

Bibliotherapy Laboratory

Experiential and Educational Developmental Bibliotherapy Workshops

Ivana Bašić

Balance Center for Bibliotherapy and Logopedagogy, Zagreb, Croatia

balans.centar@gmail.com

Iva Šišak

Balance Center for Bibliotherapy and Logopedagogy, Zagreb, Croatia

balans.centar@gmail.com

Abstract

The Bibliotherapy Laboratory is an educational and experiential program developed by the Balans Center for Bibliotherapy and Logopedagogy, the leading organization for bibliotherapy in Croatia, and has been running since 2021. Designed for literature professors, psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists and other professionals who work with people, the program provides participants with the opportunity to personally experience the transformative power of bibliotherapy. Simultaneously, it equips them with practical bibliotherapy methods that they can apply in their professional environments or use for personal growth and development. This paper will explore the origins of the program, its objectives, workshop structure, principles for selecting working material, the dynamics of group work, and the collaborative leadership approach of the two facilitators who shared responsibilities. The results of surveys conducted at the end of each cycle will be also mentioned. These findings highlight how empowered participants feel for future work with their clients, their experiences of group dynamics, the most memorable moments and the significance of humor, game and introductory exercises in fostering a stimulating and safe environment for group work. In conclusion, the paper will emphasize the importance of such experiential-educational bibliotherapy programs for the purpose of educating and connecting professionals in education and healthcare who wish to cultivate bibliotherapy in their communities.

Keywords: interactive bibliotherapy; personal growth; personal development; group work; mental health

Introduction

The Balance Center for Bibliotherapy and Logopedagogy, originally established in 2001 as the Balance Center for Social Art, has evolved significantly since its founding. Initiated by Professor Slavica Bašić, a pedagogue and psychologist at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, the Center began as a training hub for teachers and educators in experiential pedagogy, rooted in the principles of Waldorf education. Since 2011, the Center has dedicated its work exclusively to bibliotherapy and poetry therapy, practices that align deeply with the experiential pedagogy framework. Over the years, the mission of the Balance center has expanded to include in-depth

research, lectures, and workshops nationwide and across the region to raise awareness about bibliotherapy and provide education in this field.

Recently, the Center has focused on developing innovative programs that integrate expertise from literature methodology, educational sciences, bibliotherapy, and psychotherapy. This interdisciplinary approach has led to the formation of numerous reading groups, strengthened networks among education and healthcare professionals, and contributed to efforts to establish bibliotherapy standards for broader societal integration.

Bibliotherapy Laboratory

The Bibliotherapy Laboratory is a program of the Balans Center for Bibliotherapy, first held during the 2021/2022 school year as a result of the collaboration between school librarian and Integrative Gestalt counselor Iva Šišak and literature professor and logotherapist Ivana Bašić. Since then, it has become a regular program of the Balance Center for three consecutive years.

The program consists of six educational and experiential monthly bibliotherapy workshops designed for adult participants, including professionals such as teachers, librarians, psychologists, artists and anyone interested in integrating bibliotherapy into their practice. The program is envisioned as a series of developmental interactive bibliotherapy workshops conducted with a group of up to 12 participants who attend the sessions continuously, fostering group cohesion through which therapeutic goals are achieved.

The workshops are held at the Mladost Elementary School Library in Zagreb, in a comfortable setting equipped with modular furniture that can be adapted to various working formats.

Core Principles and the Structure of Program

Developmental interactive bibliotherapy is a dynamic process where the text serves as a starting point for fostering communication, expressing emotions, and sharing thoughts related to themes that emerge from the text and group interactions (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2012). Group members connect with each other through the text and also deepen their self-awareness by exploring its meanings. A key feature of interactive bibliotherapy is that each participant interprets the text based on their own experiences. This helps create a broader understanding of topics like interpersonal relationships, the connection between humans and nature, and the relationship between humans and their spiritual selves—subjects commonly explored in literature (Chavis & Weisberger, 2003).

The uniqueness of the Bibliotherapy Laboratory lies in its integration of the fundamental goals of interactive bibliotherapy with an educational objective. It is designed for participants who, beyond experiencing the bibliotherapy process, wish to learn methods they can apply in their professional settings.

