

**REDESIGNING SOCIAL  
FUTURES:  
LITERACY ISSUES FOR  
WOMEN WHO HAVE  
EXPERIENCED  
VIOLENCE AT HOME**

**Jane Gunn**



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***Jane Gunn***

***Director, Protea Training***

**Abstract**

Women who have experienced violence and who have limited literacy skills are further disadvantaged in accessing resources for both immediate and longer-term change in their lives. Changing cultures of practice in provision of literacy education, frame a project being conducted by Jane Gunn of Protea Training in association with Adelaide Central Community Health Service. This paper will report on the research leading to the project, which is being funded by DETYA through the Innovative Literacy Fund.

Questions that framed the inquiry include:

- how service providers recognise and support women with limited literacy;
- the priority service providers are able to give to issues of literacy skills of their clients; and,
- the nature of contact between service providers and ESL/literacy providers.

The presenter will summarise the research then outline the project plan which will use a range of literacy strategies to develop women's confidence and literacy skills, and incorporates the Guiding Principles related to Intervention Practices, which are in summary:

- safety;
- empowerment of the woman;
- responsibility for the violence remaining with the perpetrator; and,
- respect for the woman's choices.

Full discussion of the research methodology and findings are available on the Protea Training website, <[www.proteatraining.com.au](http://www.proteatraining.com.au)>.

My interest in this area developed from working as an ESL educator and encountering women who were in violent situations fathomed. The Institute I worked in did not acknowledge that there were students experiencing violence and there was no understanding amongst lecturers or managers about how we could support women or refer them to appropriate services. The silence that surrounded the issue was as strong and as uncomfortable to me as that which occurs in communities – a silence that says ‘we know it’s there but we don’t have any idea what to do or say or if it is appropriate to do or say anything in relation to a private problem’.

Through work I had previously done with women’s health services and through my feminist perspective I chose to incorporate some activities for the women I was teaching that recognised some of their needs and gave them space in the classroom to share information about services they knew of. No one made disclosures within class but spoke in general terms

One of the things I am very aware of as a literacy educator is that the audience and purpose of a text influence its content and format. As you, my audience, are women involved on a daily basis with questions of violence against women my first assumption is that you have a strong understanding of the different ways in which women experience violence. The purpose of this paper is to provide you with some thinking around how those experiences may affect women’s success in dealing with tasks that require literacy skills.

This is one of the key questions that frames the “Redesigning Social Futures” project which my organisation, Protea Training, is conducting with Adelaide Central Community Health Service. Our project is being funded by DETYA through the Innovative Literacy Fund.

Anson Green talks about the changes in welfare requirements and barriers women who have experienced violence at home have to deal with. From *Discourse and Change: Working through DV with Learners* (p 2):

I needed to shift from providing language and basic skills simply for the sake of a better test score to striving to find ways to facilitate learning that encouraged students to make more informed choices and changes in their lives, so that their lives might become not only more satisfying and rewarding in terms of family and work, but also safer.

The Redesigning Social Futures Project recognises and incorporates the Guiding Principles related to Intervention Practices. In summary these are:

- safety
- empowerment of the woman
- responsibility for the violence remaining with the perpetrator
- respect for the woman's choices

The Partnerships Against Domestic Violence (PADV) Project supports the notion that domestic violence be understood and acknowledged as gendered violence (citing Stubbs, 1994):

The recognition of violence as gendered, however, need not preclude an examination of the specific contexts in which the violence occurs, nor of the manner in which race, class or sexual identity (or indeed other social categories) might intersect with gender (Strategic Partners & Research Centre for Gender Studies, 1999b p 1).

