

‘Food for the Soul’: Applying the ‘human library’ concept to academic professional development

Jane Bryan, University of Warwick

Kerry Dobbins, University of Warwick

ABSTRACT

This article explores the unique application of the Human Library concept to an academic professional development initiative. Human Library events are noted for their opportunities to provide a safe space for learning, knowledge exchange and reflective thought, bringing together individuals willing to share their experiences (‘human books’) with those wishing to learn more (‘readers’). Our specific objectives were to create a space for colleagues to discuss teaching-related issues and create collegial connections. Evaluation data highlights the opportunities the event gave to connect with colleagues, share and gain ideas, and engage in in-depth teaching-focused conversations. Readers commented on the time and space offered by the event to stop, reflect and exchange knowledge. Human books reported benefits to their own practices from the two-way conversational process, with at least one potential collaboration being followed up after the event. Impact also appears to have endured beyond the book/reader encounters with participants referring to their sharing with others of learning and ideas gained from or formed following the event.

Keywords: academic professional development, Human Library, academic practice, collegial connections, knowledge exchange

Introduction

This ‘on the horizon’ article explores the application of the Human Library concept to an academic professional development initiative. Our research suggests that this is a unique application of a concept that employs a discursive forum to connect people and enhance relational understanding and knowledge.

The Human Library (also called Living Library) idea was initially developed in Denmark in 2000. Using the literal phrasing of “Don’t judge a book by its cover” (Abergel et al., 2005, p.1), its aim is to challenge stigma and stereotypes of people through the avenue of personal and respectful dialogue. Human Library events bring together people who are happy to talk about their experiences (‘human books’) with those keen to know more (‘readers’). For the duration of an event, ‘human books’, who pick ‘titles’ for themselves to define the area for discussion, are available to ‘readers’ for conversation (‘readings’). Since its introduction, the Human Library has become an internationally recognised movement that promotes diversity and tolerance in society by allowing “people from different social groups and backgrounds to communicate with each other in an informal and safe environment” (Bagci & Blazhenkova, 2020, p.414). Human books share their personal histories and experiences with human readers and these personal exchanges open opportunities for prejudices to be challenged.

The Human Library is a contact-based intervention premised on the Intergroup Contact Theory. This theory, introduced by Allport in 1954, maintains that "intergroup contact between different group members can battle prejudice and improve intergroup relationships" (Bagci & Blazhenkova, 2020, p.414). Over the years, the concept has continued to evolve as an effective platform to engage people in respectful and purposeful knowledge production and exchange. In higher education, the Human Library has been used as a method to develop students' information literacy (Blizzard et al., 2019), professional community knowledge (Sen et al., 2016) and interactions with support services (Bordonaro, 2020).

Authors continually note the ability of the Human Library to provide a safe space for learning, knowledge exchange and reflective thought (Abergel et al., 2005; Kinsley, 2009; Schijf et al., 2020). Studies also emphasise the developmental nature of the experience for both human books and readers through the dialogue-based encounters (Bagci & Blazhenkova, 2020). Dialogue is at the heart of many established institutional schemes to support and enhance teaching practices, e.g. peer dialogue and peer review schemes, with scholars noting the benefits of dialogue-based approaches for professional development (Cooper & Boyd, 1998; Gosling, 2014; Vella, 2002). It was for these reasons that we developed our pilot initiative to apply the Human Library concept to an academic professional development context. The expertise provided by the human books would be their specialist knowledge of education-related topics and readers would have the opportunity to develop their understandings through purposeful and constructive dialogue in an informal space. As a pilot, we identified three specific objectives:

- to discover if the Human Library concept can be applied to a teaching-focused context and lead to positive professional development outcomes;
- to create a space for colleagues to explore and discuss teaching-related issues;
- to provide an opportunity for colleagues to create collegial connections.

The Human Teaching Book initiative

The Human Library initiative was not new to our institution. The Warwick University Library has run an event since 2018 with staff and students in the role of human books talking about an element of their identity/lived experience, such as Christian, Chinese, Gay, Police Officer, Anxiety and Disabled. As the Human Library is already an internationally recognised movement with strict rules around organisation of events, we differentiated our initiative by describing it as a 'Human Teaching Book Event'.

To recruit our human books, we approached staff who we knew were already engaged in innovative teaching practices, where there was growing institutional curiosity but limited practical application. We also consulted an internal register of staff who are happy to share their expertise in specified areas with others wishing to learn more. This first event was run in an online format, which we limited to ten human books with titles including 'design thinking', 'co-creation', 'restorative approaches to teaching', 'trans and queer awareness', and 'neurodiversity awareness'. Once our human books were recruited, we advertised the event across the institution and readers were invited to select their book titles in advance. We allowed up to three readers per book reading to expand the number of readers who could join the event, enabling more opportunities for collegial connections to be made whilst ensuring readings were intimate enough to remain conversations rather than lectures.

