

## **‘Authentic Encounters’: the Human/Living Library Concept**

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At the core of the Salzburg Academy’s mission is the bridging of divides and the bringing together of people from diverse – often conflicting – backgrounds. The Salzburg Global Seminar has a long tradition of creating a safe space in which people from all walks of life can open up and share their stories and it is in that spirit that, in 2015, we ran our first Human Library session.

The concept of the Human (also known as Living) Library is simple: a small team of ‘Librarians’ put together a catalogue of ‘Human Books’ (each Book being a human with experience of stigma, persecution, stereotyping or othering, therefore each title representing a specific social issue or stereotype), which visiting ‘Readers’ can borrow for short, intimate conversations.

This methodology provides people with the opportunity to ask questions, share experiences or raise issues that they might be reluctant to do so in a conventional social setting. In the total absence of technology and other distractions, participants engage in open, meaningful conversations. The aim is not just to reject stereotypes but to help pick them apart and subvert them; to encounter the other and tackle one’s preconceived ideas about people or communities who are different from them; and, therefore, to overcome stigma and marginalisation.

The Human Library has consistently been one of the most popular and impactful sessions of the Academy. Year after year, we have witnessed hundreds of human connections of profound depth and value. Evening sessions that are designed to last for one hour end up running past midnight with the spaces of the makeshift Human Library buzzing with passionate conversations. Many participants report this as being one of the most transformative and enlightening experiences of their lives.

Despite the unique power of this methodology, there is a distinct lack of scholarly attention. While the concept, originally designed in Denmark in 2000, started to gather pace and spread globally in the late 2000s, it is still relatively unknown. The aim of this short essay is not to provide a detailed manual or description of the session (this is done quite well elsewhere – e.g. Little, Nemetlu, Magic and Molnár 2011; Padasani and Rivera 2017), but to outline how we applied it in Salzburg and mainly to reflect on why it has been so successful and what this may tell us about this particular moment in history.

“The human library is a clear point at which the academy completely shifted from being interesting to being absolutely life changing. The world doesn’t allow us to see people in all their dimensions, and the human library forced us to see each other in new colours” (GL, 2017 Salzburg Academy participant).



1 - Photo Montage - Human Library sessions at the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change

## Context and Brief Literature Review

Before we move to outlining how the concept was implemented in Salzburg, it is important to first touch upon the institutional context. The Human Library is one of those cases in which its history is quite key in understanding both its success and the reasons it has not yet spread even further (for a more detailed analysis of the movement's history see Dreher and Mowbray 2012).

Founded in Denmark in 2000, the Human Library is an international organisation and movement that aims to address prejudice and divides by allowing people who have experienced stereotyping, stigma or persecution to share their story.

Its original name in English was the Living Library (or Living Libraries in plural). In 2003 it was adopted by the Council of Europe (CoE) as a key tool for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, human rights, democratic participation, and pluralism (Little et al 2011). Supported by the CoE throughout the 2000s, the movement and the practice grew. Hundreds of non-profit, educational and community organisations started to organise Living Library sessions around the world: from universities in Japan (e.g. Kudo et al 2011) and school libraries in Australia (Brown 2016) to social work institutions in Finland (Pardasani and Rivera 2017), art galleries in Canada (Clover and Dogus 2014) and open street markets in Greece.

Due to a legal challenge by an American corporation, the movement behind the methodology was forced to change its name from Living Library to Human Library. The Human Library Organisation was formed as a non-profit entity. In the early 2010s, Human Library materials were made freely available through local and regional websites (such as Human Library UK – from which we obtained the guide and all the training and session materials). However, a process of formalisation and concentration of control followed – presumably so as to protect the reputation and viability of the organisation, as well as ensure that sessions meet minimum requirements in terms of respecting and implementing the principles of the concept. Today, the

Human Library name is a registered trademark that may only be used with written permission from the organisation<sup>1</sup>.

Despite its universally acknowledged potency, the academic and educational literature on the Human/Living Library methodology is quite limited and there is probably a declining amount of application and evaluation work being carried out within academia, while the last known document of the Council of Europe was produced in 2011. This may be related to the now protected use of the official name and the added obstacle of the permission 'wall' or the resource limitations of the organization. It may also be due to the resource implications of organising a Human Library session on a voluntary basis in the community, which – if done properly – can be a highly demanding and intense experience for those running it.

