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Belonging to the Library: Humanising the Space for Social Work Education

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Abstract

This article describes the running of four Living Libraries on a UK postgraduate social work course. A Living Library is a metaphoric remodelling of a conventional library where people, as authors of their experiences, provide specialist knowledge based on authorial areas of expertise. In the Living Libraries discussed here 'Living Books' carried stories of social work - their narratives were of lived experiences as people using social care services; as carers in personal relationships with others who use social care services; or, as social work practitioners. The focus of this article is on those Living Libraries involving the participation of the first two of these groups. Drawing on social psychology, phenomenology and human geography, we propose that a Living Library can act as a connective space within social work education by engendering a discursive forum where all participants – people with experiences of services, students, practitioners and social work educators - are given both the freedom and obligation to talk openly about their differential experiences, fears and hopes for social work. Through this process, opportunities are created to consider how improvements that meet all stakeholders' interests may be achieved.

Introduction

In this article we describe the running of four Living Libraries on a UK postgraduate MA in social work course. Two of the Libraries were thought of as ‘generalist’ where people with experience of social work services¹ in any capacity were invited to take part, and two were ‘specialist’ libraries, themed around particular experience – in these instances newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) and young people with experiences of social care services:

- Library 1, Generalist Living Library I, September 2014
- Library 2, Generalist Living Library II, October 2015
- Library 3, Specialist Living Library, The Experience of The First Year in Social Work Practice, June 2015
- Library 4, Specialist Living Library, Young Person’s Living Library, October 2015.

While we draw on our experience of running all four libraries the focus here will be on Libraries 1 and 4. We outline a vision for the Living Library as a connective space within social work education where students join people with various experiences of practice to hear different stories of social work. By exploring these narratives participants can develop more nuanced constructions of relationships in social work that can start to accommodate the needs of different partners, including the professional responsibilities of social workers and the interests of people using social work services. The article starts by providing an overview of what a Living Library is. It then explores the rationale for developing a Living Library in the university setting for social work, drawing on ideas from social psychology, phenomenology and human geography. Thirdly, the running of the Living Libraries is examined in more detail. Finally, the operation of the Libraries is reviewed, drawing on participant feedback, and some future possible developments are considered. A short film was made about Living Library 4 which is available online alongside some other materials relating to the different Living Libraries which have been run

(<http://www.shef.ac.uk/socstudies/prospt/ppt/masocialwork/livinglibrary>).

An Overhead Still of the Library

A Living Library is a metaphoric remodelling of a conventional library where people, as authors of their experiences, provide specialist knowledge based on authorial areas of expertise. In our Living Libraries, Living Books all carry stories of social work - their narratives are of lived expertise as people using social care services; as carers in personal relationships with others who use social care services; or, as social work practitioners. Just like a conventional library, students may borrow a Living Book to read for a period of time, but in the Living Library reading is confined by the time and space of the classroom. As the

¹ While ‘service users and carers’ is current mainstream terminology we are aware of grassroots discontent with the term ‘service user’. Therefore, where possible, we use ‘people with experience of services’ or ‘people with expertise of services’ to refer collectively to both ‘service users’ and ‘carers’.

author the Living Book decides on their book title, has control over the content of their book, and decides which chapters of their book they will share and discuss with their student Readers. Reading is a small-group interaction in the Living Library: Readers listen and talk with their Living Book, and in talking Readers also share their stories about their own experiences of social work with their Book. The story exchange in a Living Library is comparable to a book-club meeting with the author who, after reading a chapter of their book aloud, opens up a discussion about their book with the audience. In turn, the audience share their stories about their reading the book and discuss what meaning the issues raised have for them. Before a Living Library closes, there is always an open plenary space where Readers and Living Books share their learning from their experience with everyone who has participated in the Library.