Each Bibliotherapy Laboratory session follows a three-part structure:

1. Introductory Preparatory Exercise
2. Text Reading and Bibliotherapeutic Discussion
3. Reflection and Theoretical Enrichment

Introductory Preparatory Exercise

The introductory part of the session is crucial, as it serves both to create a ritual separation from daily life and to prepare participants for immersion into the text and the bibliotherapeutic process. It is important to hear what emotions participants are bringing, whether anything significant has occurred since the last meeting that relates to previous discussions, and similar reflections. To initiate this conversation, associative cards, objects, or invitations for participants to bring something that symbolizes the time between meetings are sometimes used. Participants are also encouraged to share artistic expressions inspired by the text read at the previous session.

The introductory exercises, which combined ice-breaker games, drama activities, relaxation techniques and the use of associative cards, are carefully chosen to be connected to the text. Their aim is to prepare participants on both a physical (sensory) and emotional (experiential) level, facilitating a deeper connection with the story or poem to follow. For instance, a sensory exercise in which participants explored an orange with their eyes closed opened their senses to a poem about love depicted through the metaphor of the orange.

It became clear that thoughtfully selecting these initial activities fostered a sense of group cohesion and a relaxed atmosphere of trust, both of which are essential for the continued success of the group process (Yalom & Leszcz, 2013). This was further confirmed by feedback from participants, who expressed that the introductory exercises were often a very important part of the session. They noted that the laughter and relaxation they experienced helped create a more open environment for later discussions.

Text Reading and Bibliotherapeutic Discussion

The second, central part of the workshop is dedicated to reading the text and conducting the bibliotherapeutic discussion.

The text is read twice: during the first reading, participants engage in interpretative reading and their initial experience of the text, while in the second reading, they mark quotes or words in their copies of the text that catch their attention due to the strong impression they make or the associations they trigger. The facilitators first share their impressions, demonstrating through example how thoughts and feelings can be expressed, and their manner of speaking sets an example for the length and structure of speech. It is important to emphasize that attention must be paid to these elements in order to ensure that all group members, considering the group dynamics, are given space to express themselves and communicate with others. This contrasts with communication models often found in everyday conversations, where participants compete to

have the strongest or best opinion and refer to each other's mistakes or weaknesses in an attempt to dominate or “win” the conversation.

Participants express their experience of the text using their notes, and the facilitators guide the discussion with carefully crafted bibliotherapeutic questions that encourage deep reading—an approach where the text is connected to one's own life experiences. As Peti Stantić (2022, 57) explains, “understanding the literal meaning of what is written in the text, but also understanding what is not stated in the text, what is reflected in our lives and our experiences, and then what our experience is reflected in, and what draws from that same experience, are two sides of reading with understanding.” She expands this idea by highlighting the importance of sharing the reading experience: “In this context, reading in solitude, but also reading in a group, opens up space for the possibility of understanding new worlds through understanding situations, reflecting on them, and discussing them.” (Stantić, 2022, 57)

According to Stantić (2022) several important practices that are prerequisites for deep reading and are encouraged in the Bibliotherapy Laboratory are:

1. Engagement with the text
2. Connecting with specific parts of the text
3. Expressing and sharing one's experience of the text with others, using quotes that hold special meaning for the reader
4. Exchanging different interpretations of the text, building on previously shared observations

The bibliotherapy conversation is rooted in aesthetic reading of the text (Rosenblatt, 1969). Rather than relying on an analytical approach that can constrain creativity, aesthetic reading allows participants to engage with the text on a deeper, more emotional level. This process not only strengthens individual identity but also fosters a sense of community among group members. By sharing their personal associations and emotions, participants open up to each other, contributing to mutual self-discovery.

To facilitate this type of conversation, facilitators act as models from whom our participants can learn. At times, they share their own experiences with the text to demonstrate how to express personal reflections. Throughout the conversation, participants deepen the experience by drawing out associations, referring to one another and uncovering various layers of thought and emotion. The bibliotherapy conversation always reveals how much of ourselves remains unknown and highlights the beauty of self-discovery in a group, where we open up to others.

Though the conversation is a powerful tool, time for it during sessions is limited—it cannot go on indefinitely. To help solidify feelings and thoughts, facilitators paid special attention to the conclusion of the conversation, which is referred to as integration. For this purpose, participants are engaged in collective activities such as writing a poem, creating an anagram, writing a letter to a poet or character, or sometimes painting or making collages. These methods work effectively within the groups, much like others that allow participants to translate their thoughts and

emotions into something tangible, thereby deepening their connection to both the text and the group.

