





*Applying Learning to  
Practice:  
Facilitating a  
Writing Group*

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## *Introduction*

For three years, I worked with the Write to Learn and Writenet projects<sup>14</sup> in Camrose, Alberta. Our mandate was to promote the use of personal writing in literacy programming. An important part of the work we did was traveling around Alberta and delivering *Writing Out Loud* (Morgan, 1999) workshops to literacy programs, education conferences and colleges. During these workshops, we used various prompts to invite participants to write personal stories and to share them, safely, with the group. As a new facilitator, I was surprised that many of the stories were about sadness, insecurity and fear. People would write about their complicated and stressful lives. It also became clear that many of our participants, whether Adult Basic Education (ABE) students or college professors, had experiences of violence.

In these workshops, I acted as a co-facilitator to Deborah Morgan, who coordinated the Write to Learn and Writenet Projects. Deborah is an experienced facilitator who handled emotional participants and disclosures of abuse gently and constructively. I was thankful for her skill and happy to have someone else deal with these uncomfortable situations.

Through my work with these writing projects, I was introduced to Jenny Horsman's work about the importance of recognizing and discussing that violence can affect the way people learn and participate in society. While attending one of Jenny's workshops in Edmonton, I became aware of the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (VALTA) Project and decided to become involved.

The VALTA Project offered me a unique opportunity. I would have the chance to learn about the issues surrounding violence and learning along with a group of other interested people. This learning would be both academic (which I was comfortable with) and holistic (which I was curious about). After we had learned about some of the impacts that violence has on learning and some alternative ways to approach learning and teaching, we would have a chance to step out of our comfort zone and apply our learning to our practice.

This learning opportunity attracted me not only because it was applicable to my work, but because it felt safe. I was always afraid that someone would disclose issues of violence or become very emotional during our writing workshops. What would I do? What

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<sup>14</sup> For information about the projects, go to [www.Writenet.ca](http://www.Writenet.ca)

would the participants want me to do? I was a good fair-weather facilitator. What would I do in a storm? The VALTA Project would help me learn more and the *Changing Practices* project would help me apply it. Most importantly, this would all be accomplished in the safety of a group of like-minded practitioners.

During the VALTA course, I marinated in information. I began to form a new framework for my ideas surrounding violence—not only about how violence affects learning, but about what constitutes violence. I began to define violence as simply an action (or inaction) that causes someone to feel violated. With a mind full of new information and beliefs I prepared to step out on my own with a *Changing Practices* project.

## ***My Changing Practices Project***

Knowing my fear of uncomfortable and emotional situations, I surrounded myself with the familiar as my project took shape in my mind. I chose to frame my project through a writing group, a process I am comfortable with and passionate about. I also chose to work with a co-facilitator, fellow researcher Janet Bauer,<sup>15</sup> whom I trusted very much. Janet and I led two-hour writing classes for ten weeks with four eager participants. Each class followed the format that Deborah Morgan designed and described in *Writing Out Loud* (2001). We began with freewriting and then moved into directed-writing prompts. With these anchors, I was ready to choose a focus for my research.

Choosing a research focus was difficult for me. I thought about what I had learned in the VALTA Project. The more I thought about the Project, the more I realized how it had affected *me*. I had become more aware of the way my actions affected the people around me, and how I reacted to other people's actions. I began to appreciate thoughtful leadership. Simple things like activities that got us moving, scheduled time to get to know the other group members and being able to participate as I felt comfortable made learning and participating easier. It seemed natural that my research focus should be on this change. So stepping out of my comfort zone (and using Janet to steady myself), I began to take a look at how my new knowledge and values affected my performance as a writing facilitator. Given my growing understanding about violence and learning, what skills and techniques could I employ to build a productive and successful writing group?

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<sup>15</sup> Janet's research focused on how she and I created a safe space for learning. Her report is in Chapter Five of this book.

## ***Beginning the Project***

Janet and I originally planned to deliver a ten-week writing course to participants at a drop-in centre for youth who live on or close to the streets. It soon became apparent that the clients at the centre were not interested in joining a scheduled meeting. There were, however, four adults interested in joining our writing course. Three women found out about the course through the Camrose Read and Write literacy program, where Janet was coordinator. Two of the women were students at the program and one woman was referred by her mental health worker. Our fourth participant was a woman I had met through my work with the Write to Learn Project. The six of us proved to be a dynamic group.

