



RE-ENVISIONING PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION AND INFORMATION (PLEI)



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The views expressed by participants in this report are their own. Any errors, however, are West Coast LEAF's.

This report is for the purposes of education and discussion only. It is not intended to give you legal advice about your particular situation. Because each person's case is different, you may need to get help from a lawyer or advocate.

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FRONT AND BACK COVER PHOTOS: WEST COAST LEAF 2013 YOUTH WORKSHOP FACILITATOR VOLUNTEER TRAINING



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PHOTO: THE GENDER SPECTRUM COLLECTION

As part of this project, West Coast LEAF gathered rich insights from members of our community. Their expertise and vision are at the heart of this project.

HOW CAN WE FACILITATE LEARNING ABOUT THE LAW in a way that is grounded in the vision of community and supports efforts to end oppression? How can we equip people with honest information about the legal system so that they can choose the path that is best for them? These are central questions of the Re-Envisioning Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) project.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

As part of this project, West Coast LEAF staff discussed these questions with members of our community. We gathered rich insights from youth workshop facilitator volunteers, workshop participants, teachers, youth-serving professionals, former West Coast LEAF staff members, and fellow PLEI practitioners and social justice educators. Their expertise and vision are at the heart of this project.

Additionally, the West Coast LEAF staff team reviewed archival materials documenting the history of our organization's PLEI work, as well as literature on critical, decolonizing, feminist, and trauma-informed approaches to PLEI.

The following learnings from the Re-Envisioning PLEI project will inform West Coast LEAF's re-imagining of our work for the years to come.

A STRONG GROUNDING IN VALUES IS CRUCIAL FOR PLEI THAT ADVANCES SOCIAL JUSTICE.

Important social justice values for PLEI include:

- A politics of care (as described by feminist scholar Carrie Rentschler);
- Reflection, curiosity, and learning;
- Humility, cultural humility, and cultural safety;
- Accountability, mutuality, and solidarity;
- Dismantling structural barriers to participation;
- An emphasis on flexible and imperfect processes;
- System-level, long-term change;
- Honesty about power and injustice;
- Critical hope and respect for the resistance of oppressed communities; and
- Honouring the diversity and complexity of communities and cultures.

WORLDVIEW MATTERS FOR PLEI.

PLEI that is accountable to community must pay attention to deeply held assumptions and challenge the dominance of colonial worldviews.

PLEI SHOULD BE PLANNED AND ASSESSED WITH A FOCUS ON GOALS AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS — BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE.

PLEI has great potential to:

- Contribute to community-led movements for social change;
- Reduce power imbalances based on access to information;
- Support self-determination through informed decision-making;
- Prompt critical reflection about what justice can look like; and
- Build community connections and capacity.

At the same time, there is a risk that PLEI can:

- Reinforce power imbalances;
- Expose marginalized communities to violent backlash; and
- Be framed as an alternative to legal representation and a justification for devastating cuts to legal services.

The path forward for PLEI is based on accountable relationships and community leadership. Wise practices for PLEI centre learners, their needs, and their self-determination.


WISE AND ETHICAL PRACTICES CAN HELP ENSURE THAT PLEI ADVANCES SOCIAL JUSTICE RATHER THAN UNDERMINING IT.

These practices include:

- Talking to community and asking meaningful questions when planning PLEI;
- Building evaluation into every phase of PLEI work;
- Holding relationships at the centre;
- Creating space for many kinds of communication, including conflict and challenge;
- Navigating power dynamics with awareness and care;
- Engaging learners, their life experiences, and their knowledge;
- Prioritizing cultural safety and relevance;
- Offering an honest and critical perspective on the law;
- Recognizing the power of feeling, thinking, and acting (not just thinking);
- Dismantling barriers to learning and participation; and
- Using trauma-informed practices.

The path forward for PLEI is based on accountable relationships and community leadership. Wise practices for PLEI centre learners, their needs, and their self-determination.

PLEI must address injustice frankly to avoid deepening it—including injustice within the legal system. Honest information about the law may lead learners to choose non-legal or legal strategies. It may also inspire them to work to realize new visions for justice.

A photograph showing two men in a meeting. One man, with dark hair and a light blue shirt, is leaning over a table and pointing at a laptop screen. The other man, with light hair and a plaid shirt, is sitting at the table, looking at the screen. The background shows a whiteboard with various sticky notes and a lamp.

PLEI must address injustice frankly to avoid deepening it—including injustice within the legal system.

Project overview

HOW CAN WE FACILITATE LEARNING ABOUT THE LAW in a way that is grounded in the vision of community and supports efforts to end oppression? How can we equip people with honest information about the legal system so that they can choose the path that is best for them? These are central questions of the Re-Envisioning Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) project.

For more than 20 years, West Coast LEAF has offered legal education workshops across BC, on topics including consent and sexual violence, employment law, and equality rights, to name just a few. We have also collaborated with other organizations to publish and distribute educational materials about the law online and in print, which reach thousands of people every year.

There have been many changes since West Coast LEAF first began offering PLEI, both in our organization and in society. We have expanded our mandate to embrace a more gender-inclusive understanding of feminism. We have also made commitments to decolonizing — an ongoing process, and a particularly complicated one for an organization that uses the colonial legal system to make change.

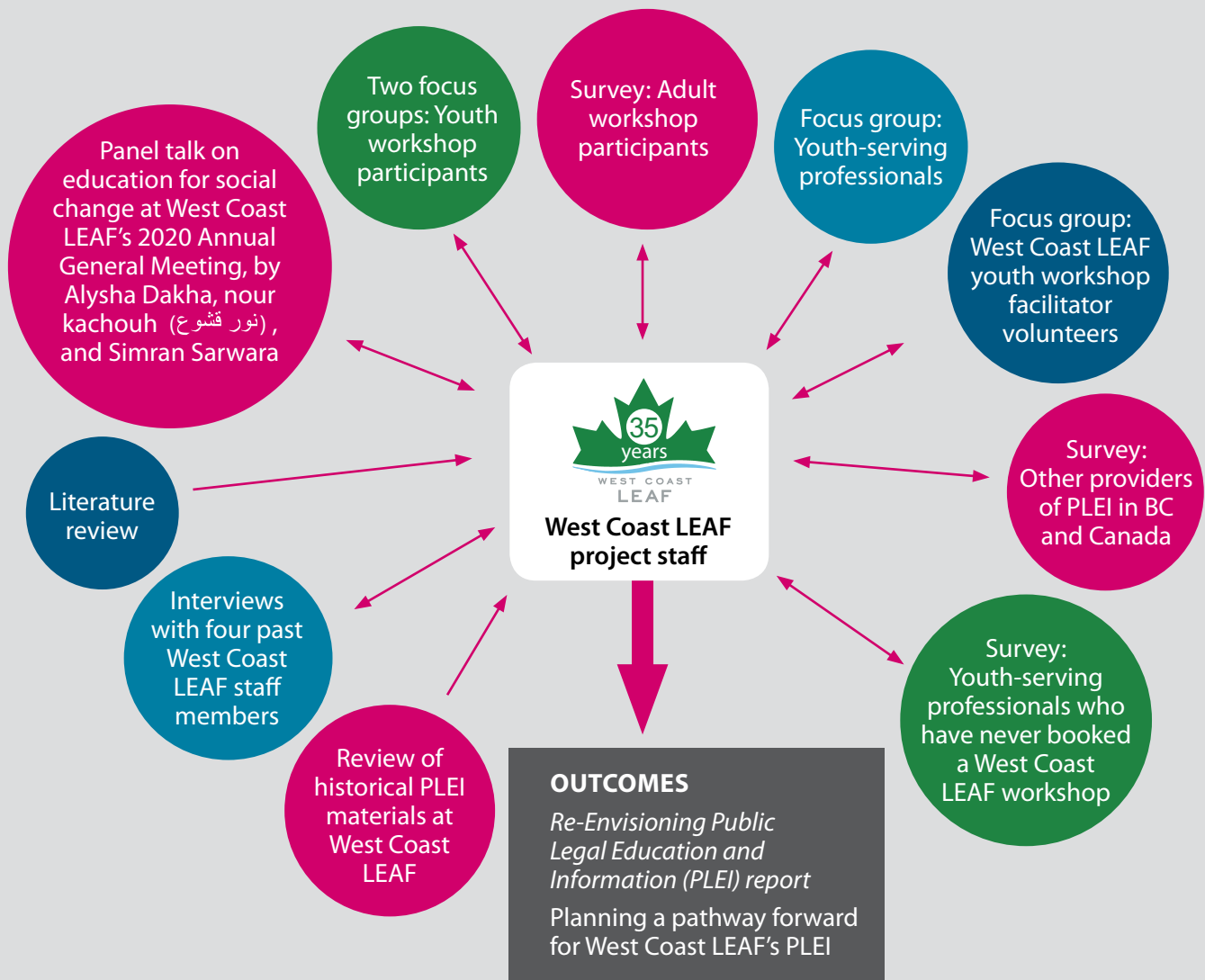
Our current staff team has inherited a set of workshops and other PLEI methods and tools, some of which were first developed in the 1990s. As we celebrate the work of the feminists who built our PLEI programs, we also want to evaluate our work thoughtfully, in order chart our path forward. The Re-Envisioning PLEI project was born from this intention.

