

## **CASE STUDY: USING PLAY AND CONVERSATION ACROSS LIBRARY PROGRAMS**



### **Overview**

At Crozet Library in Crozet, Virginia, librarian Catherine Fae has taken a practical approach to One Small Step. Centered on co-regulation and play, she has woven OSS tools and practices across all of her adult programs, connecting participants through art, writing, conversation groups, and community partnerships.

Part of the larger Jefferson-Madison Regional Library system, Crozet is a large branch serving a wide and varied community. Catherine began this work in early 2026 after participating in a One Small Step introduction presentation, building on her own interest in addressing loneliness and social division through library programming.

### **Approach**

Catherine's model centers on integration. Instead of asking people to attend a standalone dialogue program, she brings conversation practices into programs that already exist. Each month, she facilitates about ten programs like art workshops, book clubs, writing sessions like "Death and Donuts: Write Your Own Obituary," and facilitated conversations that incorporate OSS Great Questions in the first part of each session.



The DIY toolkits Catherine explored to mold include Active Listening, Coffee and Conversations, Strategic Questioning, Challenging Assumptions, and Tool Integration into Existing Programs. She also plans to use the My Story in 6 Words program toolkit. She used OSS materials such as conversation cards and the Great Questions bank as a foundation, then added even more questions to represent a range for participants to explore. Participants might start with lighter prompts and move into more personal ones, often choosing their own level of depth. Catherine organizes

questions into “mild, medium, and spicy” levels so people can decide how far they want to go.



A key part of her approach is pacing. She found that starting directly with deeper conversation could feel like too much. So, she begins with humor and simple shared activities like jokes, bubbles, or hands-on materials. These moments help people settle in and lower initial hesitation before moving into more meaningful exchanges.

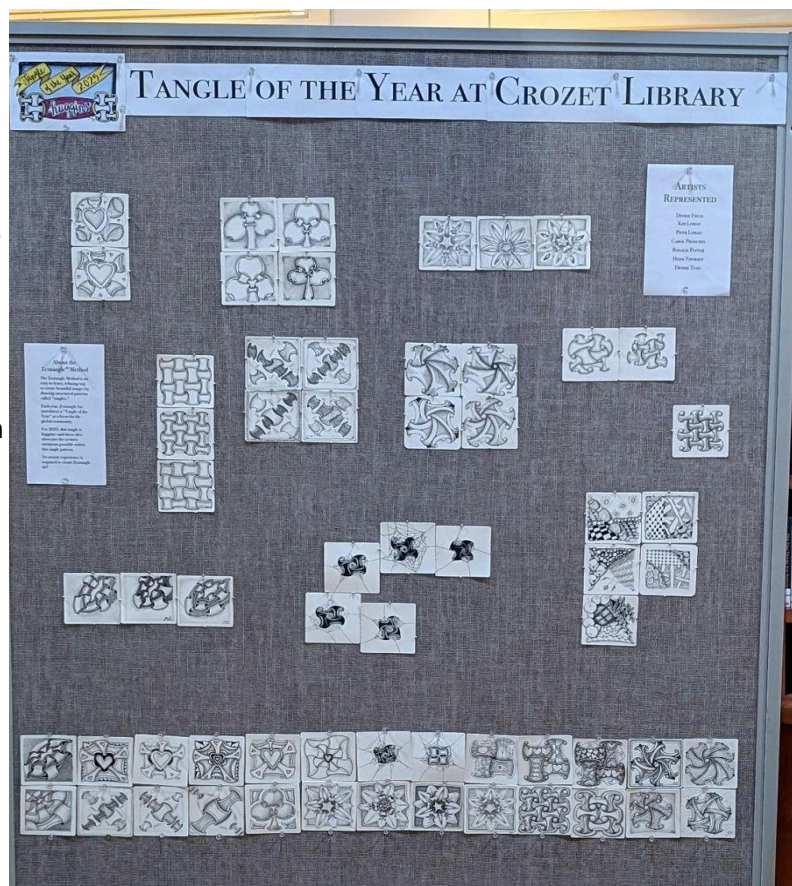
“The scariest part is making a bid,” she said. “You’re asking people to participate, and you don’t know if they will.” Even so, she continues to lead with energy and curiosity, refining the structure each time.

Many programs are also supported through partnerships with local organizations, including writing groups, hospice, and arts organizations. These partners bring their own communities into the space, expanding reach while sharing facilitation or funding support.

### What Catherine Noticed

Across programs, participants are most drawn to questions about personal history and relationships. Prompts about family, influence, and formative experiences, like “Who is important to you, and why?” consistently lead to deeper conversation. People are often more comfortable starting with reflection on the past, which can feel less charged than present-day topics.

Her own facilitation experience remains dynamic. “My heart is in my throat every time,” she said. “You never know who’s going to show up.” But the



opportunities for play and humor eased her own anxiety as well.

