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Learning and Violence

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In this chapter, we define violence as physical, psychological, economic, political and all other structural forms that intend to harm, denigrate, exclude and obstruct an individual or a group of people to function freely, fully and without fear in society. Feminist scholars, in particular critical, anti-racist and socialist, have expanded the definition of violence to include a wide range of acts, attitudes, ethics, morality, policies and social historical structures. These include patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and imperialism (Bannerji et al., 2001; Burstow, 2003; Enloe, 1988, 1989; Gowen and Bartlett, 1997; Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2008; Mojab, 2000; Mojab and Abdo, 2004; Mojab and Mcdonald, 2008; Mohanty, 2003; Rebick, 2005; UN, 2010). In our analysis, we understand all these forms of violence as a universal form of gender power relations with the propensity to develop particular characteristics based on norms, values, traditions, cultures, modes of social relations and historical epoch.

Violence, in its many forms, is pervasive in our lives. Research presented in the recent UN report *The World’s Women 2010: Trends and Statistics* argues that physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence against women is a universal phenomenon (UN, 2010: 10). It takes place everywhere – at home, the workplace, school, on the street, in the media, in religious organizations, as well as in institutions set up to serve vulnerable populations (Koczka, 1992–93: 27). Research over the last four decades has established that violence affects the quality of life and leisure, psychological and sexual well-being, the general status of women and racialized people, and physical health. It also affects the sense of belonging and membership in society and community.

Discussions about violence are often centred on ‘who’ is committing violence against ‘whom’. In this chapter we will not engage with a sociological, psychological or behavioural analysis of individual acts of violence or even, for that matter, group violence. We are interested in understanding the impact of violence on learning, either as an individual act, in abusive relationships for example, or as a structural act in the forms of state violence, colonial legacies, militarization, war or occupation. We also consider modern environmental destruction as a form of violence with lasting impact on learning.

Scholars and practitioners of the field of adult education have studied and theorized the effects of violence against women (Battell *et al.*, 2008; Horsman, 1999, 2002, 2005; Tisdell, 1996). Many conclude that violence affects women’s capacity to engage fully in society and that fear is often used to re-produce male dominance. The act of producing and reproducing the condition for women’s subjugation is identified as systemic violence. Systemic violence is intentional and serves a political function, that is, creating the ideological and social logic for women’s subordination (Hirschmann, 1998: 236). The issue of
state violence is of particular interest to educators and activists because of the effect that it has on the learning capacities and possibilities of both individuals and communities. ‘State violence’ was initially only applied to militarized, authoritarian states, where violence is a mechanism of control and disciplining, creating a perpetual experience of disenfranchisement and (dis)empowerment (Tursken, 1998: 7). However, over the last few decades, state violence has been identified by activists and feminists as being pervasive in so-called democratic states as well. State violence we define as acts of violence perpetrated by the state against its citizens in order to maintain order and control. It is important to note that the exercise of violence by rights-oriented, democratic regimes or autocratic ones often gives rise to resistance movements (Gordon, 2001: 2270). The learning that occurs within these movements is of particular interest to adult educators. Significant learning happens when an individual is forced to find a way to survive and resist state violence.

For some learners, the impact of violence is intensified because of their social, economic, cultural or geographic positions. Immigrant and refugee women, as well as women who have experienced war, often face a different reality of violence and its impacts on their learning. Individual learners bear the impact of systemic acts of violence, for instance, forced migration or forced exile, or the legacies of historical violence, such as slavery, colonialism and genocide. It is important to be aware of the reality of how these acts of violence affect survivors in order to discern how to help mitigate the effects of the trauma on survivors and enable the learning process. Appropriately, this type of learning is called ‘survival’ or ‘resistance’ learning (Mojab and McDonald, 2008: 51).