It quickly became uncomfortable to use drop-in centre space, as we were bringing no benefit to the sponsoring agency. The space felt borrowed. We soon transferred our classes over to the Camrose Read and Write Program. Immediately, the group felt at home. One participant mentioned how much she liked the switch to the Camrose Read and Write Program. She commented, "The table and music at the classroom is more comfortable than at the [centre]. Also, Janet can bring her dogs." The new space not only gave us more ownership, it allowed us to bring in different activities like planting seeds and having a makeover day.

During our first session, we lay down the foundation of our course. We talked as a group about fears about writing, and how we wanted the course to be organized. The women were consulted about everything from what snack they wanted to what topics they would like to write about. Janet and I explained that in addition to teaching the course, we were both doing research and planned to write papers about our findings. We each described our research focus and how the women could help us find answers to our questions. We asked the group for questions and concerns. Everyone seemed pretty excited and agreed to participate.

## ***How I Did My Research***

In order to collect data from the classes, Janet and I met after each class and wrote about the day's activities. We each described responses to exercises and activities and the way group members interacted. After we had finished, we would share our writing with each other and discuss the day and take more notes. These sessions gave us time to really discuss what was happening in class and what action we might take next time. The themes that we pulled out of

our discussion became the ideas behind the following week's lesson plan. This provided fluidity and constancy for the course. The notes also provided data for my research.

Once it was time to look at the data I had compiled, the work really began! As I typed out my notes, I began to pull out themes and ideas. I colour-coded and organized my notes repeatedly. Each time I did, I noticed something new. I was surprised to discover that I just kept learning. I had employed a number of strategies during the writing course in an effort to improve my facilitation skills, but I realized that wasn't what I had learned. I had begun my *Changing Practices* project to find strategies to deal with emotional situations and disclosures by my students. I came away from it with a new vision of what a classroom could be when I took the time to watch and listen.

## ***What I Learned about Facilitating***

### ***Awareness***

During the VALTA course, we read about and discussed topics including the importance of naming and recognizing violence, the hidden impacts of violence, how to bring the whole person to learning (and teaching), and how to take care of ourselves so we could keep going with our work. All of the information and discussions changed the way I looked at my role in the classroom.

Through my learning in the VALTA Project, I had become aware of issues and ideas around the impact that violence can have on learning, and what that might mean for my practice. What I learned from the *Changing Practices* project was that paying attention to the behaviors and attitudes of my participants was the most important way of providing what they needed.

### ***Understanding Participants' Behaviors***

My first insight was awareness of the issues of violence and learning. In the VALTA course, I learned how violence (in any form) could affect every aspect of a person's life. Attention span, retention, consistency of behavior, inability to sit still and low self-esteem can often be attributed to past or current violence. These are only some of the indicators that I saw in my classroom each time we met.

Having a theoretical sense of how violence affects learning, I could take a clearer look at the four women in our group. I could see and better understand their behavior. One student could not sit still. She has a beautiful soul and is a beautiful writer, but the way she participated was often disruptive for the others in our group. On bad days, her writing was choppy, disjointed, and unfocused. She would constantly talk and fidget. On good days, her writing was crisp and poetic. Being aware of the issues, I became aware of her needs and those of the other students. Every time she had a bad day, we discovered through her writing that she had had some sort of crisis the day before. When she was fidgeting and talking, she was not trying to relieve her boredom, nor was she being disrespectful. She simply had so many worries inside her she couldn't stay still.

It is always easy to notice the disruptive members. But I became more conscious of the other students as well. Those who wrote beautiful fantasy rather than personal stories and those who struggled to keep a train of thought going in their writing needed as much help as our louder participants. Each person was coping with her life in the best way she knew how. Once I began noticing more about the students and their in-class behavior and personalities, I could see a little more into their lives. I could see our writer who lost her train of thought struggling with too many domestic responsibilities and not enough leisure time. I could see our peaceful fantasy writer finally finding her individuality after years of taking care of others. This insight helped me discover what they needed of me as a facilitator. Rather than mold the students to the classroom, I began to mold the classroom to fit them.

### ***Shaping the Classroom***

Janet and I created a space and a classroom structure to help meet participants' varying needs. As we noticed what worked (and what didn't) we made small alterations, so that all of our students would feel welcome and productive. After we noticed the students fidgeting and becoming restless part way through the class, we began incorporating non-writing activities. We tried all kinds of things, from guided meditations to soft music to sculpting with play-doh. Knowing that people have different learning needs, we wanted to expose the women to different types of learning, especially learning through the senses. We brought things to touch, smell, taste, hear and see. Sometimes we wrote about our sensory reactions, other times we talked about them. Some ideas worked and we tried them again. Some ideas didn't go over well and we let them go.