The main "social category" that has been used in this study is limited literacy in English, which intersects with gender. The connection between these social categories that is being drawn throughout this study is the role and importance of developing literacy skills for women making decisions or seeking ways to "move on" from domestic violence.<sup>1</sup>

Lankshear (1998) argues that literacy education is part of a wider ideal, which balances personal, group and collective goals. It would seek to promote "a fair balance of legitimate satisfactions across social groupings" (1998 n.p.). He suggests that literacy can only be meaningfully understood in the context of social practices and purposes. Accordingly, he argues, the educational imperative associated with teaching people to be literate is to assist them to participate in wider practices and goals rather than simply improving their

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<sup>1</sup> Heald and Horsman (n.d.) look at issues around the language that is often used to describe women as "moving on" and how this language may contribute to silencing women and preventing them from taking the time they need to process their emotions about their

ability to deal with texts (1998 n.p.). An overarching goal of literacy education according to Lankshear, is:

...the achievement of a universally literate populace who employ literacies effectively in pursuing their various individual and shared social, cultural, and economic purposes, in the interests/for the benefits of all on an equitable basis (1998 n.p.).

The participation in and realisation of something larger than the lives they have been restricted to by their violent partners also seem to be the unstated goals of many women who are reassessing their options when leaving domestic violence situations. Among their options, they identify “learning more English” or “learning to read” as crucial to improving their life chances. Whether “learning more English” in a general way achieves that outcome most effectively is a question around which further research is warranted.

Until recently, domestic violence was treated as an individual problem and was regarded as a matter to be kept in the private sphere. Limited literacy has also been considered a private and individual problem and has some of the same ideology surrounding it as domestic violence, in terms of issues of shame and secrecy. The excuses of “I walked into a door”, to disguise a violent partner’s attack, and “I’ve left my glasses at home”, to disguise limited literacy, seem to me to be parallel: they both situate the problems with the individual.

Women in domestic relationships characterised by violence, who identify that they need to leave or change the relationship, are often assisted by counsellors in community health centres. In the process of identifying the changes that they wish to make, some women also confront their need to improve their literacy skills. Their reasons include managing interactions with agencies more effectively and improving employment opportunities.

The linkage of confidence in literate practices as part of a radical new self-conception for women who have experienced violence at home is an aspect of domestic violence research that I suggest needs to be explored further.

The experiences of victims of domestic violence are well documented in many reports,<sup>2</sup> but, apart from the work of Horsman and her associates, there is limited material available specifically related to the literacy needs of these

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experiences. I have qualified “moving on” with inverted commas in acknowledgment of their argument.

<sup>2</sup> See the bibliography in Strategic Partners & Research Centre for Gender Studies (1999b).

women and the Australian context. A search conducted in cooperation with the Australian Domestic Violence Clearinghouse found very little on the topic.<sup>3</sup>

Where education *is* mentioned in reports on domestic violence, it is in the context of community education about preventing domestic violence

Groups mentioned to be targeted for community education are characterised by behaviours or characteristics such as age or cultural grouping (such as perpetrators, adolescents or Indigenous Australians.)

Occasional references are made to the compounding of problems for victims by issues like speaking a language other than English and their inability to access services due to language constraints or the need for culturally appropriate services (see, for example, Bagshaw et al., 2000 pp 91-105).

In this study, the goals of literacy learning have been reframed to acknowledge literacy as “social practice” – one in which we all participate. This approach draws on the work of the New London Group, a collective of academics and researchers who describe literacy learning as follows:

creating access to the evolving language of work, power and community, and fostering the critical engagement necessary for [women] to design their social futures and achieve success (New London Group, 1995 p 1).

The New London Group goes on to describe its second goal as achieving “success through fulfilling employment” (1995 p 1). I suggest that it is necessary to view success more broadly. Success in “moving on” from domestic violence is precisely related to redesigning safe futures that will provide new levels of empowerment and self-esteem for the kinds of women discussed in this study. It is important, too, I suggest, to focus on the specific needs of particular groups and how those needs influence their education options and choices. The New London Group, for example, does not specify women but uses the generic term, ‘students’. The term downplays the gendered nature of issues like domestic violence and its interconnection with the literacy learning of some women.

Despite these qualifications, I have used their conceptualisation of the links between literacy as social practice, power and the communities that contextualise learning to consider a range of issues about how service providers recognise and support the educational and literacy needs of women

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<sup>3</sup> See <<http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au>>.

