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A Therapeutic Collaboration:

The Bibliotherapy Education Project at Oregon State University

by **Paula McMillen, Ph.D.**
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In this article I hope to briefly introduce the concept and practice of bibliotherapy and then describe the development and current state of a bibliotherapy resource page, developed jointly by faculty at the Oregon State University (OSU) Libraries and School of Education. I'm currently a social science reference librarian at OSU with responsibilities for Education, Psychology and Sociology as well as the Children's book collection.

Bibliotherapy has been defined many ways and is known by many other names such as biblioguidance, literatherapy, reading therapy, bibliocounseling, bibliopsychology, book matching and literapeutics. Most simply, if one goes back to the Greek roots of the word, it means helping through books. It has been used with all ages, with almost every imaginable issue or problem, and at all levels of intervention by teachers, counselors, librarians, social workers, nurses, psychologists and physicians. Developmental bibliotherapy, for example, can be used in the classroom where the goal may be to facilitate normal developmental passages or to educate about attitudes, feelings and behaviors. Clinical bibliotherapy usually involves trained mental health or healthcare practitioners using books as a way to stimulate discussion of difficult feelings or facilitate resolution of more significant behavioral and emotional issues. It is seldom used alone, but more typically in combination with discussion or other follow-up activities that promote the psychological processes of identification, catharsis and insight.

Our project at OSU started as a routine request for a library session with graduate counseling students in the Winter term of 2000, but it has grown into an ongoing collaboration with much broader reach and appeal. With my background in clinical psychology, I was excited to help my colleague in the Counselor Education Department at OSU, Dr. Dale Pehrsson, and work with her students on using books in

therapeutic settings. We began exploring the professional literature around bibliotherapy, initially to gather information on what recommendations practitioners made about evaluating books for use, and what the research said about the benefits and efficacy of using books therapeutically. We created the first draft of an evaluation tool based on our findings, using a paper and pencil format, to guide graduate students through the process of evaluating primarily children's books to use in therapy.

When we took our project to the joint OLA/WLA conference in Portland in April 2002, we were somewhat surprised to find that what we had previously considered a good demonstration of interdepartmental collaboration in an academic setting actually drew more interest from the public librarians than academic ones. We were pleased that librarians were interested in our project, especially because libraries serve as such a great source of reading material for teachers, mental health workers and parents who are trying to help children and young adults with issues. Not surprisingly, librarians were the first partners with healthcare professionals in using books therapeutically in the early 1900s; it's only in the last few decades that the dominant discussion of bibliotherapy has shifted from the library and medical literature to that of mental health and education.

Dr. Pehrsson and I had discussed the possibility of creating a database of the graduate students' evaluations so that students in subsequent classes could take advantage of this collected wisdom. With our new awareness of potentially broader interest in this information, we felt the optimal way to improve accessibility would be to put it on the Web. We applied for and received two small teaching improvement grants (OSU L.L.Stewart) which helped us hire some student technical expertise to move this idea into reality. We discovered in the process that we would have to significantly revise the evaluation tool to



make it compatible with a Web-based form and searchable database. Our interdisciplinary team of library technology, library intern, computer science, graphic arts and counseling students helped us realize our initial goal of creating an online form with a searchable database of the resulting evaluations.

We have continued to expand and update the Web site, now called the Bibliotherapy Education Project © (<http://bibliotherapy.library.oregonstate.edu>). In addition to the Bibliotherapy Evaluation Tool ©, we now link to book finding resources, information about the project, and about our own research and teaching related to bibliotherapy. We also include brief descriptions of student research projects at OSU that have involved bibliotherapy. Although we began with a focus on children's books, our future plans include greater coverage of resources for young adults, adults and multicultural materials. The database of book evaluations has been expanded by each new class of graduate counselor education students at OSU and at other institutions with programs in counseling, notably Texas A & M at Texarkana. We've also had inquiries from students doing research on aspects of bibliotherapy in several countries including Canada, Taiwan and South America.

OSU Libraries management and the OSU School of Education have supported the project in many ways. The Library Technology department provides the server space and technical oversight for the Web site. My work schedule has been accommodated to allow me to do graduate work in children's and young adult literature at Portland State University. This has enriched our bibliotherapy research and my ability to build a better collection of children's and young adult books in the library; obviously an improved collection better provides for our curriculum and students, and even enables new classes. I'll be teaching a graduate course in multicultural children's literature for educators and counselors this

summer, which is the first time the course has been offered in many years.

We encourage you to explore and use the Bibliotherapy Education Project© Web site. The searchable database of book evaluations and the resource links are all freely available. To view the Bibliotherapy Evaluation Tool© or use it to review a book, you do first need to complete a short form to become a reviewer. There's a link to contact us at the bottom of the home page and my co-founder and I would love to hear your reactions and ideas to make this a better resource.

For more information about the project, or scholarly explorations of bibliotherapy and reviews of the literature, follow the links from "About the project" or see the following resources:

McMillen, P. (2005). The Bibliotherapy Education Project: A collaborative teaching effort goes to the Web. *Behavioral and Social Sciences Librarian*, 23(2), 85-96.

McMillen, P. & Pehrsson, D.E. (2004). Speciality of the house: Bibliotherapy for hospital patients. *Journal of Hospital Librarianship*, 4(1), 73-82.

Pehrsson, D. and McMillen, P. (2005). A bibliotherapy evaluation tool: Grounding counselors in the therapeutic use of literature. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 32(1), 47-59.

Paula McMillen has a doctoral degree in clinical psychology as well as her master's degree in library science. Her professional experience includes over 20 years in various mental health and health care settings. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Oregon State University Libraries and a social sciences reference librarian.

