





VALTA
Evaluation Report

Barbara Sykes
Ann Goldblatt

Introduction

The VALTA Project was initiated in 2002 as a means of exploring and addressing the impacts of violence on learning for adults in literacy and community learning programs. The Project emerged from a growing awareness among literacy practitioners of the prevalence of violence in the lives of the women participating in their programs and of the profound impacts of this violence on how women learn. By engaging practitioners in a process of learning and action, the Project sought to extend awareness and understanding about the impacts of violence on learning and about how practice could more effectively address these impacts. In addition to this central goal, the Project set out to raise awareness and understanding about the impacts of violence on learning in literacy programs, other organizations and communities across Alberta.

VALTA was framed as a “research in practice” project, the key elements of which were shared learning and discussion through workshops and online connections, participation in an online course, and design and implementation of a *Changing Practices* research project. Through these major Project strategies, participants were engaged in a process of reflective practice that aimed to strengthen their ability to address issues of violence and learning. Although VALTA was a broadly based learning project, there was a particular emphasis on exploring and integrating holistic learning approaches as a means of addressing the impacts of violence.

We, Barbara Sykes and Ann Goldblatt, were contracted to evaluate the VALTA Project. In addition to collecting evaluation data, we took advantage of opportunities to be more personally involved in the Project by being present at and participating in workshops. To the extent that we were able, we sought to experience the Project firsthand and to gain a deeper understanding of what it was like for participants. For us, this involvement offered invaluable learning—about the Project, about the impacts of violence on learning, and about ourselves. We are indebted to the Project participants and coordinators for including us in this process and being so open to sharing their stories with us.

This report reflects the learning that emerged through evaluating of the VALTA Project. We acknowledge that there is bound to be learning for participants that was not captured by evaluation efforts. Moreover, data collection yielded a great wealth of material, not all of which can be included here. It is our hope that we have been able to do justice to the profound learning that emerged from the Project.

We begin the report with a brief description of the evaluation purposes and process. The majority of the report focuses on the learning that emerged from the evaluation beginning with the personal and contextual factors that underlie engagement in the Project and moving on to name Project outcomes (what difference did VALTA make?), elements associated with the outcomes (what made a difference?), issues and concerns, and the experience of participating in VALTA. In the final section, we reflect on the learning from the perspective of its implications for future endeavours. Throughout the report we have used the words of participants to illustrate the learning.¹³

The Evaluation Process

Our Evaluation Approach

The research approach that we used to evaluate VALTA was one of “interpretive inquiry” in which we sought to understand the lived experiences of Project participants. We engaged with the participants in a spirit of mutual learning, hoping that they would gain from sharing their stories as we gained from hearing them. Throughout the Project, we made efforts to seek out diverse perspectives and to be mindful of individual voices as well as being attentive to shared perspectives.

An important element of our evaluation approach is to work collaboratively with Project participants to ensure that evaluation learning is relevant and meaningful to them. In this Project, we worked closely with the Project coordinators to develop evaluation questions and focus the inquiry. Also, in recognition of the knowledge and expertise of participants, we made efforts to seek their input as to the relevance of our evaluation questions and approaches. Once we had collected data on the first phase of the Project, we shared the learning with participants and engaged in dialogue with them to deepen our understanding of the learning.

¹³ Quotes from VALTA Project participants are noted with side bars.

Evaluation

The evaluation was oriented to learning about the process, impacts, and experiences of the VALTA Project. Discussion with the Project coordinators established the following as the primary purposes of evaluation:

- To inform the Project as it unfolded by offering an evaluative perspective to Project development and implementation and by providing timely evaluation learning about what was working and what needed revision.
- To identify the differences the VALTA Project has made for participants and for their programs: personal change, program change, change in communities in which programs are located (What were the actual outcomes of participation in the Project?).
- To identify the key elements of the VALTA Project in facilitating/supporting change in knowledge, understanding and practice (How did the Project contribute to outcomes?).
- To learn about the participants' experiences in the VALTA Project (What was it like to be involved?).

Data Collection and Interpretation

In keeping with the evaluation purposes and our interpretive evaluation approach, we relied on qualitative methods of data collection that would allow for understanding participants' experiences at a deeper level. We hoped to collect data primarily by means of telephone interviews with each participant. With this in mind, we developed open-ended questions and sent them to participants by e-mail, indicating in a cover note that we would be telephoning them to set up a time for an interview. Although we encouraged participants to respond through a telephone interview, we also offered the option of responding in writing by e-mail or post.