The library metaphor works well as it identifies a place that most of us are familiar with. A recent report on the library service in England described libraries as providing safe places for literacy and learning (Sieghart 2013, p.5). In the U.S.A. libraries are recognised by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as essential community organisations. When a disaster happens in a community people take shelter, seek advice and exchange stories in the public library. Narratives of what happened - sense making around profoundly difficult experiences - are developed within the library space which thereby serves as one where people 'reinforce social bonds and . . . establish norms of helping, cooperation, and reciprocity' (Veil and Bishop, 2014, p.18 & p.44). As with all metaphors, there are limits to the fit of the comparison. Birdi, Wilson and Cocker (2008) provide a salutary insight that as much as community libraries are inclusive in policy and strategy, this can mask more socially exclusionary practices. However, the strength of the metaphor lies precisely in the normative assertion that the library can be a powerful place of communal meaning that we can all join and belong in together.

Libraries are also central places of learning in universities, repositories of knowledge, stored in books and other media, which any member can access. In the Living Library, expert knowledge is 'stored' in the stories of lived experiences told by the Living Books. Students access this specialist knowledge through reading with the Living Books in the Living Library space. Living Books do not substitute for academic or other practice-based sources of information, but they are accorded similar status to the academic texts and journals that social work educators direct students to read during the programme. The Living Library provides an additional repository of knowledge that broadens and enriches the range of knowledge available for students to read and learn from.

Within the Library Vaults: The Challenge of the Other

The original Living Library (The Human Library) was designed in Denmark as a means through which stereotypes and prejudices that undermine people's capacity to connect with fellow human-beings could be openly examined and challenged (Abergel, Rothmund, Titley and Wootsch, 2005). The core assumptions underpinning a Living Library are that when people meet and talk with each other they confront the beliefs or fears they have about the other. Their face to face encounter provides them with knowledge and greater

understanding, which increases their capacity to empathise with others (Abergel, et al., 2005). These ideas are rooted in the classic social psychology theory (Allport, 1954) which indicates that to have best effect the encounter needs to be experienced as real: participants in the Living Library are not role playing, they are together in the Library as themselves, and they are engaged together in a shared purposeful activity.

In considering the rationale for a Living Library, we also draw on Levinas' (1969) claims regarding the privileged opportunity which the face to face encounter with another human being presents. Away from the co-present encounter Levinas (1969) argues our conception of 'the Other' may be reduced by positioning them as objects within our own framework of understanding, necessarily delimiting their otherness. The intensity – the pleasure, the simultaneous proximity and distance, sometimes the sheer awkwardness - of the face to face encounter demand a recognition of the alterity of the other, and from this also a recognition of our ethical obligations to them as a being separate from and different to us (Levinas, 1969). Some connection may be seen between this strand of Levinas' work and Merleau-Ponty's (2013 edition) focus on the embodied nature of human experience. Critiquing the traditional dualist separation between mind and body, particularly the exaltation of cognitive thought, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the body is the means through we are, act and know the world. For Merleau-Ponty (2013), therefore, embodied experience is the basis for our engagement in the world and for reflective thought. For Levinas (1969), the face to face encounter is the basis for our engagement in the world, where the face may be viewed as the 'corporeal emblem of the other' (Waldenfels, 2002, p.63). While there is an ongoing debate as to how far communication mediated by digital technology may simulate or replace face to face communication (Sen, 2015) the Living Library is unashamedly premised on the power of the co-present, embodied, encounter with another being who is different to us and from whom we are ethically obliged to learn. The Living Library places a demand on Readers to recognise, explore, and reflect on the otherness of both the Living Books they encounter and their fellow Readers. Through this, it reinforces their obligations to take account of the insights of the lived experiences of social work practice which Living Books and fellow Readers hold.

The initial suggestion of running a Living Library on our course was made by a person with experience of services who was assisting us to review the MA course. We were concerned to examine how particular formulations of the involvement of people with experience of services could create barriers to envisioning the multitude of different partnership arrangements there might be between people who use and provide services in social work. Too often this involvement can be limited by oversimplified constructions that constrain the interactions that people with experience of services and students have in the classroom. We want our students to be curious and to develop a range of skills for communication and critical thinking. But, in the classroom, our shared experience had been that students listened politely and rarely questioned, or got into meaningful discussion, with people with experience of services about their own understandings of social work, particularly when it appeared these might hold alternative constructions of what social workers' roles and responsibilities should

be. It was as if the stories of people with experience of services were sacrosanct in the classroom.

