good care of themselves.

We recognized that participants might often have different and sometimes conflicting needs. Wherever possible, we were ready to explore with participants how to create a supportive setting, allow options and encourage them to make their own choices about what worked for them. We saw the creation of safety as a collaborative process involving participants and ourselves, but with us taking the lead to raise options and present processes. For example, during one workshop a participant caught up on sleep during some of the time designated for working alone. Our encouragement that this was a good use of her time seemed particularly important for her ability to be present during other sessions. As well, it modelled an approach of trusting students to participate in the best way they could to support their own learning, avoiding any judgment of laziness or lack of commitment. We also found that it was extremely valuable to have three of us as facilitators, as we were able to discuss issues, explore our different reactions, consider various approaches and notice different details. It also meant that when one of us led a session, two could observe reactions and check in with a participant if it seemed necessary.

We recognized it is always risky to reveal the self, particularly when focusing on challenging and disturbing material. We brought participants together early in the process with the intention of helping them feel more comfortable with each other online. Many said this initial contact was crucial to how comfortable they felt and to how much they revealed during the course. When participants posted online, we tried to ensure that one of us, as a facilitator, quickly posted a response so participants would not feel that they were unsupported in sending out their words. In particular, when posts were particularly “raw,” we made sure the response was quick and validating. Gradually participants also took on encouraging and offering care for each other, online and in workshops.

Value Everyone

We worked actively to create an environment where everyone felt valued. We discovered it was very important to acknowledge and create room for all the fears of inadequacy that participants might have. Participants revealed doubts about their ability to participate well for a variety of reasons: they had experienced violence or had not; had little experience as literacy coordinators or were in other adult education roles and settings; were younger than others in the group; were only used to formal academic courses or had not taken on studies in a while; were unsure about art, music or other creative expression; or were unfamiliar with yoga, movement or visualization. We wanted to suggest that it was “OK to be whoever you are,” but also wanted to go further than that. We tried to encourage participants to see that the group needed them, with their skills, knowledge and experience, and with their discomfort, unfamiliarity, and doubt. We sought to demonstrate that we valued each group member and their approach to participation through all the stages of the Project. We also encouraged participants to value each other and each others’ ways of participating in the shared experience.

Self-Reflection

As facilitators, we tried to be self-reflective throughout the Project and to invite that stance in participants. We wanted to be clear that we all have our own issues with violence, whether minor or major. We wanted to recognize the impact of all violence and to avoid the idea that less violence doesn’t count or interfere with learning. We wanted it to be acceptable to express strong emotions or feel unable to think clearly—to not be “together” all the time. We wanted all of us in the Project to think about ourselves and our own needs. We valued a stance that said that we are all on our own road, that we may have struggles of different intensities at different times, and that each person’s journey is unique, but that from our own experience and experiences we have observed, we can offer examples to prompt reflection.

As facilitators we were seeking another aspect of balance, namely a recognition that a facilitator does not work through her own issues or look for support from the group, but neither does she present herself as if she has everything worked out. We believe that facilitators can learn from participants in a group, but that facilitators should not use the group to work out their issues or expect to be looked after by the group. Again, we experienced the

value of being co-facilitators who could ask each other to take over if our own issues came up or if we found aspects of our activities particularly challenging. We wanted to model that self-awareness is crucial, but that having it all sorted out is not!

Inviting the Whole Self to Learn

Through my research, I learned that violence affects the whole self and that people who have been through violence often feel fragmented and stuck. Body, spirit, emotions and mind are all affected by violence. Recognizing this, we wanted to explore ways to invite people to bring their whole selves to learning.

Physical violence can cause injuries to the body, but all forms of violence can contribute to many illnesses and create stress which damages the body still further. Violence can lead to a tendency to avoid being present in the body—the site of violation—which can make it harder to notice bodily needs such as good food and self-care. This can lead to more illness, as well as difficulty attending to learning. It can also lead to a tendency to self-harm and addictions.

Violence can damage the spirit, leading a person to feel worthless, hopeless and to develop a belief that nothing can change. Such feelings make it hard to embark on challenging tasks such as education, and hard to persist in the face of discouragement or slow progress. Having experienced violence can contribute to depression and other emotional struggles and sharpen sensitivity to all violence, so that loud voices, anger and tensions in a classroom or other learning settings can become terrifying.

In the aftermath of violence, any stressful experience can lead to fear or even terror and can close the mind down. Experiences of violence can lead some to escape into the mind, leaving behind the messy body, emotion and spirit. Even then, the slide into feeling stupid and unable to concentrate may remain present. For those who have been systematically mistreated and devalued, or for whom school itself has been a site of violation, the possibility of escaping into the mind may have been utterly eroded and belief in the ability to think and learn destroyed.

Each part of the self can either hinder learning or can be enlisted in each person's challenge to discover her own brilliance. Creating learning environments which nurture the whole person, and introductory curriculum and teaching approaches which draw in the whole self, can enormously reduce the power of these impacts to block learning and can greatly enhance learning possibilities.