Data collection was designed to be congruent with the two main phases of the Project. Thus, we sent the initial set of questions to participants as the first phase was coming to a close. Eight (8) participants responded by means of a telephone interview only, one (1) responded by e-mail, and one (1) sent an e-mail response and

participated in a telephone interview. The second round of data collection took place at the end of the Project when the research project phase had formally ended. However, several participants were still involved in completing their research projects at this time. Of the eight participants who remained engaged in the Project, seven responded to the evaluation questions, six (6) through telephone interviews and one (1) by e-mail.



As noted above, we also attended and participated in Project workshops where we collected data through group conversations, informal individual conversations, and observation. During the second workshop, we shared learning that had emerged from the first set of data and sought to deepen the learning through discussion. In addition to collecting data from Project participants, we interviewed the three Project coordinators as a group.

Evaluation Findings: Summarizing the Learning

Learning about Engagement in the Project

We began our discussions with participants by seeking to understand what it was about the VALTA Project that engaged them or, in other words, what moved them to become involved. Learning about engagement is important in that it sheds light on the experiences of participants and addresses the question of why learning about violence and its effects is relevant to their practice. Moreover, it adds to our understanding of the contexts in which participants practice and in which their learning will be implemented. Through our discussions we learned that:

1. Participants were in a state of “readiness” to engage in a project focusing on the impacts of violence on learning. This state of readiness was marked by:
 - Heightened awareness of violence as a social issue, widespread and pernicious awareness of a connection between violence and learning
 - Wondering, questioning, curiosity about the relationship between violence and learning and about how practice could effectively address this relationship
 - Awareness of a gap in understanding and practice, recognition of something missing
 - Readiness to engage in a learning process but uncertainty about what this would entail.

There are many situations in which learners have come into my office and I've known that there is more to the story than what they are saying. I've had questions about how I could facilitate literacy learning in a way that deals with the issues people are carrying with them, including issues of violence. The Project seemed a perfect opportunity for me to do this.

2. Participants were engaged by the Project because it resonated with their own experiences in working with learners who had experienced violence. For some participants, engagement was reinforced by their personal experiences with violence and the relevance of the project to their own struggles and successes in dealing with violent relationships.

I was motivated to participate because of the experiences of the students I've worked with. They have revealed the most amazing things about violence in their lives. I have seen so many students who did not learn to read well in regular schooling, and many of them told stories of violence in their backgrounds—from bullying at school, to beatings at home, to incest. These stories were not revealed immediately but came up after time and trust had been established. I knew there was a connection between the violence and their learning but I couldn't be clear about it. I knew that I needed information and skills and the VALTA Project seemed like a wonderful opportunity.

I've come to see that almost all our students have some experience with violence. Through the ESL programs I've been doing, I'm aware of the extent of state violence and control that many people have experienced.

Also, there was my own personal experience with violence which was a catalyst, and the work I did to get through it. I thought that if I could do that myself, I could help others to do it.

3. Another factor underlying participation in the Project was its potential for making a significant impact on awareness of violence as a critical social issue and on the capacity of practitioners to address the effects of violence. It afforded an opportunity to **strengthen practice** such that it would be more **safe, holistic, effective and relevant** to peoples' life experiences. Involvement with other practitioners in the pursuit of learning was seen as a means of generating a **collective consciousness** and **decreasing the sense of isolation** that many practitioners feel in their work.

I think it will have a significant impact. It's an amazing project. Literacy workers will feel better equipped to work in practical ways with people in our programs. Hopefully, the legacy will spread beyond this group. We need to raise awareness about these issues.

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Literacy coordinators come from a lot of areas of life and bring different experiences. The Project can offer a way that I can be more effective and also prepare tutors to work differently. The work is quite isolating—we all do our own things. So the Project is important in offering an opportunity for more of us to have a common understanding.

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This is a subject that needs to be discussed and brought to the public light more. Many times, people feel helpless in knowing how to deal with violence and those of us in education roles need to be very aware of issues, public feelings and ways to help those in violent situations.

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Through this Project, we can develop a body of knowledge that can be integrated into literacy practice and other fields.

Learning about Outcomes of VALTA

Although the evaluation had a number of goals, the key focus was on learning about the **outcomes** of the Project; in other words, what difference did the VALTA Project make for the participants and their programs? All of the participants were able to name important outcomes that they attributed to being involved in the VALTA Project. While the outcomes were many and varied, we feel that they are captured by the following major categories.