Survival and resistance learning established the possibility of conscious learning in demanding the elimination of violent forms of social order. Although survival and resistance are connected to social movement learning (Hall and Clover, 2005; Kilgour, 1999), learning that happens within a social movement context often happens informally or incidentally because of the stimulation and participation in the movement (Hall, 2006: 3). In the articulation of survival and resistance learning, individuals are agents of change and are actively seeking ways out of the coercive circumstances.

The definitional outline provided above facilitates our discussion on the relationship between violence and learning. In the next sections we will theorize the impact of violence on learning, examine the concept of violence through learning, as well as outline emerging research areas including new sites or spaces where violence is (re)produced, discussing new theoretical perspectives and methodological possibilities. Throughout these sections, we will also identify some of the best practices and pedagogies in delineating the impact of violence on learning.

**Learning and violence**

Adult educators have engaged with the question of how adults learn and, along with psychologists, social workers and other educators, they have contributed to raising questions of how the violence that causes trauma affects an individual’s capacity to function. In the last 40 years, following the return of North Americans from the Vietnam War, the effects of trauma on the functions of everyday life have been studied in much greater depth (Herman, 1992: 7; Shay, 1994). This tradition has continued through different wars that have directly impacted North Americans over the last four decades. The focus has centred on the effect of the violence of war and the disruption that it causes to the day-to-day functioning of soldiers returning from the wars in the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan. This phenomenon is labelled Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Schiraldi, 2009), and significant literature has been produced for both practitioners and policy makers; however the label of PTSD has been identified as problematic in a number of ways (Burstow, 2005). Although the identification of the effects of violence has been helpful, isolating the ‘post-traumatic’ experience from other social factors has not contributed significantly to our knowledge of the relationship between violence and learning. People who have experienced trauma are often pathologized\(^1\) and their deficits, specifically trauma, have been carefully analyzed and theorized, while
their assets, including the learning from the experience, have been rendered invisible (Horsman, 1999, Burstow, 2005).

Critical adult educators have pushed the boundaries of what constitutes conditions and sites of learning (Merriam, 2001: 1999; Knowles et al., 2005). They have also been at the forefront of theorizing the implications of unequal social and material power relations. At the foundation of work with disenfranchised learners is Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed and the need for transformational learning in order to combat oppression and bring about social action (Freire, 1973). Mezirow’s transformational learning theory posits that the learner’s previous experiences contribute significantly to their understanding of the world (Mezirow, 1996: 162). Welton (1995) draws attention to the significance of all experiences to the learning process through what he calls the life-world. Jarvis (2001: 30) suggests that the concept of continuing education is at the foundation of lifelong education and addresses the important needs of learners once they have left the formal schooling system.

There have also been significant changes in the perception of educators in respect to the learning process. Whereas memorizing knowledge was once perceived as the best way to learn, it is now recognized that the learner contributes significantly to their own learning through their experiences and, as they develop, their own narratives (Jarvis, 2001: 33). Critical adult educators suggest that it is impossible to address issues of racism, classism and sexism without addressing power and oppression and the interconnection of power and knowledge construction (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999: 354).

Adult education practitioners, such as literacy practitioner Jenny Horsman, were among the first to suggest that trauma literature needed to be expanded to include issues of the effect of violence on learning. Horsman recorded an ongoing dialogue between adult educators in the literacy field who had observed learners affected by violence. Her book, Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education (1999), discusses the challenges that adult literacy learners and practitioners face. Central to her argument is the suggestion that the presence of violence in the classroom must be acknowledged in order for learners and educators to work effectively. To prevent the normalization of violence, educators must allow the experience of violence to surface in the learning setting. This can be done by designing and implementing programs that support learners, with the intent that through these kinds of programmes learners will gain skills as well as a better sense of self (Horsman, 1999: 78).

The legacy of violence is present within the learning environment. Survivors of violence encounter many barriers to the learning process, such as an ‘inability to concentrate, sense of detachment (spacing out, feeling numb), difficulty in beginning new things or taking risks, tiredness, panic attacks and flashbacks, negative self-image, concern for safety, inability to trust, health problems (depression, etc.)’ (Rundle and Ysabet-Scott, 1995: 8). Learners who have suffered violence are often distracted from learning, as their physical and psychological energy goes into their survival. These coping mechanisms can function to disable the learning process.

