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Reading and Writing the Self Bringing biblio/poetry therapy into university spaces

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Abstract

This report offers reflections and insights based on our collaborative experience of introducing and delivering a ‘staff and student wellbeing’ programme of bibliotherapy and writing for wellbeing workshops at our university. These include monthly reading workshops using self-help texts, and monthly writing workshops which use a blend of approaches from therapeutic journaling and poetry therapy practice. Our report offers examples of the kind of workshops offered, and some broader context around the wellbeing initiative at our university. We reflect also on the benefits and challenges of inviting people to talk and/or write about the self in the context of the output-driven environment of Higher Education in the UK. Whilst our project centres on personal development and the non-clinical practice of bibliotherapy/writing for wellbeing, we also share our personal experiences of the therapeutic value of ‘writing the self’, and how these inform our practice. Finally, we look towards the next phase of developing and enhancing the project, alongside student interns.

Keywords: wellbeing; poetry therapy; bibliotherapy; higher education; writing the self

Introduction

Wellbeing in higher education in the UK is central to university policies and strategies (UUK, 2022), reflecting a vital need to address mental health struggles faced by both students and staff at universities (Lewis & Stiebahl, 2024).

A study by Brewster et al. (2022) explores staff and student perspectives on mental health and life at university, highlighting the increase in stress and burnout levels amongst staff, and pressures on student wellbeing caused by academic as well as financial and psychological pressures. The authors argue for a shift in culture in universities, one where emphasis would be on compassion and community, approaches that could mitigate against the dominance of the competitive academic environment.

We are a student counsellor (Debbie) and a lecturer (Anne-Marie), both with a personal interest in journaling and writing for wellbeing, recognising that this personal interest is what motivates us and our commitment to this project that exists within our professional work context. Within the context

of broader university pressures (as outlined above), we both believe in the importance of quiet safe spaces that support non-product-oriented practices, like reading a book or exploring the self through journaling or expressive writing. The latter is anathema to many in academia, where output tends to be what receives acclaim.

A Bibliotherapy project was set up at our university in 2022, and since then it has grown in success and recognition. The project is an ongoing collaboration between Education, Student Counselling/Mental Health and the University Libraries. Our report describes the project and its aims whilst discussing the rewards and challenges we have found along the way. Finally, we will outline our hopes for the project moving forward.

Readers of this journal will be well-versed in the history, process, and application of bibliotherapy and will be aware of the benefits of reading and writing as tools to access personal insights and understanding (Mazza, 2022; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016; Chavis, 2011; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2012; Williamson & Wright, 2018).

In relation to student wellbeing, several studies report on clinical interventions using bibliotherapy to measure stress and anxiety (Ahmadipour et al., 2012; Hamdan et al., 2021) however, less is known about the non-clinical use of biblio/poetry therapy for personal development within university settings. As explored elsewhere, wellbeing in the university context tends to be situated in relation to positive academic performance and achievement (see for example Brewster et al., 2022; Baik et al., 2019). Our project seeks to promote wellbeing spaces and activities without emphasis on any direct academic impact; in this sense, the focus is on process rather than product of any kind.

Our project is made up of three strands, which we describe in the next sections:

1. *Reading for Wellbeing* (monthly workshops based on self-help books, e.g. mindfulness)
2. *Writing for Wellbeing* (monthly workshops centred around key themes for personal growth, e.g. resilience, balance)
3. *Bibliotherapy book collection* and wellbeing spaces in the two university libraries

Echoing arguments about the vital interconnection between student and staff wellbeing (Brewster et al., 2022), our workshops are offered and open to both staff and students.

Reading for wellbeing

At the heart of the project is a range of books relating to mental health and wellbeing, and which are available in our Bibliotherapy spaces within the university libraries. As mentioned above, the positive effects of literature for healing and self-understanding are well documented, with books being referred to as ‘silent therapists’ (du Plock, 2005). The right book at the right time can bring feelings of normalisation, identification as well as self-compassion and hope. Being at University where students are encouraged to read for a degree, books can often be associated with study, assignments, and deadlines. Yet, what we wanted to show is that books can be a fantastic way to manage emotional wellbeing and that books can be just as important to the student experience, as traditional subject texts.

As a university student counsellor, I (Debbie) noticed that students would often talk about books within their counselling session. I found that students benefited from using literature to describe how they are feeling or sharing a personal insight from something they have read. For that moment

both client and counsellor have a shared understanding and a way of mutually unpicking further thoughts and feelings of the client. Often, I would suggest books for students to read and I created a list of my favourite titles.

Over time the book list was further developed by staff within both the counselling and mental health teams as well as colleagues from the wider University. The list is mainly made up of traditional self-help books but also contains a variety of fiction books. We wanted to include books based on the common student issues that are seen in the counselling room. We also wanted to include a wide range of issues such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and from a variety of approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy to mindfulness. We wanted to include something for everyone. We also wanted to include books that we hoped students can identify with. For example, books relating to the pressures of academic life and the student experience. The list is available to staff and students and is located online on the counselling pages of our university's website.* The list is useful for students themselves but also for staff within the university. For example, personal tutors can use this not only as a personal resource but as a place to direct students to.