We agree with many, like Gupta & Blewett (2008, p.469), that people with experience of social work services are ‘essential ingredients’ for social work education but it does seem that we only talk about their involvement as teachers for social work in classroom settings (*learning about practice*). Explicit recognition of their role as teachers in practice placements is missing in the literature and research in this area (Anghel and Ramon 2009; Beresford and Croft 2004; Robinson and Webber 2013; Sadd, 2011). We have also noticed students’ acknowledgement of this role is often missing in their discussions about practice-based experiences where discourse is principally about learning to ‘do’ social work. Students’ focus in placement tends to be on establishing a professional identity and developing knowledge of the roles and responsibilities they will have as social workers (*doing practice*). Concern to achieve a professional social work identity seems to obscure the educative role people with experience of services actively play in students’ practice, and their contribution to students’ learning becomes primarily defined in relation to social workers’ *doing of* the practice. This separation erects a barrier to the development of meaningful partnerships with people with experience of services. As alternative, primarily employer based, training models for social work are privileged in England through Government sponsorship, there is a challenge for universities to maintain a connective space for social work education. If *teaching about* social work goes on in the academy and *learning to do* social work goes on in practice placement then the university space for social work education needs to better connect these two domains. The involvement of people with experience of services is central to this ambition.

How to develop the authentic involvement of people with experience of services is a constant challenge. Fox (2011) considers if and how people with experience of services can be treated as equals in the academic community whilst also having their needs considered. To form meaningful partnerships for practice we all need to be freed up to articulate our own views of what social work is, and might be, and examine the differences – the ‘otherness’ (Levinas, 1969) - there may be between us as potential partners. As Jenkins (2008, p.102) implies identity entails establishing the things that might separate us as well as the commonalities that can unite us, for ‘defining us involves defining [...] themself’. The Living Library attempts to achieve this by establishing a connective space, to which we now turn in more detail.

Spanning Boundaries in and out of the University : the Library as Connective Space

Research from human geography highlights how space can undermine or enhance particular inequalities through the ways in which people who occupy it are identified, and the status they are accorded within a given space according to that identity (Valentine, 2007). A core transformative aim of the Living Library is as a space which develops the possibility of different, multiple, constructions of the identities and relationships social workers and people who use social work services have. Discursive exchange in the Living Library also helps us to think about how these identities and relationships span the boundaries of the spaces which social work occupies. To take an illustration, some of our students bring prior or current experiences of using services to the Libraries, while some with experience of using social

work services who have been involved in teaching on our course also carry experience as social work practitioners. Over and above these particular instances of multiple role identities, the Living Library can provide a connective space by engendering a discursive forum where ‘we’ – people with experiences of services, students, practitioners, social work tutors – are given both the freedom and obligation to talk openly about our differential experiences, fears and hopes for social work. Through this process, opportunities are created to consider how improvements that meet all stakeholders’ interests may – or may not - be achieved. While participants have different roles as Living Books, Readers and Librarians (social work tutors) all are accorded equal status. This is underpinned by an interdependence and interconnectedness for the purpose of knowledge production and exchange within the Living Library space: Readers need Books, Books need Readers, Libraries require Librarians and Librarians need good Books and enthusiastic Readers. This embodied interconnectedness is comparable to social work practice where there is an interdependence between the people who use social work services and the people who provide them. Indeed, the relational co-construction of knowledge in the Library resonates with the (re)turn to relational engagement and embodied ways of knowing within contemporary social work practice (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014).