## ***Recognizing My Needs***

I think that to some extent anyone who works in literacy does so because they want to help people. Some days it seemed so easy to look at the struggles of my participants' lives and see solutions. One student was being bullied by her adult son who lived with her. It was difficult not to suggest that she ask him to leave, or at least have him do his own cooking and cleaning. It was even difficult not to literally take home the woman who was living in an unsafe place. Knowing that any of these actions would be inappropriate, I had to find the balance of what I could do effectively. In the writing group, I provided a space where women were safe to share, wonder and look at their lives and futures. I provided strength and support when needed, as well as information. I asked questions but didn't judge. I worked hard to offer a solid foundation for them so that they could begin whatever journey they chose to take.

While it was important to learn to watch for clues to my students' needs, it was equally important to be able to realize what I needed. I loved teaching this group of women. But it was very difficult. Every week I saw these wonderful women struggling through their lives. It hurt my soul to hear about events and people in their past that hurt them. It was even more difficult to hear the resignation in their writing and in their voices when they believed there was nothing good in the future for them. Some days I don't know how someone could or why someone would listen to people's pain and struggles as part of their job. But I learned through the VALTA Project the importance of taking the space I needed and setting the boundaries of what I could take on and what I couldn't. To my surprise, no one thought less of me for not taking on more. The students didn't want or need one more person in authority telling them what they should do. I also learned, from the women in my class, how much beauty there is in life. I saw strong, amazing women making changes in their lives, quitting drugs, moving out, opening up to new relationships and taking responsibility (and joy) for the lives they have and the lives they want.

## ***The Need for Balance***

My being aware of and open to the issues of violence, and my willingness to follow the path this knowledge sets out, made a huge difference in the lives of my students and the people with whom I work. By realizing that our disruptive student needed a variety of writing prompts and the safety of not being judged, we

created a safe place for her. In fact, it was her only safe place. Her attendance was near perfect, despite all the disruptive and dangerous influences in her life. When we discussed the merits of our poetic student's writing, she felt creative and talented. She began writing outside of class, and began writing for other audiences as a way of expressing herself to her friends and family.

Having a clearer idea of people's needs, my next challenge was to meet those needs. We had to design the course to create an effective learning environment for every participant. The importance of balance was clear. The course needed the regularity of structure, but also required the flexibility to change according to the group's needs. We also had to balance goals. My goals for the group and the goals of the members themselves were not necessarily the same. Finally, there was the balance of leadership. I wanted the group to know that we were all equals, but someone had to make lesson plans and keep the group focused.

### ***Balance of Structure***

During the VALTA course I learned about the importance of consistency and safety in the classroom. For people whose lives have often been chaotic and uncertain, it is vitally important to provide a space where they can be comfortable to express themselves. Being able to anticipate what will happen next and how the session will play out gives participants a sense of security.

In our preparation, Janet and I created a solid structure for the course. Each week followed the same plan. As described earlier, we wrote our reactions after each class while the participants' words were fresh in our minds. From that we could decide on themes and topics that were of immediate interest for next week's class. This arrangement helped create well thought-out and engaging lesson plans.

We were very deliberate in the types of writing prompts and activities we chose. Our first session began with discussion and brainstorming of fears that participants might have about beginning a writing group of this nature. Common worries included that others would not believe their stories or would judge their lives. From that list, the group created a set of guidelines to address these fears. Everyone agreed it is important to remember that joining any new group can be scary, especially when you will be asked to write and share with a group of strangers. By asking the group to list what people might find frightening and allowing them to build a series of rules to ease these fears, we gave them some control of the safety and ownership of the group. Each student

helped design the structure of the course which simultaneously made them comfortable within it and responsible to maintain it.

Each session began with freewriting and led into directed-writing prompts. Freewriting is a timed exercise (for our group it was five minutes) which has no prompt. It is a chance for group members to write about whatever is on their minds. As an opening exercise, it allows the group to mull over the events of the week and pulls them into writing and sharing. It helps everyone to be centered and focused. It is also a great way for the facilitators to check in with each participant without using up lots of class time. Our directed-writing prompts were based on everything from quotes and photos to objects and fairytales. The ideas for the prompts came mostly from classroom discussion. At first, the exercises were light, fun and rather impersonal (e.g., "I want to write about..." and "I don't want to write about..."). As the sessions progressed, so did the prompts. They became both more imaginative and personal (e.g., "What do you *deserve* from life?").