It is important to note that individuals respond differently to experiences of violence. Much of the discussion on learning and violence concentrates on those learners who withdraw or have difficulty engaging or being present. There are, however, other responses to the experience of violence. Violence can beget violence. Someone who has experienced violence may become a perpetrator of violence in order to protect themselves from further injury. Educators may be forced to police the behaviours of this particular type of learner, in order to prevent disruptions and to protect other learners from abuse within the learning setting (Horsman, 2002: 271).

With the global influx of refugees, displaced persons and immigrants, issues of the impact of trauma are attracting more attention (Battell et al., 2008; Horsman, 1999; Isserlis, 1996, 1999, 2001; Kerka, 2002; Magro, 2006, 2007; Magro and Polyzoi, 2009; Schwartz, 2005). The literature acknowledges that many learners have experienced torture, deprivation of basic amenities of life, from shelter to health and food, and often have borne witness to atrocities beyond human comprehension. The challenge is to work through these experiences to transform the inability to learn into an ability to change. This requires...
educators to be willing to think ‘outside of the box’, approaching each educational opportunity with the willingness to learn and grow themselves as they understand the particular needs of learners. Adult educators are beginning to write about these experiences in a variety of settings, from first-language literacy classrooms, to English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms filled with internationally trained professionals, to learning settings filled with individuals who have experienced various forms of state-sponsored violence.

Karen Magro, working in ESL classrooms, encourages educators to be aware that violence, state-sponsored violence in particular, has a significant impact on the learner’s capacity to learn (Magro, 2006: 70). Magro uses life history and personal narratives as tools to explore the relationships between educators working with learners who have experienced violence. She suggests that what occurs during an individual’s first years of resettlement can have a greater effect on emotional and social health than experiences before migration. Many of the educators she interviewed talked about helping learners ‘build bridges’ from prior knowledge to new knowledge (Magro, 2006: 72). Healthy and successful learners are able to build their own bridges.

Magro also mentions that educators must find ways to acknowledge and affirm the ‘hidden learning’ that occurs through trauma. This kind of learning is the same ‘survival’ and ‘resistance’ learning discussed by Mojab and McDonald. Instead of diagnosing and treating ‘victims’, educators need to transform the learning environment into a space that is safe and effective for everyone. Educators who participated in Magro’s study shared that it was necessary to balance creativity with structure and support in order to help students develop both personally and professionally. They also identified that they needed to cultivate personality traits like patience, creativity, perceptiveness and enthusiasm when working with refugees (Magro, 2007: 389).

These traits are also important in working with learners who have experienced violence outside formal educational settings. Social, economic, cultural, linguistic and political circumstances directly interfere with adults’ access to formal education. Learning opportunities may be opened to them through informal settings with alternative and creative pedagogies. There are many good examples of these alternative approaches. For instance, we are familiar with the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT) learning strategies in the ESL curriculum (CCVT, 2010), which is designed for survivors of torture and argues that classes can function to reduce a survivor’s isolation. In this purposeful setting, former political prisoners are encouraged to speak about their experience of torture as a public act for a larger social good demanding human rights. It is also important that the adult educators recognize their role as facilitators, working in a counter-hegemonic capacity against the intentions of violence. Similarly, in our research with former political prisoners, we have realized the liberating effect of inverting the pain of remembering to a testimony on a learner’s resiliency and determination to act socially for abolishing torture on a global level. This qualitative shift in learning, from an individual experience to a collective social action, is what we argue requires more theorization. In the section below we will further explore this point by focusing on learning that emanates through the act of violence.