It would be naïve to think that membership of the Library space overcomes the multiple layers of social exclusion those with experience of services encounter within and outside the academy (see Warren and Boxall, 2009). However, nor is the accessing of social space trivial, both reflecting social relations and helping produce/re-produce them in ways that help or hinder how different people interact and influencing how they identify themselves and others (Valentine, 2007; Hopkins, 2011). The running of the Libraries has made us consider how the university space can be more genuinely opened up to those with experience of services. Some Living Books have told us that they felt they did not previously have permission to enter the university buildings where we have held the Living Libraries. Our university, like many others, was set up by community subscription so that people in the community could benefit through the different ways – educational, cultural and economic - a university can contribute to community life. The buildings are key landmarks in the community landscape. Many applicants to our programme have told us how the university architecture, the buildings they walked past as children, influenced their aspirations to study here. Yet, though these buildings might meaningfully be said to belong to the community, the pulls of the university teaching and research excellence agendas are exclusionary, delimiting membership to those who may be deemed to ‘excel’ in given ways. While the narratives of those with experience of services may be reified during teaching inputs in the university classroom, outside of these selective times the university space can reinforce their exclusion. For this reason, several social work education projects have chosen to instead work in the community settings where service users live (see Duffy and Hayes, 2012).

Our choice to undertake the Living Libraries within the university is deliberate - we wanted to recognise the university as part of the place where people live and grow up, and therefore part of their identity (Valentine, 2007). We have envisaged the Living Libraries as spaces which are meaningfully shared by different stakeholders who are connected through a

relationship of mutual interest and investment in social work education. This has brought us to consider how open the university space is to those with experiences of services beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the Living Libraries themselves. Although a small symbol of our wish to open up our own university space, we were able to facilitate university library access for two people who wanted to use them, following their participation as Living Books. One later told us of her surprise and pleasure when, reading in one of the university libraries, she was recognised by a social work student she had previously met in the Living Library and, just as two people meeting might do, they had a conversation. The experience is related here to represent the way in which the Living Library may be part of a process of opening up the borders of social work education: it can create possibilities for multi-dimensional experiences of fellow human beings that go beyond the restricted constructions we might hold of each other arising from the single role identity bestowed through provision or receipt of social work services.

Glancing inside the Library Doors

Library 1 was a full day event involving, at different points in the day, students joining the course and students starting their second year following completion of a first period of assessed practice. Living Books were recruited by email circulated through a range of different networks and follow-up telephone conversations. The opportunity to narrate experiences of social work in person clearly appealed as we had a good response (see *Book Titles* below), including people who had not, to our knowledge, ever previously been involved in social work education. The format appears to be one through which we might therefore foster greater inclusion and diversity in our partnerships with people. Living Books who participated had a range of expertise through experiences of mental distress, learning difficulties, physical disabilities, non-verbal communication, surviving childhood trauma, life at older age, foster care and caring for a partner through terminal illness. It was made explicit to all members of the Living Library that it was a place where every Living Book had full control over the story they wished to share, their Book title, and the time they wanted to spend in the Library. Some people chose to bring supporters with them, some decided to spend a half day and others a whole day. Living Books also had the freedom to restrict Readers' questions to certain areas of their experience if they wished, though most felt comfortable responding to all that were posed. We are aware that a Living Library requires Living Books to narrate personal, and often difficult, experiences to groups of people they do not know. Amongst other things, this could reawaken feelings associated with those experiences. We are mindful of providing appropriate support to Living Books before a Library so they are aware of what to expect during an event. We also ensure we 'check in' with Living Books soon after a Library to get a sense of how they experienced it. However, we have also taken a deliberate stance that we do not vet Living Books. The decision on whether to participate is left to a Living Book to take, sometimes in discussion between them and their supporters.

In Library 1 all the Living Books were authored by adults. Our reflections on this led to Library 4. We recognised that young people with experience of services are often poorly represented within our university space, as they tend to be within social work education more

generally. There are complex dynamics affecting which social groups access particular spaces (Valentine, 2007) but a very practical barrier to younger young people's engagement with the university space is the overlap between the university teaching calendar and school or college timetables. Consequently, we arranged to run Library 4 in the school half-term week and worked with a local partner organisation to identify young people with experiences of social work who might wish to take part. We were conscious of the potential spatial dynamics of young people accessing an unfamiliar place (Hopkins, 2011): some young people who were interested in participating might have reservations about being in a space traditionally restricted to adults, particularly perhaps those who did not see themselves going to university or have family members who had done so. We therefore chose to limit this Library to our second year students and two of us met with the young people a week before the event in a space familiar to them, a venue used by the organisation we were working with. This meeting allowed us to explain how the process of 'authoring' a Living Book could work and provide a short embodied example of a Living Library exchange in which one of us (RS) was the Living Book, and the other (NM) the curious Reader.