1. Learning

While learning is a prerequisite for all of the outcomes, it is also a critical outcome in itself. There was consensus among participants that profound learning had emerged from their involvement in the VALTA Project. They talked about the extent to which the Project had been “eye-opening” and how it had deepened their understanding of the impacts of violence on learning. Although there was some awareness of the issues before the Project began, it is evident from the comments of participants that their **knowledge and understanding increased substantially as a result of VALTA**. In particular, there was significant learning about:

Violence and Its Effects on Peoples’ Lives

The stories of participants drew attention to how much they had learned about the nature and extent of violence in peoples’ lives, specifically:

- The pervasiveness of violence and the range of experiences of violence (for example: domestic violence of various kinds, state violence and control).
- The impacts of violence on peoples’ lives and the myriad ways in which it affects learning (for example: fear, loss of confidence).
- Understanding how the experience of violence may be manifested in many different ways (for example: appearing as lack of motivation or hostility).

I didn’t really learn anything new about the prevalence of violence in society, but I had never quite put it all together before. It was kind of difficult to take—the natural tendency to “ignore” painful knowledge. But it was good to face the big picture in that way. Also, I hadn’t really considered at all that violence could impact learning in subtle ways that weren’t obvious. It really opened my eyes.

I have a much greater understanding of the ways in which violence diminishes faith in oneself, belief in ones’ ability to learn, ability to make decisions that affect the self...violence can reduce a person to feeling like an object. And objects don’t think.

For me, there have been learnings about the impacts of violence, how to address them in the program. Violence impacts learning by creating fear, loss of confidence, inability to make decisions, or emotional instability (to name a few results) in the learner—which may look like lack of motivation or poor attitude. So far, I’ve learned that simply

recognizing certain behaviours as possibly caused by violence rather than student indifference or “attitude” is important to the way I deal with the student.

How to Address the Impacts of Violence on Learning

All participants spoke to their **increased knowledge of how to address issues of violence**. In doing so, they named four major areas of learning that they viewed as central to changing practice:

1. The accounts of participants spoke to how much they had learned about how to **create a safe environment for learning**.
2. An important area of learning was about **how to interact more effectively** with people based on a far deeper experience of understanding their lives. This involved recognizing the importance of building caring and respectful relationships with program participants.
3. There is evidence of learning about a wide range of **skills and strategies** that can be used in working more effectively with people who have experienced violence or other issues in their lives.
4. As a result of VALTA, participants were much more attuned to the importance of **bringing the whole self to learning** and were aware of many ways in which this philosophy could be effectively integrated into their practice.

I've learned the value of becoming whole, of “bringing the whole self” to learning.

My learning has included:

- ✓ Respect the feelings and thoughts of others
- ✓ Show people how important it is to take care of themselves
- ✓ Understand how important it is to feel good about oneself before learning can take place
- ✓ Being helpful to victims without destroying yourself mentally—being removed enough to be useful
- ✓ Healing from violence is not a fast process and it will always be with you, even though there are very effective ways of dealing with it.

I've learned various techniques—songs, stretching exercises and others. I've used lots of these weekly in my sessions.

There has been some major learning for me. For instance, we don't need to name violence; what we need is an atmosphere for the learner to name it if they choose.

Doing Research in Practice

Participants invariably viewed the research project component as an important and valuable learning opportunity. For the most part, they felt that they had **increased their capacity to undertake research in practice**. In terms of specific learning, no strong themes emerged that reflected a common experience of learning. Participants' accounts suggest learning in three areas: learning related to the research process in general, learning about the stance of the researcher relative to the subject, and learning about the specifics of doing research such as how to design interview questions.

I learned how to take myself out of it—with my eyes, can I be objective? What can I use to back up what I perceive?

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I learned that I needed to be less narrowly focused in my research. If I hadn't become more aware, I would have been discounting information that I thought didn't suit what I was doing.

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Time is a very important element of research—you need the time to reflect, mull over things.

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I learned more about the importance of having a framework or pattern for what you want to do. Structure is important. For me, part of it was getting over the fact that social research or research in practice is not like 'scientific' research. You've got to be willing to be flexible.

2. Personal Growth

Evaluation findings point to **profound personal awareness and growth** for participants that can be attributed to participation in the VALTA Project. The reflective learning process offered participants new perspectives on their experiences that led to increased self-awareness and understanding. Some participants spoke of the extent to which their involvement had **increased their self-esteem and confidence**. Others emphasized the importance of VALTA in moving them forward on their personal journeys such that they were able to be comfortable outside the boundaries of their established 'comfort zone.'

I've gained so much from the Project in terms of understanding myself and some of the things that have impacted my life and affected my behaviour. Participating in the VALTA Project has really opened a door for me in the sense that, for the first time, I've been able to connect some disparate sections of my life and make some sense of them. VALTA has given me a lot of tools to use in my personal journey. I expect that what I've learned will continue to affect me as it has given me the desire to learn more and a renewed determination to become a more whole person.