We launched the project at our 2020 Annual General Meeting (AGM), where panel speakers Alysha Dakha, nour kachouh (نور كشوع), and Simran Sarwara presented on education for social justice, and other AGM attendees also shared invaluable insights.

As we celebrate the work of the feminists who built our PLEI programs, we also want to evaluate our work thoughtfully, in order chart our path forward. The Re-Envisioning PLEI project was born from this intention.

Throughout this project, generous members of our community have shared their expertise to help us re-imagine what our PLEI work can and should look like. We have also gathered insights from a literature review on approaches to PLEI that are critical, decolonizing, feminist, and trauma-informed. In this report, we have pulled together some of our biggest learnings when it comes to PLEI's guiding principles, purposes, impacts, limitations, and potential harms, as well as wise practices for PLEI practitioners.

The analysis and information in this report have been drawn from the following sources:



From the bottom of our hearts, we thank the project participants who shared their knowledge with us, without whom this project would not have been possible.

PART 2

Guiding principles for PLEI

PHOTO: @WOCINTECH CHAT

BEFORE DESIGNING or revamping an educational program or curriculum, we've learned that it's important to take time to establish some principles, values, and goals. Instead of looking at just the "what," thoughtfully asking "why?" and "how?" can help guide the development and implementation of PLEI that is rooted in social justice values.

We offer the following guiding principles for PLEI with the intention that they can support fellow PLEI practitioners in the creation of resources that will have positive social impacts.

SOCIAL JUSTICE VALUES

Politics of care¹

Learning happens most readily when people feel seen, heard, safe, and accepted. Hosts, teachers, and facilitators have a responsibility to maximize opportunities for everyone in a learning space to feel this way.

Facilitators can improve the safety of learning environments by acknowledging that there is no perfectly "safe space." Instead, facilitators can cultivate "safer spaces" where trusting relationships can be built, making it more possible for learners to be vulnerable and take risks.²

Learning happens most readily when people feel seen, heard, safe, and accepted. Hosts, teachers, and facilitators have a responsibility to maximize opportunities for everyone in a learning space to feel this way.

As observed by panelists at West Coast LEAF's 2020 AGM, a politics of care calls for a model of learning based on cooperation, relationships, and mutual support — not competition and individualism.

Reflection, curiosity, and learning

Coming to educational work with a mindset of curiosity can help educators and learners hold space for critical reflection, analysis, and action. When we are aware of injustice, we can commit to a life-long process of reflection, questioning, unlearning oppressive assumptions, and considering how to use education as a tool of social change.³

Humility, cultural humility, and cultural safety

We are all on our own paths of learning. We all have different kinds of knowledge. And we must also acknowledge that there is always more to learn — especially when it comes to others' life experiences. Educators can model humility by recognizing that they themselves have much to learn.⁴ They can also emphasize the value of listening to others, not just speaking to showcase one's own knowledge.⁵

We do not and cannot know everything about the many people we meet as we do PLEI work. However, this should not be barrier to engaging with people who are different from us. Applying some principles of cultural humility can help create a safer space for learners in all their diversity. According to David Trowbridge, a scholar who studies the behaviour of legal organizations in social change movements, key principles of cultural humility include:

- Life-long learning and critical self-reflection;
- Recognizing and changing power imbalances; and
- Institutional accountability.

The relationships cultivated in PLEI can extend beyond those recognized by the colonial legal system. Patti Laboucane Benson and Alex Choby of BearPaw Legal Education and Resource Centre, an organization that creates and distributes resources about the law by and for Indigenous people in Alberta, explain that practicing PLEI from an Indigenous worldview means recognizing the interconnectedness of all relations, including not just people but also land and non-human beings.

Accountability, mutuality, and solidarity

As educators, we have a responsibility to reflect on who we are accountable to: Learners? Communities leading social change movements? School administrators? Non-profit funders? We should also identify how others can hold us accountable to do our work in a thoughtful and positive way. This is particularly important for practitioners of PLEI, given that unequal power and access are central issues in law.⁶

The values of mutuality and solidarity emerged strongly as themes in our AGM panel discussion. These values require recognizing the power of working together. Oppressive systems were built over hundreds of years by many people and will also be taken down by many people. We all have a responsibility and a role to play in creating the conditions for a more just world.

Through social-justice-oriented PLEI, learners can recognize our ability to face difficult problems together, embrace collective responsibility, and deepen relationships.

Dismantling structural barriers to participation

To support and not undermine social justice, educational work must offer different ways of accessing learning so that everyone can engage. We must challenge the notion that there is one “best way to learn,” as AGM panelist Alysha Dakha remarked. Welcoming everybody into learning requires leaving behind the habits of traditional Western education systems, which often reinforce systemic discrimination, including ableism, classism, and racism.

Flexible and imperfect processes

It can be easy to fall into the trap of wanting to create a perfect educational resource or to reach completion with a PLEI project. Perfectionism and the belief in only one right way are characteristics of white supremacy culture, according to author, activist, and facilitator Tema Okun. In contrast, feminist pedagogy calls for a focus on process and momentum as opposed to quantifiable outcomes.⁷ When we let go of perfectionism, we gain flexibility to explore different ways of doing things and to adapt to shifting needs in our communities.

Focusing on process also creates space for us to acknowledge that learning is a non-linear and lifelong pursuit, and that educators are always on their own journeys of learning.

As observed by panelists at West Coast LEAF’s 2020 AGM, a politics of care calls for a model of learning based on cooperation, relationships, and mutual support — not competition and individualism.

