

## **The Book Well program**

The Book Well program is a collaborative initiative of the State Library of Victoria, the Public Libraries Victoria Network and VicHealth. Employing read aloud reading groups, the program focuses on the power of literature to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Listen & learn!

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This presentation is my personal reflection on The Book Well Program and includes my thoughts on the therapeutic benefits of reading and, specifically, the benefits of reading for those experiencing various stages of dementia.

The Book Well Program particularly targets people who are vulnerable due to their situations, such as the homeless, the long-term unemployed, new arrivals in Australia, residents in aged-care facilities and those experiencing mental health problems. The Victorian program was inspired by the United Kingdom's renowned Get Into Reading program. The training of Australia's Book Well Program facilitators was the first course of this kind offered outside the United Kingdom. To put this in perspective, we first need to go back to the UK.

Get Into Reading was set up in 2001 by Jane Davis, the founder and director of The Reader Organisation, a UK charity responsible for pioneering the use of books and reading in therapeutic ways in community settings. Davis, as facilitator in her first Get Into Reading class, wasn't sure if the fourteen people who signed up *could* read, so she prepared to read aloud. The following describes her account of those beginnings of Get Into Reading:

*. . . it was F who made a perceptive comment about how easy it is to get stuck in life. And at the end of the session it was also F who said, 'So when are you bringing in the good stuff? Shakespeare? Tolstoy? The poshknobs have all the best stuff. Why can't we try it?' I'd never have thought of reading Shakespeare with that group . . .*

From those early beginnings Get into Reading has become distinguished from other reading therapy initiatives in that it emphasises the importance of serious, 'classic' literature and its role in mirroring and representing our own experience.

### **2. THE AUSTRALIAN CHAPTER**

#### **2.1. The 'reading cure'**

The use of books and reading in therapeutic ways has previously been approached from a very clinical perspective in Australia, with health and wellbeing information being offered in the form of brochures and self-help books. For many converts, the idea of using books therapeutically in other ways first reached them in an article entitled 'The Reading Cure' by Blake Morrison in *The Guardian*. When researching possible themes for my own reading focused thesis, I came across this article and it had a profound effect on me.

Sally Heath, the editor of *A2* in Melbourne's newspaper *The Age*, described a similar experience in an email to me, dated 8 May 2010:

*We read all the overseas papers and have rights to Guardian copy. We thought the program was brilliant and that Melbourne/Australian readers would be interested. We published it ['The Reading Cure'] on Saturday 29 March 2008.*

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*I expected my phone would run hot with people wanting contact details for Get Into Reading but there was silence. ... So I thought I would see if I could get funding or interest from groups to set up a similar scheme here.*

*The UK organisers were up for a trip to Melbourne if we could pay their way. Finally, after hitting some dead ends, VicHealth said they would fund half the cost of the UK trainers travelling to Melbourne and the State Library of Victoria said they would oversee the project. And when push came to shove, the State Library of Victoria found the shortfall of money.*

### **2.2. The Book Well Program facilitator training**

In January 2010 the State Library of Victoria began management of the project. The first objective was to train twenty Victorian Book Well Program facilitators. The second objective was to evaluate the project.

In February 2010, potential participants completed the application process.

To prepare for the Melbourne training program I attended a five day Get Into Reading facilitator training program in the UK. Get Into Reading has a strong track record of engaging 'hard to reach' audiences that are often difficult to connect with, and working with established UK groups was a reminder that these types of groups are not just for the socially isolated. Problems with living can vary, from physical health issues to mental illness, deep grief, stress and anxiety. Despite advances in technology and the standard of living, many of us still do not live very well within!

In March 2010, three Reader Organisation trainers, using theory and practical methods, covered all facets of facilitating read-aloud groups during a week long training program, after which each facilitator implemented a Book Well pilot program in their local community.

### **3. WHAT HAPPENS IN A READ-ALOUD GROUP?**

It is hard to explain precisely what happens in a facilitated read-aloud group. The new facilitators describe this by saying 'something magic happens', and express it as 'a slippery but powerful thing'. Though it is very difficult to define precisely, this presentation will attempt to offer some sort of working definition.

