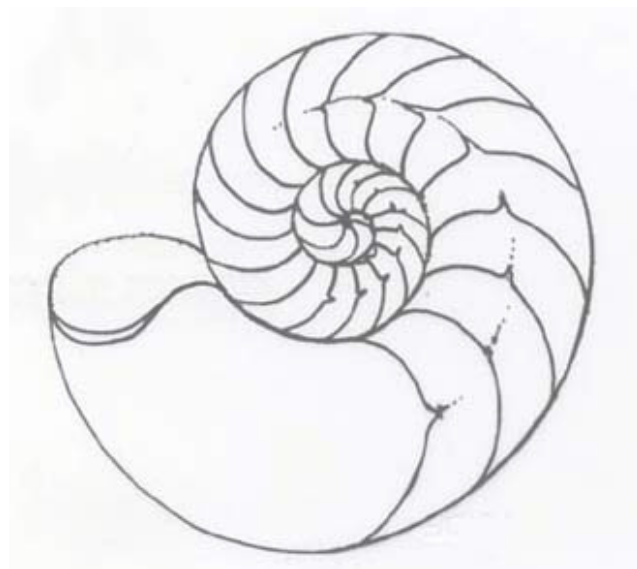
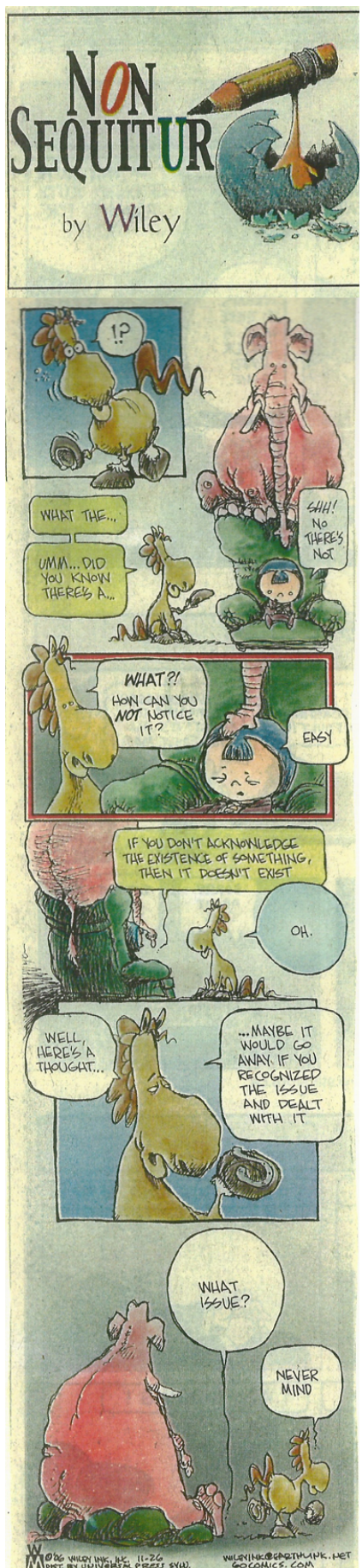


Digger Deeper: **Trauma, Violence,** **and the** **New Brain Research**



Literacy Nova Scotia
Supporting Learning Needs of Adults
April 2014



Addressing the Impact of Violence on Learning

Facing the Elephant in the Room!

Violence impacts learning

When educators don't pay attention to this truth, they may label the consequences of violence only as mental illness or learning disabilities, or, worse still, as lack of motivation or limited intellectual capacity. As a result, too many children and adults will fail in schools or other programs. They may believe they can't learn, or can't learn that subject, or in that setting. They may judge themselves harshly, thinking they should just try harder. Educators may judge or give up on them, which confirms their worst fears and judgments about themselves.

There are simple ways to address these impacts

When we pay attention to these impacts, and assume that there will be survivors of violence in every educational setting, formal and informal, we can make an enormous difference. We can make it OK to speak about this issue, and help everyone understand how the brain responds to trauma. We can support learning in many ways, including modelling and teaching mindfulness. We can remove barriers and avoid reproducing violence in our programs and institutions.