System-level long-term change

In working to transform systems so that everyone can thrive, not just survive, we acknowledge that some of this work will extend beyond our own lifetimes.

One powerful way of engaging in systemic change is using education as a tool to show the connection of personal experience to larger systems. Fostering awareness of these links can help shift unjust narratives that blame communities and individuals for systemic harm in their own lives. As Natalie Clark, a social work scholar of Metis ancestry, writes: “A focus on trauma as an individual health problem [...] prevents and obscures a more critical, historically-situated focus on social problems under a (neo)colonial state that contribute to violence and harm” (2).

Honesty about power and injustice, including a collective and contextual (not individual) lens

If we want to operate from a social justice framework, we must be honest about the ongoing harms of oppressive systems such as racism, misogyny, and others; as well as institutions such as law. Acknowledging and naming the harm perpetuated by the legal system can help us avoid deepening that harm, as one PLEI practitioner noted when responding to our survey.

Those of us who work on unceded land within settler-colonial states (such as so-called British Columbia, Canada) have a responsibility to tell the truth about the ongoing and historic violence of colonization. Clark identifies truth-telling and naming as crucial violence-informed practices (11).

At its best, PLEI can support learners “to gain insight and knowledge into how to best acknowledge and address oppression,” in the words of one adult workshop participant.

(Critical) hope: Honouring the strength, agency, resilience, and resistance of marginalized communities

As we tell the truth about oppression, it can be difficult to offer a wholistic and honest depiction of reality without leaving learners feeling hopeless and overwhelmed or deepening harms to learners who already face oppression. At West Coast LEAF, we never want to leave workshop participants feeling that harm is an inevitable part of their future or that they are powerless to create change. We try to foster (critical) hope: optimism about the potential for change balanced with acknowledgement of the realities of oppression. We value difficult emotions such as grief and anger, as these show us that something is wrong and must be changed. At the same time, we know that using our anger or grief alone as fuel is not sustainable, and that we must tap into other resources — such as hope and joy — to help us keep going.

Some practices to help us engage in hope can include:

- Paying attention to how our bodies feel when we feel hope or actively imagine a better world;⁸
- Learning from histories of resistance, as these demonstrate what is possible in social transformation, as AGM panelist Simran Sarwara remarked; and,
- Focusing on communities of resistance and support systems rather than on individuals alone. For example, we can zoom out from considering one Indigenous person who has experienced harm to recognizing that person's connection to networks of support across generations, including ancestors, land, and other relations.⁹

Turning towards hope also allows us to appreciate strength and agency, which are often missing from mainstream conversations about communities who face oppression, particularly Indigenous communities.¹⁰ Celebrating the transformational work of people who must navigate oppressive systems can be a way to practice hopefulness.¹¹

Honouring the diversity and complexity of communities and cultures

We encounter people of varied backgrounds in our work as PLEI practitioners. It's important to understand that communities are diverse and complex. Shared geography, identities, or other circumstances do not necessarily mean that individuals share a common goal.¹²

"Community" can hide differences in privilege and access to resources—for example, the "queer community" is cross-cut by major differences based on race, class, Indigeneity, gender, disability, age, immigration status and history, and much more. Rather than idealizing "community" and being guided by unchecked assumptions, we should listen to people's understandings of themselves and their lives.¹³

As AGM panelist nour kachouh (نور كاشوع) put it, "Identities do not marginalize people. Systems of power do." By naming systems of power, we can challenge the oppressive assumption that individuals are to blame for the harms they are subjected to.



To support and not undermine social justice, educational work must offer different ways of accessing learning so that everyone can engage. We must challenge the notion that there is one "best way to learn."

WORLDVIEW MATTERS FOR PLEI

There is no neutral standpoint for PLEI. We all carry our own biases and value systems, which are often unconscious. These are shaped by the power structures we live in. In Canada, colonization, misogyny, ableism, racialized capitalism, and other systems of oppression are part of our social fabric. Offering PLEI from a social justice and/or feminist standpoint means imagining alternatives to the status quo.

Limits of Western classrooms, pedagogies, and learning spaces

Canadian schools and classrooms are not neutral or necessarily safer spaces, especially for Indigenous and racialized youth. The First Nations School Association and First Nations Education Steering Committee found that the following failings in schools contribute to chronic absences for First Nations students: unsafe and unwelcoming environments, lack of personal connections between students and teachers, negative attitudes of teachers, lack of teacher training, and lack of effective action by schools to challenge discrimination and harassment (13-14). Other examples of systemic racism in BC's education system include the lack of Black voices and history in the curriculum¹⁴ and the presence of police in schools despite concerns voiced by Black and Indigenous communities about racism, violence, and abuses of power in policing.¹⁵

The harms experienced by Indigenous students today must be understood in the context of past and present colonial violence. The legacy of residential schools as a site of genocide in Canada¹⁶ is inseparable from ongoing injustices in the education system for Indigenous learners. As this report was being finalized, the bodies of more than a thousand children had been uncovered at residential school sites, and Indigenous communities were grieving and calling for justice. As Kanien'kehá:ka activist and artist Katsi'tsakwas Ellen Gabriel points out, "The word 'education' can only be loosely associated with [residential] schools. Many were little more than work camps. All of them were a crime against humanity."

Educational models in Canada often replicate harmful power dynamics, relying on a "banking model" of education where teachers "deposit" information with students, leaving little opportunity for learners to make their own choices or to share their own knowledge, including cultural knowledge.¹⁷

Classroom spaces often replicate capitalist models of efficiency and competition. As practitioners of social justice PLEI, we can focus instead on what social justice educator, activist, and scholar Mary Breunig calls "slow pedagogy": an approach to learning that pushes back against the neoliberal insistence that learning be fast and measurable and fit into pre-determined time blocks (2-3).

Importance of holding space for multiple worldviews

We all have our own worldviews and our own knowledge (including knowledge gained through lived experience). Practitioners of PLEI can unsettle hierarchies by creating space for multiple worldviews.¹⁸

We can also challenge the assumed superiority of the colonial state legal system by recognizing and valuing other legal systems. As one PLEI provider noted in our survey, “We emphasize that no system is wrong, but that it is important to look at a situation contextually and determine the right legal approach.”

Finally, we can shift our vocabulary away from “best practices” and instead embrace “wise practices,” in recognition that knowledge is ever-changing and that many different practices offer something valuable. This shift in language can be a small way to challenge the assumption that there is only “one right way,” which Okun has identified as part of white supremacy culture.

Concepts central to “feminist” legal work are very different in different worldviews

West Coast LEAF’s PLEI draws extensively on concepts of “gender” and “rights.” We need to be mindful that Western conceptions of binary gender uphold colonialism. As Indigenous child and youth care scholar Sandrina de Finney points out: “Indigenous nations have always had their own diverse gender formations and roles” (17). Indigenous and other non-European communities are reclaiming their traditional genders despite colonial suppression.

Furthermore, the colonial legal system’s individualistic approach to rights is at odds with Indigenous worldviews. de Finney cites Indigenous scholar Leroy Little Bear’s description of kinship as a “spider-web of relations” and observes that this web “includes humans and the natural world and necessitates complex arrangements of rights and obligations” (18). The colonial legal system’s model of rights does not encompass this vast, inclusive network of relations.

