

THE VICTORIAN BOOK WELL PROGRAM

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Inspired by the successful UK Get into reading campaign 20 Victorians, including representatives from public libraries and health, families and migrant support organisations, have been trained to establish reading groups in their communities. Short stories, novels, poetry and plays are read aloud by these facilitators with group members joining in and sharing their stories as their self confidence grows. The program aims to reduce social exclusion and improve the health and wellbeing of vulnerable people such as the homeless, unemployed, people in aged care facilities, new migrants and those with mental health issues.

The Book Well Program is a collaborative community based initiative developed by the State Library of Victoria in partnership with the Public Libraries Victoria Network and VicHealth. Employing readaloud reading groups, the program focuses on the power of literature to improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities. It particularly targets people who are vulnerable due to their situations, such as the homeless, the longterm unemployed, new arrivals in Australia, residents in aged care facilities and those experiencing mental health problems.

The Victorian program was inspired by the UK's renowned Get into reading program, set up in 2001 by Jane Davis, the founder and director of The Reader Organisation. The Reader Organisation is a charity responsible for pioneering the use of books and reading in therapeutic ways in community settings. Currently it delivers 170 weekly Get into reading sessions to hard to reach groups including prisons, care homes, hospitals and mental health services.

The objectives of the project were to train 20 facilitators to deliver the Book Well program and to evaluate the initial pilot programs. In March 2010 the 20 Victorians were trained by UK trainers from The Reader Organisation over five days to deliver the Australian Book Well pilot programs. This was the first time the course had been offered outside the UK. The participants included 17 from a wide range of Victorian metropolitan, suburban and country public libraries. Nineteen of the participants rated the training as excellent and feedback included

I can now, upon reflection, say that the facilitator training was succinct and highly valuable. The training ensured that I felt comfortable and well

equipped to launch into a community partnership that has been absolutely successful and engaging.

Support provided by VicHealth meant that the training could be offered free of charge. Training was provided on the understanding that each facilitator would commit to the implementation of a Book Well pilot program and would assist with evaluation of the program.

In January 2010 a brochure was disseminated across the Victorian public library network inviting applications from librarians to attend the facilitator training and encouraging them to form partnerships to deliver Book Well groups in their communities. Additionally, approaches were made to selected individuals, working with disadvantaged groups who were known to be interested in the therapeutic power of reading. The training was oversubscribed.

In February 2010 potential participants completed the application process, which involved a comprehensive application form designed to elicit responses about their views on the social value of reading. The 20 successful applicants were selected by considering their responses and with an aim to ensure a diversity of interest in working with socially excluded and disadvantaged groups. They were asked to familiarise themselves with a variety of literature before the course commenced, concentrating in particular on poetry and short stories. The point of this was to make the participants think about *what* they read and *why* they read, thus encouraging a personal and meaningful relationship with the content of great writing.

Three experienced trainers from The Reader Organisation used a combination of theory and practical methods to teach the 20 facilitators all

facets of facilitating readaloud groups. As the week progressed, the trainees learned about and practised many of the skills and competencies required to be a readaloud group facilitator, for example

- allowing readaloud sessions to be about group members and their experience
- allowing silence if group members are quiet after a shared reading
- how to select materials of sufficient depth and complexity to engender the sharing of personal stories and experiences relevant to the text
- how to select stopping points within a text
- how to introduce opportunities for relevant personal and emotional responses to the text
- how to facilitate issues that might arise
- how to read aloud in front of others and be assessed with individual daily feedback.

Before the five day training commenced, a date was set for a Book Well workshop one month later. On the last day of training the new facilitators were asked to consider three questions in preparation for the follow up meeting

- how much time would you have to prepare, promote and deliver the Book Well program?
- which health service would you most likely approach to develop a partnership?
- can you identify a colleague/colleagues that would support you in program development?

