

# You Can't Judge a Book by Its Cover! Using Human Libraries in Schools to Engage, Explore, Discover and Connect

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## Abstract

*Everyone has a 'story'. Many different events and experiences shape our lives. Just like a book, the stories inside people are fascinating! When people share these stories with others they become a 'living book'. We have used 'Human Libraries' at William Clarke College in a new, innovative way. They provide our K-6 students with a wonderful opportunity to connect with diverse members of our school community and beyond, listen to their personal stories, communicate with them, build relationships, explore and learn. By participating in a 'Human Library' they acquire life skills, widening their understanding of others and the world. Students are hungry for real life experiences and 'living books' inspire them!*

**Keywords:** *living, human, books, communicate, inspire*

## Introduction

*'You truly cannot understand or criticise someone until you walk a mile in their shoes - and to do that you have to meet them and talk to them.'*

Noni Hazelhurst (National Patron, Human Libraries Australia – Living Libraries Australia, 2012)

We all have a 'story'. Events, experiences, people, places, beliefs, customs and cultures shape our lives. They have moulded us into the people we are. As Teacher Librarians we are very familiar with the phrase 'You can't judge a book by its cover'. It's what's on the inside that is fascinating! Human Libraries are all about people - people sharing stories, their experiences, sharing themselves, their ideas, beliefs and customs, sharing what's important to them. 'Human Libraries' are collections of 'living books'. 'Human Libraries' give our students the opportunity to open up a 'living book', read it, discover what is hidden within, connect, communicate and build relationships, explore and learn. We all have a very unique story to tell.

## Background

Originally developed at the Roskilde Music Festival in Denmark, the 'Living Library' concept emerged as a popular strategy for 'challenging prejudice and promoting social inclusion' (Little, Nemetlu, Magic, & Molnar, 2011). Since then, a wide range of organisers including local and state public libraries and health services, universities, and community activists and organisations have adopted the idea in more than 65 countries throughout the world. 'The Human Library is an innovative method designed to promote dialogue, reduce prejudices and encourage understanding' (Human Library Organisation, 2013).

The first 'Living Library' in Australia was held in Lismore, NSW in 2006. Planned as a one-off event, the response from both living books and readers was so positive that organisers decided to run the 'Living Library' regularly. 'Lismore Living Library became the first Living

Library in the world to be established on a permanent basis' (Human Library Organisation, 2013). Since then, hundreds of 'Living libraries' have taken place across Australia.

In 2010 the term 'Living Library' was changed to 'Human Library'. The name change at the international organisation was 'prompted by contact from a US-based company selling educational resources under the registered name, Living Libraries. The US company informed Living Library organisers in Denmark that they were contravening copyright and should stop using the name' (Sword, 2011). Living Library organisers in Australia have followed suit, despite some disappointment as 'Human Library' doesn't quite have the same ring to it.

Traditionally, 'Human Libraries' have been used with youth and adults. In some countries, such as Canada, the UK and in parts of Europe they have been used successfully in schools, primarily with older students. I found no documented evidence of use with very young students. By using 'Human Libraries' in schools 'you are offering a fun and innovative learning experience for a captive audience of young people' (Little, Nemutlu, Magic, & Molnar, 2011). 'Human Libraries' need to be presented to school students in a way that is appropriate for their age, the needs and styles of the learners and in appropriate context.

In CBCA Book Week 2012 we held our first 'Human Library' at William Clarke College. It was so successful 'Human Libraries' have been used since to help resource the curriculum topics taught in the classroom. By the end of 2013 all grades K - 4 (five – ten year old students) will have experienced a 'Human Library'. Lunchtime 'Human Libraries' are being planned for Years 5 – 8 (11-14 year old students) with further development of the idea planned for Years 9 – 12 (15 – 18 year old students). As the 'Human Library' coordinator at William Clarke College, I believe we have a long way to go. We are on the cusp of implementing this concept and have not yet fully realised its true potential with students in our schools.