Clark cautions that settler-led programs and services often try to address the needs of Indigenous communities by treating Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing as a mere add-on to Western frameworks. West Coast LEAF is reflecting on the need for deeper restructuring of our work to align better with Indigenous worldviews. We appreciate that this process needs to be budgeted for and adequately resourced.

Non-profits are often embedded in Western, colonial worldviews

Non-profit ways of being and doing are often constrained by and consistent with “business as usual” under Western capitalism; therefore, it can take significant effort to do the work differently. For example, youth social justice facilitator Simran Sarwara explores how positions for young people at non-profits (many of which involve facilitation roles) are often framed as “flexible” opportunities, and how framing may draw attention away from unfair wages, lack of benefits, lack of accountability structures, and unstable employment. Over the years, West Coast LEAF has gradually moved our youth workshop program towards a staffing model of permanent employment with benefits, consistent hours of work, and better integration into our larger staff team.



PART 3

Purposes and impacts of PLEI

When PLEI applies a critical lens on the law, it can equip people to use legal and non-legal strategies on their own terms and choose the path that is best for them.

OUR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS and other research for this project explored a foundational question that West Coast LEAF has often bypassed when designing our PLEI programs: Why do PLEI in the first place? This project has reminded us that we can't assess how we are doing unless we know our goals and the range of impacts that may flow from our work.

Project participants and sources consulted in our literature review highlighted many potential goals and impacts of PLEI.

PLEI can contribute to social change.

There are many ways PLEI can help transform society for the better:

- By directly presenting opportunities for presenters and facilitators to get involved in social change efforts;¹⁹
- By increasing public awareness of law and policy issues and their social implications, which can mobilize public support for changes to laws and policies (as PLEI providers who completed our survey suggested);
- By modelling everyday liberatory practices and challenging the top-down model of the dominant education system (as focus group participants and AGM panelists suggested); and
- By supporting collective action and equipping community groups with the legal information they identify as necessary to advance their aims.²⁰

PLEI can reduce power imbalances resulting from unequal access to legal information.

Focus group participants and AGM panelists observed that unequal access to legal knowledge worsens systemic power imbalances, and that withholding information about legal rights can be a tactic of domination. PLEI, then, can equip learners with resources for “social self-defense” or “a safety harness,” in the words of focus group participants. Youth workshop facilitator volunteers and people who have booked West Coast LEAF’s youth workshops felt that information about employment rights was particularly empowering to young people in the context of employers’ frequent failure to provide accurate information about these rights to young workers.

PLEI can support informed decision-making and self-determination to pursue non-legal or legal strategies.

When PLEI applies a critical lens on the law, it can equip people to use legal and non-legal strategies on their own terms and choose the path that is best for them (Laboucane Benson and Choby; Wintersteiger and Mulqueen). This type of PLEI is honest about the barriers to legal recourse and the inequalities in access to satisfactory outcomes. It presents legal strategies as only one set of options and affirms participants’ choices of non-legal and/or legal approaches to the injustices and problems they face.

Informed decision-making about whether to pursue legal options has several prerequisites. One is knowing how the law applies to everyday life and which problems can be considered legal in nature. Therefore, an important role of PLEI is clarifying the real-life implications of the law and equipping people to identify and communicate about legal problems.²¹ Focus group participants stressed the critical relevance of legal information to the lives of participants and the need to emphasize this relevance to ensure learner buy-in. West Coast LEAF has reflected that we could make our workshops more engaging by more clearly communicating the relevance of the content to the lives of participants.

Another prerequisite of informed decision-making is awareness of the existing legal options. As one PLEI practitioner noted in our survey, PLEI can increase public awareness of legal channels that are seldom used; for example, BC’s human rights complaints process is not often used by Indigenous people, despite frequent and severe discrimination impacting them (Walkem 46). To be sure, awareness of legal options does not mean that communities will pursue them, particularly when legal institutions and processes are unsafe, unwelcoming, or irrelevant.

AGM panelists noted that small practices can either disrupt or maintain power imbalances — such as setting the room up in a circle as opposed to rows of desk with the facilitator at the front. At times, West Coast LEAF facilitators must navigate constraints in the settings where we facilitate workshops, often institutions with their own rules and routines.

Overemphasizing individual problem-solving in PLEI can focus attention away from systemic injustices and place an unfair onus on individuals, especially those who already face oppression.

Finally, PLEI can support informed decision-making by helping participants access additional legal information and direct legal help. Imparting facts about the law in a workshop may be less useful than supporting participants to develop skills to track down accurate, up-to-date information about the law when needed.²² Focus groups revealed that West Coast LEAF's workshops sometimes serve as entry points for participants' self-directed learning. Our resource list of contacts for legal assistance and crisis supports was identified as one of the most valuable components of our workshops, as it lets participants know that they are not alone and can connect with someone who will listen and be on their side. Several participants indicated that they have shared the resource list in their community.

PLEI can support people as they navigate the legal system.

Not everyone has a choice about whether to engage with the legal system. When people are forced to navigate oppressive legal processes that can profoundly impact their lives, PLEI can help them to do so in a more informed way. Research shows that unresolved legal problems carry wide-ranging and heavy costs.²³ If PLEI can reduce these harms by helping people avoid unintended legal consequences,²⁴ it can make a significant difference for communities, families, and individuals. For example, PLEI can clarify the high-stakes practical steps required by bureaucratic systems, such as filling out forms, applying for services and benefits, and appealing decisions.²⁵ That said, overemphasizing individual problem-solving in PLEI can focus attention away from systemic injustices and place an unfair onus on individuals, especially those who already face oppression.

PHOTO: DISABLED AND HERE



PLEI may reduce rights violations by educating people in positions of power about their legal obligations.

Focus group participants and our fellow PLEI practitioners recommended that people in positions of power and authority should be a key target audience for rights-based legal education. PLEI aimed at this audience has the potential to reduce rights violations rather than only responding to them after the fact. It also puts the onus for change where it belongs and avoids victim-blaming.

PLEI can get people thinking about diverse approaches to justice.

PLEI has the potential to disrupt the dominance of the colonial legal system by inviting reflection about diverse understandings and practices related to justice — a theme that emerged from our AGM panel. This type of PLEI recognizes the vast possibilities for advancing justice beyond the colonial legal system.

PLEI programming can offer capacity-building opportunities.

Many West Coast LEAF youth workshop facilitator volunteers shared that they have appreciated the opportunity to gain skills and knowledge through our volunteer program, especially in the areas of teaching, facilitation, public speaking, youth work, leadership, critical thinking, and law. Many volunteers are interested in careers in law and value the relevance of our workshops to their professional goals.

PLEI programming can build community and spread learning through community networks.

Many youth workshop facilitator volunteers also expressed that our volunteer program creates a sense of community, particularly through our monthly volunteer meetings. They find it rewarding to connect with people who share similar values and to contribute to a larger movement.

In addition to building community among facilitators, PLEI can also leverage the power of existing community connections to spread legal information and a social justice analysis through social and family networks. Education affects not just individuals but whole communities. Focus group participants indicated that workshop attendees and facilitators often pass along their learning to their peers and colleagues, including people in positions of decision-making authority such as college and university administrators.

PLEI programming can offer emotional and values-based rewards.

Volunteers identified many feeling-based benefits of our youth workshop program: they described their involvement as fun, meaningful, gratifying, and empowering.

Challenges, limitations, and harms of PLEI

PHOTO: TOM CARNEGIE/UNSPLASH

WHILE PLEI CAN MEANINGFULLY ADVANCE SOCIAL JUSTICE, it also presents drawbacks and serious risks. The following emerged as key challenges that West Coast LEAF will need to strategize around as we plan our future programming:

- PLEI with a social justice orientation may face pushback from institutions such as schools;
- It can be challenging for PLEI facilitators to avoid giving legal advice when participants ask questions relating to their personal experiences;²⁶
- PLEI does not repair the failings of the colonial legal system itself,²⁷ nor of state policies that have systematically undermined “the community networks, kinship systems, and political and economic resources that could sustain [Indigenous] well-being” (de Finney 15);
- PLEI can be wrongly positioned as an alternative to legal representation and used to justify cuts to legal aid;²⁸
- Some forms of PLEI can deepen power imbalances and marginalization;²⁹ and
- Oppressed people may face backlash, punishment, or danger for asserting their legal rights.³⁰

Educator and author Laurel Schmidt discusses social justice education as a threat to power and to the status quo which may be unpopular. A former West Coast LEAF staff member shared a clear example: during youth workshops about consent and sexualized violence, some teachers make victim-blaming comments that are the opposite of the messages facilitators are trying to convey. This past staff member reflected that it would be valuable to create a toolkit of responses to help facilitators navigate the complex power dynamics at play.

Wise and ethical practices in PLEI

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THROUGHOUT THIS PROJECT, we learned about many promising approaches for maximizing PLEI's positive community impacts and reducing its harms. The following practices were identified as crucial for PLEI that is accountable to learners and their communities and handles relationships with care and respect.

Talk to community and ask meaningful questions when planning PLEI.

Lawyers and legal educators should ask themselves whether people in the community have expressed a need for a workshop before developing one. They should also explore the intended purpose of the workshop and the expectations of the lawyer/facilitator in conversation with community members.³¹ West Coast LEAF has reflected that we have sometimes fallen into the trap of having these foundational discussions with service providers rather than with community members directly, and that service providers don't always accurately understand the PLEI priorities of the people they work with.

Build evaluation into every phase of PLEI work.

The findings of this project suggest that evaluation should be community-centred and undertaken in collaboration with partners (while being mindful not to burden them with heavy expectations in terms of time and work). For example, workshops can build in active evaluation practices such as check-in conversations about the usefulness of the sessions. Evaluation metrics should be aligned with community goals, and data should be shared transparently with those who have participated in PLEI so that they can assess the impacts for themselves.

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While most PLEI practitioners we surveyed use feedback forms as their primary evaluation tool, several proposed other promising strategies for evaluation, like hiring external consultants to improve the cultural relevance of PLEI programs and hiring peers to audit workshops and give feedback on materials.

There is no doubt that it can be hard to evaluate PLEI goals such as shifting social norms and attitudes. Even goals that are more defined in scope, like supporting participants to learn their legal rights, can be harder to measure than many would assume.³² But evaluation is crucial³³ for finding out whether PLEI is leaving people with inaccurate, incomplete, or outdated information about the law³⁴ or creating other unintended impacts, such as reinforcing oppression. To address these challenges, it is useful to use a variety of community-centred evaluation strategies.

Hold relationships at the centre.

Many types of relationships are crucial to PLEI and must be treated with care, including:

- **Relationships among workshop facilitators and participants.** Facilitators should convey that that everyone in the circle brings something of value, and that learning and teaching flow in all directions.³⁵ They should emphasize that the workshop is a space of learning³⁶ — a point West Coast LEAF usually makes explicitly when co-creating community agreements with participants. Community agreements help ensure transparency about roles, values, and practices for handling challenges and conflicts.³⁷
- **Relationships between the organization and facilitators, and relationships among facilitators.** When using a peer facilitation model, it is important to engage in long-term work to build relationships, knowledge, and support systems for facilitators.³⁸
- **Relationships with community groups.** Forming long-term, collaborative partnerships with community groups is crucial for PLEI practitioners for many reasons. First, these partnerships facilitate direct community input into PLEI programming

Broad and Haggerty describe a peer-facilitated PLEI program that was developed after interviewing women survivors of violence about the legal information they considered most relevant to their lives. Daily evaluation check-ins were embedded in this program, alongside other group routines such as a welcome and thank-you round and a closing circle.

Additionally, our archival research for this project indicated that more than 10 years ago, West Coast LEAF's youth workshops included a "head, heart, hands" evaluation activity about the ideas, feelings, and goals for action that participants were taking away.

and greater accountability of PLEI providers. Second, relationships and environments that are familiar and supportive are most conducive to learning.³⁹ Third, a strong network of community relationships enables appropriate referrals when workshop participants need support or further information, or when the public requests workshops or publications that fall outside of a PLEI provider's expertise or mandate.

Create space for many kinds of communication, including conflict and challenge.

The co-creation of community agreements with participants allows for the development of norms for navigating disagreement. Rather than suppressing conflict — which can mean further stifling the voices of oppressed communities — facilitators can help participants build a container to hold the conversation.

In their guide to feminist pedagogy, Lis Valle-Ruiz and her collaborators challenge the assumption that conflict-free spaces are possible or desirable. Their vision of feminist pedagogy incorporates listening, speaking, risk taking, respect, and repair.

Be aware of power dynamics and social positioning, and navigate these with care.

Project participants highlighted the need to be clear and transparent about who West Coast LEAF is as an organization, where the information is coming from, and who the facilitators are⁴⁰ — recognizing that in a workshop context, participants may connect much more with facilitators than with the organization. Systemic power differences based on race, Indigeneity, gender, age, disability, class, language, immigration status are present and relevant in every context and can affect learning profoundly.⁴¹ West Coast LEAF valued the AGM panelists' reminder that PLEI practitioners are part of social hierarchy just as much as anyone. Facilitators should reflect about the ways they might reinforce oppression and take care to counteract these tendencies, while recognizing that oppression is always active.

PeerNet's principles of peer support as described by Simran Sarwara during our AGM panel include:

- **Sharing equal status;**
- **Sharing and receiving (mutual learning); and**
- **Knowing through experience (valuing participants' sharing of knowledge from their life experience, and creating an environment where they can feel heard, seen, and accepted).**

Actively engage learners, their life experiences, and their knowledge.

PLEI practitioners should ensure that learning is active and relevant to the lives of learners, and that it embraces their expertise drawn from their life experiences.⁴² Rather than replicating the dominant, top-down approach to education where teaching and feedback flow in only one direction (from instructors to students),⁴³ PLEI practitioners should facilitate a process of knowledge co-construction by everyone in the group. In particular, it is important for PLEI providers to recognize that many people already know a great deal about the law as a result of their interactions with police, landlords, employers, and government agencies.⁴⁴ West Coast LEAF workshop facilitators usually tell participants explicitly that we recognize the knowledge in the group and know that we have a lot to learn from them.

Prioritize cultural safety and relevance.

It is difficult or impossible to foster active learning and sharing of lived expertise when PLEI programming is culturally unsafe, unwelcoming, or irrelevant. This project identified several important considerations for cultural safety in PLEI:

- Ensure that the facilitators⁴⁵ and creators of PLEI belong to same communities as those accessing PLEI;⁴⁶
- Pay attention to the social and political context of violations of legal rights, recognizing that not all communities are impacted in the same way or to the same extent;⁴⁷
- Consider how to make the learning usable in people's lives;⁴⁸
- Bring in the cultural and grassroots knowledge of facilitators (as suggested by our AGM panelists);
- Explore approaches to learning that fit with oral traditions and storytelling,⁴⁹ recognizing that videos and audio recordings may often be preferable to print resources;⁵⁰ and
- Include art formats⁵¹ as a challenge to the dominance of the written word.