Patrons have shown their appreciation for Crozet Library's welcoming and interactive focus. Many patrons have come to the desk to compliment the programs, and one patron said they were "channeling grace" in response to the empathetic listening



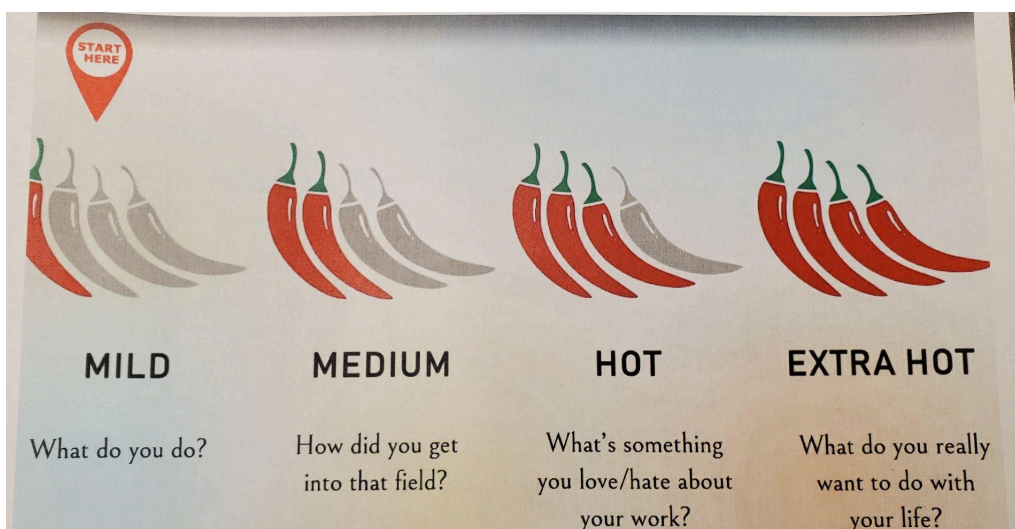
program. At the same time, participation does not always translate into return attendance. Even when people have a meaningful experience, they may not feel ready to re-engage right away. This led her to rethink how programs conclude at the end of each session and how she takes the time to extend personal invitations to return.

Structure matters, not just at the beginning of a program, but at the end as well.

Catherine's overall goal is for groups to begin to sustain themselves, with participants continuing to meet or shaping the direction of the program together.

### Community Context and Experimentation

Catherine's work is shaped by what she's seeing locally and in research. She's discovered a growing need to address isolation in ways that do not feel demanding or confrontational. With her "mild, medium, and spicy" questions, patrons at Crozet Library do not need to jump directly into difficult or deep conversations - they get to have shared experiences that allow for play and for connection to build more gradually and sustainably.



She is confident in the programs' ability to make an impact: "The value of these

programs will ripple out through the community as parents, spouses and neighbors repeatedly attend the communication programs, specifically to improve their interpersonal relationships.”

Her programs include what she describes as “parallel play” environments, where people are engaged in the same activity in close proximity, even if they are not immediately in conversation. Art-making, singing, writing, and nature-based programs all serve this function.

## Empathy Cafe: Listening 101

Tuesdays 6-7:30 PM

Sep 30

Oct 21

Nov 18

Dec 16

Crozet Branch

A simple yet powerful approach to enhance your communication skills and deepen your connection with others (and yourself).



Over time, she is working toward more direct civic conversations. Her goal is to build enough trust and familiarity through these programs that participants will feel ready to engage more openly in the future.

### Key Insights & Lessons Learned

Integrating conversation tools into existing programs can lower the barrier to participation. People are more likely to engage when the setting feels familiar and low-pressure.

Starting with fun shared activity helps people settle in. Humor (like dad jokes), play (like bubbles), and hands-on materials (like slinkies) can shift the tone quickly and make deeper conversation feel more accessible. Structure matters at both the beginning and the end. Gentle opening activities help people ease in, while thoughtful closing helps them leave in a more grounded way and consider returning. Participation is not the same as retention. Meaningful experiences require careful follow-up and invitation if people are going to come back.

Programs can become self-sustaining over time. With the right support, groups may continue beyond the initial facilitation and, as Catherine calls it, “group calibration,” helping address staff capacity limits.



### Looking Ahead

Catherine plans to continue refining her model through the spring and summer, with the goal of building toward more direct community civic conversations in the fall. By layering conversation practices into a wide range of programs, she is giving people different ways to take part and allowing relationships to form over time.



For her, the value of One Small Step lies in its flexibility and Great Questions. The tools can be adapted, expanded, and embedded into existing work, making it possible to respond to community needs without starting from scratch. “One Small Step programs increased accessibility for patrons interested in attending library programs, increased ongoing program participation, and provided tools and skills to our community members to carry connection and communication out into the world.”

For future One Small Step conversation guides, she recommends jumping in with an iterative approach, making sure to take in direct feedback from patrons to guide the process.

**This case study highlights programs adapted from One Small Step toolkits. Visit [diy.takeonesmallstep.org](http://diy.takeonesmallstep.org) to explore the tools.**