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I had to stretch out of my own comfort zone. I learn effectively in standard ways. This has been really different for me. I have more empathy and understanding of what it's like for students to be presented with a learning situation that's different and not necessarily comfortable.

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It's done incredible things for my self-esteem and confidence.

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I'm just plain happier! Not that I was unhappy before, but I'm more relaxed and put more pressure on myself. I say 'no' more easily, ask for what I need more easily and spend less time worrying.

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I've been trying to use a lot of it in my personal life. I've been living the VALTA Project since I began it. It has generated a lot of discussion at home, with my children and their friends. I've tried to encourage this sort of discussion and I think it's had some impact.

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I have found this initiative to be the most rewarding and factual, and the most holistic of any course or program that I have been involved with. I have found that I have brought my whole person into all aspects of this initiative.

3. Increased Capacity to Address the Impacts of Violence on Learning

VALTA set out to strengthen the ability of participants to address the impacts of violence in their practice. The accounts of participants offer evidence of the considerable extent to which this desired outcome was achieved. In many cases, participants have **overcome their own fears** and **discovered strengths and capacities** they didn't know they had. They are more able to hear about violence and to respond in supportive ways without feeling the responsibility of solving others' problems. Perhaps most importantly, VALTA has **inspired a passion among participants for making a difference in the lives of people who have experienced violence.**

In all cases, participants felt that they had more to offer to people in their programs who had experienced violence. They were aware of how their increased knowledge and skills could be implemented to strengthen their practice and felt an increased confidence about applying their learning. Not all of the learning could be implemented during the course of the Project but participants were able to speak to an increased capacity to make changes in their practice and an intent to take action. Beyond an individual capacity to make change, some participants felt that, thanks to VALTA, they had an increased appreciation of their **power to influence change in their field.**

I feel that I have something to offer now. The strategies may seem small but they're important. Just having someone not turn away is important.

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Seeing ourselves as having the power to influence change is hugely important.

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I had been so scared before that someone would disclose violence to me. I found out in this course that it wasn't so scary. Things that were scary are not scary any more. It gives me hope that learners can be supported in such a healing way...that will in turn improve their chance at succeeding at learning.

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When I first came into VALTA I was terrified that I'd have to talk about my own experience. For me to go from that fear to doing a whole workshop on it is huge.

Once the VALTA Project was underway, participants very quickly began to **integrate their learning and insights into their practice.** The changes that they have made in practice have been numerous and diverse, ranging from changing physical environments to working differently within the community. Research in practice projects afforded an important opportunity to implement learning. However, substantial changes were also made prior to these projects as participants applied their learning to many aspects of their work and their personal lives. Space prevents us from illuminating all of the changes that participants have made in their practice but we offer the following glimpses of how learning has been implemented.

- Connecting/interacting with program participants and tutors in new ways: with **increased sensitivity and sharing of control**—being more sensitive to a diversity of experiences and backgrounds.

- Incorporating ways of **bringing the whole self to learning into practice**—singing, relaxation exercises etc.—using holistic learning approaches more spontaneously.
- Developing and collecting **materials/tools for use in learning opportunities**.
- Making **changes in the physical environment** to ensure comfort, safety, sense of belonging.
- Making **changes to processes** such as registration and program evaluation.
- **Sharing learning/influencing others** (passing it on): encouraging people to reflect on their own and others' circumstances and to become more sensitive, modeling different ways of interacting, offering workshops to tutors and others about the impacts of violence on learning and how to address these impacts.

I'm more aware of the physical environment in which our program takes place. I've changed the office space—re-organized and painted, added more artwork and colour. It's a space I feel better in myself because it's more relaxed and comfortable. A student recently said, "I feel so much better in this room." I want the program space to be a place where students feel welcome and comfortable.

The way I talk to students and tutors is different. I'm giving them more control over what they do. I think I'm more understanding of the circumstances of students, more sensitive. My goals were to learn something new and to be better at my job and I feel that I'm there. These things have happened.

I've incorporated many of the ideas I've learned into tutor training and training with paid facilitators—also, to some extent into the volunteer handbook and in one-on-one conversations. It has had an impact on the tutors and facilitators. It helped them to understand more about the impacts of violence. They know that I'm there as a support for them.

I used what I'd learned in VALTA. When I organized my course, I was very conscious about creating a safe environment, making space for varying levels of participation, and offering a wide range of activities (including breathing and visualization).

My research question was: With all this new knowledge, how could I go about changing my practice? I consciously applied my learning in the writing course that we designed and ran.

Impacts on my practice: allowing time to listen so the student can get on with learning, taking care of myself so that I can hear, finding ways to use the student's story to enhance learning if that's what the student needs/wants to focus on, or finding materials/methods that help the student focus on other aspects of learning.

