

The Bibliotherapy Education Project: A Collaborative Teaching Effort Goes to the Web

Paula S. McMillen

ABSTRACT. This narrative details the evolution of a collaborative teaching project into an educational Web site about bibliotherapy, which is the process of facilitating personal development or problem resolution through books. Working with a counselor education colleague, the education librarian at Oregon State University helped develop a tool to evaluate books for use in therapy. The project included creating a database of graduate students' book evaluations and making them available through the Internet. The considerable coordination and technical challenges of this transition to the Web are described. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Winter quarter, February, 2000: A seemingly innocuous request to co-teach a class on bibliotherapy to counseling graduate students, launched a project that has now grown into a Web site and fledgling book evaluation database sponsored by both the Oregon State University (OSU) Libraries and the School of Education (SOE). Bibliotherapy, facilitating personal development or problem resolution through books, is utilized in many helping professions. Reviews of the literature, however, found no discussion of providing training for counseling students or practicing mental health professionals. Based on this same literature review as well as our clinical experience, we identified the primary criteria considered by practitioners for evaluating materials used in counseling settings and developed a Bibliotherapy Evaluation Tool for counselors to use. We wanted to allow future graduate counseling students to draw on the book evaluations already completed and planned to organize evaluations into a database. This decision was followed by two successful teaching grant applications, development of a Web site to accompany the database, and significant revisions of the tool. This article is an overview of the complicated and sometimes convoluted process of moving our project to the Web.

BACKGROUND

My own graduate training in clinical psychology, as well as library science, made bibliotherapy an area of natural collaboration for teaching and research with my colleague in the Counselor Education Department. The review of the literature focused on the last ten years of education, psychology, and library literature with forays into older works that were significant in the field. Although libraries were historically one of the major players in this field (McMillen & Pehrsson 2004), the focus of the literature has shifted to helping professions such as counseling, social work, teaching, healthcare, and nursing. We were particularly interested in work with children and young adults, although we also looked at key literature that dealt with adults. Several sample bibliographies are linked from the History page of the Web site. I provided students in a graduate level class on counseling theory and techniques with an overview of bibliotherapy definitions, terminology, historical perspectives, research on effectiveness, hypothesized therapeutic mechanisms, benefits, and cautions for use. My colleague modeled reading aloud and re-

viewing a book according to the criteria of the evaluation tool, as well as discussing other implementation techniques, ethical considerations, and ties to counseling theories. Students were asked to use the Bibliotherapy Evaluation Tool (BET) to evaluate two books. The class was taught twice a year, and each time students gave us feedback on the BET's clarity and utility. We presented our work with students and the development of the tool at state, regional and national library, and counselor educator conferences (see the Web site for a complete list) and were met with enthusiastic interest.

FIRST STEPS TOWARD THE WEB

The purpose of the project was to allow successive cohorts of graduate students to benefit from the work of former students. Moreover, since graduate students were primarily reviewing books in our university library Children's Collection, sharing the evaluations would encourage better collection utilization and reinforce the habit of using local library resources to support counseling work in the community. Initially we imagined putting the evaluations into a spreadsheet or an Access type database, but eventually we agreed that the ideal solution, from an accessibility standpoint, would be a Web-based database. Neither of us was technically proficient with either Web page or database design, which meant we needed to involve outside technical support personnel. That focused our efforts on getting funding to pay a programmer. We also needed a server to host the database and Web site. I consulted with a Computer Science (CS) faculty colleague and with the head of the Library Technology Department (LTD). The CS faculty gave me an estimated number of programming hours to do the work I outlined and Library Technology expressed a desire to be the subcontractor, i.e., hire and supervise a student programmer, if they were to host the site. I wrote a proposal outlining the anticipated resource needs for Library Technology services and support. I also wrote an internship proposal that was submitted to the distance education program in library science at Emporia State University. Armed with these two documents, my colleague in Counselor Education and I wrote an application for a small internal teaching grant (OSU/L. L. Stewart Faculty Development Award) to cover two hundred hours of student computer programming in January of 2003. Both the grant application and the internship proposal were successful. Our library intern joined my counseling colleague and me in June 2003 as we started looking at how to adapt a narrative style questionnaire into a database-compatible review form.

Hiring a computer programmer took longer. Library Technology wrote an advertisement with our input and interviewed students, finally hiring a graduate student who started in August. We now had a team of five people: my colleague in Counselor Education, our library intern, our liaison to the Library Technology Department, our programming student, and me as de facto coordinator.