“moving on” from domestic violence. Research into literacy conducted by Gee (n.d.), Freebody and Luke (1999), and Lankshear (1998) has also guided the critical thinking on literacy in this paper. In addition, the work of Susan Heald and Jenny Horsman (n.d.) with women who have experienced domestic violence, and their literacy needs, has informed my thinking about how domestic service providers think about literacy as a client need. Susan Heald and Jenny Horsman (n.d.) refer constantly throughout their work to the need that women have for safety, and the impact that a lack of safety, or a sense that safety may be tenuous, can have on their ability to learn effectively. This approach is supported by the work of feminists like Lather, who, as I have already mentioned, also refers to the need for an environment of trust and support for women in the process of changing their self-conception (1991 p 60).

Questions that framed my inquiry included:

- how do service providers recognise and support women with limited literacy?
- what priority are service providers able to give to the issue of the literacy skills of their clients?
- what is the nature of contact between service providers and ESL/literacy providers?
- to what kinds of educational programs do service providers refer women?

## **Findings and Issues**

I was able to identify four key findings in the data:

- recognising and supporting women with limited literacy skills;
- making literacy a priority;
- institutional connections between service providers and ESL/literacy providers; and,
- professional development for staff.

The following discussion of these main findings draws on the range of material from formal and informal interviews but, in relation to certain issues, I focus on particular interviews because these participants have grasped the importance of the connection between service provision and literacy provision

and therefore provide useful insights. The participants who made these connections are employed by agencies that support a feminist approach to service delivery: in the words of one agency's strategic plan, this means "challenging inequalities in power and status for women, ensuring that services for women are designed by and for women and supporting women's participation in decision making" (Department of Human Services, n.d.).

Full discussion of the research methodology and findings are available on the Protea Training website, <[www.proeatraining.com.au](http://www.proeatraining.com.au)>.

### **Different Ways in Which Service Providers Recognise and Support Women with Limited Literacy**

One participant talked about the issue of women needing assistance with "practicalities" that involve literacy. These "practicalities" include Centrelink forms and material about restraining orders, custody, and access visits. She talked about how the health centre is unable to provide literacy help due to time constraints but it does refer clients on, for example, to a community house where the clients can receive assistance in completing paperwork. A spin-off from clients' receiving this assistance is that some clients join an existing class that is available at that venue.

A number of different ways in which service providers recognise and support women clients with limited literacy emerged:

- providers in agencies that enunciate feminist values understand the need to support women with limited literacy;
- those that understand this need provide materials that accommodate some of the clients' limitations in literacy;
- they are open with clients about the fact that having problems with reading is a common experience;
- they refer clients to community houses for assistance with practicalities;
- they give strong support to the idea of having literacy programs based at the health centres, as venues that the women already attend and with which they feel familiar and safe.

## **Giving Priority to Literacy: Dilemmas and Tensions**

Competence in literacy is seen by some workers as having an integral role in developing practical immediate and long-term plans for survival and self-empowerment. The immediacy of other needs in respect of safety, however, reduces the priority that service providers are able to give women's literacy needs.

The challenges for those providers who recognise the need to support women with limited literacy were often articulated in the interviews as limitations on time and referral of clients. For example, one provider described how women clients sometimes ask the health service to assist with form-filling in the process of separating from their violent partners and applying for benefits. The health service cannot assist with this task because of time constraints; instead, the service may refer such clients to a neighbourhood house where someone can assist. Clients may be encouraged to join an existing literacy class in that neighbourhood house as a result of this experience of assistance.

In summary, community health providers face the following dilemmas:

- too little time to support women with limited literacy
- the need to address women's immediate needs of safety rather than long-term issues
- the knowledge that women need a sense of safety and a venue where they can build confidence in their own ability to learn and to take power over their own lives
- recognition that venues in which women already feel safe and which have less bureaucratic structures are likely to support better learning outcomes for women with domestic violence experiences
- limited options to refer clients to venues that match these features.