The emphasis on self-care throughout the Project had an impact in that all participants had become **more aware of the importance of self-care**, for themselves and others. However, the extent to which they had been able to incorporate self-care practices into their lives varied considerably. For some, this had been a significant outcome of involvement in the Project. Others came to appreciate the importance of self-care but struggled with trying to make it part of their lives.

It's the first time in my life that I've accepted the idea of taking care of myself as a good idea. I've learned that it's okay to take the time to treat myself well—not run myself into the ground. I'm paying more attention to how I'm sleeping. I've instituted boundaries at work that make me feel much better.

I'm a lot better at self-care. I've had a truckload of stress in these last few months. I could have put a lot of pressure on myself but I decided not to do that and I feel okay saying that.

I'm still really bad about self-care. I do it in the classroom for others but I don't really do it for myself. I've changed in little ways but I haven't really focused on this.

I've found that I've used lots of what I've learned in my own life. I'm more mindful of comfort and when I'm not comfortable and more conscious of what I'm feeling about things. I sense when I need to do something differently. I've incorporated a lot of the strategies into my own life.

4. Broadening the Impact of the Learning

Through **taking their learning into other contexts in their communities**, participants have broadened the impact of the VALTA learning beyond their own practices. In many cases, they have established **mutually supportive connections** with other services in their communities with a focus on addressing the impacts of violence. Learning has also been shared in schools and other settings. Participants have become **change agents in their communities**, generating discussion and action that is having a ripple effect.

I'm really excited about effecting some change in my community now! I can't wait to get started on my project (as soon as I figure out what it will be...) this has been a really positive experience for me personally and I know it has helped and will continue to help me professionally.

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Because of my involvement in the Project, I was motivated to go to the Crisis Centre where there is a women's literacy group and help to plan a women's wellness conference. It was because of the Project that I was willing to talk about this.

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In a short while, it's been spreading. I've been talking to other people about it. Everyone's been doing that. It's having a ripple effect. [Another participant] and I started a writing program for street youth, mostly young mothers. We combined our resources to do this. We couldn't have done it without this Project. Having learned to share with our learners is an amazing asset.

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As a result of discussions among agency people, things have started to happen. It has all been exciting. When I saw people thinking and talking together and saw action taking place, it was very gratifying. People are wanting to come together at the table.

Learning about Key Elements of the VALTA Project

As we engaged in conversations with participants and attended workshops, we were oriented to learning about what it is that makes a difference for participants. In other words, what are the important elements of the VALTA Project that contributed to its effectiveness and to the achievement of outcomes? Asked to reflect on this question, participants were very forthcoming in articulating what they experienced as the most meaningful elements of VALTA for supporting a process of learning and change. In naming these important qualities, they have summed up the 'essence' of the Project:

1. Creation of a Safe and Comfortable Environment within the VALTA Project

Participants emphasized the critical importance of the positive learning environment that was created in the VALTA Project. They

experienced a sense of **safety and comfort** that **allowed for being vulnerable and for taking risks** in terms of what they shared. In this environment, they felt safe to confront their own issues around violence, and to question, explore and reconsider the ways in which they worked with adult learners. The environment was **responsive to the diversity of experiences** of participants and made space for a variety of styles of learning, which meant that people could “come from where they were.” Another element of the learning environment was a **sense of equality** manifested in a shared understanding that all contributions were important and equally valued and that nobody was an expert above others. As one participant put it, there was a “**culture of gentleness**” within the group.

There was the idea that ‘nobody’s an expert here.’ It made it easy to be real about what’s going on for you.

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One of the surprises at the workshop was the emphasis on play. I thought we were wasting a lot of valuable time on play. Then I realized that what the organizers had accomplished by providing a safe place to play and be ourselves was group cohesion. I feel safe revealing thoughts, concerns and ideas online to both participants and instructors. I was blown away when I realized how important this was.

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It struck me that care was taken to encourage people to participate in whatever ways they were comfortable with. As a result, the group really bonded—we came together very quickly.

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We were all treated throughout the process as a resource whose opinions were valued.

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We didn’t have to say anything if we didn’t want to but we were encouraged to.

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There was an acceptance that each participant was at a different place and in a different space. You could come from your own experience. We had different amounts of energy to expend on it. They were responsive to this.

2. Learning through Modeling

The experience of learning through modeling was profound for Project participants who drew attention to the capacity of the Project coordinators to ‘walk the talk’ or ‘practice what they were preaching.’

They modeled what they were teaching in the way that they taught: they mirrored it well.