MAJOR REVISIONS TO THE TOOL

The first and immediately obvious task facing us was a major rewrite of the questions on the original BET. This had been written to solicit narrative responses and we now wanted evaluators to input information in a form that would allow others to search the database for evaluations. To take a few examples:

Original: *Is the book well constructed from a literary point of view, e.g., plot, character, writing style?*

Revised: (became three separate items with ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ or ‘N/A’–answer options)

Is the plot cohesive?

Are the characters well developed?

Is the book well written?

Original: *Does the story leave the reader “flat”?*

Revised: *How engaging is the story? Followed by a 5-point Likert scale, anchored by ‘flat’ and ‘very engaging’*

Original: *Is the vocabulary complex, interesting, challenging, and age appropriate?*

Revised: (became three items):

For what grade level is the vocabulary of this book appropriate?

Followed by a drop down menu with grade/age ranges

Is the vocabulary of the book appropriate for the reading level of the target audience? (Y, N, N/A)

Is the book fun to read aloud? (Y, N, N/A)

The length of the BET went from its initial four pages and eleven categories to ten pages and eight categories. Two categories from the original form, 'Picture clarity and interest' and 'Text, print and lettering,' were combined into 'Text and pictures.' The original categories 'Counselor value' and 'Therapeutic use' were combined into 'Therapeutic use.' The majority of the questions were converted to wording with more discrete response possibilities. Six narrative questions such as, 'Describe any content in this book that could cause emotional trauma,' were retained in the hopes of capturing qualitative data for continuous improvement.

This process was more complex than it sounds here. We often had to tease out multiple discrete concepts included in a single question. We asked dozens of questions about what it was that we really wanted the evaluator to know about the book. There was often an understandable reluctance on the part of my counselor education colleague to reword the questions in a more closed direction. Our focus shifted significantly toward thinking about how a user would potentially ask questions of the database, and what would be useful information for someone trying to decide whether or not to use a book, based on a BET evaluation.

WEB PAGE DESIGN ISSUES

Many things that were not part of our original conceptualization for the database took up time and energy for all of us. The first set of questions raised by the programmer and LTD liaison was how did we want to authenticate those reviews entered into the form. Another query was 'would there be a screening process for the reviews before they become part of the database?' and, if so, 'who would do this?' Some of this is still under negotiation; however, we did agree to set up a registration page. This, of course, necessitated determining what kind of information we wanted to capture about both users of the site and potential reviewers. Perhaps with a professional programmer, this process would have gone more smoothly, but the development of the registration page and the login mechanism required a significant amount of programming time that took away from work on the database itself—an unpleasant surprise.

How were the questions in the BET itself going to be laid out? Did we want it to be one long continuous form/page, or have a new page, and from a programming point of view, a new form, for each criterion's set of questions? We had to decide which questions, if any, required an-

swers from the evaluator before s/he could move forward from one section to the next. Would a separate record be created for each review of the same book, or for reviews of different editions of the same book? What about a book in translation? How could we assure consistency in the author, illustrator, and title fields, i.e., did we want to develop or link to some kind of authority control records? It wasn't only the need to make decisions about dozens of unanticipated questions that put bumps in the road, but also the need to make the issues and possible solutions clear to a group with such diverse backgrounds. Clearly, we each brought our areas of expertise, but also our gaps in understanding. I know my colleague in Counselor Education must at times have felt outnumbered and out-talked by those of us who even knew what an authority control file was or why we were entertaining the notion of using a Z39.50 link to a catalog with expansive juvenile literature holdings. On the other hand, she frequently reminded us not only of the counselors' perspective, but also the issues for non-computer-savvy users who would likely be our primary customers.

We're still trying to decide what database search options should be offered. Should there be a single page or a separate page for a particular book title or author vs. books *about* a subject? How many fields should we let users search and which ones are likely to be most useful? Do we allow a keyword search or only fielded searches? Many more questions arise around how the results of a search should display. Those of us familiar with databases need to remember that what we're familiar with isn't always the friendliest way to display data. The BEP team looked at other Web sites, but we were limited in that our product is unique in many ways. We did decide on a brief description of the book with dates serving as links to reviews of the books. The format of the display doesn't exactly mirror the format of the review form itself. To take a small example, the review form says, "*Are the themes of the book applicable to certain groups or populations?*" (Y,N,N/A) "*Specify which groups.*" Whereas the display of the review says, "*Evaluator thought the book's themes were appropriate for the following groups: pre-teens.*" Given that there are ten pages of questions, this was both a significant editing and programming task.

