The books we read and share are an important part of the way we understand who we are. Stories shape our view of ourselves and each other. Books and the stories they contain are part of the creative and cultural capital of a society, a community, a family, and an individual reader. By engaging in dialogue with ex-service personnel about portrayals of the military in books for the very young, Dr Limon created a space for people who have been greatly impacted by their participation in conflict to participate in debates about military life and the place of service personnel in community and society.

Working in collaboration with Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children’s Books, and the service veterans charity Forward-Assist, groups of service veterans and Dr Limon from Newcastle University discussed the portrayal of military personal and military conflict in a selection of picture books for children. A series of three workshops took place to gather the veterans’ responses to stories and images that use the military as characters in illustrated fiction. Building upon this, a new activity called ‘book-hacking’ was undertaken, and a short animation was created using the illustrated titles to illuminate the veterans’ reactions to the work. The ‘book hack’ was a liberating and enabling methodology, and a very energising way of working with the veterans. The approach of the ‘book-hack’ could be effectively used by other researchers when working with a diverse range of communities.
The most significant impact has been with the veterans support charity, Forward-Assist. Forward-Assist understands and works within a myriad of activities that help/hinder ex-service personal to ‘thrive’. Forward-Assist had not engaged with representations of the military in children’s fiction as a research and support tool before, and had not used animation to represent research outputs to a wider audience. They are pleased with the creative output of the project and with the emerging relationship between themselves, Newcastle University, Avondale House, and Seven Stories. With an estimated 125 000 to 208 000 service veterans living in the North East all of whom have a range of different experiences and with many of whom being supported by a range of statutory and non-statutory organisations, it is important to find out how veterans see themselves reflected in this significant example of contemporary culture and to listen to what their view of these portrayals in children’s fiction tell us (and them) about their life as military personnel and their transition back to civilian life.

The Engagement team at Seven Stories were involved in all of the workshops, and have reflected listening to veteran’s observations about how their profession and military experiences are portrayed in these books has changed the way, the Engagement team works with other groups using these and other titles. As a result of the project, Seven Stories has engaged with a different audience none of whom had ever visited the centre before despite many of them being fathers. All the veterans have been given ‘golden ticket’ passes to Seven Stories for the summer holidays and Seven Stories hopes that they will become regular visitors. To continue the reach of this project, the animation will be distributed to other agencies and organisations concerned with the support of service veterans, and Forward Assist will be co-delivering joint papers and presentations at academic and practice based conferences.

This project gave us a chance to understand if and how this example of popular, mainstream culture might help individuals to ‘thrive’ or indeed to form barriers to them ‘thriving’. Dr Helen Limon


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