

Shared Reading in Norfolk Libraries: The Story So Far by

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Introduction

Shared reading is a proven approach to Social Reading championed by The Reader Organisation. Shared Reading is based around Read Aloud groups which meet regularly and where members can choose to read and are invited to give personal responses.

- Shared reading groups meet regularly – offering valuable continuity and structure for participants
- They are highly inclusive – all are welcome and can take part regardless of their level of literacy, status, health, age, education or cultural background
- Groups are safe – readers control their own involvement contributing as little or as much as they like according to mood and confidence levels
- A support group with a difference – a community of peers is developed, with a focus on the written word

Sessions are facilitated in such a way as to ensure all members of the group feel that their opinions are valued and that there are no right or wrong answers as people work together to make sense of the texts being read. The text itself is the focus of the group. Author biographies and other background information are not referred to which helps to ensure that the group aren't made to feel ignorant by an 'expert' facilitator.

By reaching out to people who may not otherwise be readers the Shared reading approach can meet a vast range of individual needs. The groups can help to ease those physically or emotionally troubled; provide a confidence boost to those who need it; allow people to unite with one another; and introduce new authors and poets to all readers.

Sessions can;

- help prevent people from becoming socially isolated
- help libraries to reach out to new customers who may never have been keen readers in the past
- develop and expand the reading choices of library customers
- provide community librarians with a tool to use when taking the library experience out of the library building to where people are
- provide Community Librarians with an effective and unique offer to share with our partners within Community Services, within the County Council and beyond
- help Norfolk Library and Information Service be identified as an innovative service capable of achieving non-traditional library objectives

Sessions also help libraries to;

- promote literacy and the enjoyment of reading
- encourage lifelong learning
- support vulnerable members of our local communities

The need for this sort of session is clear from looking at research linking social isolation with depression especially among older people and people living with chronic illness.

Along with combating social isolation sessions can also benefit participants by being mentally stimulating and offering a rewarding social space to have one's opinions heard and valued.

Sessions can also help people who are anxious or ruminative by offering them a new set of mental challenges to collaboratively overcome.

In Norfolk Libraries the outcomes we are hoping to achieve in our Shared Reading sessions are as follows;

- Participants feel less socially isolated
- Participants express a growing feeling of self confidence and are more able to read aloud in front of others
- Participants say they are more able to relax
- Participants feel more able to take part in group discussions
- Participants feel more confident to try new authors
- Libraries reach out to participants who may have been keen readers in the past

In 2013 Norfolk Library and Information Service invested in The Reader Organisation's Read to Lead training for all Community Librarians.

Shared Reading activity since September 2013

Since 20 Community Librarians completed the Read to Lead training last year 15 courses of 6 sessions have been delivered at 13 libraries around the county.

The approach of delivering 6 session courses is unique to Norfolk (The Reader Organisation generally delivers sessions over much longer time periods). Using this approach we hope to reach more people over a larger area. This approach also offers us a chance to evaluate the impact of sessions more carefully with the chance to note the 'journey' people have been on during this time.

The 6 session courses have been delivered at; Brundall, Costessey, Dersingham, Earlham, Gaywood, Gorleston, Mile Cross, Norfolk and Norwich Millennium, Plumstead Road, Tuckswood, Wroxham, Wymondham (x2) and Great Yarmouth Libraries.

These courses have been delivered to a range of different audiences;

- One course at Wymondham was targeted at people who were living with Dementia and their carers in partnership with the local Pabulum Café. This course featured short poems which, it was hoped, would be more appropriate for people experiencing memory loss than longer stories.
- At Gorleston the Community Librarian worked with the local High School to target young people who found reading difficult and ran sessions in the public library during school time.
- At Mile Cross the Community Librarian contacted RVS Home Library customers and arranged transport to bring them to the library to experience a more social, interactive kind of reading.
- In addition to this there have been 9 one-off taster sessions that have been delivered in a range of locations in the community, often as a way of promoting Shared Reading to particular audiences ahead of a six week course.
- In Norwich, Community Librarians have attended meetings of Norwich Carer's Support Group and Home Instead Carer's Group to promote upcoming series of sessions and also, more broadly, to share the idea of carers sharing stories and poems with those people group members are caring for.
- In Swaffham the Community Librarian used the Shared Reading approach to promote the Books on Prescription Scheme to a local Well Being group (of 32 people!) reading extracts aloud.

All of those Community Librarians who completed the training (and three others who didn't) have now delivered at least a one-off taster session of Shared Reading and over 150 people county wide have experienced Shared Reading.

