

Creating Sacred Space

Supports for Low-Income Women in Adult Literacy Programs

by Roanna Yangco

At Project Hope, we believe that a clean, comfortable, and friendly atmosphere can foster learning. We want our students to feel the same qualities that the space represents: beauty, worthiness, abundance, and self-care. This promotes self-worth and self-esteem—a core goal of our program. If our students feel self-worth because we have provided an enriched learning environment and special classes that boost self-esteem, then it will carry over to the other areas like reading, writing, and math.

Is it such a radical idea that schools put effort and money into making learners feel welcome and comfortable? While the money could be spent on more books, learning tools, or new technology, if a learner does not feel comfortable and safe, then more supplies will not be much help. Giving her a dictionary or another writing textbook will not necessarily make essay writing any easier if the source of her inability to express herself lies elsewhere.

At the Adult Learners Program (ALP), we wish to create a “sacred space” for learning because we believe that *each woman in our program is sacred and has every right to take up space*. Our understanding of the word “sacred” is analogous to Webster’s definition, “worthy of respect.”

The agency, in which our Adult Learners Program resides, is in an old building that was formerly a convent. Our main classroom was the chapel for the sisters who once lived here. It is a beautiful room, but the walls, shelves, and altar-piece had collected dust and dirt over the years. The carpet and curtains were dark and dirty. The walls were a light mustard color. Electrical sockets were few and far between in the classroom,

so extension chords were stretched from wall to wall. The chairs were unstable and the seats of many had rips. We had tried our best to make the atmosphere comfortable given our budget, but there was still much more to do.

The Transformation Begins

In the spring of 2000, we began transforming our classroom. Prior to working on the physical space, we asked the students to imagine what their ideal classroom would look like. Through a guided “visioning exercise,” the women dreamed of water fountains, plants, comfortable chairs, coat racks, and new paint for the walls of our learning environment. When summer arrived, a few teachers and

students gathered to make the visioning dream come true.

We painted the walls, polished the wood, cleaned the carpet, and removed the curtains so that light could freely flow into the

room. Our former director brought us a stained glass picture she had made, so we placed that in the center of a large window in the main classroom. We added new halogen lights to counteract the harsh fluorescent overhead lights. We brought in new plants. During the school year, some women even took turns bringing in flowers to celebrate their sacred space. We took out the old bookcases and cabinets that cluttered the room and sorted through the years of accumulated books and papers. We only kept the essen-

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tial materials, which allowed for a more spacious and open learning environment. The *Art Connection* donated pictures so we had a gallery in our classroom.

We know that the transformation of our sacred learning environment is ongoing. We are continually adding new elements and taking away those that no longer meet our needs.

Although we have limited resources, we always keep the learning space in the forefront of our minds as a place that needs constant care and attention, just like our learners.

Roanna Yangco teaches at Project HOPE, which, in 2000, received a three-year grant to study the impact of violence on women in adult education programs.

Improve Your Classroom Space

ABE teacher and researcher Jenny Horsman believes that a good learning environment will cater to each of the senses, bringing “the whole person to learning”—mind, body, spirit, and emotions. For the eyes, light and color have been proven to have a powerful effect on our inner feelings. **Softer lighting** generally creates a feeling of safety and warmth, whereas intense fluorescent lighting can make a person feel exposed and uncomfortable. The bright rainbow of flames from a **candle** is beautiful and attractive. For some, fire also represents hope, strength, and healing.

Another way to add **color** in the classroom is to bring in plants and flowers. Not only are plants visually stimulating, but they are also helpful in creating an environment full of life and growth.

Aromatherapy, which affects the sense of smell, uses natural oils to stimulate physical and emotional well-being. Pleasing scents soothe the body so the brain can concentrate on learning.

Music can also become an integral part of the classroom. According to writer Marie Herbert, First Nations cultures believe that “sound vibration connects the mind, body, and spirit, and makes the physical body whole.” For some classes where students work individually, meditation music can play softly under the steady rippling of the water from a fountain. Also, music often supplies a meaningful backdrop during freewriting.

Last, but certainly not least, make **coffee or tea** and some basic **snacks** available during class. It is common knowledge that it is difficult to be fully attentive to a task on an empty stomach.

1. Slowly scan your classroom/ learning environment. How does the physical space appeal to each of the senses?
2. Does your classroom space allow learners to explore and reach their full potential?
3. How might you make your learning environment more “sacred”?