We ran the event for 90 minutes, which enabled us to create three reading sessions of twenty minutes each. The format we followed is set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Format of the Human Teaching Book event

Timing	Activity
12.00pm - 12.05pm	Welcome.
12.05pm -12.30pm	Move into breakout rooms and have the first book reading.
12.30pm - 12.55pm	Move into breakout rooms and have the second book reading.
12.55pm – 1.00pm	Screen break.
1.00pm - 1.25pm	Move into breakout rooms and have the second book reading.
1.25pm - 1.30pm	Thanks and close.

Readers and human books were assured that no preparation was required for the event, but we did suggest to the human books that they come primed with conversation starters such as, 'What interests you in [book title]?', 'Have you done anything with [book title] already?' and 'Is there any area of [book title] you are particularly curious about?' After an initial welcome, readers were assigned to breakout rooms according to their title selection where they met their human books. Readers were then reassigned for two further reading sessions before returning to the main room for a short closing session. Not all readers attended all three sessions.

Evaluation

Overall, the event went well. Some readers did not attend or offered apologies at late notice, which meant some human books had no readers for some reading sessions. These human books usually then became readers and attended other sessions. Due to non-attendance, in all cases there were no more than one reader per session. The online platform (MS Teams) presented the only difficulties encountered on the day. We ran into challenges allocating participants to breakout rooms, though this was resolved by the human books calling the readers through MS Teams. In future runs, we will use channels with each channel bearing the name of the book title.

An evaluation form was created as part of our evaluation plan, which was given ethical approval by the University's ethics board. This evaluation form was circulated to readers and human books after the event. As some human books had also become readers on the day, they were sent both reader and human book evaluation forms. The evaluation data suggests that the event was successful and enabled readers and human books to connect, share ideas and learn from each other in an informal and supportive environment.

Results

Experiences of readers

Five readers completed the evaluation form. All five agreed that the Human Teaching Book concept was effective to support teaching-focused conversations and had helped to develop their understanding of topics they were interested in. They also agreed that they had gained useful ideas that they would be able to incorporate into their teaching or support for student learning. Four of the five agreed that they had made useful connections to colleagues because of this event.

The qualitative comments revealed that readers enjoyed the event and would participate again. Of particular note are the benefits they highlighted that relate specifically to the Human Library concept. For example, readers commented on the opportunities the event gave to:

- “connect with people and start to share ideas” (Reader (R)1);
- “stop, reflect and exchange knowledge” (R2);
- “clarify some of my understanding on certain topics” (R5);
- “reflect more about my own practice, skills and strengths” (R4).

For one reader, the one-to-one time with a human book was “incredibly valuable”:

Rarely are we afforded time and space to explore a question/topic to inform our practice...it was so interesting to unpack definitions, explore meaning, and connect with a colleague and consider ways we can develop our appreciation and application...it was proper food for the soul. (R2)

Readers also identified positive actions that they would be taking following the event, which included sharing their learning with team-mates, running a similar event in their own departments and joining relevant internal networks or groups related to the topics they had explored. One reader indicated that they would be communicating their learning to senior leaders within forthcoming Faculty policy discussions.

Experiences of human books

Four human books completed the evaluation form and all agreed that the Human Teaching Book concept was effective to support teaching-focused conversations. All responded that they felt confident in engaging the readers in discussion, had benefited from their interactions in the event and had made useful connections to colleagues.

Human books echoed the readers' qualitative comments and highlighted the opportunities the event gave to connect with colleagues, share and gain ideas, and engage in conversations for which time does not usually allow. Significantly, the human books confirmed the benefits for their own learning and practices through the “two-way” (Book (B)1 and B4) conversational process. At least one book reported that they would be following up a potential collaboration with a reader after the event.

When asked what advice they would give to other human books to get the most out of the experience, the comments included:

- spending time getting to know the reader – “It helps to contextualise the conversation and you learn so much from them too” (B1);

- being prepared to think laterally in answering questions – “The readers don't necessarily ask questions in the way you might first expect” (B2);
- embracing the two-way process – “It is not only about answering questions, but also about getting new ideas” (B4).

Conclusions

This pilot event confirmed that the Human Library format can be meaningfully adapted to create spaces for conversation and connection-building beyond its original remit of challenging stigma and stereotypes around certain identities. The format worked to facilitate a space for colleagues to connect and discuss teaching-related issues. The experiences of human books and readers suggest that the encounters operated as an exchange of knowledge rather than a one-way transmission from book to reader, evening out the traditional power imbalance of teacher and learner. In effect, the event acted as a space for learning to occur through the dialogic method discussed by Shor and Freire (1987). Whilst the human book may initially know the topic better than the reader, they re-learn it through the new knowledge or perspectives gained by discussions together. As Shor and Freire (1987, p.14) put it, the human book and reader “meet around [the topic] and through it for mutual inquiry”. As we can see from our evaluation data, the dialogic encounters created opportunities for new ideas to develop for all participants and collaborations to form.