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Broader concept of learning demonstrated by the facilitators—they could experience it and in turn be able to apply it in their work.

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Mary, Jenny and Judy practiced what they were preaching. I'd read a lot about bringing the whole self to learning but I'd never seen it in action. They showed us what it looked like and now we can internalize those values ourselves.

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There's a huge difference between leading and directing, and while direction was offered, in choice of reading materials and activities, we were led—these three women were examples of what they taught: awesome!

3. Learning by Doing

Another recurrent theme was the power of learning by doing. Participants were not just told or shown how to develop a more holistic way of working; they were deeply involved throughout VALTA in the practice of bringing the whole self to learning. The Project clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of experiential learning.

Learning by doing is very powerful.

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The best part was being actively involved in different holistic learning options. I learned so much more this way than just reading about it.

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We learn by doing: first by taking part in art, music, and movement activities at our workshops, then by being encouraged to continue activities of that type while taking the course.

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The self-care and the holistic approach were really powerful. Here we were creating silly hats, looking after ourselves and having a good time and I wondered, "When are we going to start learning?" Then I realized that we were learning. We weren't just given strategies to use—we were doing it. It's more powerful when you do it yourself.

4. Being Connected with Others and Being Part of a Network

One of the elements that participants found most meaningful in VALTA was the sense of **being connected with others in the project in relationships of mutual trust**. Group cohesion developed very early on through the workshops and this fostered comfort, closeness and a collaborative ethic among participants. They experienced a sense of community that imparted an energy to the work of the Project.

It was really helpful to have that energy (of connection). Just knowing everyone was there was a huge thing.

I felt a sense of community—I asked for and received input from the group.

There was intensity, honesty and bravery in the sharing in the last meeting.

The workshops solidified us as a group and we got to know the facilitators. In online courses, there is often a difference between what is said and what is meant. It was not so in this Project because we knew the people we were communicating with.

The personalities within the group were very different but it worked very well. A lot of connections were made and there was fostering to work with those connections. Within the group there was a lot of comfort and closeness.

They led us to be a very cohesive group with trust in each other. One of the key supports for me was the rapport we shared which began with the first weekend meeting. I admit to finding the activities a wee tad strange...and I thought it was pretty airy-fairy until I realized how close we had become and how much trust there was within the group. That's where I knew I wanted to learn more and be able to create that kind of atmosphere among learners in my program.

5. Experiencing Support from Coordinators and Participants

Support emerged as a critically important component of the Project, making a difference to participants in terms of their ability to deal with the challenges they faced in moving forward with the work. The Project coordinators were a major source of support,

offering **unlimited encouragement, feedback and helpful ideas**. The fact that this support was offered proactively was significant for many participants who indicated that they have difficulty asking for help. The coordinators were “always nearby to answer questions or offer guidance” and they did so in a way that recognized and respected the strengths of participants.

It was also clear that the participants themselves were a key source of support for each other. **They offered encouragement, acted as sounding boards for ideas, and validated the thoughts, feelings and experiences** that were shared. Although none of the participants contacted the counsellor who was involved in the Project, they noted that knowing she was available to them and that they could contact her if they needed support made a difference. The two participants who worked on their research project as a team derived considerable support from the partnership.

Leaders were very supportive, available ... [Judy] was incredible from the get-go. She was amazingly supportive. Her personality was important ... she was someone I could talk to. Having mentors is an important part of how I learn. She would ask, ‘How are you feeling?’, encouraging listening to what your body is telling you, letting you know it’s ok not to be ok and on top of things. That was the greatest support.

I felt comfortable knowing that we had support if we needed to speak to a counsellor or therapist. Also, the other participants support and validate the thoughts and ideas that are shared.

The support we got from the facilitators was a really important element. It allowed for members to become partners in offering support. There was never any hierarchy. They modelled support.

Their faith and respect for our knowledge and experience made a difference. A lot of it was them, how they were with each other and with us.

6. Project Structure

Participants drew attention to the structure of the VALTA Project as contributing to the achievement of outcomes. They mentioned a number of elements of the structure, one of which was the amount of **time allotted for learning and for applying the learning to practice**. Another important element of the structure was the **diversity of learning opportunities**: through workshops, reading,

online discussion and research projects. In particular, having workshops scheduled at key points throughout the Project was extremely valuable in terms of reinforcing learning, strengthening supportive relationships, and seeking input. In the section below entitled “Learning About the Experience of Being Involved in the Project,” we offer more specific details about the major Project strategies: the workshops, the online course and the *Changing Practices* research projects.