Although Janet and I wanted the students to have the chance to write about more complicated issues, we knew they needed a chance to become comfortable in the group before sharing intimate life stories. As the group became more comfortable with the process and each other, we began asking more difficult questions. The prompts required more imagination, reflection and risk. Janet and I listened very closely as the group read their "I want to write about" and "I don't want to write about" lists. Many of the students listed such topics as events in their past, bad relationships and sad stories as ones about which they didn't want to write. We never prompted the participants to write about these things. However, when we asked them to write about their dreams, hopes, self-image and memories, they touched on many of these "don't" topics.

The structure Janet and I designed was like a spiral. We began slowly and worked our way up to the riskier work. The group bonded in the same way. We couldn't have asked the more in-depth questions at the beginning because the group didn't know each other and there was no trust. As the writing deepened, so did the friendships. This may be why the participants wrote about the topics they had earlier listed as off limits. At the start, they couldn't imagine wanting to share that information. On our last day, we wrote about "What I still want to write about." The lists included "the ups and downs, the heart love of my life that I have," "I want to find out what I am afraid of, guilty of and angry at," and "pain and happiness in life." One person wrote, "my poems would be about laughter, heartaches, and the joy of life.... How peaceful you can feel with yourself."

## ***Choice and Control***

Although the students needed consistency of structure, it was also important to maintain their feelings of ownership and control. Janet and I designed the course so that everyone could participate at a level at which they felt comfortable. When I asked the group to write about their favorite found object, one student wrote about a book she found on a memorable trip with friends while another wrote about finding herself after years of care-taking and personal illness. Both pieces of writing were beautiful, and told us lots about the writers. Any writing prompt can trigger deep, soul exploring writing. However, if a participant isn't ready for that, a prompt can also inspire humorous, informative, less risky pieces. A facilitator doesn't need to ask students to bare their souls; they will do it, or not, on their own schedules.

One day, a participant and I were discussing the writing group outside of class. She was saying that she found writing difficult sometimes, because of a past relationship (with her abusive ex-husband). She was afraid to trust another woman in our group, as they had acquaintances and family in common. I was worried that she would want to quit the group, or would spend her time feeling unsafe. When I asked her how she felt about this person being in the group, she replied, "I just think about what I'm writing before I put it down. It might be less free, but there is nothing wrong with not writing about my past. I like to write about the present. She [the other person] needs a place too." It was clear that this student wasn't getting less out of the class, she was just taking control of what she contributed. In the same conversation she said, "This group helped me get through the nights; it was something to get up [in the morning] for."

It is important to note that the women also had the option not to participate in any given activity. That could mean not writing with us, or choosing not to read their pieces out loud. Janet and I made a point of modeling different ways of participating. Janet would sometimes choose not to read her work out loud. During breathing exercises, I made a point of keeping my eyes open. We didn't want the women to feel they must participate in a certain way to be a part of the group. Our first goal was to make them comfortable in class; the next goal was getting them writing. It didn't take long before the participants were writing madly and wanting to be the first to share.

## ***Flexibility***

Once we settled into the new space and our group knew what to expect every day, there were no surprises. The only things that

changed were the activities. This is where the flexibility became essential. I had to be willing to throw away an entire lesson if needed. Even the best thought-out exercises don't work for every group every day. It is difficult to describe how I knew when to change course. I was very careful to watch the group members, when they were preparing to write, as they wrote and as they shared their writing. Even the banter between exercises provided important clues to the students' needs. I watched for signs of boredom, discomfort, fatigue and distraction, and made changes accordingly.

As an example, during one session we had a member who was obviously agitated. She was disrupting the class because she couldn't sit still and be quiet. Janet and I had planned a series of rather introspective prompts. Seeing that this participant could not keep up with the class, I changed the lesson plan mid-stream. I asked the class to write down a page full of lies. I told them to fill the page, go wild, write sideways, write with a crayon—but that none of what they wrote could be true. This energetic question encouraged a point-form list answer. The participants didn't have to keep a train of thought going. The agitated participant immediately calmed down and began writing.

