

promoting access to White Rose research papers



Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **Public Library Journal**.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/77637>

Published paper

Wilson, K and Train, B (2005) *Give me a break: championing the development of reader-centred initiatives*. Public Library Journal, 20 (2). 22 - 25.

Reader Development: *Estyn Allan* in Wales

***Give me a Break*: championing the development in 'reader-centred' initiatives**

Kerry Wilson and Briony Train discuss the recent evaluation of *Give me a Break*, the first national public library book promotion in Wales

Researchers from the *Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society* (CPLIS) at the University of Sheffield have recently undertaken an evaluation of *Give me a Break*, the first national public library book promotion which is supported by *Estyn Allan*, the national training programme for reader development in Wales. The evaluation has revealed positive and encouraging results in terms of the impact of *Give me a Break* upon library users and their reading experiences, and at a wider level in terms of their relationship with library staff, and staff attitudes towards reader development activities and the requisite skills.

In some professional circles, the term *reader development* continues to cause debate. It has been suggested that the term implies a somewhat controversial interventionist and paternalistic development of library users' literary experiences and reading choices. Despite the continuing questions raised as to the political and philosophical role and value of reader development, evaluation of such initiatives demonstrates that the suggested developmental element is primarily of benefit to library staff and services themselves in terms of professional practice. Research such as the *Give me a Break* evaluation shows that reader-development inspired initiatives are welcomed by library users, blissfully unaware that they are in any way being 'developed'! The authors argue that such evidence is of greater relevance to the public library service than the continuing 'question of semantics' concerning the terminology of reader development and what this implies.

Project background

Give me a Break has featured in all public library authorities in Wales and has been managed by the participating *Estyn Allan* librarian within each authority. The promotion recognises the ways in which people use reading to 'take a break' or as a form of escapism, and offers a range of titles to meet a variety of reading needs and preferences. This range consists of a mixed stock-list of Welsh and English language contemporary fiction and poetry with professionally produced promotional and display materials designed to offer a different approach to readers in public libraries. Targeted audiences for the *Give me a Break* promotion included computer users within public libraries who would not usually borrow adult fiction, and parents and carers accompanying children to story time events who wouldn't normally borrow books for themselves (18-40 age group).

Give me a Break was also supported by a Welsh and English language reader-centred website, an integral part of the promotion. The first such experimental site in Wales, and the first bilingual site for readers, the interest in www.givemeabreak.org lies not only in its usage by readers, but also in the extent to which library staff are able to make the link between and work with the online and offline elements of the promotion.

Estyn Allan is managed and coordinated by the Society of Chief Librarians in Wales, along with the reader development organisation *Opening the Book*, and is supported by the Arts Council of Wales. Each of the 22 public library authorities in Wales have nominated one *Estyn Allan* librarian to participate in the project over a three-year training period. Training has included the development of reader-centred aspects of librarianship and the requisite skills, including reading promotions and displays; stock selection; library design and layout; project management; ICT and training skills; managing reader groups. The primary objective of *Estyn Allan* is to develop the skills needed for libraries in Wales to reach more readers, including specific objectives to increase access to the rich diversity of contemporary writing in Welsh and English by using the popular base and extensive networks of the public library service; to offer new opportunities for readers to take an active role in their own development and to share reading experiences with others; to develop imaginative projects which increase people's enjoyment of reading and take the pleasure of reading to new audiences; to promote contemporary writing in Welsh and English.

The reader development debate

It would be a great shame if the selective interpretation of, and subsequent discussion and debate surrounding the *language* of reader development as a concept were to overshadow the realities and significant benefits of reader development initiatives in terms of professional policy and practice within public libraries. Traditionally, public librarians have employed a non-interventionist approach to adult fiction borrowing, which supported the perceived neutrality of the public library service. Train (2003) suggests that the recent reader development-inspired cultural changes towards adult fiction borrowing, which emulate the 'reading for pleasure' philosophy advocated and encouraged by children's librarians for many years, should be celebrated rather than questioned.

Within the 'intervention versus neutrality' debate, it is the term reader development itself that causes the most controversy. Alternative terms such as 'reader-centred', 'reader engagement' or 'reading for pleasure' have been suggested as more appropriate (Train, 2003), although the process or activity they describe will invariably be the same. Those familiar with the 'M@ilbox' page in the Library and Information Update may remember the letters recently printed on the subject of the term 'reader development' and its use and definition, for example:

"Am I the only person to find the phrase 'reader development' distinctly patronising? I am a school librarian and run such sessions under the title 'reading for pleasure'. They are highly successful" (Davies, September 2004)