In the Living Library student Readers are allocated into small reading groups of between four to seven students, with reading group exchanges taking between 45 minutes and an hour each time. The interaction in reading groups may be thought of as student-led small group teaching (Dennick and Exley, 2004) guided by a Living Book. Tutors' primary role is to ensure each reading group is set up and working, and to facilitate the plenary session at the end of the Living Library. Students know they must complete reflective tasks after the exchanges and this may help structure their questions, but discussions are also fluid and open ended, facilitating exploration of different perspectives. In Library 1 we gave students a particular focus according to their stage of learning on the programme. First years were asked to think about what people who have experience of using services find helpful and unhelpful about social workers and to later record their reflections. Second years were asked to undertake and present a 'Living Book review' to their Living Book at the plenary session at the end of the day. The plenary sessions add a workshop element (Dennick and Exley, 2004) to the small group collaboration evident in reading groups, facilitating the sharing of learning between all Library participants.

In Library 1 we also asked second year students to create something tangible and personal to give to their Living Book - a letter, picture, piece of creative writing or whatever else they decided was most appropriate. We construed this as a gift created and given by the students to the Living Books in return for the gift of knowledge the Living Books had given them, reflecting the ethos of exchange and reciprocity within the Library. We felt we could enhance the reciprocal exchange further and so, in Library 4, we arranged an undergraduate student led tour of the university for the young people taking part in the Living Library. The tour highlighted the university space as one they might choose to access afterwards, either as local residents or as potential future students. As another aspect of the exchange, after the young people had presented their experiences as Living Books, some of our MA students became Living Books, articulating their own narratives in choosing to study social work, with both fellow students and the young people as Readers within the small reading groups. The

Library thereby constituted a knowledge exchange where social work students learned from young people's experiences of services, and young people had the opportunity to develop insights into why someone might choose to pursue a career in social work, and how life experience might have influenced that decision.

The voluntary exchange of experience was one of the essential principles of the original Human Library: participation is a gift from which both Living Books and Readers derive benefit (The Human Library, 2015). While our course normally offers payment to people with experience of services for their involvement in teaching, we have explicitly not done so for participation in Living Libraries for this reason. We have offered any financial support that was needed to facilitate participation – mainly transport costs (taxis, bus fares, petrol and parking) and the payment of costs for any support Living Books required to attend. We were also committed to making the Libraries welcoming and hospitable spaces, so refreshments have been available throughout the days. In Library 1, due to budgetary constraints, refreshments were only available to Living Books and we excluded students. During discussions with Living Books afterwards it dawned on us that, to our embarrassment, this created a division which was contrary to the spirit of equality and interconnectedness within the Living Library. We managed to access funds to offer refreshments to all in Libraries 2 and 3 and in Library 4 we adopted the practice of 'Jacob's Joints', whereby tutors and students each brought some food in to share for lunch and everyone -the young people, their supporters, tutors, social work students and undergraduate students who had led the university tour - ate together before the Living Library commenced.

Book titles from Living Libraries 1 and 4 are given below by means of an illustration. It should be borne in mind that some titles may give an indication of what the stories might be about while others do not:

Living Book Titles Living Library 1

- My marbles and how I lost them. Volume two:- The wilderness Years. Containing special Limited Edition bonus chapters
- I'm a lunatic
- Right then! what's next?
- A Person Centred Life
- Recovery: Fighting back
- Saved from Closure
- Living with anxiety
- Living with disability in a normal world
- If I were a book
- Leap of faith
- My life as a carer

Living Book Titles from Living Library 4

Authored by Young People

- Uncertainty and Joy
- Live and Let Live
- For Those Who Care
- Diaries of a Self-Confessed Moron
- Changes and Shape Shifters
- An Old Shoe & a Used Tampon: Diaries of a Boss Ass Bitch
- Don't Judge a Book by its Cover

Authored by Social Work Students

- 360°: Turning (-) into (+)
- 4's the Charm
- Great Expectations
- Choices
- Why am I here?
- A Series of Unfortunate Events...Ends in a Rainbow
- Forgiveness
- Behind enemy lines
- Social Work? You must be crazy!