The handful of evaluation studies (which range from pre/post questionnaires to qualitative feedback from organisers and participants) provide compelling evidence about the method's efficacy and value. Orosz et al (2016) examined the effectiveness of this prejudice reduction intervention with living 'Books' who were trained volunteers from the Roma and LGBT communities. In a pre-post intervention study with high school students, they found that the Living Library intervention "reduced participants' scores on multiple measures of prejudice. [It] appeared to be effective among both those participants whose friends endorsed prejudice or more tolerant attitudes toward Roma and LGBT people".

In a similar pre/post intervention study, Groyecka et al (2019) examined the effectiveness of the Human Library (held in Wrocław, Poland) in reducing social distance towards Roma, Muslims, dark-skinned, and transgender people, as well as in decreasing homonegativity: "we found that the Human Library decreased social distance towards Muslims. Also, the more Living Books that the participants "read," the bigger the shift in their social distance towards Muslims. Furthermore, we observed an increase in positive affective attitude towards working in diversified groups, as a result of participation in the event. The study serves as partial support for the effectiveness of the Human Library in altering one's attitude towards minority groups and diversity."

Goebel's (2011) study in an educational setting also "certainly validate the Human Library's contribution to the institution's extra-curricular context", while in Pardasani and Rivera's (2017) study, "about 85,42% of participants responded that were very impressed with the event and 93.75% would recommend the Human Library to others. Based on qualitative data, the Human Library managed to challenge many of the stereotypes about minority groups, served as a platform to introspection regarding marginalization, and helped students to practice many of the professional competences needed in social services".

As with any such initiative, running a successful Human Library session poses several challenges: from fundraising and procuring the space, resources and materials needed to recruiting and training volunteers who can act as effective librarians, library assistants, and – crucially – Human Books, to opening this up and reaching out to diverse demographic groups beyond the 'usual suspects' (i.e. people who might be inclined to engage with diverse others anyway), which is the point of the whole enterprise. Huang et al (2017) found some inconsistent application of the concept and this is something to be expected as the application of the method's mechanics, rules and principles is bound to differ across cultures, settings and even personalities.

## **Session Design**

As it happens, the setting of the Salzburg Academy, bringing together an annual cohort of 100 students, faculty and staff from all over the world, provided us with the perfect conditions in which to run such a session in an one-off, educational, experimental, voluntary and non-profit setting. The Academy group is a rich human tapestry of cultural, religious, sexual, linguistic, political, socioeconomic backgrounds and physical, mental, familial and spiritual conditions and experiences. Having said that, a superdiverse cohort

is not a prerequisite for running a successful Human Library session. Even the members of a particular community will have individually experienced enough unique circumstances to provide ample material.



2 - The Availability Board at the 2018 Salzburg Academy

Key to the success of a Human Library session is the provision of a wide range of Books, i.e. social issues and experiences and, especially, the tackling of lesser known or unseen stereotypes and hidden trauma. In fact, some of our most popular Books have been those unorthodox or unlikely choices. The sessions run by Kudo et al (2011) featured an albino patient, an alopecia patient, a person with a 'unique face' (angioma), a blind person, a blind soccer player, a commissioner of an NPO on wheelchairs, the family of a person who had committed suicide, two sexual minorities, a global tourist, two foreign residents, a house husband, a Buddhist nun, a voice actor of silent movies, and three officials of Japan's Self-Defence Force.

Over the five years that we have run a Human Library at the Salzburg Academy, we have encountered more than a hundred Books on a wide range of topics: from eating disorders, body image, self harm, addiction, cancer and mental health issues (depression, anxiety, ADHD, OCD, borderline personality, bipolar disorder), to autism, gender identities and sexualities, religious identities and interfaith marriages; from fleeing persecution and ethnic conflicts to physical disabilities as well as particular physical features (e.g. being extra tall) that might not be immediately seen as stereotyping material; and from experiences of family rejection, domestic violence and sexual abuse to professional identities and career choices that are often judged or misunderstood (e.g. being in the military) and political views and beliefs that are often at the centre of culture wars (e.g. gun ownership and abortion).