Rachel Van Riel (November 2004) responded to Davies' letter by explaining that reader development describes an area of *professional practice*, like librarianship, which is not explicitly associated with reader events and promotions. It is explained that the professional practice of reader development is based on the 'equality of different readers and different reading practices' which focuses on the quality of the individual's reading experiences rather than that of the book or the writer, thus refuting claims of reader condescension with a greater emphasis on reader inclusion. This explanation inspired a further response:

"We need to promote what we offer vigorously – but that is very different from the intrusive and patronising manipulation which seems to be inherent in the RD approach" (Rooney, January 2005)

Evaluation objectives and methodology

To prove the value and inclusive nature of reader development initiatives, irrespective of their name and terminology, it is important to provide evidence of value and impact and undertake effective evaluation studies. The central aim of the *Give me a Break* evaluation research was to discover how a national promotion reaches readers in Wales, including whether or not the promotion has attracted the desired target audience; if *Give me a Break* library displays have successfully attracted new readers; are some promotions more effective than others and why; the role and usage of the *Give me a Break* website; the relationship between website and library promotion use; the impact of the promotion upon participating readers.

A combination of research methods was employed to evaluate the promotion, including the analysis of preliminary evaluation data collected by participating *Estyn Allan* librarians in the form of user exit surveys, promotion book issue statistics and peer review observation data; a survey of participating *Estyn Allan* librarians and observation, along with user and staff interviews undertaken by CPLIS.

The following discussion includes edited extracts of the full evaluation report submitted to *Estyn Allan* organisers in April 2005.

Reader impact

One user exit survey/questionnaire designed and distributed by the *Estyn Allan* team was designed to assess the extent to which the promotion had encouraged the reading of new authors amongst *Give me a Break* borrowers (distributed to users upon issue/return of promotion titles). When a sample of 264 *Give me a Break* borrowers (from 12 participating authorities) were asked if they had read anything by the selected author before, 41 answered 'yes' and 223 answered 'no', therefore 85% of *Give me a Break* borrowers surveyed had chosen to read an author from the display that they had never read before. When asked if it was the display specifically that had encouraged them to try a book which they 'wouldn't normally have chosen', 214 users

answered 'yes' and 50 answered 'no'; 81% of users borrowing from the display therefore had felt encouraged to try something new.

The majority of respondents chose to leave brief but positive remarks such as 'eye-catching', 'nice display' or 'good idea', which are too numerous to include and comment on within this paper. Some examples of comments from individual authorities are given below which have been chosen to represent the general feedback from all of the responding 12 authorities. Respondents generally welcomed the display for providing an accessible opportunity to try something 'different', even if it wasn't to their particular taste; respondents agreed with the philosophy and objectives of *Give me a Break* in attempting to encourage different reading habits:

"It was very helpful. Caught my eye straight away. Chose some books that I might not have done otherwise" *Knighton Library, Powys*

"I didn't find these books were to my particular taste, but I *do* think it's a good idea to encourage people to extend their reading field" *Hay Library, Powys*

Readers in Pembrokeshire noted that they would now consciously look for authors discovered in the promotion, which illustrates a positive outcome in terms of changing reading habits and broadening literary perspectives. The active promotion of Welsh language titles was also acknowledged and appreciated:

"An interesting assortment of books which I probably wouldn't have searched for on the library shelves – but will do in future"

"I think it's an excellent idea and I'll certainly go to that display again. I tend to go for 'tried and tested' modern novelists; it's good to read something different and start on another path for a change"

"Well portrayed... easy access... new authors... pleased *some* novels are in Welsh!"

One *Estyn Allan* librarian in Merthyr Tydfil undertook a rather proactive approach to user survey data collection. Borrower history details for each *Give me a Break* title in Merthyr Tydfil Central Library were collected, and the user questionnaire was posted out to each borrower with a pre-paid return envelope. Of the Merthyr Tydfil Central Library user sample 85% had not read anything by that particular *Give me a Break* author before, and 79% had been encouraged by the display to try something new. Comments given by respondents illustrated an enjoyment of the display and a desire to read more *Give me a Break* titles; the effectiveness of the display in helping readers to make new and informed reading choices; the accessibility of the display in helping readers to make selections in limited available time:

"I think that it is an excellent idea. The book that I selected was outstanding and I look forward to reading more from the display"

"Eye-catching display. I really enjoy seeing displays in the library and I make an effort to look at the books... encourages me to read different topics and authors, because I never really know what I am looking for in a book so these displays really help"

"I like the idea of the display as I can look for new books and authors easily. I am a heavy reader and a serious science fiction reader so it was good to find something new"

"I have used the displays in the past as I like to see suggested authors. I wouldn't know where to look and I don't have the time to enjoy a browse"

Comments made during staff and user interviews conducted in the qualitative fieldwork stages of the evaluation also support the positive impact upon library users in terms of improving access to alternative authors and genres and encouraging the enjoyment of a 'wider' reading experience. Staff noted that regular users have welcomed the opportunity to try something different. Users illustrated the value of promotions and displays in drawing their attention to genres which they would find enjoyable but would never usually have come across, and the effectiveness of displays in attracting target audiences such as parents and carers and enhancing their own personal library visit and experience:

"It's been here [branch library] for about 3 weeks... and considering its a different 'style' of book for us I would say its gone reasonably well... we have had a couple of comments from people saying its nice to try something different... a lot of borrowers are very set in their ways so they need to be pushed to try something new, but they will do it!" (Branch library staff)

"What I did find is that some of the most unlikely people took books from the display and thoroughly enjoyed them... I'm being very stereotypical here but we have one lady who always takes out Mills and Boons... but now she goes to the display and tries something different, and she's even joined the Book Chain and comments on the books she's read... this has only come about because of something like Give me a Break which to me is really good"
(Estyn Allan librarian)

"I usually only read biographies or true crime... the book I have chosen from the display is a crime-related story, and its set in my home town, so I'm quite intrigued enough to read it! It's good to have the chance to browse different types of books... I would never have found this one on the shelves, simply because I wouldn't have been looking for it in the first place"
(Library user)

"I thought the display looked interesting and it gives me something to do whilst [daughter] is doing her own thing... I can only flick through so many children's books without going mad! The position of the display is good as I can still see what she's doing... It's difficult to browse the main adult section and still keep an eye on her... also I can quickly choose a few books to take with me to flick through properly if she decides she needs me with her" (Library user)

It is very difficult to relate the comments made by users during the evaluation of *Give me a Break* to the previously discussed accusations of condescension and manipulation directed towards reader development initiatives. It would be interesting to see if research could be undertaken to prove such a hypothesis.

Staff impact

To provide evidence of the impact of reader development approaches upon professional practice in public libraries, it is essential to consider the opinions and attitudes of participating staff. A questionnaire-based survey was distributed by CPLIS to all participating *Estyn Allan* librarians. The staff survey sought to investigate feedback and opinions on the *Estyn Allan* staff training experience in relation to running the *Give me a Break* promotion, and practical

experiences of running such a promotion. 15 completed questionnaires were received by CPLIS (68% response rate).

It was considered important to examine staff reactions to and opinions on *Estyn Allan* training as a whole to establish how the programme has helped to develop reader development awareness and skills, and the participating librarians' confidence in running promotions and events with particular reference to the *Give me a Break* promotion. This can help to illustrate the impact of reader development initiatives upon professional practice.

All staff survey respondents either agree or strongly agree that the national co-ordination of *Estyn Allan* has been a success and that training events have been organised, facilitated and managed to a high standard. 9 respondents agree that their expectations have been met by the relevant staff training (4 strongly agree) and 11 respondents strongly agree with the statement that they have enjoyed the *Estyn Allan* staff training experience. All respondents agree or strongly agree that the experience has contributed significantly to their continuing professional development.

The positive response to staff training as a whole implies a strong basis for successful reading promotions and events building upon the knowledge and confidence gained via the training programme. The opportunity to network with other authorities and organisations, and the subsequent opportunities for discussion and debate, has proven to be valuable. 8 respondents strongly agree that they have felt able to share ideas and express their opinion during staff training events (6 agree). 7 respondents equally agree and strongly agree that the training has encouraged greater communication and collaboration between libraries and authorities. 9 respondents agree that their knowledge and awareness for the potential of working with external partners has been improved.

Building upon this foundation, the survey has shown how *Estyn Allan* staff training has helped to develop specific and practical reader promotion skills and awareness. 7 respondents equally agree and strongly agree that the experience has improved their stock selection awareness and skills. 11 respondents agree and 4 strongly agree that their book promotion marketing and publicity skills had been improved. Apart from one 'undecided' respondent, all either agree or strongly agree that that they have learned to make the most of physical displays and promotions. To support such practical skills and awareness, participants have also developed an understanding of the role of reader development and book promotions within the wider public library remit (9 agree with this statement), and of the impact and benefits to library users (all agree or strongly agree). In terms of *Estyn Allan* librarians' confidence in reader development activities, 7 respondents equally agree and strongly agree that their confidence has been improved, all agree or strongly agree that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to manage a book promotion under their own initiative.