Focus groups conducted by Legal Aid BC on PLEI for Indigenous communities recommended hiring Indigenous writers, editors, and designers when creating materials for Indigenous people, as well as user testing by Indigenous people, to improve the cultural relevance and accuracy of the content. These focus groups also highlighted the importance of connecting people to trusted supports and resources within their communities. These insights about cultural safety have significant implications for hiring and budgeting, given the need to compensate people fairly and fully for the work and expertise they contribute to PLEI development.

Offer an honest and critical perspective on the law.

By unpacking how legal systems actually work — not just in theory, but in reality — PLEI can equip learners to choose their own pathways, including legal options and other strategies such as mutual aid and activism.⁵² Many project participants agreed that PLEI practitioners should:

- Acknowledge the disconnect between the law in theory and in practice;⁵³
- Recognize how long legal processes can take and how hard it can be to get a satisfactory outcome;⁵⁴
- Communicate possibilities for participants to identify failings of the law, contribute to change, and support other pathways to justice;
- Acknowledge the legal system’s harms to avoid deepening them and alienating oppressed communities from PLEI programming;
- Challenge the assumption of superiority of the colonial state legal system and create space to value other legal systems; and
- Acknowledge that making something illegal doesn’t prevent it from happening.

Recognize the power of feeling, thinking, and acting — not just thinking.

Project participants shared that they value learning environments where it is okay to feel — including emotions that may be deemed “negative,” which are a healthy response to injustice. They observed that anger and pain may illuminate the changes that are needed in society, and that noticing and expressing emotions⁵⁵ can be part of strategizing for action.

AGM panelists stressed the importance of multiple options for engagement in PLEI: online and in-person; individually and in groups; and using various senses (such as listening and looking).

Our survey of organizations that provide PLEI found that a wide variety of formats are being used by our peers, including one-off workshops, longer-term courses or workshop series, videos, social media content, interactive online tools, blogs, and other written materials.

Kinwa Bluesky, the Principal Consultant for the *Indigenous PLEI Final Report and Recommendations* of Legal Aid BC (then Legal Services Society), found that audio and video materials may resonate more than print-based materials for people from cultures with strong oral traditions.

PLEI practitioners should ensure that learning is active and relevant to the lives of learners, and that it embraces their expertise drawn from their life experiences.

Dismantle barriers to learning and participation.

Our literature and project participants highlighted these strategies for minimizing or removing the factors that can exclude people from accessing PLEI:

- Use varied formats and approaches to learning;
- Consider the common failings of PLEI resources when it comes to accessibility;⁵⁶
- Remember that access is largely about how easy and intuitive it is to find information;⁵⁷
- Place PLEI resources in community spaces that are inclusive and free to access, and consider the needs of workers in those spaces;⁵⁸
- Create public legal information resources that are short, well-organized, and in plain language;⁵⁹
- Consider the language and distribution needs of migrant and newcomer audiences;⁶⁰ and
- Plan for access for those in rural and remote communities⁶¹ and those with limited access to technology.⁶²

PHOTO: DISABLED AND HERE



Use trauma-informed practices.

What is trauma?

Trauma is generally understood as stemming from experiences that exceed a person's capacity to cope. The impacts of trauma are diverse, personal, context-dependent, and often long-term.⁶³

However, there is no universal definition of trauma, and as Clark points out, mainstream trauma theory comes from a specific socio-political and cultural context and is frequently used to erase structural violence, including colonial violence. Clark explains that this dominant framework of trauma can be used to try to silence local and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Members of a working group of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children at Western University (Nonomura et al.) have proposed an alternative trauma- and violence-informed framework that explicitly considers systemic violence and recognizes the profound impacts of everyday oppression.

PLEI practitioners should be aware the prevalence of trauma. Research suggests that almost half of youth in the US have experienced serious trauma,⁶⁴ and the rate is likely high in Canada as well. Given that communities who face oppression deal with high levels of trauma and that oppression is itself profoundly traumatic, lack of trauma-informed practice in education can compound injustice.⁶⁵

Principles of trauma-informed PLEI

Our literature review suggested these important considerations for PLEI that takes trauma into account while also paying careful attention to the context of systemic injustice:

- Challenge stigma and victim-blaming of trauma survivors⁶⁶;
- Offer choices for participation and respect the agency and decision-making ability of trauma survivors;⁶⁷
- Consider that people often need support not only to deal with legal problems themselves, but also with the impacts of the legal resolution process on their well-being; and be mindful that the legal system can itself be a source of trauma, especially for Indigenous communities;⁶⁸

Education scholar Susan McDonald points out that group learning formats may not work for everyone; ideally, there should be individual and one-to-one options as well.

Additionally, Nonomura et al. stress the importance of putting participants in control of how their stories and words are used, if they choose to share; offering small choices such as closing one's eyes or not; and explicitly reminding participants that they don't have to participate in the same way as others in the group.

We hope these wise and ethical practices may be of use to PLEI practitioners, teachers, lawyers, youth workers, anti-violence workers, and others who aim to share information about the law in a learner-centred, accountable, and justice-seeking way.

- Be aware that trauma-informed practices for educators apply to all subject matter, not only to those topics that are often considered as potentially traumatic;⁶⁹
- Cultivate trustworthiness by being transparent⁷⁰ and consistent⁷¹;
- Avoid information overload⁷² and fast pacing that may make it hard for learners to process information, reflect, and ask questions;
- Recognize that consent to participation in learning is ongoing and can change at any time;⁷³
- Prioritize the safety of participants⁷⁴ while respecting their informed consent and avoiding paternalism, creating space for them to engage with difficult topics if they so choose;⁷⁵
- Create space for participants to name, understand, and honour their own experiences and tell their truths, recognizing that these can be healthy resistance strategies;⁷⁶
- Create regular opportunities for facilitators to debrief their experiences and access support; and
- Ensure that facilitators (including peer facilitators) are equipped with training to:
 - Make effective referrals;⁷⁷
 - Understand and communicate the boundaries of their facilitation role;⁷⁸
 - Use trauma-informed practices;⁷⁹ and
 - Recognize signs of vicarious trauma and secondary post-traumatic stress in themselves and their peers.