Learning through violence

We have so far explored the notion of violence as an inhibitor of self growth, fostering community, facilitating connection and enabling learning. In this next section, we want to explore the notion of violence as a source or as an enabler of learning. Violence injures individuals and communities, causing them to forget who they are and their purpose in life. But, this reactive mode of being carries with it the seed of a potent resistance and survival mechanism. In the field of psychology, this particular phenomenon is called resilience (Werner and Smith, 2001). Resilience is the capacity of individuals to cope well under adversity and to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity to individually and collectively negotiate for these resources to be provided (Ungar, 2008).
Learning and violence

Resilience is also the phenomenon of recovery from immediate danger or stress or prolonged or severe adversity (Carver and Scheier, 1999). There are many factors that can foster resilience in people. For instance: family and community support (Benard, 1991), belonging to a religious or cultural community, heightened level of social/political consciousness (Brookfield and Holst, 2011; Ungar et al., 2007) and art and creative expression (Alayarian, 2007).

Creative approaches to the learning process provide learners with opportunities to express their thoughts as well as stories. Most of this discussion within the adult education community centres on narrative and storytelling (Horsman, 1999; Isserlis, 1996, 1999, 2001; Kerka, 2002; Magro, 2006, 2007; Mojab and McDonald, 2008; Osborne, 2010; Stone, 1995). The telling of story, both oral and written, can play a significant role in the survivor’s recovery process, because it provides survivors with the opportunity to make sense of their experiences and consciously refine their thoughts on understanding and learning through the act of violence (Herbst, 1992: 143; Horsman 2002).

The use of narrative and storytelling is important in making meaning in education, in addition to being an effective therapeutic technique (Kerka, 2002: 4). It is important to allow learners to be silent and to learn from their silences as well as their words, to bear witness by listening attentively, to create space for pain as well as for expressions of joy and humour and to offer learners activities that give them the freedom to choose to either share or to be silent (ibid). Storytelling, in traditional forms such as oral and written expression, or more non-traditional forms such as film, photography, poetry, song, ritual or talking circles can be used as a holistic tool as well (Rosenwasser, 2000: 4). These methods access different ways of knowing and help to repair and build the closeness, community and connection that were destroyed through the acts of violence (Kerka, 2002: 4).

In the case of state-sponsored violence, individuals are faced with the remaking of their worlds. This is true in the case of women refugees who were victims of political torture. In her work with these women, Chester suggests that educators and practitioners need to engage in a learning process, understanding and using the strengths of both their gender and cultural contexts, in order to provide vital healing strategies (Chester, 1992: 219). Educators and practitioners can facilitate this by bringing women who have had similar experiences together in both formal and informal learning settings. This can provide an outlet to share the suffering and frustration that have come to define their lives. Guatemalan women living in the United States of America discovered that, as they met together, they began to be able to express the experiences of violence that had defined their lives in Guatemala and in their settling process. They were able to reject the patriarchal assertions such as ‘women are not worth anything’, ‘women are only to stay in the house and cannot do anything’, or ‘we cannot decide, cannot think’ that had held them captive, and then they begin to write new scripts (Light, 1992: 298). Similar experiences are mentioned by other adult education scholars and practitioners.

Mojab and McDonald researched the experiences of informal education with women who had experienced violence in Latin American and Middle Eastern contexts. The women they worked with talked about the importance of learning from each other. They also talked about the confidence they gained from approaching a problem or situation together (Mojab and McDonald, 2008: 37). When individuals are given the opportunity to share common experiences, they are figuratively freed from the prison of their isolation.

Similarly, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian worked with a group of women who were former political prisoners in Palestine using the technique of voice therapy, with the goal of providing women with the opportunity to share with and learn from each other. Voice therapy technique encompasses three interrelated components: (1) breaking silence about oppression by developing self-reflexive speech and opening a dialogue in which women can share their individual visions; (2) emphasizing the process of grafting a group-based point of view; and (3) confronting, countering, or talking back to elite discourses with a woman-oriented discourse (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005: 10). In these discussions, women were able to reflect on the trauma that was caused by the different socio-political conflicts that were part of their lives.
The group provided a safe space to speak and an opportunity to move towards healing, as women shared and validated each other’s experiences. Women were able to share pictures that spoke of their history of displacement, verbalize traumatic experiences like preventing the imprisonment of loved ones and eventually gain power and ownership over their traumatic experiences. This form of narrative therapy helped the women to discover the possibility that they could take ownership of their situation and that they had the capacity within themselves to create the tools they needed for survival (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005: 10).