When asked to describe aspects of the training programme that have been of most benefit to them, respondents repeatedly commented on the value of

increased awareness of the importance of reading promotions and activities which can then be cascaded to managers and colleagues within their authorities. This illustrates the importance of peer and staff support when running a reading promotion, and of the need to justify reader development activities to managers and decision makers. The training has clearly been important at the foundation level of planning and running a promotion. Other comments reflected the benefits of networking with other authorities and libraries and the extent to which individual confidence levels had been raised:

“Raising the whole profile of reader development and libraries for staff and managers”

“Network days were extremely valuable as they gave ‘authority’ to the issues raised, and reinforced the reader development ‘message’ to peers/managers”

“Reader development doesn’t work in isolation, the more staff that take ownership the more effective the results. Through the Estyn Allan training, I have developed confidence to cascade information and report back at library meetings”

“Working with neighbouring authorities and the network of Estyn Allan librarians and the opportunity to ask advice”

“Stock selection – I’ve always selected a wide choice of fiction, but it gave me the reasons for doing so, the facts to back it up, and the courage to select even wider. Promotions – the part of library work I’ve enjoyed most. It gave me a huge range of ideas for new promotions, and the facts to support my asking other staff to participate”

“Not afraid to spend money on stock that’s a ‘little different’”

It is also evident within qualitative evaluation data that promotions such as *Give me a Break* encourage increased dialogue between library staff and users, as well as within individual authorities between colleagues and peers. Changes have occurred in reading habits and attitudes amongst staff themselves further to engaging with the promotion, which encourages a greater shared experience between the library service and user, and increased communication about the needs of users and the relevant services provided. This also conforms to the inclusive nature of reader development initiatives, whereby the individual reading experiences of the readers themselves are used as quality benchmarks, rather than established assumptions about “good literature” and authors:

“Staff have tried the books themselves following recommendations from readers... it’s all word of mouth but has a really positive ‘knock-on’ effect...” (Estyn Allan librarian)

“A lady started work here approximately 3 months after I did... she has a degree in English literature and her [preferred] reading material is very classical shall we say... modern classical as well as the old ones... that was good reading for her and that’s what she would recommend that people read... with the [Give me a Break] promotion she really did interact with people and started to read these books herself and thoroughly enjoyed them... she even joined a Book Chain which helped her to get out of the habit of just reading the classics”
(Estyn Allan librarian)

Many of the skills (and relevant impact upon professional practice) described above emulate the evaluation findings of the *Branching Out* initiative – the national reader development training programme in England. Train (2003) explains that both senior managers and front-line library staff were able to

provide such evidence of the considerable impact of participation in *Branching Out* upon their respective library services, including increased staff awareness of readers and their reading needs; increased collaboration and co-operation between staff across an authority; new focus on stock selection and book promotion as an integrated processes. This demonstrates how large-scale, national approaches to reader development can be consistently effective in changing and developing professional practices.

It is important to note the role and development of evaluation within the *Estyn Allan* initiative in terms of equipping participating librarians with the skills and tools to provide evidence of impact to colleagues, peers and decision makers within their respective authorities (as evidenced by the 'preliminary evaluation data' collection undertaken by all *Estyn Allan* librarians). The development of such skills should not be overlooked in a time of increased accountability for public services and cultural sectors. In a study of impact evaluation, professional practice and policy making, Johnson et al (2004) assert that the LIS profession as a whole has become compelled to confront the relationship between research, policymaking and the development of the profession. Reader development initiatives provide the opportunity for public library staff to acquire and develop such essential and professionally pertinent transferable skills.

Developing reader services

The evaluation of *Give me a Break* has added to an extensive existing body of value and impact studies concerning reader development initiatives. There is clearly a valuable role for reader development in developing and sustaining the role of the public library service in supporting reading for pleasure amongst its adult users. Less emphasis could be placed on the negative interpretation of the philosophy of reader development and of the term itself, which in fact tends not to be recognised or used by public library users and readers. The only true commentators on the impact of reader development initiatives upon public library users in reality are the readers and library users themselves. It is recommended by the authors that reader development, for many an entirely established professional practice, should become universally accepted within the public library sector, as an appropriate vehicle for achieving 'reader centred' aims and objectives.

Note

Estyn Allan is an initiative from the Society of Chief Librarians, managed in partnership with Opening the Book and supported by an 'Arts for All' Lottery grant from the Arts Council of Wales. The Estyn Allan National Co-ordinator is Sian Ashman, Library and Information Service Neath Port Talbot.

References

Davies, K. 'Pleasure Principle': Library + Information Update, September 2004, Vol. 3, No. 9, pp. 21.

Johnson, I.M. et al (2004) Impact evaluation, professional practice, and policy making. New Library World, Vol. 105, No. 1196/1197, pp. 33-45.

Rooney, J. 'RD: intrusive and patronising manipulation?' Library + Information Update, January/February 2005, Vol. 4, No. 1-2, pp. 20.

Train, B. (2003) Reader Development. In: Elkin, J., Train, B. and Denham, D. Reading and Reader Development: The pleasure of Reading, pp. 30-58. Facet Publishing, London.

Van Riel, R. 'What does 'reader development' really mean?' Library + Information Update, November 2004, Vol. 3, No. 11, pp. 19.

Kerry Wilson is a researcher with the *Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society*, Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield.

Briony Train is a lecturer in librarianship in the Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield.