



# Stories, Communities, & Libraries

*Sam Dodd*



# Session Layout

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- Questions & Answers





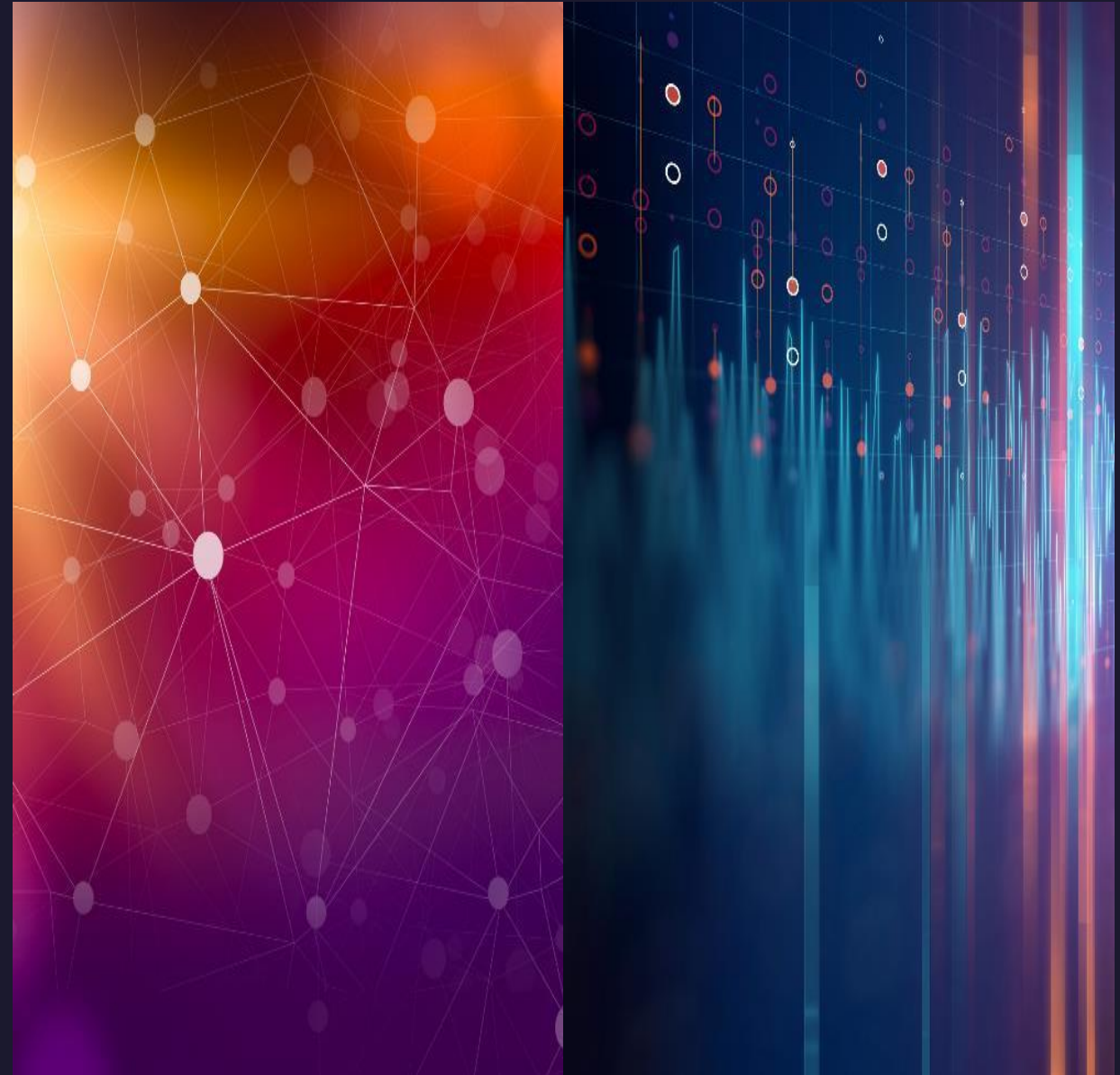
# What I Do

- Co-Founder & Project Manager at CityLife Stories
- Community Engagement Practitioner
- Creative Writing Mentor & Facilitator
- MSc graduate in Library Science
- Public libraries advocate

Interests: creative writing, ethics and inclusion, community spaces, community history, information history, radical movements, life stories, participatory research, public and prison libraries, social justice, housing justice, and spatial justice.