General page design issues were also numerous. What other information was going to reside on the page besides the review form? We decided to include a short history of the project, some biographical information about the two primary developers, a list of our presentations and publications, a bibliography of print resources for those inter-

ested in finding out more about bibliotherapy, and some links to sites with information on children's and young adult books.

OTHER PLAYERS

Legal: Because we intended to make the Web site and database public once it was established, we also began conversations with the University's legal counsel about the steps needed to have this 'branded' with the University's logo. Legal counsel then referred us to an Assistant Attorney General for the state of Oregon. She reviewed the project and conferenced with us by telephone to ascertain intended use. She agreed with our suggestions for disclaimer information that needed to be included on the page and asked for a final review of the language before the page was made publicly available. Our e-mail discussions of how 'legalistic' the disclaimers and copyright language needed to be, lasted for weeks. We lobbied against her suggestion that we have evaluators accept a licensing agreement before they could submit reviews, since we reasoned that the information they provided was virtually meaningless without the evaluation tool itself, over which we do assert copyright. It was an educational process on all sides.

Human subjects: This is a swamp we have yet to completely cross. We intend to collect information about reviewers as part of our ongoing research around this project. We're interested in not only basic demographics such as age and gender, but also in what settings and with what populations reviewers use books (see "Become a Reviewer" page). Because most of our reviewers, especially initially, will be graduate students at the university, and because our Institutional Review Board (IRB) considered their book evaluations to be student records, we needed to determine what limitations would be imposed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA, aka the Buckley Amendment) which controls access to student academic records. Several consultations with the IRB representative, who also consulted with the University's Registrar's office, were required to clarify what was needed. Students must sign a "Request for Release of Records" in addition to the usual Informed Consent forms in order for us to use their evaluations as part of the publicly accessible database. Additional proposals to the IRB were required to ensure we could use the results of knowledge, skills, and comfort level questions administered to the stu-

dents prior to and following the bibliotherapy teaching module in the Counseling Theories and Techniques class.

The School of Education and the OSU Foundation: Much of the money for special projects comes from private donors at our institution, and the School of Education, in particular, was eager for their liaison to the money-raising arm of the university to learn about our project. We are also interested in securing additional and longer-term financial support, so we readily agreed to meet and outline our progress to date, as well as anticipated directions for growth. The SOE's library liaison, a faculty member in the Early Childhood Education program, joined us because of his special interest in children's literature. Obviously, building the juvenile literature collection in the OSU Valley Library (the main library) would provide richer resources from which the graduate counseling students, among others, could draw to identify and review books useful in therapeutic work. There was discussion of establishing a committee specifically to solicit donations for the Children's Collection, but that is currently on hold. Although we provided PowerPoint slides of key project aspects to the OSU Foundation liaison, that effort has still not advanced noticeably. The dean of the School of Education is very enthusiastic about the project and has had my Counselor Education colleague present to an SOE advisory committee and to potential donors. We are temporarily in a "Catch 22" situation where we need money, or the resources it can buy, in order to move forward quickly, but we need a demonstrable product to generate money from donors.

Computer Science faculty—again: In our efforts to move forward with limited funds, I talked several times with my colleague in Computer Science about possibilities for using CS graduate students to do programming work on the project. He offered to sponsor independent study work if any of his students expressed interest. He helped me draft a proposal for a senior capstone project that was submitted to another CS faculty running the relevant class. We interviewed one team of student programmers, but apparently they found another project more to their liking, and we never heard back from them. He has in the meantime 'loaned' us a student programmer from another grant-funded project who has been trouble shooting PHP (programming language) code and working on future designs for the database and the search interfaces to the database. There is a high likelihood that this same programmer will work for us as part of a student project in a CS seminar 'Special Topics' this coming spring term. We are still looking for money to pay him to go beyond the requirements for the class.

SEEKING ADDITIONAL FUNDING

This brings us back to money. My colleague and I submitted a second application to our original source of funding, the L. L. Stewart Faculty Development Award in fall of 2003 and succeeded in obtaining an additional \$2,200 to pay for more computer programming time. Our original CS graduate student left after only a month to take a teaching assistantship, and so work on the database itself came to a standstill for about four months until we hired a new CS student in January of 2004. Working closely with our liaison in Library Technology, these two were able to get the complete set of review pages up on the Web site in time for my colleague's Counseling 552 class in Winter term 2004.

