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# Bibliolinking: An adaptation of bibliotherapy for university students in transition

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*A team composed of one student and two faculty members worked in concert to develop and evaluate a training model for personnel who work with university students in transition. This model utilizes “Bibliolinking” (a newly coined word developed during this research) which is an adaptation of bibliotherapy. The primary purpose for using Bibliolinking is to establish and nourish relationships among Resident Assistants (RAs) and student residents (SRs) via a shared experience with a text such as a novel, short story, article or self-help book. Although, RAs play an important, often counselor-like role, they receive no or little formal preparation for establishing relationships. This project involved the development of a quasi-experimental model and assessment of the Bibliolinking technique. The results indicate Bibliolinking provided increased awareness of materials relevant to the needs of young college students, especially those in transition. When applied by RAs, Bibliolinking not only appeared to meet the needs of SRs but also provided RAs with a lasting and adaptable strategy for building relationships and normalizing challenging experiences.*

**Keywords** *Bibliolinking; developmental bibliotherapy; residence life; university students*

## Project overview

Although it is not unusual for university students to experience anxiety about transitions, students who are transitioning from their homes to a university residence hall are usually less mature, often feel isolated and lonely, and are very vulnerable during this period in their lives. This study focuses primarily on one way to support the needs of and to reduce anxiety among these first-year college students by establishing relationships with other students. The relationship is established by a program known as “Bibliolinking.”

The Bibliolinking research project was a first step toward realizing a goal of assisting these university students through the facilitated use of written materials.

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Bibliolinking is an adaptation of bibliotherapy from which it draws research, theory and its practices. Bibliotherapy has been shown to be developmentally appropriate and helpful for individuals of varied ages and for those experiencing transitional events such as divorce, death of a spouse, and other more ordinary events, such as moving from one house or one job to another (Berns, 2003; McEntire, 2003; Pardeck, 2005; Quackenbush, 1991; Sommer, 2003). Bibliotherapy has been shown to benefit both children and adults by providing a relief from generalized stress and anxiety (Reeves & Stace, 2005), by modeling problem-solving skills (Forgan, 2002), and by reducing feelings of isolation (Cohen, 1994). Issues such as these are relevant for students who are stressed and anxious and trying to cope with their transitions from home to college life.

The primary purpose of this study was to train Resident Assistants (RAs) to use Bibliolinking, because of its anticipated ability to help RAs establish relationships with student residents (SRs), and to assist in developing skills that will be essential to students while making transitions. Developmental bibliotherapy, from which Bibliolinking is derived, has often been used to normalize individuals' experiences, letting them know that they are not alone (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). This type of support is often exactly what is needed by students in transition because, when students recognize that they are not alone in their experiences or feelings and learn that they are living among people who are experiencing similar challenges, the commonality of the experience can provide a context for developing relationships. For example, students who have transitioned from living at home where their parents might prepare every meal for them to a dining facility where they have to make their own choices might not know that eating pizza twice a day will not meet their nutritional needs. The RA can find books and internet sites on the topic of nutrition, specifically regarding eating on college campus. The RA can share this information with the student.

Undergraduate students in their second, third or fourth year at a college or university often choose to serve as RAs, and their primary role is relationship development. RAs were selected as participants in this project because of their involvement in residence life education and their ready access to university students. Prior experience as an RA provided the student researcher with a firsthand look at the needs of that population, specifically a need for more relationship building skills and methods for introducing new skills into existing relationships. Using this knowledge, the RA developed an instructional module that would teach these specific skills as well as how to implement them.

Bibliolinking, adapted from bibliotherapy, is a process designed in this study for establishing positive relationships between RAs and SRs by sharing experiences with written materials such as novels, short stories, articles and/or self-help books. For the purpose of ascertaining the effectiveness of this process two assessment strategies were utilized. One strategy assessed the set of prerequisite skills determined to be important for RAs to successfully employ Bibliolinking with SRs. This assessment was developed based on a review of the current literature, tools employed in the Bibliotherapy Education Project, developmental knowledge of young adults, and discussion with several experts. A university RA training curriculum and standards were explored as well. The assessment involved RAs who were asked to self-report on their perceived level of ability to create and sustain healthy relationships, facilitate helping

interactions, share resources with peers, and find appropriate books. Further information was collected regarding confidence levels for locating appropriate materials and using these materials with university students in residence. The RAs also self-reported about their comfort level in working with young adults in transition.

