

The Encyclopaedia Reader: exploring reading habits

In August 2016 I began working with three library-based bibliotherapy groups - two weekly, and one monthly group specifically for carers. Promotional material for the weekly sessions targeted individuals with mental health difficulties, and deliberately invited a wide range of needs and abilities. The service had retained original members of the weekly groups since the initial set up in 2014. Therefore, planning and selecting fresh and appropriate material for each session presented an obvious challenge.

I was used to working with groups with a clear shared experience, grief and loss for example, and I was immediately struck by the difference in levels of disclosure in the weekly groups. Some members openly identified with mental health difficulties, while others preferred not to disclose any sort of struggle. In the early weeks, I hoped to select material that would allow me to get to know the participants, and build on existing group bonds.

The session I would like to share proved valuable with all three groups but was designed with the smallest weekly group in mind; all three members wished to take a break from poetry, and shared a passion for crime fiction and biographies.

I borrowed ten questions about reading habits from the service's existing toolkit, and paired these with a recently published piece of creative nonfiction in the New York Times. *The Encyclopaedia Reader* tells the story of Woods, a young offender learning to read during a long prison sentence - and of his metaphorical and physical escape from incarceration. Woods writes to Stevens, the editor of Merriam Webster Encyclopaedias, when he spots a typographical error. Stevens' response to the letter leads to a life-long friendship.

We began by reading a page each, occasionally stumbling over unfamiliar terms or place names, and often pausing to ask, *is this story really true?* When we'd finished reading, I asked the group what had surprised them most; people then went on to share what had saddened and inspired them. The group were particularly moved by Woods' determination during a hunger strike when his books were taken from him. What surprised people most of all about the story, aside from being true, was that since Woods re-joined the outside world he no longer reads.

Everyone recognised similar characters to Woods, recalling classmates from their early years, often overlooked or misunderstood by teachers and parents. Each group came up with similar questions for one another, which included; *What if Woods had never written the first letter? What if Stevens had never replied? What if Woods' early opportunities in life were different?* Moved by Woods' resilience, people began to touch on their own strengths - past and present - identifying unlikely childhood mentors.

We then moved on to discuss reading habits. The cards were placed faced down in the middle of the group. People were invited to pick a card up and to read the question aloud. This offered a little more control in facilitating the responses, and everyone seemed to enjoy 'owning' a question, with the option to 'pass' on any question that felt uncomfortable.

Questions included:

Q. *What is the last book/poem/story you read, and would you recommend it?*

Q. *Is there a book you have read more than once?*

Q. *Have you ever not finished a book?*

Q. *What is your favourite childhood book?*

Q. *Is there a book/poem/story that changed your life, even a little?*

The following week, people began to challenge ideas about their own perceived hierarchy of reading material, and in the weeks that followed there seemed to be a shift in attitude towards unfamiliar texts. I found the session allowed me to reinforce the message – as a new facilitator - that there's no need for technical analysis to enjoy the material.

Subsequent sessions such as 'notes to my younger self', were built around the emerging themes and provided a familiar framework for retelling stories from the past. There may be potential to use these materials within a short programme of bibliotherapy, perhaps as an ice-breaker in the early weeks. The session might include poetry to introduce, or complement themes. Similar themes emerged from all three groups, including; guilt and regret; crime and punishment; opportunities and limitations; censorship and freedom; and the labels we carry from childhood to adulthood.

Regarding risks and unintended consequences - I hoped the subject matter posed a low risk of veering into dangerous territory. All three groups shared a fascination with crime as a form of escapism, providing access to another world - this led me to assume the group had little, or no, first-hand experience of a prison setting. I anticipated the 'favourite childhood book' question might be difficult for some, as it comes with so many assumptions – assumptions about perceptions of childhood, and a childhood with books. Yet I still managed to underestimate how common it was to have grown up in a house without books. Member's ages ranged widely, from late-twenties to early-nineties; and for those who had access to books, reading was often seen as a frivolous pastime, reinforcing a life-long message about right and wrong types of reading material.

The Encyclopaedia Reader offered the groups permission to respond more honestly to the reading habit questions. This type of nonfiction, arguably written more like fiction, can allow the reader access to real-life stories from a safe distance. One group with long-term friendships, were surprised by how much the questions had revealed about one another.

Despite the obvious common ground around the secrecy and guilt attached to early reading experiences, the conversations that emerged offered me valuable insight into individual relationships to reading and to people's backgrounds. This went some way to address the challenge of working with such a diverse group in terms of disclosure.