Measuring the impact

Since the meeting of the first group of Read to Lead trainees in June 2013 all Community Librarians running groups have been completing Facilitator's Logs describing each session. The idea behind the Logs is to capture

- Attendance
- Texts used
- How well the selected texts worked for the group
- Any change in individuals confidence over time
- 'Wow moments' of particular note

In addition to these notes, participants were originally invited to share their responses at the end of the course on an evaluation questionnaire.

Since May 2014 there have also been standard questionnaires available for the participants to complete at the beginning of the course *and* at the end. The aim of these two questionnaires is to measure 'distance travelled' to try to establish a stronger evidence base for future use with potential funders/ commissioners.

To aid Community Librarians in their completion of the Facilitator Logs a Shared Reading Assistant Volunteer role has been created – the role involves helping to set up sessions (refreshments, seating etc.) but most importantly to observe the group to help the Community Librarian 'unpack' the session immediately afterwards as it's very hard to observe interactions and look for wow moments when a facilitator is busy running the session. There are currently 4 volunteers signed up ready to assist Community Librarians in their evaluation.

Highlights from Facilitator Logs.

"It was lovely to see how everyone joined in, even the men, one of which never really participates but he was clearly enjoying the discussions."
(Feedback from group leader, Home Instead Carers)

"In my role [...] I have supported a client with severe and enduring mental health issues to attend the "Feel Better with a Book" sessions at their local library for all of the sessions offered. In my opinion, these sessions have had a recognisable and significant impact on the client. The client was noticeably more confident and relaxed after these sessions, and enjoyed them very much. It was an invaluable way for the client to meet and get to know people from the local community in a relaxed and supportive atmosphere. Even when unable to participate in many activities after a crisis, the client wanted to attend these sessions and participated in discussions. The client has difficulty concentrating sometimes, and this was an excellent way for them to engage in creative and stimulating reading. The librarian running the session was friendly and supportive, and encouraged an atmosphere where everyone seemed to feel welcomed and valued. I sincerely hope that these sessions run again." (Recovery Worker for Rethink Mental Illness, Costessey Library)

Doreen told me after the session that after having her stroke, she found speaking in a group difficult, but she was glad she's had the courage to come and had felt good about it today.

"These Monday mornings set me up for the week"

"This is sparking my brain in to action again"

"I feel like am making new friends here. That we can tell each other things"

"These sessions have been fantastic for getting to know people in the local community. I have also met people who I would not normally get to meet. Discussions have led to the group sharing stories about their own lives, which has been as enriching as the stories and poems read. I would love to see this happening in every library every week. I always have a spring in my step and a smile when I leave."

“I have learnt to accept that others views on a subject are not necessarily the same as mine and feel that my brain has been poked into life and made me think outside of the box.” (Costessey Library)

“I did not know books were written about this, it was something I thought was just my problem, the group helped me, but if books are written about it, it means it is quite widespread! I feel less of a weirdo!”

“I laughed today...I laughed at myself..I felt so much better for this”

“I am looking forward to the shared reading sessions, you see I cannot read and you made me sit up, you described how I often feel.” (Swaffham Well Being Group)

Jane was widowed in the last few years, so has suddenly stopped being a full time carer. Her experience of carer's groups wasn't good. Didn't want to sit around and talk about issues that affect carers but to just do something very different. “At home you just don't read aloud! I've learned to concentrate more, it has made me think..... I like talking about books now” (Dersingham Library)

..... we were talking about how it was hard to make connections with people Pamela explained that her husband had died two weeks ago and that she was worried about how she would make friends on her own. The other group members were immediately very supportive and sympathetic.

After the course Pamela wrote,

“Thank you so much for the course, it was very thought provoking and I enjoyed it very much. In fact it helped me get back to normal living, and it was lovely getting to know new people.”

Mary talked about how her role as a carer meant that she often went for days without talking to anyone other than her husband who has Alzheimer's and is no longer capable of sustained conversation. She added how much she was enjoying shared reading as an opportunity to talk with others.

She also said;

“This is just right. At ordinary book groups you have to read the books first before coming to the sessions, but I find that hard because I care for my husband”

(Earlham Library)

“Please tell whoever started this that it's a great idea, well done for taking it on. It's very different. Our opinions matter.”

“If I wasn't here I'd be sitting at home alone. I've only just started to live alone for the first time in my life. I was at home, then university, I got married the day after I graduated. My husband recently passed away, so I'm getting used to being on my own.”