The reading for wellbeing groups are hosted by staff members from across counselling, mental health and wellbeing teams and each group focuses on a particular book or subject area. Some groups are attended by the authors themselves and/or local organisations. Although each group differs in terms of the way it is presented, they all offer a way of encouraging students to talk about difficult subjects. Most groups also promote organisations external to the university as well as advocate services within the university. An example of this is a recent group held at the university is on gambling. This group was facilitated by a member of the money advice team and a mental health advisor. The group was also attended by a representative from a local gambling charity. Students who attended were provided with a safe space to discuss gambling as well as learn about the support available in terms of the local organisation and within the university. Students were also given information on the relevant bibliotherapy books relating to this topic. Another example of a recent group was a talk by the author Hope Virgo who presented her book *Stand Tall Little Girl: Facing up to Anorexia* (2018).

Bibliotherapy book collection and wellbeing spaces

The books are housed across our university libraries and located in their own area. This section also contains a selection of leisure reading books and is known as the Wellbeing Area. Books can be read in comfortable chairs which are surrounded by furnishings that aim to promote relaxation and wellbeing. At the same time books can be loaned in the same way as traditional subject books. We hope that the central location of the bibliotherapy books will help to reduce any stigma surrounding mental health and wellbeing.

We have found the books and groups to be a helpful addition to the student advice and wellbeing services that are already available. On our Bibliotherapy website space we have also included an opportunity for staff and students to review the bibliotherapy books. Our libraries also advertise our reading and writing groups within their wellbeing areas. We also have posters to promote books that may be relevant depending on the time of year. For example, books on exam stress are always popular during assessment times.

**** <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/discover/student-support/health-and-wellbeing/counselling-and-mental-health-service/bibliotherapy>

Writing for wellbeing

Monthly ‘Writing for Wellbeing’ workshops were added to the university’s Bibliotherapy initiative in 2021. These workshops use the interactive model of biblio/poetry therapy as advocated for example by Hynes & Hynes-Berry (2012), based around the tripartite interaction between participant-stimuli-facilitator. Sessions may be themed, e.g. ‘resilience’, ‘balance’ with materials chosen to enable personal creative explorations of ideas and emotional responses to images, poems, or prose. For more insight and detail about the writing workshops see Smith et al. (2024).

Workshops are open for students and staff; attendees have been a mix of undergraduate, postgraduate students, academic and professional services staff (e.g. counselling team, student international office).

Informally, during sharing of reflections at the workshops, participants have noted that their writing has been *liberating, surprising, and cathartic*. Some participants attend as people who are already regular journal writers, or writers of poetry; for others this is a completely new experience, and clearly very different to the usual output driven writing that university demands (of both staff and students).

Writing the self in the university context: challenges and opportunities

Moving forward we are always looking at ways to continue to develop and improve the project. One challenge has been attendance at the reading and writing wellbeing groups. We question to what extent students are aware of the benefits of non-curriculum activities alongside meeting their assessment deadlines. How do we encourage students to find space for them? At present both staff and students are able to attend the groups and we wonder if that may hinder a student’s intention to take part. We are a large city centre campus, and it can be difficult to highlight activities amongst all of the other information students are expected to retain.

Over the past three years of the project, we have noted usually low attendance. As we prepare to embark on a formal evaluation of the workshops, we question whether ‘writing the self’ may be regarded by some as an indulgence, and not as important as the kind of writing that gets a grade or a star rating. For example, academic staff may likely prioritise writing for recognised output and publication, rather than writing just to focus on the self. If mental health is to be considered a strategic priority for universities (Hughes & Spanner, 2024), we believe there must be a focus on informal spaces and a recognition of their value. As evidenced in previous work (Smith et al., 2024), finding safe and non-judgmental spaces where students can focus on the self, develop greater self-awareness, and attend to their personal wellbeing, is valued by students who often feel the pressure of assessment and grade achievement. “It was a different space to my other 'student' spaces – there were no right or wrong answers, no pressure to say something; just a kind of 'if it's there and you want to share, go ahead' mindset.” (Smith, Padt & Jones, 2024, 6)

Alongside the monthly workshops, Anne-Marie also offers *Writing for Wellbeing* workshops for postgraduate courses internally and externally (e.g. Social Work, Counselling). Interestingly, amongst these students for whom reflexivity and reflection are central to their studies, there is often trepidation and even suspicion when invited to “write the self”. Informal feedback includes comments such as “this is uncomfortable. I don’t really do this kind of stuff,” reflecting an absence of self within traditional university writing. In this sense, some participants imply that this focus on the self through writing is somehow superfluous or “extra” to university learning processes. This

makes a focus on ‘process’ difficult to transmit in the way that our writing workshops endeavour to achieve. Students also of course have assignment deadlines, many are also working alongside their studies, so the idea of spending an hour on wellbeing activities can sometimes seem like an added commitment that they don’t have time for.

Conclusion

Within the context of day-to-day university life, we wonder if the expectations of academic achievement results in students metaphorically ‘leaving themselves at the door’ when entering the learning space.

Our “reading and writing for wellbeing” initiative is part of the wider wellbeing support mechanism in place for students at our university; as facilitators, we both also strongly believe in the importance of creating “non-graded” spaces to counter the pressures experienced (by students and staff) of output expectations. By inviting participants to “unload on the page”, without pressure of grade or output, can bring catharsis and “meaning making” (Chavis, 2011). Interestingly, over the past year of the Writing for Wellbeing workshops, I (Anne-Marie) have been struck by the fact that more staff than students have attended; a frequent reflection after the workshops has been about the recognition that they (staff) do not give themselves enough time and space to just attend to the self.

Looking ahead, the project has secured funding to work with three student interns (Jan-June 2025) as participant-researchers to develop creative ways of gathering feedback and insights from workshop participants, tutors and librarians. It is our hope that this collaboration with students, based on their own experiences of being at university, will enhance the project and lead to greater engagement and awareness of the value of the process of reading and writing for wellbeing.

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