## **Getting Involved**

### ***1. Anyone Can Do It***

As Teacher Librarians in our schools we all have a community. We all have a vast bank of human resources out there. Each person in our community has their own unique story. There is something very special about a person sharing their story with others.... and we all have the curriculum to resource! 'Organisers stress that the 'Living Library' concept is one that is concrete, simple and affordable' (Dreher, & Mowbray, 2012).

### ***2. Planning and Preparation***

I am convinced the 'Human Library' concept at William Clarke College will not work without the support of the College and the local community. We can plan, prepare and organise 'Human Libraries' for the students but it's all about community. It is the community which makes it work. It is the community that will drive it, sustain it and ultimately benefit from it. Community building is the very essence of this idea. Recent research from UTS Sydney states 'Community ownership is crucial to the effectiveness of Human Libraries' (Dreher, & Mowbray, 2012). This publication represents the first comprehensive and independent analysis of Human Libraries in Australia and provides an overview of Human Library practices, and identifies key challenges for policymaker and practitioners.

Realising the significance of this, we have taken considerable time to share the concept of the 'Human Library' with the College Headmaster and Deputy Headmaster, members of the executive, the staff, parents and of course the 'living books'. Individual meetings, grade and whole staff presentations, newsletters, emails, magazine and newspaper articles, parent forums, phone calls and information on the College website have been used to 'create a buzz', involve people and communicate the concept successfully. Before each 'Human Library' begins the students are prepared carefully and their role clearly outlined. Students

learn what it means to be a good listener, how to respond appropriately, how to visualise, when and how to ask questions and are encouraged to empathise with others. Preparing the students always begins with preparing the teachers. 'Teachers who have been involved in the collaborative planning of the Human Library can better mesh their students' learning with the rest of the lessons on that topic, engaging them in critical thinking about what they have learned and why' (Quan-D'Eramo, 2011).

### **3. Getting Started**

Our 'living books' are carefully selected from our school and local community by the Teacher Librarian and prepared ready for inclusion in the library collection. When planning a 'Human Library' ideas for 'living books' are gathered from across the College community, from staff, students and community members. All suggestions are carefully reviewed and people approached accordingly. The participation of each 'living book' is determined by their understanding of the concept, their willingness to be involved, and their availability. In a 'live presentation', each book tells its story and the readers listen, and have the opportunity to ask questions and interact with the book. 'Central to both the operation and the appeal of Living Libraries is the focus on storytelling and one-on-one communication' (Quan-D'Eramo, 2011).

The key to using 'Human Libraries' in schools particularly with very young students is to make the 'living books' accessible to them. Students need to be given opportunities to actively listen, interact, communicate, empathise, ask questions, think critically and form opinions. We now have a wide range of presentations from teachers, students, staff, parents, grandparents, volunteers, community members, indigenous students and students from other countries. These 'living books' have given the students the wonderful opportunity to interact with people they would not normally have met, hear their fascinating stories, acquire new knowledge and form lasting friendships. This leads to networking and builds a stronger sense of community.

### **3. A Fresh New Approach to Resourcing the Curriculum**

The 'Human Library' is an 'innovative and interactive program that provides a safe and welcoming environment in which participants can learn more about the individuals in their community' (Quan-D'Eramo, 2011). Through 'Human Libraries' our students have been able to explore curriculum topics in an exciting way and build their knowledge and understanding of new information through others. It is important to stress that the 'Human Library is not an add-on or enrichment activity. 'It is an integral part of the learning continuum within the context of the area of study, bringing richness and depth to their understanding of the topic' (Quan-D'Eramo, 2011). It is crucial Teacher Librarians 'be part of the curriculum planning process, working with classroom teachers to develop rich learning opportunities that get to the heart of the information needed' (Quan-D'Eramo, 2011) and that they promote the opportunities available through the 'Human Library'.