The second assessment strategy employed a self-report survey, the Adapted Bibliotherapy Knowledge Acquisition Survey (ABKAS). This survey is an adaptation of the bibliotherapy survey developed by Pehrsson and McMillen (2005). ABKAS was used to assess an RAs knowledge of books and other materials that demonstrated potential relevance for SRs who were trying to cope with transitions. This also included an assessment of an RAs strategies for evaluating such materials. ABKAS was used for both pre- and post-assessments and was rated on a Likert scale. To determine validity, the survey was piloted with RAs currently working at Oregon State University (OSU). It was also evaluated by practicing counselors for criterion validity.

All participants, RAs and SRs, were students living in a learning community centered around a University Honors College theme, though not all of the participants were Honors College students. Twelve volunteer participants were given a packet of written materials, such as the informant consent, and pre- and post-survey, as well as Compact Disc with the PowerPoint learning module when they volunteered to participate in the study, and all 12 completed the study. Ten of the participants were RAs in the residence hall where they lived, and two were first-year students living in the hall. Five of The RAs who participated had been RAs for a year and a half, and five of them had been RAs for just six months. The participants' tenure at the university ranged from just six months to two and a half years.

RAs in this study were asked to complete the pre-ABKAS. Participants were then requested to access <http://bibliotherapy.library.oregonstate.edu/search.php>, the bibliotherapy education project database, and to locate material appropriate for specific needs of the SRs in their residence halls. They were asked within a two-week period to study the Bibliolinking instructional module and then to review books they thought appropriate for the SRs. Part of the instructional module was aimed at teaching participants to evaluate books for their general usefulness. Furthermore, they were requested to add these evaluations to the Bibliotherapy Education Project online book database. Students picked a topic, such as eating disorders, entered it into a search window and reviewed sites until they found something that fit. Popular texts included research articles as well as blogs written by their millennium generation peers. The blogs provided primarily anecdotal but often helpful information about their topic. Finally, participants were asked to complete the post-ABKAS. Based on these responses the researchers attempted to determine whether such skills were currently being used by these RAs. The next step was to find out if these Bibliolinking skills could be acquired through typical teaching strategies.

## **Results**

Participants reported that the instructional module allowed them to quickly acquire a new set of skills. They also reported that, although they were already using many of

the relevant skills, they could now identify the skill set by name. After all, the pre- and post-ABKAS tools had been returned, recording and analysis of the data were completed. The researchers found that the scores on a scale of 0–5 increased on average 1.62 for each question. These results support the initial hypothesis that the instructional module would be effective in increasing knowledge about Bibliolinking for participants. The questions with the largest increase were those that involved recognizing how they and their peers could benefit from Bibliolinking. They also felt their book evaluation skills were important developments.

### **Benefits of bibliolinking**

As stated in the purpose, Bibliolinking can help RAs as they build new relationships with SRs, and help them to maintain those relationships. Bibliolinking also provides a set of resources that RAs might not otherwise access. RAs can use these resources to help students in each specific transition. According to Zaccaria and Moses (1968) the key to good mental health is the ability to deal with the stress that comes from transition and situational crises. In this specific case, the students living on campus have just transitioned from high school to college, from living with their families to living with 300 other undergraduate students and from a high level of parental supervision to a very low level of supervision. RAs need sufficient knowledge to be able to identify university students who are using poor coping methods and to encourage them to begin using more effective strategies. All university students are experiencing transition in their lives but without the ability to appropriate coping skills the transitions cannot happen smoothly. According to Tussing (2001), books can help to develop “more effective coping patterns,” through an “unobtrusive, non-threatening medium” and this applies very well to Bibliolinking for students in transition. Books can help readers to gain new skills, as well as insights into things they may not yet have learned in their own lives (Gladding, 1994).

#### *Project benefits*

Participants of this study benefited in several ways. They gained a new set of skills, which would help them not only in their role as a leader in their residential community but also in their personal relationships outside of their RA role. An additional way that participants benefited was by learning that the Bibliotherapy Education Project online book database exists and by practicing they gained confidence with the tool.

### **Future research**

This study was conducted with students who were independent learners and are able to use a computer-based tool. Further research could explore ways to adapt the learning module for students with disabilities or learning challenges. The researchers

could also pursue the idea that Bibliolinking can be applied to any helping role. Human service professionals, such as nurses would be a reasonable participant pool. A “next step” would be to administer this self-paced module in other university settings to establish generalizability with other college populations.

## Summary

The results of this study demonstrate that a self-paced learning module can be used to increase knowledge of Bibliotherapy and to better prepare individuals to use Bibliolinking as a helping strategy. The instructional module developed and used here could be adapted to different audiences serving various populations, such as high school peer mentors or gerontological social workers. Books are readily available and information on the internet is inexpensive, if not free. Both sources are accessible and time-effective tools for helping interventions. A residential life helper, trained in the use of Bibliolinking, can make a major difference in university students’ lives as they struggle, cope and deal with change.

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