Reflecting on Concerns and Issues: What Didn't Work Well

Although the focus of our inquiry was on outcomes and the factors that contributed to outcomes, we also sought to learn about what did not work well for participants in their experiences of VALTA. However, it should be noted that participants' responses were overwhelmingly positive and they had little to say about any problematic elements or issues. The most commonly mentioned issue concerned the **large volume of reading in the online course**. Some participants indicated that they felt badly or uncomfortable about their failure to complete the readings even though they knew that they were not expected to read everything.

Only two other concerns were raised by participants. One related to a perception of deadlines for completion of work as being 'soft' with the result that it was easy to postpone the work. The other issue was that participants received very little pay for the hours that they put into the Project.

Learning about the Experience of Being Involved in the Project

As noted above, we were attuned to learning about the experience of participating in the VALTA Project. To a large extent, the experiences of participants are reflected in their comments in the previous sections. In this section, we turn our attention away from outcomes and project elements to consider what it was like for participants to be involved in the Project.

Not surprisingly, participants talked about beginning the Project with very mixed feelings: excitement on the one hand and apprehension and anxiety on the other. Excitement centred on the mental challenge and the opportunity for learning afforded by the

Project. Doubts about participation in the Project related to feelings of uncertainty and discomfort about the involvement it would entail. Some participants felt anxiety about having to revisit their own experiences of violence, and others worried about how they would be able to deal with confronting the issue of violence so directly. Participants described the initial period of the Project as a time spent sitting with their doubts and their feelings of discomfort, uncertainty and fear. The approach to learning that was used in the workshops was unfamiliar to many participants who expressed concerns about their ability to move beyond their comfort zones.

Once the Project was underway, these doubts and anxieties quickly gave way to excitement as participants experienced new ways of learning in a safe environment. They became willing to take risks and to shift their own boundaries. As the unknown and uncomfortable became known and comfortable, participants experienced the Project as “fun,” “exhilarating,” “affirming,” “special” and “magical.” Part of the exhilaration was feeling that they were being challenged to think differently and, they said, “stretch our brains.”

In the section below, we consider more specifically participants’ experiences as regards the three major Project strategies.

1. Workshops

Participants identified the workshops as the most meaningful and enjoyable experience of the Project. They experienced the workshops as **fun, encouraging, confidence building and hopeful**. Workshops created a sense of group cohesion and being in it together. They offered a safe environment that set the stage for developing **mutually supportive relationships**. Participants emphasized that communication in the online course was greatly strengthened by the relationships that were developed in the initial workshops.

The philosophy they were working with was very important. Bringing the whole self to learning—singing, breathing, creativity—helped people to relax but also to be very focused. And it was fun. Given the topic, it could have been very different. But it was a hopeful, encouraging, motivating experience.

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By participating in the workshop, we learned how much easier it is to learn when we did not feel threatened in any way. For example, nothing we said was ever put down, options were given if we felt

uncomfortable in a situation and, as a result, we formed a very comfortable group. It was much easier to focus on learning in this situation.

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The workshop offered the opportunity to see face-to-face where people were coming from. This was important, especially with the sensitive nature of what we're doing. We were talking about the sort of topics where 'Aha' moments are slow clarity that dawns on you. The biggest thing that happened was awareness—you can see that it makes sense. Things that I've seen through my lifetime and now I'm connecting the dots. You become aware of how big the issue is and see that there are people willing to get down and dirty and deal with it. It's inspiring and makes me want to be one of them. We were learning from what we already know.

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The workshop was incredibly important in providing us with a sense of cohesion and defining a sense of purpose. The face-to-face thing was important because we could carry on online after that. The workshop helped us to understand that the support was there in each other and in the facilitators. It was easier to talk freely after we had established a safe environment. The way it was facilitated was really important—they were practicing what they were preaching. They modeled the idea of bringing the whole self to learning. It was a totally good experience—a great way to start. I sang all the way home.

2. Online Course

The online course was experienced as an invaluable means of exchanging and building on ideas. Participants appreciated the opportunity to engage in dialogue around the readings and to deepen the discussion over time. As noted above, the relationships formed in the workshops meant that participants could be more open and authentic in seeking and offering input online. Most participants indicated that they had enjoyed the readings. However, there was substantial agreement that the reading load was too heavy. Even though participants were aware that they were not required to read all of the articles, many felt that they were not doing justice to themselves or to the Project if they did not complete the readings and as a result, they felt caught in a dilemma.

The online component of the course is magic. We talk to each other, toss out ideas, and it's amazing to see the different perspectives on reading and learning.

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The online connection was wonderful. Without it, we would go back into our projects and get isolated. It was an excellent form of communication.