(Gaywood Library)

“I learnt that reading is really fun, relaxing and exciting and talking about the stories was really creative”

“In a story, my favourite thing was trying something new. Overall, I liked the trips to the library” (High School students at Gorleston Library)

“I used to hate poetry at school, but now hearing it read aloud has stimulated my interest in it. I remember The Lady of Shalott from then but it didn’t make me think as this reading has done.” (Plumstead Road Library)

“I like this I don’t usually like poetry, but I like this. It says something important”

“I love how the story and the poems always come together. It makes you think wider”

“I’m going to take this short story home and read it to my friend. I think she’ll love it. Lots of my friends say they find it hard to read a whole book now, so short stories are great”. (Wymondham Library)

Questionnaire Data

In addition to the verbal and anecdotal feedback above it is now possible to begin to analyse the participants responses to the first evaluation questionnaire that was handed out at the end of some (but not all) courses. The questionnaire was a simple tick box one asking participants to select whether statements were; Not true, Somewhat true or Certainly true. Some useful indicators of impact follow below;

Around 70% of participants responded to the questionnaire which were returned for collation (from Wymondham, Costessey, Wroxham, Great Yarmouth, Gaywood and Earlham Libraries);

100% of participants strongly agreed that the sessions were enjoyable

90% of participants agreed that they felt better in themselves as a result of attending shared reading sessions

88% of participants agreed that they felt more confident as a result of attending shared reading sessions

81% of participants agreed that they felt less isolated as a result of attending shared reading sessions

73% of participants agreed that they felt more able to relax as a result of attending shared reading sessions

For more of this data and to see the questionnaire that was used see appendix 1

To see the new evaluation questionnaire, developed with the help of Cressida McLaughlin and Anne Tansley-Thomas from the Customer Service and Communications Dept. see appendix 2

The Future

After investing in the training for all Community Librarians in 2013 it's vital that we continue to deliver Shared Reading courses throughout Norfolk. Shared Reading as an approach to sharing stories and poems is continuing to be embedded in other promotions Norfolk Library and Information Service is involved in as in the three examples below.

Black History Month Shared Read Package

As with other promotions (e.g. Older People's Day, Great Big Read) the BHM planning group agreed to create a Shared Reading Package focussing on stories and poems by Black authors for this years BHM to be delivered as a one-off in libraries.

Norfolk Stories

Fiona Henderson is planning on including a Shared Reading element in this partnership project in the North of the County.

Work with Study Centres

Ros Johnson is in contact with Paul Wickens, Study Support Centres and Children's University manager who is keen to keep public libraries involved with his work with 'families who don't read' . Ros is interested to see if a Shared Reading offer might work, probably linked with one of the Norwich Libraries.

Building the evidence base

Much of the content of the Facilitators Logs from sessions to date has been useful as a reflective tool for those running the sessions, and whilst we have some feedback (around 70% of people attending courses so far have completed an evaluation questionnaire) we need to get better at consistently using the new before and after surveys with every 6 week course we deliver.

Working with Shared Reading Volunteers will undoubtedly help Community Librarians gather more anecdotal evidence on the difference the sessions are making to participants.

Support for Shared Reading Practitioners

A workshop is planned in late November for all trained Community Librarians to come together to discuss the successes and challenges encountered in their Shared Reading work so far, to consolidate their thoughts on best practice and to plan for future opportunities. The result of this meeting will be a development plan for Shared Reading from 2015 onwards.

Spreading the word

We will develop a plan to ensure that we promote Shared Reading and its benefits to potential partners who work with our target audiences within Norfolk County Council and beyond. We also need to develop a web presence for this work which will serve as an information point explaining and celebrating Shared Reading and also offering points of contact for interested groups or individuals.

Understanding the Commissioning system

Much of the work The Reader Organisation do is based around project work in the field of mental health and social care. It would be good to do more research around what commissioning opportunities exist for us locally in these areas

Conclusion

Leading a Shared Reading session is a unique challenge and leading one well requires a specific set of skills and much practice. With the investment we've made in the initial Read to Lead training, Community Librarians have gained many of the necessary skills. The approach of delivering one-off taster sessions to start with, working up to longer 6 week courses has helped Community Librarians build confidence gradually and to refine their own, personal approach to this challenge.

The anecdotal evidence from participants above shows the positive impact sessions have had on participants.

The quantitative evidence shows that Shared Reading has made a positive difference in the areas of;

- Social Isolation
- Self Confidence
- Well Being
- Customers trying new authors or genres
- Concentration
- New Library members feeling inclined to explore the Library further
- Relaxation
- Enjoyment

Recommendations

- LMT are asked to note the contents of this report and agree the direction of travel for the Shared Reading project