Education which recognizes the whole person has been advocated not only by those exploring the impact of violence on learning, but also by those who argue that a holistic approach leads to stronger and more diverse learning. Research and practice about learning styles and about multiple intelligences (e.g., Viens and Kallenbach, 2004), have demonstrated the value of recognizing learning through various modes. Holistic approaches to learning are also found in many indigenous and spiritual traditions of education and are an element of popular education traditions.

Create Environments that Nurture the Whole Self

Environments for learning can nurture all parts of the self and invite people to bring their whole selves to learning. The physical environment can provide comfort on many levels. Flexible, comfortable seating makes it possible for people to sit with ease and to shift into different groupings. People can move out of their seats to a floor that is inviting, perhaps with mats or cushions. This shift may make it possible to prevent the pain and discomfort of the body from blocking learning. It can bring a calm and centredness that aids learning and enlists the body and body knowledge in the learning process in a myriad of ways.

Objects such as puzzles, pipe cleaners, plasticine, massage balls or worry beads can all form part of an environment where students have permission to move as they need, where “fiddling” is not just tolerated, but invited. Often, especially in childhood, fiddling or other movement is seen as unacceptable. But for many, fiddling supports concentration, calms emotions, lengthens periods between smoke breaks, and makes it easier to stay more fully present in the body. Frequent refreshments, and the permission to leave the room when needed, all help to foster the presence and comfort needed to pay attention to learning.

A beautiful, calm or energizing environment, created with colour, flowers, pictures and other aesthetic comforts, can feed the spirit, help participants to feel valued and to feel that the time to focus on learning is precious. A space to retreat to with an easy chair; music; supplies to draw, colour or fiddle; a blanket; or even a teddy bear can all calm the emotions and create comfort and pleasure.

Strange as it may seem, it is not all that common to find a learning environment that stimulates curiosity, interest and a relaxed thoughtfulness rather than tension and competitiveness. Such an environment is created most easily through the stance of the

facilitators and fellow learners and includes genuine interest, freedom from judgment, and exercises and approaches that build community and generate support from fellow learners. Such environments recognize that the mind works better when the rest of the self is cared for and that breaks from stretching the mind are needed, too. These environments also acknowledge emotions and include space in which they can be felt and expressed.

During the VALTA workshops, we tried to pay attention to all these elements of the environment. Each workshop was held in a different setting—a retreat centre, a penthouse room with a panoramic view of Edmonton’s river valley, a rustic lodge in the Rocky Mountain foothills, and a light-filled hotel suite. We balanced the lower cost of the retreat centre with the cost of the lodge, arranged a special rate for the penthouse, and were gifted with the use of the suite so that we could experience “abundance” while staying within budget. We brought flowers and afghans and took care to arrange the rooms to appeal to our senses and our comfort.

We encouraged participants to reflect on the effect of their surroundings and to consider how to create a nurturing environment to encourage students and practitioners in their programs to bring the whole self to learning. We also encouraged participants to think about how to introduce these elements into their own environments for online and independent learning during the course.

Use Creative Approaches

Creative approaches such as visual arts, music, creative writing, movement and visualization can support bringing the whole person to learning by drawing on different ways of knowing. For learners in literacy programs who have come to believe their minds do not work well, creative approaches can draw on other strengths and lead to insightful reflection that may have been limited due to mistreatment and deprivation. Creative approaches can also be a fun variation from the usual, and so hold attention and interest or provide a break from challenging mental learning.

Because creative approaches may be unfamiliar and surrounded with messages about who is a “real” singer, artist or writer, they can also be intimidating and challenging. It is important to focus on process, rather than product, and with sensitivity to participants’ fears of being shamed and embarrassed. For those who regularly escape from their body into the mind, an invitation back into the body can also be scary.

Creative activities can also be misunderstood because they are fun and different from expected class activities. They can appear to be only distraction and relaxation, not part of the real work of learning. But they can also generate much excitement. Learners are surprised by the insights gained through creative processes, by their increased creativity as they practice different approaches, their increased sense of connection with others, and the new knowledge they gain as experiences of the process are shared.

During the VALTA workshops, we explored how to integrate creative approaches as important ways of learning and knowing, not simply as a diversion or break. We invited participants to be fully present, to reflect and reveal themselves to others with a wide range of activities. Choosing and decorating a hat to represent the many roles and responsibilities in our lives was a surprising introductory activity that helped us to reflect on ourselves and see each other. We took risks, felt a little silly, and were unsure what purpose the activity might serve. But reflecting back at the end of the course, participants suggested that activities such as these were important in setting a tone, building trust, and revealing the many dimensions of learning that were possible in the course.