When we support learning success we intervene in cycles of violence

When students gain self-esteem through understanding what is getting in the way of their learning and find out they are not alone – then the ongoing cycles of violence both inward and outward can be interrupted. Too much violence is fuelled by a constant state of fight or flight, the push to numb pain in the aftermath of violence, or the desire to feel better about self by diminishing and controlling others.

Jenny Horsman 2013

Learn more at: learningandviolence.net and jennyhorsman.com

Learning and Violence A B Cs

A Acknowledge

Acknowledging the impact of violence on learning helps students begin to move from feeling stupid and ashamed, or blocked and unable to learn or change. When we teach students about how their brain works they can see how the survival mechanisms for violence and trauma that were vital for living through the experience can also get in the way of the learning and change they/we want to take on now. Once educators and students can talk about this recognition then we can open new conversations: create more clarity about the stuck places and expand the possibilities for learning and change.

B Bring your whole self to the work

Many of us in the helping professions have our own histories with violence – this can strengthen our ability to do this work as long as we pay attention to ourselves and address our needs. Whether we have more or less experience with violence if we are to: bring our whole creative selves to the work, notice when we are triggered, stay curious and willing to explore new options with each student, we need to make sure we have the supports in place to ensure our self-awareness, self-reflection and self-care.

C (Be) Curious, Connect and Create Conditions for Learning

Look at students' actions and words and your own with curiosity. Help those you work with to feel safe to bring their whole selves free of the fear of judgment. Connect and wonder, with them, and your allies, about what might be going on. Ask gently about what they/you might be feeling and thinking. Don't make assumptions about people who are often late, often sick, don't participate or follow the rules, don't ask for help, ask for help all the time, don't attend or pay attention consistently, and so on. You don't know what material and emotional barriers may be in their lives, in the school set up, in the classroom conditions, in your approach. You don't know how hard they are working behind the scenes to "show up." Try to explore all behaviours with curiosity and interest and to create the connections and conditions that support students to come down from emergency reactions and be present to learn and change.

D Don't Diagnose

Rather than sliding quickly into labels of mental illness or learning disability assume that experiencing greater and lesser degrees of violence shape how they/we engage with learning and the world. Don't treat anyone as "other" a "poor soul." Look for our common humanity and our shared strength and resilience. A diagnosis is simply one way of characterizing the impacts of violence on life and learning. Use diagnoses only as they increase access and possibility. Focus on identifying strengths rather than characterizing deficits. Instead of "symptoms" think of patterns of behaviour as survival strategies and notice how they make sense. Share these positive observations and understandings with students. Don't focus on diagnosing who has experienced violence; instead teach all classes assuming survivors will always be present – even when you don't know who they are.

The Elephant in the Classroom: Addressing the Impact of Violence

BY JENNY HORSMAN
PHOTOS BY HOPE WISHART

We may never know whether students we are working with have experienced violence – such as abuse, war, rape, bullying and hostility due to racism, ableism, homophobia and so on – or the neglect of parents who were “absent” and numb, struggling with poverty, addictions, or mental illness. We may hear snippets of a story or see behaviour that give us clues, but we don’t need to know because we can make a crucial difference when we focus on creating a safe environment that helps all students learn.

We can teach in many simple ways that mean that whether we know who has experienced violence or not, we can support all students to understand their own behaviour, judge themselves less harshly, and be more ready to learn and change.

The new brain research is making clear just how extensively the brain can be changed by violence and trauma (including illnesses, accidents, and major losses). Even events in our parents and grandparents’ lives can alter their DNA and those changes

can continue from generation to generation. But while that may shock us into feeling hopeless, what we know now about how extensively the brain can change – in structure as well as function – throughout the life span, can give us hope. We all have the ability to reshape our brains and learn, and even change our DNA for

WHAT WE KNOW NOW ABOUT HOW EXTENSIVELY THE BRAIN CAN CHANGE THROUGHOUT THE LIFE SPAN, CAN GIVE US HOPE. WE ALL HAVE THE ABILITY TO RESHAPE OUR BRAINS AND LEARN

the better for future generations. We can help each other to find the “sweet spot” when our brains can learn and change, the “spot” where we are not too anxious and wired, nor too numb and absent.