Our course design was a living thing, like a house in progress. The walls and the roof were the consistent class structure. They were solid and dependable, a safe, warm place.

### ***Balancing Goals***

Balancing the goals of the group and my goals as a researcher was very difficult. Janet and I were a great match as co-facilitators. We had similar research goals as well as the same ideas and viewpoints about how groups such as ours should be handled. We had the same values of creating a safe space and the same beliefs about how the participants should be treated and respected. We had a consistent structure. Within that we could change and adapt.

My difficulty came partway during our course. I became uncomfortable with having specific motives that were different from the participants'. My ultimate purpose in organizing this group was to see how I would be able to incorporate what I learned from the VALTA course in my practice: How would my practice change, exactly? The participants had no real interest in this goal. They came to learn and socialize, and most often they were looking for something, anything, to help them make changes in their lives. I felt guilty that I was using their experiences for my goals. I was off balance.

What brought me balance was realizing that my goals and the participants' were not at odds with each other. In trying to use new values to inform my practice as a facilitator, I was in effect becoming a better, more attentive leader. This attentiveness fed the goals of the group. It was part of my research goals to try various activities and approaches to see what would work best in different situations. My goal, looked at from a different angle, was to bring the group the best possible class experience—to be what they needed.

### ***Balancing Needs***

Balancing goals reached beyond the tensions of research. Each person coming to the group had different needs. They had needs for their lives and within the group. There were two members of our group who needed to belong to a community where they felt they could contribute and belong. The first person was living in an unsafe situation and was just beginning to make positive changes in her life. She was often unable to concentrate and sit still. Her mind often drifted in and out of the class. Our second member had left an abusive relationship years before, but still struggled with short-term memory loss and shyness. She needed a quiet space to slowly put down her thoughts so she could contribute in a manner in which she was comfortable. When she was disrupted, she couldn't keep her train of thought going, and therefore didn't feel comfortable with what she had to contribute.

As a facilitator, I needed to meet the needs of both women. To meet this challenge, Janet and I would adapt the lesson plan to both draw the attention of our distracted member, and interest the rest of the group. We had frequent and regular breaks with healthy snacks and began to incorporate non-writing activities. We soon realized that the snack we provided was a substantial part of what some of our students would eat that day. We switched from cookies and donuts to fruit plates and bagels. The activities allowed everyone to do something with their hands or bodies, as well as to talk in an informal manner. Even these discussions helped ease the tension; as members got to know more about each other they began to create their own ways of working as a group.

You can't always meet everyone's needs, but balancing them is important. It would have been easy to tell our disruptive member that this was a quiet space and she needed to act accordingly or to tell our shy person that she needed to learn to work with distraction. I decided that more than anything else, these two women needed to be in class and I kept trying different things until I found a way that worked for both of them.

## ***Acceptance***

Once I became more aware of the students and their in-class behavior and personalities, I could see a little more into their lives. I became aware of what they needed from me as a facilitator. This is an important distinction. I couldn't fix their lives or force them to fit into a classroom mold for their "benefit." They never asked for that. What all the students needed was acceptance of where they were in any given moment; they needed the support found in the classroom. It became clear that my main role wasn't to extract a binder full of good writing. My job was to create a space where the women felt accepted for the strong, if struggling, women they were. I encouraged, supported and validated each participant. They felt confident with their place and importance in the group because I honestly felt that they were valuable members. I accepted them as whole people, and worked with their issues instead of around them. This did not mean I had to fix their problems or move them into my spare bedroom. The students neither expected nor wanted that from me.

## ***Leadership and Group Roles***

The ideas of group dynamics and leadership are very closely connected to those of structure and goals. A group is defined by its goals and design. But groups are dynamic, and group issues extend past the constructs of design and purpose.

By far the most exciting thing about this project was watching the group grow and form a real community. As is common in small towns, each of the members had connections outside of the writing group. Some were positive, some were not.

In addition to the classroom structure described earlier, Janet and I worked to create a safe emotional structure. While consistency and flexibility are important, emotional (and physical) safety is essential. Physical safety was addressed by the private, comfortable space where the women felt ownership. Emotional safety was addressed by directing the way the group interacted through modeling and positive feedback.