THESE WISE AND ETHICAL PRACTICES will guide West Coast LEAF as we plan our PLEI work for the coming years. We hope they may also be of use to other PLEI practitioners, teachers, lawyers, youth workers, anti-violence workers, and others who aim to share information about the law in a learner-centred, accountable, and justice-seeking way.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The framing of a “feminist politics of care” comes from Rentschler.
- 2 For more on risk-taking and vulnerability in safer spaces, see Crosby et al. For more on building trust, see Nonomura et al.
- 3 For more on awareness of power and inequality, as well as commitments to lifelong reflection, see Crosby et al. and Hart.
- 4 Panelists at West Coast LEAF’s 2020 AGM observed that everyone is on a learning journey on a different timeline.
- 5 See Clark for a discussion of the value of listening, not just talking.
- 6 For a discussion of accountability in lawyers’ work in support of social movements, see Gordon.
- 7 For more on feminist pedagogy focused on progress, not outcomes, see Hart; Breunig; and McDonald.
- 8 For more on using somatics (body awareness) to access a “window of transformation” and hopefulness, see Thom. For more on the active imagination of a better world, see Hart.
- 9 For more on a conceptual shift away from atomized individuals and towards an understanding of an individual as embedded in larger communities, see de Finney.
- 10 For more on the consequences of narratives that fail to recognize strengths, see Clark.
- 11 For more on the importance of honoring the strength of people navigating structural violence, see Sarwara.
- 12 Gordon cautions lawyers who seek to support social change efforts not to assume “that people who live near each other and share markers of race or ethnicity are bound by a common conception of their interests” (2135).
- 13 For a discussion of the risks of collapsing diverse people into a monolith, see Rentschler.
- 14 Naomi Hudson, a Black university student and former BC secondary school student, noted in a CBC editorial that BC is still one of the only provinces that does not require Black Canadian history to be covered in the social studies curriculum, despite government promises.
- 15 A report prepared by Argyle Communications Inc. and commissioned by the Vancouver School Board found that Black and Indigenous students surveyed about a policing program in schools were more likely than other students to oppose the program and express concerns about racism and oppression in policing. In April 2021, the Vancouver School Board voted to cancel the program (see Bains).
- 16 Many Indigenous people and communities have identified residential schools as a weapon of genocide. For just a few examples, see Stirbys and McComber; Qaqqaq; and Starblanket.
- 17 For more on the banking model of education, see Breunig.
- 18 According to Laboucane Benson and Choby of BearPaw Legal Resources, creating spaces for multiple worldviews can be one way of enacting reconciliation values.
- 19 One PLEI provider who completed our survey gave the example of inviting people to join a campaign to stop street checks. Another example: in our latest version of the Youth in the Workplace workshop, we share contact details for BC’s Minister of Labour so that participants know who to contact if they want to advocate for changes to employment law.
- 20 According to Gordon, lawyers aiming to support grassroots struggles should recognize that community groups must be at the centre of strategizing, not the lawyers themselves.
- 21 For a discussion of the importance of addressing common misconceptions about how the law works and applies to everyday life, see Broad and Haggerty. For an exploration of the importance of being able to recognize and name legal problems, see Wintersteiger and Mulqueen. For an analysis of the need to counteract the gatekeeping of legal information that relates directly to people’s lives, see Farrow et al.
- 22 Wintersteiger and Mulqueen maintain that the ability to locate and evaluate legal information and apply it to real life is one of the most important outcomes of their model of PLEI (1567). Broad and Haggerty point out that while legal information can quickly become outdated, legal research skills allow participants to continually expand and update their legal knowledge.

- 23 See Farrow et al. for findings from a Canada-wide survey about legal problems and their economic and social costs. See the 2020 Everyday Legal Needs in BC survey by Legal Aid BC for recent data about the legal problems faced by people in BC and their impacts.
- 24 BearPaw Legal Education explicitly identifies the prevention of unintended consequences as one of the aims of its resources: “BPLE’s resources assist Indigenous people to understand their responsibilities regarding Canadian law; we strive to increase awareness in an effort to prevent unintended consequences — such as eviction, arrest, fines or incarceration” (Laboucane Benson and Choby 2).
- 25 For a discussion of the role of public librarians in providing PLEI for high-stakes matters such as filling out application forms for benefits and financial supports, see Kwasnicki (7-8). For a discussion of the unmet need in Indigenous communities for relevant PLEI on the legal aid application and appeal process, see Bluesky.
- 26 Lupo points out that lawyers facilitating PLEI may cross the line into giving legal advice without meaning to, opening themselves to liability (8) — not to mention risking harms to participants.
- 27 Wintersteiger cautions that PLEI can have a “pacifying” (128) function and undermine movements for social justice if it wrongly positions the law as a means through which oppressed groups can fight for change. Indeed, research demonstrates that many people in Canada, “particularly those with fewer resources and those who see themselves more on the margins of society, do not view the justice system as fair, accessible or reflective of them or their needs” (Farrow et al. 11). Denvir et al. suggest “the need to consider legislative rather than educational interventions” (156) for legal problems involving systemic power imbalances.
- 28 See Wintersteiger and Mulqueen (2017) and Wintersteiger (2019) for a description of this phenomenon in the UK. Canada is also facing a severe crisis in access to legal aid, as Farrow et al. explain in detail.
- 29 For example, Sarwara observes that many non-profits fail to recognize young people as the experts on themselves and their lives, perpetuating the paternalistic dynamics of ageism.
- 30 This risk was flagged by AGM panelists as well as by Lupo, who stresses that “Knowledge of one’s rights, or the invocation and implementation of that knowledge, can mean escalation. It can mean injustice. It can even mean death” (1).
- 31 See Lupo for a discussion of the importance of following the lead of community groups when planning PLEI programming. See Broad and Haggerty Appendix A (29-31) for a useful set of self-evaluation questions for PLEI creators, including questions about community leadership and involvement in identifying needs and goals.
- 32 Research by Denvir et al. suggests that people do not always accurately report their own legal knowledge.
- 33 See Kwasnicki for a discussion of the importance of evaluating the design and user-friendliness of promotional and training materials for PLEI programs as well as PLEI resources themselves.
- 34 McDonald illustrates this point in relation to immigrant women survivors of violence who were given legal information but no opportunity to talk about their understandings. Interviews with these women found that the learning they took away was often not what the PLEI provider had intended.
- 35 For a discussion of Black feminists facilitating co-learning by “crowdsourcing” anti-carceral responses to street harassment, see Rentschler. For commentary on the relevance of educators’ intentions, see Valle-Ruiz et al. For an exploration of the importance of educators valuing youth participants and leading with empathy and patience, see Crosby et al. The insight that everyone holds valuable knowledge also emerged strongly from both the survey data and the AGM panel discussion — particularly the need to resist ageist assumptions about who can teach whom.
- 36 Challenging the shame that may be attached to not knowing something was a wise practice that emerged from the AGM panel discussion.
- 37 Transparency is an important principle of trauma-informed practice, according to Nonomura et al.
- 38 For example, in their study of a peer-based legal education program for women survivors of family violence, Broad and Haggerty noted the effectiveness of a buddy system to enable peer facilitators to support each other between formal group meetings; they speculated that this system may have contributed to the high retention rate