Another inevitable result of state violence is forced migration. In their country of exile, refugees are often caught in the chronic cycle of the victimhood status and are unable to move forward. One reason for this is the concept of impurity—the absence of formal justice (Espinoza, 2004: 56). The Chilean community and their supporters in Canada faced this challenge and formed a group to resist the effects of the political violence. ‘The Memory and Justice in the Americas Working Group’ is a community-based and civic-education project with two central objectives: the organization of an international tribunal, to denounce the human rights violations that continue to take place in Latin America, and the implementation of what the group has theorized as a pedagogical and collective healing process, through education workshops and activities aimed at recovering collective memory in exile (Espinoza, 2004: 57).

Similarly, over the last six years, we have been involved with a group of former political prisoners from Iran based in Toronto. The purpose of this project has been to provide a forum for former prisoners to meet and to find ways to speak out against state violence. We spent two years with a group of women former political prisoners, using narrative and visual arts to mitigate the effects of trauma and to enable learning. Part of this research was the development of a Narrative ESL Teaching Method that used the prison narrative as an instructive text to increase capacity in the English language. Participants expressed frustration with their inability to tell their stories due to lack of adequate English. Regular adult ESL classes failed to provide a learning context relevant to generate vocabulary, thoughts and the discourse necessary to express their stories of incarceration. We provided one-to-one learning opportunities for them through a weekly scheduled meeting where they would narrate a moment in prison. The session was taped. We transcribed the session and created vocabulary and grammar sheets. We then made an audio version of the story to enhance their English comprehension and pronunciation skills. This generative learning process expanded the repertoire of the participants’ English vocabulary and enhanced their analytical skills to a qualitatively higher stage of abstraction. In other words, they were able to clearly locate self within a larger collective of sympathizers and listeners who were ready to stand with them to protest against human rights violations.

This language-learning effort was accompanied by art workshops that provided learners with the opportunity to visually depict their experience of imprisonment and to create art that made their experiences accessible to others. It is important to note that these art workshops involved renowned local artists who were able to work with participants, giving them tools to use in their expression of their prison experiences. The inclusion of art was important, as it transformed this act of overcoming personal and collective acts of violence into an act of educating others.

Our research findings indicate that political consciousness and a politicized understanding of self and society assist learners in successfully walking through their own paths of learning with a dual purpose: first, of self healing, and second, of making an individual healing process into a collective process of remembering in order to forgive but not to forget. The very process of learning was transformed into acts of testimony and witness, breaking the silence that had been orchestrated by the acts of violence (Osborne, 2010).

Learning processes demanding change and justice are taking place in various informal educational settings in diaspora with significant results. This involves communal remembering, a process that invites individuals with similar experiences to remember together, constructing a shared history that is a composite of individual memories. Similar learning processes are also taking place in contexts where the violence
is perpetrated. In Colombia, the youth at the centre of the civil war are attempting to reconstruct their lives (Riaño-Alcalá, 2004: 165). In order to deal with past terror, Riaño-Alcalá suggests that silenced histories need to be recognized in order that justice can be realized (ibid.: 184). With this justice comes a sense of freedom to both remember and forgive, to move on and to learn new ways of engaging with the world. This is a process which Herman calls the ‘survivor’s mission’ (Herman, 1992: 207). As individuals come to a greater awareness of who they are in respect to the forces that enact violence, the possibility for systemic change also emerges.

