

3.8 An Interview with Janet Isserlis

Interviewer's Note: Janet Isserlis, of the Rhode Island Adult Education Professional Development Center and the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University, works with adult literacy practitioners and learners to expand professional development opportunities and assist in improving delivery of services to adult learners. She has worked with adult immigrants and refugees in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Vancouver, BC since 1980. A co-author of [*Making Connections: A Literacy and EAL Curriculum from a Feminist Perspective*](#), she has written about trauma and learning, assessment and practitioner research and was a 1999-2000 Literacy Leadership fellow of the National Institute for Literacy.

Q: As you note in your excellent [*Trauma and the Adult English Language Learner*](#) article, while most of us are familiar with all of the obstacles and difficulties our learners have had to overcome in order to start a new life here, few of us are aware of domestic violence or personal trauma that our learners have faced or currently face.

Why is this an issue that is so seldom discussed?

It's discussed a little bit more among practitioners who've been in the field for a while – but the chronic challenge of the field itself is that we turn over. People who are new to it, particularly, may not be intimately familiar with the impacts of those stressors on learning; they may think, "This learner just doesn't want to be here," when in fact there are far more complex issues that people are struggling with.

Q: In the same article, you noted that abusers strive to isolate their victims. You write, "For immigrant or refugee women, this isolation is exacerbated by language and culture differences that make finding safe options all the more daunting." How is this so?

For a lot of victims of violence, there is a stigma of shame and very real fear. "If I disturb the status quo, the ramifications are that I'll be in bigger trouble." Common wisdom is that you're at greater risk of violence after you leave your abuser.

If you're coming from a culture where violence is innately normalized, there's already an expectation of "this is how it is."



They don't have to become involved; if they're aware, or if a student (or a colleague) discloses violence, the most important message is to let the person know it's not their fault. Let them know of resources – many programs have posters with resource information and an 800-number [1-800-799-SAFE]. There should be information that is visible for everyone to see. [Editor's Note: See [Messages that Hurt and Help](#) under Resources, below.]

Q: Ten years ago, you wrote that “Although strides have been made in raising public awareness about the prevalence of violence in all forms and its effects upon learning, work remains to be done in the areas of teacher education, policy, and increased awareness among learners and practitioners in ESL programs.” Have such strides been made – and what remains to be accomplished?

Yes and no. The Violence Against Women Act has made some strides and increased awareness. In teacher education, Jenny Horsman contributed in huge ways in raising our awareness and helping us make connections between understanding the impacts of violence on learning and on how our approaches to teaching support or hinder learning for all.

Because the field turns over so often, there's a need to make people aware of the fact that we don't know who our learners are; we don't know what their stories are. But, there are really good chances that every person here has had some form of trauma.

Just knowing that people have histories that impact their ability to be present for learning at a given moment is really important.

Teacher education varies from state to state but needs to be as much about the process as about language approaches or verbs.

This article was written by Betsy Wong, Adult ESOL instructor and trainer for Fairfax County Adult and Community Education. It originally appeared in [Progress](#), Virginia's adult education professional development newsletter (Vol. 23, no. 3; Summer 2011).



Resources

[Domestic Abuse Intervention Project \(DAIP\): Power and Control Wheel](#)

[Managing Stress to Improve Learning](#)

This website from World Education and the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) is based on the 2010-2012 Managing Stress to Improve Learning Project, directed by Lenore Balliro and funded by Jane's Trust.

[Making Connections: Literacy and EAL Curriculum from a Feminist Perspective](#)

This 1996 curriculum edited by Kate Nonesuch was published by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

[Messages That Hurt and Help](#)

This 2006 resource is from Brown University's Swearer Center for Public Service.

[Moving Research about Violence and Learning into Practice](#)

This webpage is part of the Learning and Violence website, an extensive resource initially conceived by Jenny Horsman and incorporating contributions from numerous partnering individuals and agencies.

[National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) (1-800-799-SAFE) <http://www.thehotline.org>

[Trauma and the Adult English Language Learner](#)

This digest by Janet Isserlis was published by the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) in July 2000.

[Violence and Learning: Taking Action](#)

This 2004 publication edited by Mary Norton is made available online through Canada's National Adult Literacy Database.



If you decide that this is not okay, do you have the cultural knowledge of what's available to help you?

In this country, there are resources in place. But if you speak Urdu, who is going to help you? If you go back to your community, word gets out. Perhaps it's a small community, and maybe nobody will believe that your abuser is your abuser.

It's all the more difficult if your abuser hides or destroys your papers.