# Public Libraries & Their Function

- Libraries are buildings in your local community that provide a range of information services, books, magazines, internet access, learning courses, and sometimes council services.
- They tend to be quiet, good for studying, good for finding information on a range of issues, and supportive to people from every background.
- They are free to belong to, free to use, and are funded through the collection of taxes.
- They function as a meeting place, where community members can participate in learning, internet access, career and CV surgeries, literacy, book groups, art and movement classes, and many other shared activities.
- People share their stories with each other in libraries – a library is a recognisable central anchor point in towns, villages and cities, that everyone belongs to.



# My Research on Libraries – The Power of Stories

## MY RESEARCH – WHY LIBRARIES?

- I am a lifelong library user, and I've watched hundreds close down across the country since I was a child.
- Library bosses and local councils currently measure the value of their services – which informs the amount of funding they receive with numbers. The number of visitors, the amount of money made in late fee fines, etc. This doesn't make sense when you consider their main purpose is to provide information and educational tools for free to anyone, from any background. You cannot measure something that doesn't exist – profit is not the purpose of libraries.
- So I wanted to measure differently – with people's stories, community members narratives on the library and why that physical space, having somewhere to belong and navigate towards to improve their life chances and their sense of belonging somewhere, was important to them.
- I wanted to include myself in the research too. I have at times been vulnerable and been helped by libraries myself: I've had mental health, housing, employment, and physical health issues, and libraries were there. So instead of just looking at other peoples experiences of libraries, I mixed in my own too – I wanted to be honest about my motives in conducting this research.

## WHAT I FOUND

- The physical space of a library is important for communities as a place of congregation, finding information, and sharing stories and experiences. People meet others they would not usually have in their circles, in libraries. They facilitate more diverse, tolerant and connected communities.
- The groups who value the public library most are marginalised and/or vulnerable – people more likely to experience social isolation or exclusion.
- These groups experienced less loneliness, and higher feelings of belonging, as a direct result of using their libraries and engaging with activities within them. Having somewhere to be, and a routine, contributed to their happiness levels.
- Public spaces, and which 'bodies' belong in them, is brought into focus when thinking about how the library functions as a place of belonging.
- The availability of libraries, for many, is literally a question of survival. Narratives, and the sharing of them with each other, are how we construct social groups and social realities – libraries are a space to share lived experience and build communities from.

# Libraries & You

## AS A LIBRARY USER

- Are you already a member of your local public library? If so, why? If not, why not?
- If you are – what do you use it for?
- How often do you visit?
- What do you like about them, and what would you change?
- Find and join your local library by putting your postcode into the government website here: <https://www.gov.uk/local-library-services>
- Take as many forms of ID/proof of address as you have, just to be sure. Different libraries have different rules.

## AS A LIBRARY WORKER OR RESEARCHER

- As a career choice, public libraries are just one option of many – there are also museums, archives, academic libraries, health libraries, law libraries, and countless other collections-based institutions and organisations.
- At MSc/MA level you study: library history, the social-cultural impact of libraries and library services, information resources, collections management, cataloguing and classification, metadata, information law and ethics, digital libraries, information technologies, information literacy, research methods, and children's/young persons library services. Wherever you study, make sure the course you choose is accredited.

(List from <http://www.city.ac.uk/lis>)



# The Stories in Libraries



All the stories available in the books, magazines, graphic novels, and other reading sources on loan to you



The stories within these stoke our imaginations, memories, and shared experiences – they help us find commonalities



Through this we find our own stories reflected back to us – and here we can feel more connected and less alone



We find kinship in characters and plots in books



Kinship leads to stronger feelings of belonging in your community

# The Stories in Communities



Kinship leads to stronger feelings of belonging in your community

When we feel more connected, we seek out others like us more often – we look for our kin more actively. Then we are sharing space, sharing voices, sharing experiences with each other

Without telling our stories to one another, there aren't any for us to find – books don't exist. If we share our stories with each other, we are stronger

But if those stories don't exist and have no platform, we cannot find them – we have to share them to find them. So in libraries we join creative writing groups or reading groups – we write together, or read together. Regardless, together

At CityLife Stories, we pair up writers with community members who want to tell their story, and create collections of voices less heard in the mainstream



One more poke to join your local library:  
<https://www.gov.uk/local-library-services>

# Thank You

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