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I have enjoyed the participation in the online course. I am learning so much from the others and they have also provided the affirmation I needed in some areas. I was feeling a little swamped when I started my new position but now I am starting to pace the work that I have to do. I also sometimes need a 'nudge' from others to get back into what I am supposed to be doing.

The online course has been awesome. We have total freedom to respond as we choose. It's great because you can rewind your conversation and add thoughts. You don't have to wait until it's your turn. You're able to mull things over and come back at it—there's time to think.

3. Changing Practices Research Projects

The research in practice project component of VALTA was experienced as both challenging and exhilarating. Each person's experience with the *Changing Practices* research projects was different and each encountered different challenges in doing the work. For some, deciding on a project was a significant challenge and many participants recounted feeling somewhat intimidated about taking on a piece of research. The research process was unfamiliar to most participants and as a result, it is not surprising that designing and implementing the research projects entailed some struggles. Adding to the challenges for some were the constraints imposed by their work or community contexts. In some cases, there was little support for carrying out research projects or very limited time and resources available. Other issues related to ethical concerns associated with doing research on neighbours or infringing on the goals of research participants. A number of participants drew attention to the struggles involved in shifting from a linear, 'hard science' mindset to one that took a more open and flexible approach to inquiry. Writing their research reports was difficult for most participants, the major problems being the large amount of data they had collected and the challenges of organizing the material in a written format.

Despite these struggles, participants described the experience of doing a research project as a positive one overall. Not only was it an opportunity for learning, it also demonstrated their ability to do research in practice. In particular, participants generally derived great pleasure and satisfaction from their projects and from making a difference in the lives of others.

It was really hard to write the report. I couldn't write out the results in a straight line — it was very circular. It was hard to get a starting point.

It was sort of difficult. I'm a linear, literal person and this felt kind of loose to me. It seemed like I wasn't really doing research and I felt that I had to justify it to others. Also, I had concerns about my research goals infringing on the goals of the people in the course. I felt selfish having my own goals.

It was very difficult because I'd never done anything like this before. It was totally new territory and I doubted my own ability to do it. It was a huge issue—taking something that was personal to me into the public realm. But I learned that violence affects everyone.

I really enjoyed the experience entirely. It felt like a treat to have the opportunity to do this.

Reflections on Learning: Conclusions and Implications

In this evaluation inquiry we set out to learn about what difference the VALTA Project made for participants and to identify the elements of the Project that contributed to these differences. The voices of the women who participated in VALTA offer rich learning about the experiences and outcomes of involvement in the Project.

The practitioners who took part in VALTA spoke eloquently about the difference the Project had made for them in terms of both personal growth and a strengthened capacity to address the impacts of violence on learning. Moreover, they spoke to the extent to which they have acted on the learning, integrating it into their practice in diverse ways. A key outcome of the Project was greatly expanded knowledge and understanding about violence, and about its profound effects on women's learning and about how to effectively address these effects through programs and practice. Through sharing their experiences, participants also shed light on what it was about the Project processes that contributed to the outcomes. By articulating these critical elements they have offered valuable learning for future efforts to address the relationship between violence and learning.

The learning that emerges from this inquiry clearly demonstrates the value of the VALTA Project in addressing the effects of violence on learning in literacy and adult education programs. Participants invariably felt that their practice had been strengthened as a result of taking part in the Project. In light of their own increased

awareness about the pervasiveness of violence and its effects on learning, participants expressed concerns about the general lack of awareness among literacy and adult education practitioners as regards this issue. They stressed the importance of “moving forward with this” and strongly recommended efforts to expand the learning such that other practitioners would have the capacity to address the effects of violence on learning. In particular, they suggested that a component on how to address the effects of violence be incorporated into training sessions for new literacy and adult education coordinators as well as into professional development workshops and conferences.

The further I go in my work, the more I see that literacy and issues of violence are connected. I think it should be part of the new coordinators' training.

The success of the VALTA Project also clearly demonstrates a potential for a research in practice approach to enhance the capacity of literacy and adult education practitioners to deal with key issues such as the impacts of violence on learning. Indeed, the VALTA Project offers a powerful model for changing practice that is transferable to other contexts and issues. A critical feature of the model is the multi-faceted design that integrates workshops, online learning and discussion and a *Changing Practice* project. However, just as important are the qualities that speak to the essence of the learning approach: the creation of a safe environment for learning, learning through modeling, learning by doing, being connected with others and experiencing support. As evaluators, we are confident in saying that the VALTA model has much to offer in informing the practice of a wide range of individuals and programs providing support to people who are experiencing or have experienced violence.

The value of this project? It's huge—and it needs to go further than to literacy workers in volunteer tutor programs. There is a great deal of violence 'underground' in Alberta, and from learners' stories, it is in all segments of society.