Domestic violence is about power and control. If you don't have the financial resources, your abuser has more power and control; if you're undocumented, your abuser may threaten to report you to immigration.

Q: You have advocated "making the classroom safer for all" – meaning, not only for victims of personal trauma or abuse but for all adult learners and practitioners. Can you outline for us some ways in which to do so?

The approaches we try and take to accommodate learning have to work for everyone – and not just victims of domestic violence. There's the notion of building community, establishing ground rules over time, and finding a way to talk about something that might be upsetting to others.

Give learners lateral choices. If they're answering the question, "What did you do this weekend?", I let learners know that they can make something up as long as you can tell me in the past tense ("I washed the floor").

There's Jenny Horsman's (see Resources below) idea of having a comfortable chair or area in the classroom, where learners can take time out – maybe sit there and have a cup of tea for as long as it takes and then go back to learning with the rest of the group.

We can also find ways to make it clear that, "If you need to take a break, you can let me know that 'I need 10 minutes, I'm going for a walk, I'll be back.'"

We want learners to not worry about being present for learning if they can't. We don't want to tell someone to go resolve their issues and come back. It's that notion of "what are the ways that you can be present now? and how can we support your learning?"

I always make myself say, "I'm glad you're here," if a person is late. We want to honor any decision they make ... It's also building the notion that we



have expectations for you as a member of this class: We need you here. We want people to feel that their presence is valued and necessary.

We can accommodate ways for people to learn without being physically in the classroom – using computers, worksheets, or other forms of self-study materials. It requires more of practitioners and adds a degree of difficulty in terms of organization and planning but enables learners to stop out rather than dropping out.

Q: Some practitioners would argue that issues of domestic violence or personal trauma have no place in an adult ESL classroom. The focus of the classroom, they say, should remain purely on language acquisition. How would you respond to this viewpoint?

Absolutely! I'm not suggesting that we stop and talk about domestic violence, that we talk about being a refugee or witnessing atrocities.

We need to understand that those experiences have possibly occurred for our learners – and among our colleagues – and they may possibly have difficulties focusing on language or whatever we're doing in class, at work.

But if the class raises that topic and wants to talk about it, we can ascertain what people know and what the focus of their interest is. Are we putting together a manual for the community, and we want to focus on what to do for victims of crime?

We don't pose this as subject matter, but we need to know how it affects learning and teaching.

Q: You've worked with immigrants and refugees in Massachusetts, Vancouver, and Rhode Island. At what point did you begin to perceive issues of personal violence in the immigrant community – and what did you do in response?

In the early '80s ... I'd be teaching family terms with Cambodian and Hmong refugees using Cuisenaire rods, and they'd line up the Cuisenaire rods representing family members – and then knock them over, because those family members had died during wartime. I started understanding intuitively that issues were there.

In the mid 90s, when I was working in Vancouver on a curriculum guide, I understood that it wasn't only political violence that refugees experienced but domestic abuse and trauma.

What is it that makes people able to learn or not? I backed into that again and again. What is it that distracts us on a day-to-day level – and if you're experiencing chronic violence, what does that mean?

It's important for us to be aware of this. For some, that means having a startle reflex when they hear loud voices – so don't clap your hands loudly to make a point. Put a book gently on the table.

Not everybody is a victim and not everybody is a survivor, but everybody is at risk.

Q: Returning to the context of an adult ESL classroom, let's say that you're an instructor and a student tells you after the class that her husband doesn't want her to come to English class anymore. What do you tell the student?

I would ask how she feels about it; if I knew her well, I'd ask her if she feels safe and what she wants to do ... maybe see if self-study materials would be of use, see if she might be able to negotiate something once a week, or see if she's on e-mail.

I'd try and ascertain the level of risk and level of engagement that would still be possible – and I'd make it clear to her that she would always be welcome to come back to class.

One of the things in this line of work is to anticipate, "What can I ask?" as opposed to "What can I say?". Find out her level of safety and what she wants; for instance, is it okay if I call you, or is it a problem?

Without probing into her privacy, try to ask her questions to help me learn how to connect her to learning – and learn how I can help her.

Saving people, as such, isn't the objective here. We are not working with learners – or with colleagues – as saviors. We're not there to save people or help them to change their lives – we're there to make them aware of the decisions that are possible, and, when appropriate, to support them in ways that respect boundaries, privacy, and safety concerns.

Q: Some instructors are wary of broaching issues like domestic violence because they don't want to become involved in their learners' personal lives – or feel that they don't have the qualifications to deal with such complex issues. What advice would you give these instructors?

