

## **Workshop 4a: You Open a Book, You Feel Warm - John Duffy**

### **Notes – Briony Birdi**

You know you're going to enjoy a session when the speaker begins by reading a poem, concluding with the words 'Imaginative literature enables us to discover things about ourselves'. Hearing somebody else read to us, at whatever age, helps us to relax and escape from present worries – a form of bibliotherapy, in fact.

The term 'bibliotherapy' is common within libraries today, but what makes the Kirklees Libraries model different is that it involves dedicated staff who can take time to work with people who are marginalised in some way, using a wide range of resources and focusing on imaginative literature. Participants may be from local mental health community groups, or medical staff may have recommended that they attend. John is a former Social Worker, his colleague Elaine was a teacher, and they work with the involvement of an Occupational Therapist, so they have a great deal of expertise, between them. Despite this, the strong message from this workshop was that we could all have something to offer in working in this area, with appropriate guidance.

**The Bookchat group:** the Bookchat group runs in the same way as a reader's group, but instead of asking all members to read the same book for each meeting, people are encouraged to bring their own books, and to read passages they have enjoyed. This different approach deliberately moves away from the more 'traditional' model: 'For a lot of people, reading a book and having to talk about it in a group smacks of school'. On average 7-8 people (sometimes more, sometimes fewer) meet for Bookchat in the library itself, and anyone is welcome to attend: 'Our remit is to encourage people who are affected by stress, depression and anxiety, and in my mind that seems to cover everybody!' People talk very openly with each other about issues and problems, as John explained: 'People are remarkably kind and tolerant, and I think the books make it easier for us to be so'.

**One-to-one bibliotherapy:** John has developed his own collection of books specifically for bibliotherapy, so he can take time to sit down with individuals and help them. A structure is there for John and his colleagues to support users at an individual level, when library staff would not normally have more than moments to spare at the issue desk.

**Conquering our fears:** talking about the present move to use libraries more as a space for mental health patients, John said 'The thing about fear is that it's very real – but it goes away if we are properly supported and guided'. He reminded us, 'People with mental health issues have been using libraries forever'.

**Training:** for John, the best training for this kind of work clarifies 'what not to do', for example that we are not there to diagnose conditions or causes, but are there to share the pleasure of books with people who may find this helpful. The guidelines need to be clear, and we should all know our limits in terms of

what we are capable of doing. In answer to the question 'should we have training in mental health awareness in public libraries?', John said 'Enough training to be able not to panic, to know who to refer things to, to know what not to do... Integration within the community is a good thing, but it means that to be a good citizen we need to learn more, to be more aware.'

In all of this work, whether at an individual or group level, one of the most important points, for John, is that we 'start with our own enthusiasms, the books we like reading', and then we can't go far wrong.

**Diversity Network:** if anyone is interested in making contact with others working in this area, John would be happy to set up a network. Email him at [john.duffy@kirklees.gov.uk](mailto:john.duffy@kirklees.gov.uk), with 'Diversity network' in the subject header, and he will add your name to the list.

For more information about RAYS (Reading And You Scheme), go to <http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/community/libraries/activities/rays2.shtml>