Several Living Book authors chose titles that appear to play with negatives stereotypes and labelling they had encountered. The possibility of 'non-derogatory in-group use' of language as a progressive form of re-appropriation has been documented (Croom, 2013). But, such language can also serve as a source of tension and discomfort when its use extends across the boundaries of a given 'in-group' and 'out-group', and because it seems to jar with values which social work education seeks to promote around the challenging of discriminatory labelling. Such potential tensions, though, precisely illustrate the expectation to engage in dialogical exchange which the Living Library provokes. Questions around the differential use of language, and the experiential basis for it, can start to be explored and unpicked. Though this is not without its challenges for all involved, it is part of what makes the embodied encounters in the Living Library meaningful, real and developmental.

Surveying the Library

We did not set out to undertake a formal evaluation of the Libraries. Rather, we took stock of their operation by primarily considering information that was already available to us. This consisted of:

- Feedback from those with experiences of services or their supporters shortly after the Libraries on their experience of being a Living Book in Libraries 1, 2 and 4 (n = 13)².
- A review of students' mandatory written reflections on Libraries 1, 2, and 4 undertaken shortly after the Libraries (n = 204).

² In addition to these 13 we received feedback from all the NQSWs who were Living Books in Library 3 but, given the focus of the article, do not consider this here.

Additionally, six months after Library 1 and two months after Library 4, we made a request to students to provide us with:

- Any further reflections they had on the impact of the Libraries, if they wished to provide them. We received a modest number of responses to the request (n = 21/152).

A thematic analysis of the comments and reflections was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and brief excerpts are used below to illustrate three core themes. Permission to use comments was provided by their authors. Though there were some suggestions for improvement (*see below*), their overwhelming tenor suggested the Living Library experience had been developmental for Living Books and Readers. The Living Libraries are nonetheless a small part of the curriculum and, in the absence of more robust longitudinal data, we acknowledge that is no certainty such feedback has translated into better practice, and consequently, better outcomes for the people our students will work with. While, as Carpenter (2011) argues, this final consideration is the ultimate arbiter of social work education, the challenges in clearly establishing that any educational input has indubitably met it are manifold, and educators often have to gauge whether teaching will positively affect students' future practice on less than full information. Alongside our own insights from running the events, the comments and reflections collected on the Living Library experience do sustain a reasoned belief that it carries the potential to positively influence participants' approaches to social work practice.

The first theme, from the feedback from Living Books and their supporters, was a view that narrating experiences in the Library had made a difference. This was in two ways –Living Books felt that students Readers valued and respected their stories, and connected to this, that the exchanges were thereby influencing future practice:

'Pleasure to be involved, I prefer smaller groups of students. ...more chance of good interaction, and from a service user viewpoint, you get a better feel for how they are in and around the people they will be working with. It's not just the professional that is assessing things, service users also do it to a lesser degree, "Can I work with this person, do I feel comfortable, and more to the point, can I trust them?" (Living Book, Library 1).

'It's definitely worth taking part as these people are going to be the social workers of the future, it is the perfect medium in which to articulate your concerns to shape social work practice in the coming years.' (Living Book, Library 4).

For student Readers, the power of accessing direct narratives about good and poor social work practice resonated strongly. The embodied face to face encounter with the other (Levinas, 1969; Merleau-Ponty 2013) meant the messages conveyed were persuasive and compelling:

'Continuity and consistency are vital. You are a stranger going into someone's home, you must build a relationship with them. You are dealing with human beings, not the

problem on its own.’ (1st Year Reader, Library 2, Immediate feedback on one thing they had learnt from a Living Book).