USABILITY TESTING: BUGS, BUGS, AND MORE BUGS

Although we believed we had a workable set of input screens for the BET, we knew that the graduate students were unfamiliar with the tool and the Web site and would provide usability testing for both products when asked to use the Web-based forms for evaluating two books. Numerous problems surfaced and the students were quick to let us know when things didn't go smoothly! Students were forewarned that this was a beta version of the Web-based tool, and were asked to print hard copies of the form pages and to document problems, questions, and comments on the printouts. Nevertheless, they seemed to forget all these instructions when faced with things that didn't work. My colleague received numerous distressed e-mails and phone calls reporting that the site wouldn't recognize their e-mail addresses and wouldn't let them log in. They consistently had problems moving from one particular page in the BET to the next. The text box for one narrative question was found to be much too limited in the number of characters it would accept. My colleague jokingly commented that one should never have students beta test anything right before evaluations for the course and the instructor are due. Our LTD liaison and CS student promptly responded to each problem as it arose and ultimately had to move the entire site to another server, providing the opportunity to utilize a newer version of PHP software. We plan to ask a second class in the summer (2004) to enter data using the Web-based forms before we make the Web site publicly accessible.

Other assessment: One very positive outcome of the usability testing was the resulting data from a pre- and post-survey we administered to the graduate students. Our preliminary analysis showed that the bibliotherapy teaching module, including the use of the Web-based BET, significantly increased several areas of knowledge about bibliotherapy and about the criteria for evaluating books for therapeutic use, as well as student practitioners' comfort levels for using books in therapy. These results certainly encourage us to believe we are on the right track.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

From a technological aspect, we're working on a revised back end for the Web site and database. One of our excellent computer science students¹ summarized the goals very well:

1. To enable review questions to be updated without changing the underlying program. This includes changing the wording of a question, disabling questions, adding questions, and changing the answers to a question.
2. To have a modular program design, thus allowing program components to be developed, tested, and replaced as new requirements are identified.
3. To support information exchange using standard protocols, thereby, enabling other software to make use of BET data.
4. To enhance support for disabled users. This will include recognizing the user's font size settings and having the layout change accordingly.
5. To support criteria search in addition to a known-item search. This will allow users to make queries for books meeting the specified criteria, such as appropriateness for a given reading level.
6. To use a relational database structure. This will allow book information to be reused across reviews and localize changes to book information.

We've discussed additional enhancements such as finding a way to connect the input forms with a catalog representing a sizable collection of child and young adult literature in order to take advantage of standard versions of author and illustrator names as well as titles (authority files of sorts). Other possibilities include relevance ranking of the search results, links out to local library catalogs (based on zip code), and links to publishers' pages.

We're working to clear the last hurdles of university and state legal review needed to make the evaluation forms and database publicly accessible. Disclaimers are being revised and we need to sort out who will retain copyright for the actual evaluations once they are entered in the database.

We are still exploring what is needed to allow us to use demographic data collected from reviewers as part of our ongoing research. Ideally, we would like to create descriptive statistics summarizing the settings in which reviewers are using books, what age groups they are working with, and the thematic content of the most commonly used books.

We plan on continuing to promote the Web site at professional conferences and have already done workshop and poster presentations to counselor educator/supervisor and librarian audiences regionally and nationally. Based on past conference responses from public librarians when we described the early stages of our project, we believe this Web site will have broad appeal, beyond the helping professions such as teachers or counselors, to those who assist helping professionals to find materials.

CONCLUSION

I thought of titling this article "It seemed like such a simple idea. . . ." Little did I know when I agreed to collaborate on a teaching module how this project would evolve. Neither my primary collaborator nor I had any idea what would be involved in moving this project to the Web. Because neither of us was very tech-savvy when it came to creating Web-based databases, I did consult with computer science faculty and library technology staff. However, the time commitment has grown well beyond even these expert estimates as the scope of the project has continued to expand. It has nevertheless been very exciting to watch this project grow, helped along by several enthusiastic and committed colleagues. To check out the project's current status, look at <http://bibliotherapy.library.oregonstate.edu>. Finally the question one has to ask of any such project is "would we do it again?" And the answer is a resounding, "Yes" . . . only next time we would be so much wiser.

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NOTE

1. Kevin Harris in an e-mail communication to author dated March 30, 2004.

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