Put very simply Book Well works like this: Each week, small groups, usually of no more than ten people, listen to short stories and poetry slowly read aloud. They then respond to what they have listened to. For some this may be to voice their thoughts, for others it may be to just think thoughts. There is no pressure for anyone to speak and, at times, the members of the groups share an undemanding silence. It is an opportunity to be with people without the pressure of the expectation of having to interact.

A former volunteer at my own Prague House group recently contacted me. He had been reflecting on the reading group and said in an email to me, dated 20 September 2011:

*My attendance at the groups you ran at Prague House I found to be very therapeutic for the residents ... I noticed it inspired some of the participants to voice their opinions or thoughts quite easily in this safe environment.*

It is the shared literature that is the key factor to a group's success. The group's focus is not anyone's problems with living – the focus is the literature! The participants move past the individual to the greater picture of humankind. The things that divide us are far less important than those that connect us – and all literature is connected to life. Readers want to talk about these connections, and the story making process within literature invites a reader to do just that. We don't need special knowledge to understand classic literature: we just need a willingness to think deeply and engage with our emotions. Reading literature in this way can only be described as therapeutic.

## **4. HOW DOES THE THERAPY HAPPEN**

### **4.1. Cognition**

*. . . If I don't write this story tonight  
I never will . . .*

### **4.2. Emotion**

*. . . Today the day is seeing time. Knife-sharp,  
a cruel blade of light cuts through  
the brain's greyness, sweeps over mists  
and hints at ridges, distantly . . .*

### **4.3. Language**

*. . . Close in, at the stone-trough  
hard by the spring of language where  
the cypress stands, a falcon drinks.  
The cypress ripples in shattered water  
nights of many moons and nightingales . . .*

### **4.4. Rhythm**

*. . . I remember, I remember  
the house where I was born,  
the little window where the sun  
came peeping in at morn;  
he never came a wink too soon  
nor brought too long a day;  
but now, I often wish the night  
had borne my breath away . . .*

### **4.5. Imagination**

*... I wander'd lonely as a cloud  
that floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
when all at once I saw a crowd,  
a host of golden daffodils,  
. . . For oft, when on my couch I lie  
in vacant or in pensive mood,*

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*they flash upon that inward eye  
which is the bliss of solitude;  
and then my heart with pleasure fills,  
and dances with the daffodils . . .*

### **4.6. A Safe Place**

*. . . They were good lads, The comrades. They did not grumble  
because of weariness or because of thirst or because of frost.  
They had the manner of trees and the manner of waves  
that accept the wind and the rain,  
accept the night and the sun,  
and in the midst of change they do not change.  
They were good lads . . .*

## **5. READ ALOUD GROUPS IN VICTORIA**

### **5.1. The Book Well program in 2010**

In 2010, eighteen Book Well pilot groups took place across Victoria. Nine of these were involved with Aged Care groups, of which some of the participants had various stages of dementia.

Evaluations from Aged Care facility partners illuminated how reading aloud can have positive effects with dementia patients. Some of the specific comments included:

- staff observed that some resident's moods are agitated or low before leaving their rooms to attend and then the same residents begin to reminisce individually and their moods are improved and enhanced
- the high quality classic literature used in Book Well sessions, and the relevance of the topics selected for the lives of persons with dementia, makes these materials a natural for eliciting engagement. I think this is a great way to communicate with people in the later stages of this disease
- even those with severe dementia smile and laugh
- the Divisional Therapist noted an improvement in the communication/recall of dementia patients. Another participant, suffering depression, was buoyed enormously by the social sense of belonging to the group. She often commented after the session, 'How wonderful it was to have a conversation!'

### **5.2. Groups working with dementia in Victoria**

Perhaps the best way to talk about the benefits of Book Well for people suffering dementia is to share some stories with you. I will begin with my own Book Well group at Prague House, a low-care residential facility of St Vincent's hospital.