Reflection and Theoretical Enrichment

The last, third part of the workshop is dedicated to sharing, but in the sense of reflecting on the entire process. It is an opportunity to review the methods used, ask questions and highlight the most important moments of the session. This serves as an educational enhancement of the experience. Through the analysis of the main procedures and decisions made by the facilitators in the preparation and during the workshop, participants gain insight into the working principles, as well as the multiple possibilities that emerge during the process of leading the group.

Selection of Texts for Bibliotherapy Workshops

Hynes & Hynes-Berry (2012) outlines the principles of text selection. They emphasize what many bibliotherapists also have identified as crucial: the principle of hope, openness to interpretation, language tailored to participants, and strong imagery that evokes emotions.

A significant part of the preparation for Bibliotherapy Laboratory sessions is devoted to finding high-quality texts by reading through short stories and poems. Short texts are selected in order to be read multiple times during the session, allowing for greater attention to detail in discussions and creative tasks related to the text. The facilitators are selecting the texts together, first researching them individually, and then discussing all the important elements of the text to assess its quality and suitability for bibliotherapy sessions. While they sometimes have differing opinions about which text to choose, they negotiate, align their perspectives, and ask questions that lead them to the best decision. Once they agree on a text, based on assessments, they structure the workshop around it. In the surveys conducted after each cycle of workshops, some participants highlighted that the good collaboration and communication between the facilitators served as a model for communication among the group members, which has already been mentioned.

Evaluation of the Bibliotherapy Laboratory by Participants

The majority of participants in the Bibliotherapy Laboratory were highly educated women, employed, aged between 35 and 60, along with several younger, highly educated, employed men. Most participants came from the Zagreb area, while a few participants traveled from other distant parts of Croatia. Most of these participants regularly attended the workshops, which is an indicator of strong group cohesion in all groups (Yalom & Leszcz, 2013). There was a strong commitment, even during challenging pandemic circumstances that sometimes threatened the possibility of in-person meetings and motivation to attend.

At the end of each cycle, a survey and interviews were conducted with the participants to identify moments that were the most intriguing, which texts left the strongest impression, whether

participants felt comfortable in the group, and how important humor was in connecting with other members. The whole research involved 27 participants, all of whom reported high levels of personal and professional satisfaction with the program. The participants highlighted the positive atmosphere with plenty of humor, but also touching moments of respectful silence that connected the group. Everything indicated that the participants felt comfortable in the groups and experienced the meetings as deeply transformative. They reported feeling safe and supported within the group and stated that they had gained the necessary foundational knowledge and encouragement to lead similar workshops in their workplaces, which fulfilled one of the most important goals of Bibliotherapy Laboratory.

Conclusion

By the end of the program, most participants felt empowered to engage in bibliotherapy. Based on the program, various developmental bibliotherapy projects have been launched in schools, libraries, and clinical environments. After the first Bibliotherapy Laboratory, the participant and therapist, Matija Lukač, mag. med. techn., started the “Therapy with Books” program at the County Special Hospital Insula on the island of Rab (Croatia) as a rehabilitation program for individuals suffering from anxiety disorders. The Bibliotherapy Laboratory also inspired Tihana Gašpert, a nurse at the Radiotherapy and Oncology Clinic at KBC Rijeka (Croatia), to research the applicability of bibliotherapy when working with oncology patients. Her paper was presented at an international conference in Milan in 2023. Tea Sesar, a professor of Croatian language and literature at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, inspired by this program, introduced bibliotherapy as a topic for her students, future teachers and educators.

From October to March each year, the Bibliotherapy Laboratory continues to serve as a place of inspiration, support and exploration of the potential of developmental interactive bibliotherapy. It also becomes a platform for building a community of individuals interested in bibliotherapy and poetry therapy in the Republic of Croatia.

References

- Chavis, G. G., & Weisberger, L. L. (2003). *Healing fountain*. North Star Press of St. Cloud, Inc.
- Heller, P. O. (2009). *Word arts collage: A poetry therapy memoir*. Pudding House Publications.
- Hynes, A. M., & Hynes-Berry, M. (2012). *Biblio/Poetry therapy, the interactive process: A handbook* (3rd ed., updated and revised by J. Roulier Sawyer). North Star Press of St. Cloud, Inc.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2015). *Metaphors we live by*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Peti Stantić, A. (2022). *Čitanjem do (spo)razumijevanja : Od čitalačke pismenosti do čitateljske sposobnosti*. Ljevak.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1969). Toward a transactional theory of reading. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 1(1), 31–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862969609546838>
- Yalom, I. D., & Leszcz, M. (2013). *Teorija i praksa grupne psihoterapije*. Psihopolis.