In the workshops we used breath work and movement, singing, and visualization to draw us all more fully into the room, into the group and into our learning together. Breath work calmed us and helped us become centred and focused. Movement woke us up, brought us more fully into our bodies and helped us realize our power. Singing helped to link us to each other and to something greater than ourselves. It spoke to or shifted our emotion, fed our spirits, encouraged us to believe in our abilities and sometimes challenged us. Singing and visualization also gave us pleasure and helped us to relax and unwind at the end of a day so that we slept well and returned renewed the next morning. Sound occasionally communicated or indicated our individual moods.

We also encouraged participants to learn and reflect through creating sculpture, pictures and illustrations, and to speak or write about what became visible through that process. We introduced these approaches so that participants could experience the value of them, prepare to try them on their own during the course, and imagine trying them with students. At the same time, we were also integrating them to enhance and broaden the dimensions of learning throughout the project.

Activities during the online component of the course included analytical readings and discussion to increase formal knowledge of

each issue. We also included creative reading and writing, observing and experiencing movement, listening to and producing music, examining and creating visual forms, and observing and reflecting on what each participant saw in their literacy program or learning centre and the interactions there.¹² We encouraged participants to challenge themselves by trying out modes they were less familiar or comfortable with, and then observing their reactions and insights. We included a vast array of exercises, hoping to entice participants to pick and choose, explore and pursue greater depth in a mode or on a theme that seemed fruitful. We hoped to spark, surprise and catch interest in the broad range of possibilities, but discovered that although a broad array was enticing, it was also intimidating. Participants felt that they should have done more. The analytical readings felt especially onerous. Another time we would try to recognize the possibility of those feelings and take care not to overwhelm or contribute to a sense of inadequacy.

In the online course, as in the workshops, different approaches were included not simply for the experience or the variety, but to enhance the depth and dimensions of the exploration of the theme. For example, one of the first themes was examining the complex layers of violence and the ways in which issues of violence are silenced in our society. They disappear from view almost as soon as they are raised and with very little broad change resulting. We explored this theme through visualization, a powerful extract from a novel, other fictional reading about violence, observing and creating violence prevention posters, exploring hiding and revealing through using layering with wax crayons and scraping off layers, listening to songs about violence and exploring sound and silence in a range of ways, as well as through a selection of analytical reading. In each activity, participants were invited to reflect, to document their reflections in any mode they chose, and share thoughts, feelings and new insights with the rest of us online.

In keeping with our aim of self-care, we tried to encourage participants to engage with the course material in whatever ways felt right to them. We invited them to stretch themselves a little, to challenge themselves to try out modes they were less comfortable with, to experiment, explore and to notice their own reactions and set their own pace without making a judgment about better or worse ways to participate.

¹²A description of the course activities is included in Appendix 1 and a sample module is included in Appendix 2.

The Facilitator is a Whole Person, Too

During this chapter I have spoken often of the participants in the VALTA Project. As co-facilitators, Judy, Mary and I also saw ourselves as participants, and participated in the course and workshops as fully as we could. We believe it is extremely important to ask not only participants to bring their whole selves to learning. If we are inviting others to risk and experiment with new approaches, as facilitators we need to take the same risks and be part of the same exploration. We need to take a reflective stance if we are to bring our whole selves to facilitating and to teaching.

The Value of Co-Facilitation

The value of working in a team of co-facilitators was evident as we tried to bring out whole selves to facilitating. Frequently, we were each aware of different nuances and had paid attention to different aspects of the way holistic exercises were working and received. We had different experiences ourselves in exercises and were able to draw on this variety to help us shape the next activities. For example, when Mary introduced a singing round that many participants found hard, Judy and I were able to share how bad it felt to feel that we had “failed.” Mary could see the importance of coming back to the song later, which allowed us all to enjoy the experience of successfully completing the song.

Extending the Invitation to Experience and Create

As described in the first chapter, we set up a VALTA resource room at the Provincial Literacy Conference (PLC). We were fortunate to have been given a spectacular light-filled suite for this purpose, and invitations to drop by were included in the conference program and packages.

The room provided the opportunity to sample the kinds of approaches we had explored to support learning, to visit with Project participants and facilitators, and to check out reading materials and a broad range of other resources. It was also a chance for visitors to nurture body, mind, emotions and spirit. In the room there were healthy snacks, a kettle to make tea, a yoga mat and

bolster and an invitation to feed and relax the body. Crayons and modeling clay provided an opportunity for simple creativity to rest the mind, while a wonderful array of books, resources and people to talk with stimulated and fed the mind. The beautiful and relaxing environment with music, flowers and comfy chairs nurtured spirit and provided a calm and pleasing resting place for those who wanted a break from the intensity of the rest of the conference.

We were delighted with the way the space was used as people shed their jackets, belts and shoes and lay down on the floor to stretch out their backs, poured herbal tea and sipped while they browsed through reading materials, or simply sat quietly to gather themselves before returning to the conference. Many talked to participants and us about their own, their students' or their friends' difficulties with learning. While one or two told us that the issue of violence and learning should not be opened up, or that opening it up wouldn't help, many came to talk about the importance of drawing attention to the issue. We were excited by the response to the availability of this resource room and hope that a similar place will be available in future conferences.

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