- 'Human Libraries' provide an opportunity to share stories about a community and its past: a way of 'sharing history'. Old things, people, and places come alive when 'living books' tell personal stories about them. This assists students to relate to history and helps them develop pride in their local and national heritage.
- 'Human Libraries' provide a space in which individuals within a community, who hold an expertise or a specific set of skills can share these with others, 'building relationships' and fostering a sense of 'shared community'.
- 'Human Libraries' provide an opportunity for students to engage with others and learn about their cultural beliefs and experiences. They provide a 'celebration of diversity' and help develop tolerance of others. They give students the opportunity to visit other countries and experience different cultures through stories of those who have lived or travelled there.

- Human Libraries provide an opportunity for students to learn about different sports, recreational pursuits and pastimes through people actively participating in them.
- Human Libraries provide the opportunity for students to develop a greater awareness of and empathy for people living with disabilities.

All efforts are made at William Clarke College to ensure our 'Human Libraries' are personal, intimate, comfortable, and safe. Students are encouraged to show respect at all times to the 'living books', to look after them and treasure them just as they would a 'favourite' book in the library. Even when questioned, 'living books' should only share what they feel comfortable sharing. This atmosphere encourages openness and honesty. In response, students listen carefully to their stories, appreciate them and begin to empathise with them.

#### **4. A Rich Environment for Learning Life Skills**

What are the benefits of holding 'Human Libraries' in schools? Students learn 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. 'These are the skills students will need to work and live productively in an ever-changing, global community. These skills will prepare students for the yet to be defined challenges their future holds' (Quan-D'Eramo, 2011). The flexibility of the 'Human Library' concept means it can be adapted to any school situation. Students are hungry for real life experiences and 'living books' inspire them!

Students develop personal skills by participating in 'Human Libraries'. They need to learn to listen. In today's world our visual senses are constantly stimulated and we are bombarded with visual input. As a result, we have become largely dependent on this input to stimulate our attention. Our students are products of this visual world. They too, are surrounded by televisions, video game consoles, computers, smart phones, and iPads. It is unusual today for a child to sit and listen to a story without any visual stimulation or input. Through 'Human Libraries' students learn active listening skills. They learn to give their undivided attention, use eye contact, listen to the words and try to picture what the speaker is saying, they learn not to interrupt and how to respond appropriately to the speaker. They are required to 'exercise personal responsibility and accountability for their own behaviour and learning during the event' (Quan-D'Eramo, 2011).

By participating in 'Human Libraries' students develop inter-personal skills to assist them in communicating and interacting effectively with others. They begin to understand and manage oral communication. They learn to formulate questions, share findings and develop argument. They develop empathy for others. Students learn to exercise sensitivity when probing for more information. They begin to understand that language is used in combination with other means of communication, for example facial expressions and gestures. They learn to participate in honest and open discussion and respond in a tactful and respectful manner.

By participating in 'Human Libraries' students develop cognitive skills to enable them to analyse and use the information presented to them. They learn to reflect on the 'big picture' implications of the statements made by the 'living book'. 'Human Libraries' encourage intellectual curiosity. Students begin to understand the interconnection between the information gathered through the conversation and information gathered through other resources such as books, newspapers, articles, databases and diagrams.

The Human Library provides a very real and tangible opportunity to promote individual student growth in all of these areas. 'It provides an authentic opportunity for students to engage in the learning process and make concrete steps to understanding themselves in relation to the world around them' (Quan-D'Eramo, 2011). Overall 'Human Libraries' provide a wonderful opportunity for students to learn first- hand from others.

### **5. Integration of Technology**

The technology is available to record our 'living books' for use by staff and students. Digital records are kept of presentations so they can be used time and time again and linked to various curriculum topics as the need arises. These files are uploaded to DVC and catalogued accordingly. A general search locates them under 'living books' on the library OPAC. Using our 'Human Libraries' in this way enables access to all members of our College community, preserves a valuable resource and allows the 'story' to be used in a myriad of ways both now and in the future. 'Using ICT for learning enables personalised or individualised learning through students having immediate access to learning tools and resources at the point of need' (Wall, & Ryan, 2010). When using digital formats in the classroom or with small groups of students, teachers hold the key to providing the students with the opportunity to interact, discuss, communicate, share their ideas and reflect.