## **The Nature of Contact between Service Providers and ESL/Literacy Providers**

It appears from the data that the contact between the two sectors is occasional and, to some extent, coincidental and reliant on personal contacts, rather than there being explicit strategies in place for these two sectors to utilise each other's services for women experiencing both domestic violence

and limited literacy. Opportunities to build links between the two sectors are limited by the heavy workloads of service providers. Where contact does exist between both sectors, some excellent literacy and education opportunities for women have developed.

In summary, contact between the education and community health sectors:

- is limited by time and funding constraints
- appears to be most effective when providers have developed personal links with key personnel in other organisations
- does not necessarily establish a mutual understanding of the issues that face each sector in dealing with their clients' needs.

### **Professional Development**

In summary, professional development issues to emerge from the data include the following:

- each sector could be improved by receiving professional development about services, strategies for effective provision, and related issues for women
- there is both need and potential for an improvement in provision of services for women by combining knowledge of ESL/literacy learning and the impact that domestic violence has on women.

### **Conclusion**

Some domestic violence service provision agencies appear to employ staff who recognise and articulate the importance of literacy in empowering women leaving domestic violence situations. Although these service providers perceive that literacy support is not part of their role, they are proactive in supporting women with literacy needs in a variety of ways. In particular, these service providers employ strategies with clients that shift the social focus away from the belief that limited literacy is an individual problem. The main restrictions that they face in following up literacy development of clients and in according it a higher priority in the provision of services are lack of time and incomplete networks with ESL/literacy providers.

The research data suggests that, where service providers have stronger links with formal education providers, it is likely that referrals, the cooperative development of courses and ongoing discussion about the links between the two sectors take place. As a result of these links, women with limited literacy benefit by having greater access to a variety of services provided by both the health and the education sectors.

Although this research project has been small and there are areas that require further investigation, a number of possibilities for future action suggest themselves.

## **Recommendations**

- Professional development opportunities for both community health service providers and ESL/literacy educators need to be investigated, with the aim of informing both groups about possible means of cooperating in order to provide women who have experienced domestic violence with ESL/literacy services that acknowledge their specific needs.
- An education representative should become a member of the Western Domestic and Family Violence Action Group with the role of disseminating relevant material to educational institutions in the region and strengthening links between domestic violence service providers and education providers.
- The possibility of developing a project to provide literacy skills development relevant to women who have experienced domestic violence should be investigated in conjunction with Adult Community Education, Community Benefit SA or other funding agencies. It could be located in community health centres, since these are venues in which women “moving on” from domestic violence may already feel are safe and supportive.
- Figures on the relationship between young women dropping out from school and their experience of domestic violence should be established and a review of provision for their educational needs should be funded.
- Service providers in community health centres require updated information about ESL/literacy services and ACE programs that may be relevant to their clients.

- Managers and equity officers of institutions that provide ESL/literacy programs should undertake consultation with community health agencies and experts in the field of domestic violence to establish how their internal resources could support classroom teachers to deal with the needs of women and issues of safety and violence in the classroom.

The following chart was used in the presentation to highlight some issues around teaching writing in different ways. The author and project co-workers are engaged in questioning the most appropriate methodologies to work with women who have experienced violence at home and who have literacy needs.

<i>Process writing workshops</i>	<p><i>Disadvantage lower income and minority student populations in terms of gender class and race</i></p> <p><i>Construct a gendered representation of personal experience and masculinist discourses of violence</i></p>
<i>Genre pedagogy</i>	<p><i>Argues that wide variety of genres need to be taught, including explicit linguistic and textual features if students are to be empowered.</i></p> <p><i>Posited as corrective to the ideological deficiencies of process writing</i></p> <p><i>On grounds of equity and empowerment they argue a less personalist, more explicit pedagogy would benefit groups disenfranchised by Australian society.</i></p>
<i>Critical writing pedagogy</i>	<p><i>Relocating the personal</i></p> <p><i>New set of writing practices</i></p> <p><i>Engagement with feminist theory</i></p> <p><i>Experimentation, positioning student writers as co researchers who produce stories and subject these to a critical process of analysis and theorising</i></p> <p><i>Writing conceptualised as a space for transforming both the text and the writer's subjectivity.</i></p>

Kamler (2001 pp 28-34)

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