



You might say...

"I'm struggling to know how to respond to the 'lads'—the whole group of young guys seem to be always ready for a fight and to blame somebody else for starting it—but Stan particularly worries me—he is so loud and angry. When he's around I notice some of the women sit as far away from him as they can, especially Val who always seems so anxious and sits there waiting to be told what to do.

When the whole gang are there most of the women are pretty quiet. I have threatened to chuck the guys out but I'm not sure they care that much. I'm scared some real violence is going to erupt and the more I try to set consequences and stop them from behaving like this the worse it seems to be getting."

I find it hard to teach when some students are disruptive.

...but did you know:

The angry, loud students may be struggling with the need to feel in control and to connect. They may not feel there is a lot of point in studying because they don't really believe they will have a future.

At that moment when we experience major violence, all control is taken away from us. We may feel utterly isolated, even when others are sharing the experience. It may seem that life will end, there will be no future. Ongoing struggles around control of oneself, others and the environment, connecting with oneself and others, and finding meaning and belief in a future may continue to shape our lives.



Angry, loud students may be struggling with the need to feel in control and to connect.

In the aftermath of repeated sense of threat, even a pleasant surprise, something exciting, or new, can be registered as danger, leading the analytical thinking portion of the brain to close down. The “lads” may be anxious and hiding it as they respond aggressively to everything, even a look or a request, as if it were life-threatening. This reaction may also explain why many students are unable to settle and seem always ready to “fight.”

Traumatized children often believe they won’t live to be adults. If there is no future, then why not take risks, take drugs or commit crimes, why try to stick at studies for the future? If this is the experience of any of the “lads,” talking of “consequences” is not likely to have much effect on their behaviour, except that they will think you are trying to control them, and react to that.

Students may:

- seem to believe they can never have control – act like a victim
- insist on total control
- switch between total control and total helplessness in an instant
- ask permission for everything, and take no initiative (like Val)
- look for someone else to blame as a way to regain a sense of control (like the lads)
- explode angrily when it seems others are trying to control them (like Stan)
- be terrified by loud, angry people or tensions and perhaps space out in response
- be disconnected – isolated and alone – even disconnected from themselves
- act out and bully, hurt themselves or others
- be part of a gang or clique – seeking to belong and connect
- not ask for help when they need it
- not seem to believe in a future, or to care about “consequences”

What can I do to help everybody learn?

1. Develop curiosity about behaviours while avoiding judgement

- **Try to be curious about where any frustrating or counter-productive behaviour may have come from.** Talk about it as ordinary in the aftermath of trauma.

2. Encourage learners to take control of their learning


- **Create regular structures to give options, without anxiety-producing openness.** For example, team teaching to offer an “inhale” room—where something is taught—and an “exhale” room—where students choose what to do, allows students to control their own learning. (Thanks to Kate Nonesuch from BC for this idea.)
- **Try to be creative rather than confrontational.** For example, another idea from Kate Nonesuch is a rule that students should refuse to be bored in her class. When students say they are bored she works with them to make it better. What would change the boredom to interest—is it too easy, hard, or disturbing? This provides a way to work towards change.
- **Stand side by side with a student and point out the problem you both need to find a solution for,** rather than confronting them face to face and criticizing who they are.
- **Avoid any possibility of humiliation or shaming.** Talk quietly with a student alone about a problem and how to address it, not in front of their peers, or other teachers.

3. Create connections, community and as safe a learning environment as possible

- **Carry out frequent activities to help students to get to know each other well.**
- **Recognize the whole person**—help students to feel physically comfortable, emotionally safe, nurture spirit and self-esteem, and help them feel smart and capable.
- **Work with the students to set boundaries and make sure the classroom is as safe and comfortable a place as possible for everyone.** Make sure any student whose behaviour might scare others leaves, until their behaviour changes.
- **Prepare to address violence if it should erupt.** Know who you can call for help.

4. Help students believe in their future

- **Help students to see gradual change in their success at their studies.** This helps them learn to see “middle ground” and get out of “all or nothing” reactions.
- **Create holistic curriculum that encourages students to express themselves in many different forms** including music, visual arts, and movement, as well as words.



Where can I find more information and ideas?

Each of the six information sheets in this set will look at a learning problem through a typical journal entry and give more information about what might lead to the problems practitioners see.

Go to <http://www.learningandviolence.net>

In the **Impacts of violence on learning:**
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/impact.htm>

...especially **Acting out** and **Lost hopes and dreams**

In how to deal with **Violence in your learning space:**

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence/learningspace.htm>

Also to **Helping others learn:**

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm>

This is one in a set of six information sheets for adult literacy practitioners on learning and violence, written by Jenny Horsman, Spiral Community Resource Group. Funded by literacy coalitions in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta, NWT and BC. October 2009. For more information: <http://www.learningandviolence.net/>

Factsheet design/illustration: Elaine Frampton




What is literacy?

Literacy is **the** essential skill.


It is the ability to use printed information to function in society, at work and in the family.


It is the combination of thinking and social skills we need to analyze and use information to control our own lives, achieve our goals and develop our knowledge and potential.

How to reach us...

 **Literacy Nova Scotia**
NSCC Truro Campus
Room 125, Forrester Hall
36 Arthur Street
Truro NS B2N 1X5

 PO Box 1516
Truro NS B2N 5V2

 902-897-2444 or
1-800-255-5203

 902-897-4020

 literacyns@nsc.ca

 www.literacyns.ca

Literacy Nova Scotia gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, HRSDC.