- of facilitators. They also noted that many peer facilitators expressed that the eight-week program was not long enough.
- 39 See McDonald for an exploration of factors that may support informal learning about the law among newcomer women.
 - 40 Clark emphasizes the need for protocol for sharing who you belong to and who you are accountable to.
 - 41 Valle-Ruiz et al. stress that recognizing the intersectional identities of all participants in teaching and learning, and consciously creating space for voices that are often suppressed, are key practices in feminist pedagogy.
 - 42 For a discussion of the power of active learning that is directly applicable to the lives of participants, see Crosby et al. and Schmidt. For the theory that optimal learning experiences strike a balance between being too consistent or too inconsistent with learners' experiences, see McDonald (citing Sharan B. Merriam and M. Carolyn Clark). For commentary on lived experience as a crucial source of knowledge, see Crosby et al.; Wintersteiger; and Breunig. This theme also emerged strongly from the AGM panel discussion, with a particular emphasis on honouring the lived expertise of oppressed communities, challenging dominant assumptions about who holds expertise, and compensating people fairly when asking them to share their knowledge.
 - 43 Sarwara identifies the unidirectional flow of feedback as part of an ageist and exploitative dynamic in the way many non-profits interact with young workers and volunteers.
 - 44 As McDonald points out, many people are forced to learn about the law very quickly for the sake of their survival.
 - 45 For example, West Coast LEAF's youth workshop facilitators are predominantly non-lawyers and young women of colour, and many workshop participants share these identities and social locations.
 - 46 For example, de Finney highlights the "importance of directly including Indigenous children and youth of all genders and sexualities in developing research, practice, and policy for anti-sexual violence and anti-settler violence initiatives" (18).
 - 47 To offer a few examples: according to Legal Aid BC's 2020 Everyday Legal Needs survey, lower-income people in BC face more legal problems than those with higher incomes, and people are much less likely to be satisfied with the outcomes of discrimination-related legal problems compared to other types of legal problems. Additionally, focus group participants in this project observed that employment rights information may be particularly important for newcomers to Canada, because of the socio-political context of racism and exploitation by employers (particularly when workers have a tenuous immigration status). They also highlighted the relevance of widespread economic insecurity for discussions of employment rights: people struggling to make ends meet face immense risks from speaking out about violations of their workplace rights, and they may particularly benefit from a space to talk openly about injustices in the workplace and the pros and cons of the available options. Finally, in a focus group discussion of West Coast LEAF's workshops about consent and sexual assault, a youth-serving professional pointed out that post-secondary institutions are expected to create a "consent island in a Niagara Falls of rape culture"; therefore, it can be valuable to have a space to unpack the messages surrounding us, as West Coast LEAF does in our *Only Yes Means Yes* workshop.
 - 48 The metaphor of metabolizing knowledge surfaced as part of the AGM panel — suggesting that information requires processing in order for it to become nourishing and energizing. Focus group participants suggested that exploring real-world examples is one wise practice for making learning applicable to participants' lives.
 - 49 Clark explores "the importance of story-telling, in particular, the process of call and response, in order to link emotion with reason and as such situate knowing, within the context of the relationship with the larger community" and to challenge "current modes of truth and justice, helping us to understand and change the present by placing it in a new relation to the past" (10).
 - 50 Bluesky found that community advocates and workers who serve Indigenous communities often recommended auditory and visual learning formats.
 - 51 Clark observes that art is a tool of resistance that can reframe stigmatizing narratives.
 - 52 For a detailed exploration of decentering the law in public legal education, see Wintersteiger and Mulqueen. For commentary on the dissonance between expectation and reality when pursuing legal resolutions to problems, see Farrow et al.

- 53 For example, by unpacking legal case examples where judges relied on rape myths in their reasoning — an exercise West Coast LEAF and at least one peer organization have used.
- 54 One PLEI provider who completed our survey gave the example of the difficulty in proving discrimination to a legal standard when making a human rights complaint.
- 55 Valle-Ruiz et al. offer the following framing of the relationship between thinking, feeling, and doing: habits of head (ways of thinking of knowing), heart (values), and hand (practices informed by head and heart).
- 56 Bluesky found that the services and materials of Legal Aid BC (then Legal Services Society) were often inaccessible for Indigenous clients dealing with serious legal problems in the areas of family, child welfare, and criminal law, on the basis of “language differences, lower rates of literacy, higher rates of cognitive disability, highly variable rates of digital readiness, and the accessibility of PLEI in general” (8).
- 57 A participant in our survey for PLEI providers recommended categorizing information according to everyday concepts rather than according to legislation. For example, “work” is an intuitive, plain-language category, unlike “*Employment Standards Act*.”
- 58 See Kwasnicki for a detailed investigation of public libraries as a setting where communities access PLEI, particularly outside of large cities, and the training and support needs of public library workers when it comes to facilitating learning about the law.
- 59 Useful formats may include step-by step instructions, checklists, and timelines, according to Bluesky. West Coast LEAF has reflected that we need to avoid information overload and be mindful that people using our public legal information resources may be in crisis.
- 60 See McDonald for recommendations for PLEI outlined by participants in a Spanish-speaking women’s group.
- 61 For example, Kwasnicki reports that physical brochures can be extremely useful for promoting legal information library collections in rural and remote areas, in contrast to webinars, which were described as the least effective way to reach people in these communities (24-25).
- 62 Bluesky recommended that mobile-friendly resources be prioritized when creating web-based content, given that many people have access to cell phones rather than computers.
- 63 For an introduction to trauma and findings from a literature review of wise practices for conducting ethical research with women and children impacted by violence, see Nonomura et al.
- 64 Crosby et al. cite this statistic (16) and propose practical strategies for middle school educators to account for widespread trauma experiences among students.
- 65 Crosby et al. argue that trauma-informed teaching is itself a form of social justice pedagogy, while a lack of trauma-informed teaching deepens injustice.
- 66 See de Finney for an analysis of the pathologizing and victim-blaming impacts of psychometric assessments of trauma for Indigenous girls; and the stigmatizing view of Indigenous girls who have survived violence as “faceless and broken” (15), particularly when they do not “bounce back” from violence in the way Western psychology demands.
- 67 See Clark for a critique of colonial trauma frameworks that condescendingly treat Indigenous girls as needing to be rescued. See Trowbridge for a discussion of the damaging myth that trauma survivors are “too fragile” to consent to participate in research or talk about their experiences (5).
- 68 Laboucane Benson and Choby highlight many examples of how the colonial legal system has harmed and continues to harm Indigenous communities, including by separating families, banning cultural practices and ceremony, and perpetuating racism.
- 69 Crosby et al. describe trauma-informed practices for all aspects of middle-school teaching.
- 70 This is one of the six principles of trauma-informed research ethics identified by Nonomura et al. Being transparent can include providing a detailed description about what to expect when attending an event or accessing a space, including the sights, sounds, and smells that may be encountered.
- 71 Crosby et al. identify consistent routines as important for trauma-informed teaching, particularly with youth.
- 72 McDonald suggests that a confusing array of options with uncertain outcomes can worsen a sense of instability for survivors of violence.

- 73 This is crucial because, as Nonomura et al. point out, it is not possible to predict with certainty what might cause distress for participants.
- 74 A wise practice proposed by Nonomura et al. is asking participants what they need to feel safe.
- 75 According to Nonomura et al., “[. . .] [T]he failure to empower a participant’s expressed consent might have the adverse effect of reproducing a client’s loss of control and autonomy” (20).
- 76 Clark stresses the importance of this strategy in her work with an Indigenous girls’ group that resisted a colonial, pathologizing, individualized approach to trauma.
- 77 Nonomura et al. suggest reaching out to the organizations listed on resource sheets to ensure that they are aware that participants might contact them (18). West Coast LEAF has reflected that we can do more to build relationships with support organizations on our resource list rather than setting participants up to make cold calls.
- 78 Broad and Haggerty point out that there is a crucial distinction between facilitation and therapeutic support, and that peer facilitators must be able to draw boundaries around their role and offer good referrals.
- 79 Nonomura et al. suggest that facilitator training can include role-plays, rehearsals, and situation-based learning around asking questions, explaining the limits of confidentiality, offering choices to participants, checking for consent, and other important aspects of trauma-informed practice.

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West Coast LEAF is an incorporated BC non-profit society and federally registered charity. West Coast LEAF promotes gender equality and human rights through equality rights litigation, law and policy reform, and public legal education in British Columbia.



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