So what can we do to find that “sweet spot” and support others to learn and change?

We can talk about it. Acknowledge that violence is widespread and impacts learning. When we do that individuals don’t feel so alone

or crazy: “It’s just me!” “I must be stupid!” This recognition for teacher and students makes new conversations and creative ideas possible. For instance at the start of a class we might say: “Lots of us have likely been through tough times and have developed brilliant ways of surviving. Some of those – like spacing out when we get anxious – can get in the way of our learning. This is a place where we can talk about what is happening for each of us and together we can find ways to work so that we can all learn well here.”

We can create as safe a physical and emotional environment as we can. We can work with students to bring in every element we all agree might make the group feel a safe place to learn, full of encouragement and possibility. For example: we might create ground rules to avoid put downs and make sure that painful experiences aren’t dismissed; instead of shouting to draw attention we might sound a meditation bell or create another gentle sound; we could

create a room set up where students don't have to have their backs to one another, and where they have snacks and comforting hot drinks, and can walk around freely to reduce their tension. We might practice mindful breathing for a few minutes together before we begin a class to help everyone become calm and present to begin to learn.

We can teach everyone about ways to ground themselves and be present. Stress balls, modeling clay, and rubbing our thighs with our hands all help us to come back from spacing out. When we know how to bring ourselves back to the present our minds are able to learn because blood supply returns to the parts of the brain where analytical thinking occurs.

We can be curious and avoid judgments. We often think we know why students are late, or missing classes, or generally don't seem very motivated. Instead of making judgments we might wonder how that behaviour seems to help them stay safe. We might explore what is happening with them. For instance we might say: "I notice that when we have a test you often miss that day. For many people that can be a reaction to anxiety. If our brains have learnt to protect us from stressful situations we can end up sleeping, or



feeling too ill to get up, or completely forgetting why we wanted to come to school that day. I don't know what happened for you but I thought it might be helpful to develop a strategy for next time. What do you think?" Together you might come up with a plan - perhaps a friend might come by early to pick her up, or perhaps you might do lots of practice tests - sitting together - until they lose their threat, or...

We can create structure so that students are less anxious about what will come next, and openness so that students don't get caught in clashes around control. Having no control can feel unbearable in the aftermath of violence. A lovely example is: having one space in the classroom for "inhale," to take in some new information, and another for "exhale," to work on anything the student is already filled with and needs to finish. In this way there is structure available, but no pressure to take part in it. The more we can make clear that we are trying to solve problems together rather than telling another person what they "must" do, the more

spacious it will feel. Even sitting side by side and talking about how to do something may feel less threatening than being face-to-face.

We can build community and connection.

Isolation and the sense of being the only one struggling to learn in the aftermath of violence makes learning so much harder. Though connecting can be extra difficult for people who have experienced violence, when we nurture it carefully - with activities that help everyone to get to know each other, to share their needs, and hopes - it can make an enormous difference to everyone's ability to learn.

We can teach holistically. When we use all the means and modes we can find - bringing visual arts, sound and movement into our work - we help students understand and express themselves, and experience more success. Words can feel suspect in the aftermath of violence and students may find it hard to find words to express themselves, other modes can help them recognize what they know.

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To learn more, explore learningandviolence.net. Check out the Teachers' room in the Student Kit, the Making Connections resources, the Helping Others Learn section and look for resources you can use to teach others about this issue.

Finding the “Sweet Spot” for Learning

Chaos.....

Too noisy in my head to learn

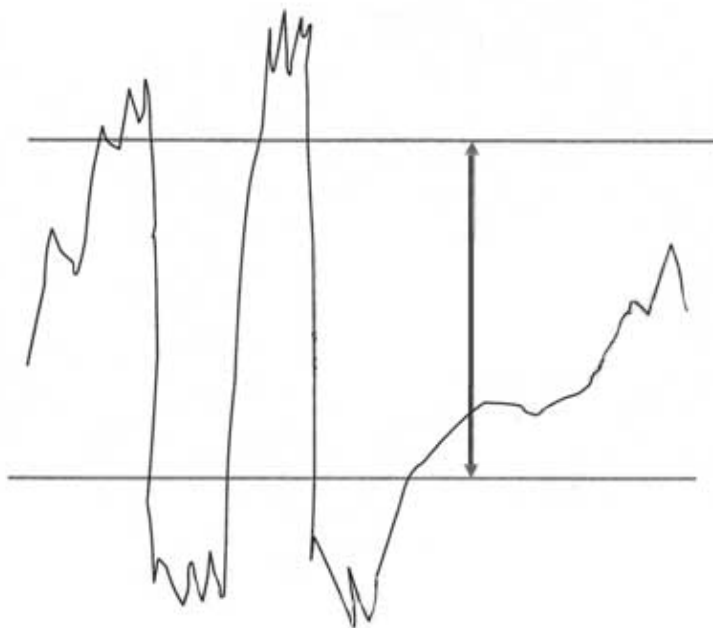
Racing thoughts, impulsive, defensive, reactive, angry

Overwhelmed, overload, panic, hypervigilant

Feeling unsafe

Acting out

Chronic Hyperarousal



In the flow...

Relaxed alertness

The “sweet spot” for learning

Can think and feel

Reactions fit the present situation

Optimal arousal zone

Control....

Too quiet in my head to learn

Nobody home, not there, silent

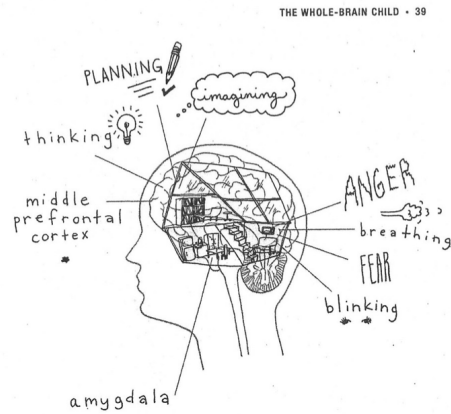
Still, spacey, dissociative, daydreaming

Numb, passive, no feelings, no energy, can't think, disconnected, ashamed,

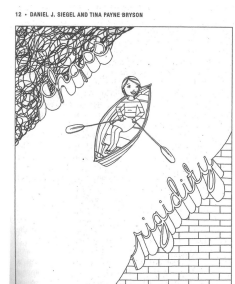
Chronic hypoarousal

Horsman & Lash 2012 (From: Caine & Caine, 2005; Cozolino, 2009; Fisher, 2008; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006)

The User's Guide to the Brain



1. Experience, including violence, trauma, and neglect, shapes our brain
2. Even our parents' and grandparents' experience, and the conditions of their lives, can change our brain
3. Lots of violence and trauma raises our "thermostat" so that we slide easily into fight, flight or freeze mode
4. We can teach our brain to settle down - to get into the "sweet spot" where it can change again:
 - a. If we name what is happening when we are anxious and reminded of past events
 - b. If we tell new stories about ourselves – and our brilliant brain that is just trying to protect us and keep us safe
 - c. If we learn to let go of the fear and calm ourselves – by moving our body and shaking, stamping it out, taking a break, making sounds, breathing deeply....
 - d. If we learn to ground ourselves in the present moment – rub our own body, look at what we can hear, see, feel now
 - e. If we listen to our body – and trust it to tell us what we need now...
5. Remember you can learn – when you practice these things you change your own brain and get back into the flow!



Too Scared to Learn Bibliography 2014

Understanding the Brain

Cozolino, Louis. *The Social Neuroscience of Education*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Exciting text speaking to educators about the implications of the latest brain research and what this means for how educators can be most effective.

Levine, Peter A. *Healing Trauma: A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body*. Boulder, Colo.; Enfield: Sounds True ; Publishers Group UK [distributor], 2008.

Clear introduction to understand trauma and Peter Levine's research/approach to release the aftermath of trauma stored in the body.

Siegel, Daniel J, and Bryson. *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*. New York: Bantam Books, 2012.

Wonderful book explaining the developing brain and providing clear ways of teaching children about their brain and working with them in a way that responds to what the child's brain needs to develop strength. Helpful for us all to understand the parts of the brain and the need for integration in the aftermath of trauma.

Siegel, Daniel J. *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*. New York: Bantam Books, 2010.

Clear introduction to what Dan Siegel calls "mindsight" the capacity to become aware of ourselves and our own brains, introduced in a clear straightforward way. Very helpful to enhance the ability to learn.

Maté, Gabor. *Scattered Minds: A New Look at the Origins and Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1999.

A little older but still helpful research into connections between trauma and ADD.

Body Work

Emerson, David, and Elizabeth Hopper. *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body*. Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 2011.

Good introduction to how to lead trauma-sensitive yoga

Murphy, Judy. *Move the Body Stretch the Mind*. Edmonton: Windsound Learning Society, 2008.

A lovely gentle introduction to movement, breath, and meditation to open us to learning. Images are people of all sizes and shapes – not yoga bodies! Aimed at the adult student themselves, easy to read.

Creative Arts

Norton, Mary. *New Pathways to Learning*. Edmonton: Windsound Learning Society, 2012

Some creative arts activities for use with adults

Working with Children:

Levine, Peter A, and Maggie Kline. *Trauma through a Child's Eyes: Awakening the Ordinary Miracle of Healing*. Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 2006.

A powerful introduction to what is needed to help a child who has been through trauma to heal and learn.

Learning to Calm and Focus

Hawn, Goldie, and Wendy Holden. *10 Mindful Minutes: Giving Our Children-- and Ourselves-- the Social and Emotional Skills to Reduce Stress and Anxiety for Healthier, Happier Lives*. New York, NY: Perigee, 2012.

Oehlberg, Barbara. *Making It Better: Activities for Children Living in a Stressful World*. St. Paul, MN; Beltsville, MD: Redleaf Press ; Distributed by Gryphon House, revised edition 2014.

Thich Nhất Hanh. *Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2011.

Includes a CD with songs to teach children in order to help them focus on their breath and calm themselves. Contains some simple meditation and relaxation techniques helpful for adults too.

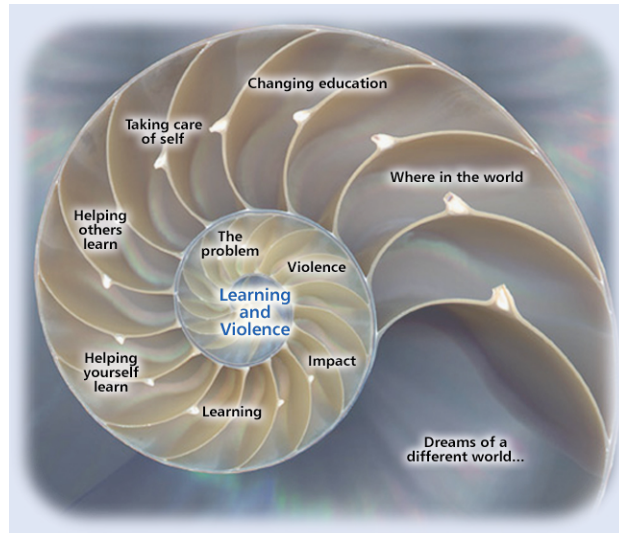
Caring for Ourselves

Lipsky, Laura van Dernoot, and Connie Burk. *Trauma Stewardship an Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009.

A beautiful book inviting us to reflect on the toll working for change can take on us, offering wisdom about how to take care of ourselves as well as others.

Too Scared to Learn

What can you do to support learning?



learningandviolence.net

In the aftermath or presence of violence, too many people believe they cannot learn. This innovative interactive site is a resource to support learning. Join us to:

- **Build an Understanding** of the scope of the problem and of different forms of violence and their impact on learning;
- **Explore Possibilities** to learn differently, help yourself and others learn, and take care of yourself;
- **Create Change** by learning about new initiatives in every sector of education and finding others working on this issue;
- **Imagine a Future** by dreaming with us about a world without violence and inequality.

Become part of the community:

- Explore learningandviolence.net - use it, tell students about it, link to it. Add your voice to it - in word, image, sound;
- Check out jennyhorsman.com - set up presentations, workshops, courses, consultations;

Contact Jenny Horsman

jenny@learningandviolence.net or [jenny@jennyhorsman.com](http://jennyhorsman.com)