‘Being able to ask the foster carer’s honest opinion was the most valuable experience. Normally when working with service users it’s not always appropriate to question them in such depth or with such freedom!’ (1st Year Reader, Library 1, Immediate Feedback).

The proportion of students who provided comments some months after the Libraries was small, and it is unclear how well they reflect the overall cohorts’ thoughts. In the comments which were provided, however, the power of the first-hand narratives of social work practice in the Living Library exchanges remained a salient theme. This suggested the possibility of their enduring influence:

‘What has stayed with me is how people have been affected both positively and negatively by social workers. I always knew this was the case, however hearing it first-hand has more of an impact.’ (2nd Year Reader, Library 1, 6 Months After).

‘The Living Library was an exceptional opportunity to see how social workers were perceived through the eyes of a young service user. The most significant learning point was to understand how social workers’ dishonesty created feelings of distrust, anxiety and oppression’ (2nd Year Reader, Library 4, 2 Months After).

There were also indications that some students carried learning from the Library exchanges into their subsequent practice placements, providing illustrative support for the contention that the Library can function as a connective space between the *learning about* and the *doing of* social work:

‘My book’s belief that her being labelled as diagnosis X involved a barrier to good practice, in that she was treated *as* a diagnosis, was interesting. Later informed my understanding of the medical model being less person-centred.’ (1st Year Reader, Living Library 1, 6 Months After).

‘I asked [the foster carer] how she felt when she had brought up a girl from a matter of weeks old and she was adopted when she was 18 months and the de-attachment not only for the child but for the foster carer. This made me think about how parents dealt with the issue of loss when their child has been taken away, and that there are no real services for that biological parent once the child has been removed.’ (1st Year Reader, Living Library 1, 6 Months After).

Suggestions for improving the Living Library experience focussed on practical aspects of their running. Getting the right physical space is a challenge. Feedback highlighted the importance of a venue that allows for the intimacy required for sensitive small group work and can also accommodate a larger plenary session and accessibility needs. It is a challenge we have better met in the later Libraries but given the demand for university space in peak teaching times it remains an ongoing one. Some students indicated they wanted greater freedom in Living Book selection, and the opportunity to read more Living Books. Following

Library 1 students have had the opportunity to read two Living Books and Readers' access to two different, sometimes differing, narratives on social work practice has been valuable, requiring the navigation of a path to understanding them together. There are though limitations to how much choice, and how many Living Books, we can offer Readers in one Library session. We have discovered that conversations between students after the Library are also a good means of sharing learning from the different reading experiences, as well as a mechanism for supporting the translation of learning from the Library to practice. This has brought focus onto developing exercises after a Living Library which encourage Readers to share experiences between them, as well as reflect on them individually.

Architects' Plans for New Developments

We are currently developing an online 'archive' of the Libraries. The archive does not seek to directly record or replicate the Living Library exchanges themselves which are private and dependent on embodied dialogic interaction. Rather, it has been conceived of as an eclectic mix of objects which, between them, should provide a core record of each Library which has taken place, as well as some additional insights into how particular Libraries have run. So far it consists of a record of each of the Book titles within every Library there has been, a video of footage from Library 4 and two audio interviews with Living Books undertaken after Libraries 1 and 3.

We are seeking to establish partnerships to sustain the Living Library model and intend to run Generalist Living Libraries as part of our student introduction programme each year. Many of the Living Books from Library 1 returned for Library 2, which reflects their commitment to conveying their experiences to student social workers, as well as their positive experience of Library 1. At the same time, we want to ensure opportunities for new Living Books to participate. We also want to develop further specialist Living Libraries around particular service areas or groups of people using social care services, particularly those with experience of services who may be less well represented within social work education. Current embryonic thoughts are for Libraries involving those with experiences of mental distress, parents with experience of child protection services and young people with disabilities.

If anyone is considering developing a Living Library, we would be happy to hear from you.

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