### **6. Reflection**

There is opportunity for students and staff to give valued feedback. Working closely with class teachers when planning units and collaborating during the process provides opportunity to assess, evaluate and modify the program as necessary. At the conclusion of each 'Human Library' younger students are asked to comment orally. In order to review the process and 'Human Libraries' as a whole, older students are asked to reflect in writing. 'Reflective writing facilitates sorting out knowledge, ideas, feelings and understanding'. (O'Connell & Groom, 2010) To assist them in doing this the students are asked to respond to the following:

- The 'living books' they enjoyed most in the 'Human Library' and why
- Something new they learned from the presentations
- Their overall impression of the 'Human Library'

With the aid of Moodle, we reflect together on all the 'living books' in their 'Human Library' and their real life stories. This gives the students valuable thinking time necessary for personal reflection before completing their writing. I ask for complete honesty reminding them that I value their evaluation and their feedback will improve 'Human Libraries' at William Clarke College in the future. The majority of students, to date, have been very positive in their responses. They have enjoyed the fresh, new approach to learning that 'Human Libraries' provide. They have all looked forward to participating in another 'Human Library'.

Teachers too, are asked to complete a SWOT analysis. So far, all teachers have responded positively. They have particularly noted the high level of engagement shown by students in the sessions and their enthusiasm for learning about people's experiences. There has been a noticeable increase in student-initiated discussion about the curriculum topic in the classroom. This discussion has centred on the 'living books' and their stories.

### **6. Building Relationships within the College Community and Beyond**

At William Clarke College we value the importance of belonging to a community. 'Human Libraries' help build strong school communities. We are all unique with our own special story and we can all learn from each other. 'The feeling of belonging created for participants during the interaction is thought to have longer-term consequences for how they interact generally within the community' (Dreher, & Mowbray, 2012). Instead of students and adults passing each other in silence when moving around the College, students now call a friendly hello and use the person's name. They have interacted, communicated and shared in a very special way. At times they even stop briefly to discuss some aspect of the topics covered. They are now no longer strangers but friends - it's bringing our community together.

## Conclusion

Using 'Human Libraries' at William Clarke College has enabled students to further engage with the library and learning, explore new horizons, discover new ideas, thoughts and knowledge and connect with others, learning from their 'real life' stories. 'Human Libraries', when carefully planned and programmed in collaboration with teachers, have become a valuable way of resourcing the curriculum and enhancing student learning. Students are developing 'life skills' that will assist them in life-long learning. There is a stronger sense of community amongst members who have participated in a 'Human Library' within the school. Students have met and now communicate with people with whom they would not normally have had the opportunity to associate. They have become connected with diverse members of our community. In addition, the success of the 'Human Libraries' initiative at William Clarke College and the positive collaboration with students, teachers, staff and community members during the process, has provided me with a platform from which to promote the library across the school community and in the local, state, national and international arena.

## Key Learning Areas

- 'Human Libraries' can be used in schools in innovative ways to provide students with the opportunity to build relationships, communicate, explore and learn
- All school communities have a wonderful resource of 'living books' available to them
- The success of 'Human Libraries' at William Clarke College has provided a platform from which to promote the library across the school community and beyond

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I have taught for many years in Australian schools as a Teacher and later as a Teacher Librarian. This has included experience in Primary (K-6) and Whole School (K-12) situations. Currently I am Teacher Librarian K-8 at William Clarke College in Kellyville, NSW. In 2007 I gained Accreditation at Classroom/Professional Excellence level in NSW and have maintained this since. I am actively involved in local, state and national associations in Australia and am currently President of the Independent Primary Schools Teacher Librarian Network NSW. This is my sixth IASL Conference. Teaching is my passion and I love working with students and staff. I am energised by exciting, new learning opportunities. I am keen to take every opportunity to raise the profile of our library and its important role in the school. I am excited when I see all students achieving, learning new skills and gaining deeper knowledge and understanding.