Some of the group members have a degree of dementia associated with alcohol or substance abuse. Despite these conditions, and the accompanying cognitive impairment, the Book Well discussions each week are articulate, and are characterised by depth and presence. The benefits of these discussions to the group members are encapsulated by one

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participant's comment: 'These conversations are fun; they're really fun. You know, I never hear people say boo and here they are speaking with exuberance.'

That comment was made by Bill. Bill has dementia. Not long ago, it was feared he had lost the ability to access language. But in each session he's perceptive and articulate and, after reading 'Everything Touches' by Roger McGough, he commented, 'I get a great relief when this poem is read to me. I don't have any inhibition. I can let myself inwardly go. I can concentrate 360 per cent.'

I will always remember Bill leaning into the circle after reading this poem and asking us: 'Can you touch another person without physically touching?'

Bill's question prompted philosophical observations about things that might touch us. Sharing with Bill I would forget he had dementia and each week I found myself surprised when he asked me to take him to the lunch room or his bedroom after a session. I had forgotten about his illness and its affect on him.

Don also has dementia due to alcohol abuse. His son joined the group on one occasion. It was clear that Don didn't recognise his son. After the group his son said to me, 'Dad didn't know who I was, did he?' I think it may have been the first time that had happened and Don's son was obviously shaken by it. But, each week, at the end of the reading of the short story, Don tells us, 'I was away with the birds thinking about my childhood. I just love the reading group because it takes me back to wonderful places.'

We have the facilities manager join us at times, because Elizabeth feels that it is good for management to see how much of a person suffering from dementia is still available and how the reading aloud groups reaches and touches that.

Now I would like to share some stories from a Book Well group held at a regional Victorian BUPU Aged Care home.

### **6. UK RESEARCH WE CAN DRAW ON**

Lynn Glyn from the London branch of The Reader Organisation shared feedback from a UK BUPU Aged Care home in an email to me on 11 May 2011:

*My wife [B, who suffers from Alzheimer's] so looks forward to the readings. She becomes active, participates, discusses, looks to help the others, talks to them. What can be better for an Alzheimer sufferer? ... In the past the idea of reading aloud would never have interested either of us. [B] is enjoying and benefiting. ... She is even attempting to read out loud – that is something she would never have entertained previously.*

An interesting development alongside the UK Get Into Reading model has come from the University of Liverpool where cognitive scientists are developing research based on the co-operation of arts and sciences in the study of the brain, and the neural inner processing of language. Research suggests that there is one specific part of the brain that processes nouns and another part that processes verbs. The stimuli created in the study were noun-to-verb or verb-to-noun shift-words based on Shakespeare. The EEG stage of experimentation has shown, when processing the words, there appears to be movement between these two parts of the brain. This research is published in a book entitled *Shakespeare Now* by Professor Phillip Davis and future findings could have positive implications for neural inner processing of language.

### **7. THE FUTURE IN AUSTRALIA**

This year VicHealth offered further support to extend the reach of the Book Well program. The delivery of the second round of the program will take place in February and March 2012

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through ten facilitators from eight public libraries. Some of these groups may include participants suffering from various stages of dementia. We hope additional data will attract funding to further grow and sustain the program.

### **CLOSE**

I encourage you to read Morrison's inspirational article, 'The Reading Cure'. The source of its intrinsic inspiration are the stories collected from group members, medical staff and people involved in some way with the Get Into Reading program.

The Book Well Program needed its own stories and Suzy Freeman-Greene at *The Age* has collected some in an article entitled 'Between the Lines' published on Monday 14 March 2011. In doing so Suzy herself was deeply touched and says of the program:

*I was really touched by the experience and I was amazed by the discussions that followed. The participants had been diagnosed with illnesses such as alcohol-induced dementia but the stories seemed to open a window into their psyches and pasts. The men's anecdotes and startling observations stayed with me long after I'd finished my article. I think of them often and would like to visit the group again.*

And while we must remind ourselves that we are working with brains we must never forget we are dealing with hearts.

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