Networking and collaboration with the facilitators continued and resources were prepared to help them to approach and develop partnerships with community organisations to deliver Book Well pilot programs. These included

- a promotional flyer, inviting Victorian community organisations to pilot a Book Well readaloud group
- a list of tips and ideas for developing partnerships with community organisations
- a guide to pilot program preparation
- a delivery questionnaire to assist facilitators to reflect on their group sessions and collect evidence

- a sample letter of agreement to use with partner organisations
- notes on reporting methodologies
- copyright guidelines
- an introductory powerpoint.

Three working groups were set up – the first two in the areas of aged care and mental health, and the third as a general group. The idea was for each team to share the task of preparing suitable reading material for readaloud groups in these areas.

Eighteen facilitators implemented pilot programs: ten in aged care facilities and five in partnership with mental health service providers. Other groups included the University of the Third Age; English as a Second Language (ESL); veterans; and people affected by the Black Saturday bushfires.

Eighty three per cent of the facilitators rated the program as being effective in reaching the anticipated target groups. Factors that contributed to the success of the program included

Receptive and enthusiastic participants

Facilitators reported that participants were responsive and keen to share their experiences, and often individual reflections were deeply personal and insightful. Many participants continually expressed appreciation for the program and most expressed regret that the pilot programs had to end.

A high level of attendance

Attendance was voluntary, and the high level of regular attendance is indicative of the participant support of the program. Partner organisations noted

people suffering mental health and/or highly medicated people can at times not attend regularly or just stop coming. They are easily discouraged and their attention spans can be limited. Regular attendance, particularly by some of the male members of the group, is unusual.

Thirteen facilitators contributing to the evaluation reported that on average there were 132 weekly participants over the pilot program phase.

Enthusiasm and support from activity coordinators, health professionals and support workers from partner organisations

Partner organisations provided feedback about the program and its suitability for their organisation. Staff from partnership organisations were mostly actively engaged in pilot program development and in some cases willing to allocate their own time in implementing the program.

The Book Well program format

The program balances personal experience without being intrusive. It is an opportunity to be with people, but not have to interact. The use of quality literature encouraged participants to have a deep engagement with the text and a subsequent willingness to share life stories and poignant insights. Participants described the format as 'nonthreatening' and 'soothing'.

Wellbeing improvements

There was a great deal of anecdotal evidence pointing to improvements in the wellbeing of participants.

One group reported a participant who was unable to leave her home through anxiety and depression but became a regular attendee and formed a friendship with another equally socially isolated participant.

Collected evidence showed the participants' relaxation and confidence increased as well as their enthusiasm for the group. Community

partners listed improvement in communication and recall with dementia patients. Participants with depression were invigorated by the social contact of belonging to a group.

Facilitator personal benefits

Many facilitators drawn from public libraries reported that it had been very rewarding for them because they were able to reach a group of people whom they would not normally meet other than through short transactions over the library counter. They were reminded that access for everyone to reading and literature has always been a fundamental principle of public libraries.

Most facilitators reported feeling that they were beginning to bond with the members of the groups even after a very short time, and many expressed great sorrow about the ending of the program and the contact with the participants.

A third of the facilitators have remained engaged with the program, through partner organisations funding an ongoing program at the end of their pilot, or through individual libraries' commitment to social inclusion programs. Their branches include Bendigo, Brighton, Coburg, Reservoir, Ringwood and Wangaratta.

The remaining facilitators are in regular contact to ask how we move the program forward – while the list of people who have been touched by the program and would like to attend future training, grows... and grows.

Susan McLaine works at the State Library of Victoria and is responsible for programs including the Book Well program, a creative bibliotherapy initiative. She is researching her thesis *Bibliotherapy practices and Victorian public libraries* and leads a new association of medical professionals, academics and public librarians aimed at raising the profile of bibliotherapy and supporting bibliotherapy based initiatives. Address: State Library of Victoria 328 Swanston Street Melbourne Victoria 3000 email smclaine@slv.vic.gov.au