**Emerging research areas**

The existing body of literature on violence and learning begins to address some of these important issues. It is, however, only the beginning. The literature does take a critical view of psychology’s pathologized approach to the effects of violence on individuals and to the notion that violence is a phenomenon that only needs to be explored and addressed at the individual level, but its scope remains limited. This is because the populations that have been included in the research have been limited to learners within either literacy or ESL classrooms.

Research needs to examine the broader effects of systemic oppression and exclusion. In the case of the aboriginal population, there has been a historicization of violence. The result of this historical violence has been the breakdown of community and family structures. For many aboriginal people, their education in the residential schools was an experience of state violence (Haig-Brown, 1988). The broader experience of assimilation led to poverty and social exclusion, experiences which had a direct link to the appropriation of land and resources. This violence in respect to the appropriation of land has impacted the way that aboriginal people learn (Wilson, 2003).

We see this issue in the global context with the interconnectedness of occupation and violence. Women living under the conditions of occupation and resettlement are not perceived as having acquired significant learning, instead, they are looked at as having deficits and needing education (Mojab, 2006: 173). It will be important for research to continue to explore issues of occupation and violence and its relation to learning in order to understand the investment of aid organizations as well as the attempts of governments to resettle displaced people.

We propose that there is a need to engage with these concepts and conduct more empirical research on the relationship between informal, formal, non-formal, lifelong learning and violence. Further empirical research on forced migration, displacement, land occupation and social exclusion will contribute to our theoretical analysis of the relationship between learning and violence. Given the current global political climate, where citizens are classed, raced, gendered or divided based on religion, ethnicity or sexuality and categories of ‘exotic’ or ‘trouble’ are constructed, we should draw on theoretical approaches that explain the interaction between violence and learning in a comprehensive manner. Critical adult education approaches that incorporate feminist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist analysis have the theoretical rigour to push our thinking and practice beyond a normative, individualized or pathologized mode of analysis. Research on violence and learning has implications for civic education and citizenship learning. Awareness of the root causes of population movement and deeper knowledge of transition processes can potentially assist us in rethinking the integration and the creation of social cohesion. This revised methodology could also be conceived as innovative approaches to civic engagement.

It is important for adult educators to pay attention to emerging research in other fields of study, in particular memory studies and cultural studies, and to look for places where concepts, theories and research areas intersect. Memory scholars examine areas such as memorialization and commemoration, which can be contested events especially in the aftermath of a war or a natural catastrophe (Edkins, 2003: 1). They are interested in the space that the country of resettlement can provide for individuals and communities to process the trauma caused by the acts of violence and to learn new ways of resisting state-sponsored
violence (Espinoza, 2004; Herman, 1992; Osborne, 2010). They ask questions that are of interest to
adult educators, such as: What role does memory play in resistance?, How is agency restored in
people who have experienced trauma? What roles do public proclamation and memorialization play in
restoring memory and agency for individuals and collective groups of people who have experienced
trauma?

To conclude, in this chapter we have recognized the important contributions of the field of adult edu-
cation to the theorizing of learning and violence. We have argued that the first step in navigating the
challenges that learner’s experiences of violence face, is to recognize and name the violence. Learners who
have experienced violence, and the trauma that follows, have survived to tell their stories. Within their
stories are strategies on how to survive and resist and from them we can discern more effective strategies
that will help us in our own active resistance against violence in its various forms. However, a more critical
theorization of the intersection of violence and learning can contribute to theorizing the relationship
between consciousness and practice. Allman suggests that ideological thinking is expressed in written and
spoken word as well as in the way that people behave – the ways that they relate to other people, species
and objects – and that education can be an important vehicle for the dissemination of ideology (Allman,
2007: 40). And, as people learn, they develop their potential, collectively becoming more fully human and
more fully in control of their own development and of the progressive development of humanity.

Note
1 To pathologize is to characterize as medically or psychologically abnormal. In her work, Jenny Horsman suggests
that learners are often pathologized because of the symptoms of their experiences of violence (1998: 16).

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Learning and violence


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