I am normally very nervous in new and potentially emotional situations. The prospect of a student disclosing painful information terrified me. I had no idea how I would react. Would my reactions be "right"? Would I do more harm than good? I decided early on that my only option was to be honest. If I was shocked, it was okay

to be shocked. I was asking the members to be honest with their emotions; it was only fair that I was as well. With that decision firmly in my mind, the others fell into place

There were many parts of this new structure. Each member was given the opportunity to participate or pass, depending on what they needed. Each exercise was open-ended, allowing the members to be as creative as they liked. We commented positively and sincerely on each piece of writing. Most importantly, Janet and I never asked the participants to do anything we were not going to do ourselves. We participated in every activity and shared only when we were comfortable doing so. Janet and I modelled, carefully, the way we wanted the group to behave. We wanted to express that there were a variety of ways to engage with the group.

With a group of this nature and size it is important to remember that the facilitator is very much a part of the way the group works. I was no longer only a teacher: I was a leader, facilitator, coach and equal participant. I was risking just as much as the other members of the group. This created a trust and camaraderie that a pure student/teacher relationship could not.

I made a point of building on the strengths and connections of the members of the group. We polled for opinions and asked for help. We had two members who had been a part of similar groups in the past and asked for their expertise and advice for writing exercises and activities. I also made a point of commenting not only on their strengths as writers but as people. Our members became very devoted to this group and I praised their dedication, skills, and determination in class and in their home lives. By my acknowledging them, their commitment to the class increased. This commitment gave the group a stable membership that slowly began to gel and form a cohesive community.

I also paid very close attention to how the writers were engaging with the exercises. Which ones worked, which ones did not work? Who enjoyed them, who did not? Were the members being literal or figurative with the prompts posed? What were they saying? What were they not saying, but implying? Sometimes an exercise just didn't work the way I expected it to. By listening closely to the words that were written and the responses of the group members, I could tell if I was doing a good job. I knew how each person was doing, inside and outside of class. I knew if I was posing appropriate questions. I could hear when adaptations needed to be made. I also could glean themes and topics for further discussion. Since these themes and topics were fresh in the participants' minds, it made our prompts more effective and engaging for the class. They felt a part of the system. They *were* a part of the system.



## *Recognizing My Role*

So much of my time was spent planning and thinking about the class, it came as a surprise to me when the participants were not doing the same. That is not to say they didn't value their time in our classroom, but fitting a two-hour class in with work, children, and the day-to-day grind of life was often difficult. In the eleven weeks that we ran the course, one woman was being forced out of the shelter because her time was up, one was denied access to her kids despite positive changes in her life and one was living in an unsafe and unhealthy home where she wasn't even allowed to have a key. These were only some of the things going on in these women's lives in only three short months. Pretending that writing class was a priority seemed crazy. I began to get a much clearer understanding of how it would be difficult for someone to concentrate and hold their nervous energy in check. However, each woman, for her own reasons, made the class a priority. As a facilitator, it was important for me to respect the time and effort the students were putting into class. I also had to be patient and understanding when the students were not present either because they were physically absent or present but too distracted to contribute in a positive and helpful way.

The outside lives of our students played a huge role in the classroom. One incident in particular really made me realize what my role was as a facilitator. During the course of our eleven weeks together, one student attempted to commit suicide. She missed one class, and then arranged for a pass from the hospital to attend our final session. That day in her freewriting she wrote:

[My mental health worker] and Janet got me a pass to come to writing group this morning. I feel great about that. I'm glad I have some good friends around me that really care about me. I'm feeling better every day. I'm changing attitude little by little. I'm glad to be here today. The world doesn't look so gloomy anymore. I'm happy to be alive still.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, her health and well-being were more important than attending writing class. The class, however, had become a safe and comfortable space for her to express herself. I was a teacher and a leader, but most importantly, I was someone she could count on. The class and I were there to support her, and ensuring that they did so was my most important role.

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<sup>16</sup> As coordinator of the Read and Write Program, Janet had established a working relationship with the mental health worker. Janet and the worker consulted about how to support the woman in the final session.

## ***Conclusion***

The *Changing Practices* project taught me more than I ever could have imagined. As a facilitator, my confidence grew. I was able to slow down and take a really good look around me at the women in the group. I learned to share leadership not only with my co-facilitator but with the participants. Setting personal boundaries meant I could give my full energy and heart to the class without fear of overload. I found this did not make me selfish; it made me and continues to make me smart. Good observational skills and the ability to think on your feet are the two most important facilitation skills. The VALTA Project gave me the chance to learn what needing help or even just consideration looks like. I am a better facilitator as a direct result.

## ***References***

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