The impact of the event appears to have endured beyond the encounters themselves and spread wider than the participants taking part. Participants referred to the reflections and collaborations that occurred following the physical encounter, and their sharing with others of learning and ideas shared at or formed following the event. We can see then that in the first instance, the event provided opportunities for colleagues to make connections with others across the University that they may not otherwise meet. Importantly, the data also suggests that it has acted as a channel through which colleagues might seed ideas and practices into areas outside of their own departments and disciplines.

Going forward, in terms of running the event again, the feedback from participants confirmed the importance of careful preparation of the reader and human books to ensure all attend with reasonable expectations as to what will follow. Human books may find it helpful to have some conversation starters and questions prepared in advance to quickly build rapport and help focus conversations. In an online event, finding a way to create virtual rooms easily is key. Requiring readers to make book selections in advance should help with this aspect.

Building on our learning from this pilot, we will be looking to further explore the sustainability of the positive outcomes reported by our human books and readers. For example, did the expected collaborations materialise and flourish? Does the event itself provide enough infrastructure for sustainable outcomes or is more required? It would also be beneficial to examine the impact of different spaces used for such an event. Ours was an online event and it would be interesting to consider if conversations or encounters may run differently within an in-person event. Such considerations may help us to understand the affordances and limitations of different spaces for this activity as a professional development exercise and help event organisers plan measures to address any limitations to ensure participants feel comfortable to engage. This may involve careful consideration of the promotion of the event and recruitment of human books and readers, agreement of ground rules and thoughtful arrangement of the event setting. Finally, we suggest that research on the perception of the event as a 'safe space' or 'brave space' would be incredibly valuable. As noted earlier in the paper, the Human Library is promoted as offering opportunities for learning and

knowledge exchange within a safe environment. It may be helpful to consider the features of a 'safe' or 'brave' space in this context and how we, as facilitators, cultivate these to support sensitive but meaningful discussions.

Biographies

Jane Bryan is a Reader at Warwick Law School and Academic Lead of the University's Community Values Education Programme. Jane has a research interest in the benefits of dialogue and leads the Warwick International Higher Education Academy Peer Dialogue Staff Network which creates opportunities for teaching staff to connect.

Kerry Dobbins is an Assistant Professor in the Academic Development Centre. She is an experienced pedagogic researcher with expertise in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

References

- Abergel, R., Rothmund, A., Titley, G., & Wootsh, P. (2005). Don't judge a book by its cover! The Living Library organisers guide. https://www.cittametropolitana.bo.it/sanitasociale/Engine/RAServeFile.php/f/LV_book.pdf
- Bagci, S.C., & Blazhenkova, O. (2020). Unjudge someone: Human Library as a tool to reduce prejudice toward stigmatized group members. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 42(6), 413-431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2020.1792298>
- Blizzard, K., Becker, Y., & Goebel, N. (2019). Bringing Women's Studies to life: integrating a human library into Augustana's Women's Studies curriculum. *College Quarterly*, 22(1).
- Bordonaro, K. (2020). The Human Library: reframing library work with international students. *Journal of Library Administration*, 60(1), 97-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1685271>
- Cooper, C. & Boyd, J. (1998). Creating sustained professional growth through collaborative reflection. In C.M. Brody & N. Davidson (Eds.) *Professional development for cooperative learning: issues and approaches* (pp.49-62). State University of New York Press.
- Gosling, D. (2014). Collaborative peer-supported review of teaching. In J. Sachs & M. Parsell (Eds.) *Peer review of learning and teaching in higher Education: international perspectives* (pp.13-31). Springer.
- Kinsley, L. (2009). Lismore's Living Library: connecting communities through conversation. *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services (APLIS)* 22(1), 20-25.
- Schijf, C.M.N., Olivar, J.F., Bundalian, J.B., & Ramos-Eclevia, M. (2020). Conversations with human books: promoting respectful dialogue, diversity, and empathy among grade and high school students. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 69(3), 390-408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2020.1799701>
- Sen, R., McClelland, N., & Jowett, B. (2016). Belonging to the library: humanising the space for social work education. *Social Work Education*, 35(8), 892-904. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2016.1211098>
- Shor, I. & Freire, P. (1987). What is the 'dialogical method' of teaching? *Journal of Education*, 169(3), 11-31.
- Vella, J. (2002). *Learning to listen, learning to teach: the power of dialogue in educating adults*. John Wiley & Sons. Jossey-Bass