While the Academy's setting means that students and faculty are potentially more open and willing to participate as Books and/or Readers than the average person outside of an educational setting, identifying, recruiting and training Human Books even in the context of the Academy is still a process that takes time,

effort and care. It is an iterative process that involves working with Books to formulate their ideas and choose a title that is at the same time punchy and descriptively accurate. It is about creating a safe space that encourages people who may have never assumed such a role to share some of their most intimate and possibly traumatic experiences and emotions with others. It involves training everyone – Books and Readers alike - on their “Rights and Responsibilities”, which include the ability to ask/answer – or *not* ask/answer – any question that they wish; to terminate the conversation whenever they wish; to be open and willing to explore, listen and to be heard; to ask and to be asked questions that in other contexts might be judged; but also to treat others with respect.

Preparing the session includes recruiting and training a team of assistants (known as Library Assistants or Runners) whose jobs include preparing the Registration area and identifying individual spaces/seating for Books; welcoming Readers and providing them with their Library ID; showing them around the Registration area and explaining how the process works; updating the Availability Board (which includes all the Books that are ‘Available’ and ‘On Loan’ at any given moment); registering the details of each individual loan (i.e. time that a Book was checked out and returned and by whom); escorting Readers to their chosen Book (we restrict each conversation to a maximum of three Readers so as to maintain intimacy); and – if a time limit has been set for each conversation (which depends on how busy the Library is – we usually keep conversations to 15 minutes if new Readers are waiting to check Books out) gently notifying the Book/Reader(s) to wrap up their discussion.

Due to the numbers involved (i.e. 20-30 Human Books for 90-100 Readers each year with evenings running for more than four hours and involving hundreds of loans), designing, organising and running a Human Library session in which individual loans/encounters run like clockwork is a demanding job that requires careful planning and a well-designed, albeit gentle and unseen, choreography. The aim is to make everyone feel welcome and respected, to allow for conversations to reach a meaningful depth, while at the same time providing Readers with the chance to encounter as many Books as is practically possible.

The Human Library is a powerful tool for human interaction and, as such, it should be handled with extreme care and responsibility towards all participants. Those considering organising such a session should engage with the materials of the Council of Europe and/or the Human Library Organisation and contact those organisations, which provide training for new Librarians and Readers. They should strive to read widely the available manuals and previous studies, so as to fully understand the values and principles of this approach. They should allow enough time and space to properly train the core team, as well as all participants. They should create conditions that are conducive to people opening up about highly sensitive experiences and thoughts. And they should ensure that all written or electronic data – including details of personal circumstances and photos from the sessions – is handled carefully and with consent.

As with the roles and mechanics of the session, space and space design are also crucial to the success of this activity. The Max Reinhardt Library at Schloss Leopoldskron has proven to be an ideal space for this activity, not only due to its stunning aesthetics and collection of real books, but also due to its versatility. A series of designated corners, spaces and adjacent rooms allow each Book to have their own space and ensure the privacy of conversations, while still bringing everyone together in the same overall space and retaining proximity and connection to others and to the Registration area.

During the last few years, we have also experimented with the timing of the event within the 3-week period of the Academy. We have found that strategically placing at the end of the first week is the ideal time. At that point participants have already established a basic level of trust and familiarity with each other, with the aims and mission of the programme, and with the space itself. Equally, not enough time has lapsed for them to form tightly-knit groups or ‘cliques’, which might act as obstacles to open-minded encounters.

It is probably the case that in the in the lifecycle of professional, educational and social events (e.g. courses, conferences, seminars and summer schools), as time passes we tend to become less open to chance encounters. We form connections and smaller circles, which may occasionally be disrupted, but essentially become less and less porous. The danger there is of those groupings becoming calcified. After only a few days (or even hours), we may think we know others well. Yet, in reality, we have only seen the one dimension that they have projected to us in the period of our acquaintance. Incidentally, the same is true with friendships and even family or romantic relationships. The Human Library acts as an opportunity to start afresh and ‘meet’ the other person again. It requires being prepared to momentarily set aside preconceptions and notions that you have formed. It is in that sense that this session acts as a critical juncture in the lifecycle of the Academy, because it disrupts those patterns of socialisation and mental stereotyping that naturally occur in any cohort, while illustrating in the most emotionally engaging of ways our common humanity.



*3 – Photo Montage - Human Library sessions at the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change*

The Human/Living Library method has been described as “diversity training and intercultural education” (e.g. Kudo et al 2011) and it has been used as a means to enhancing students’ generic skills as part of an active learning approach (Yamashita 2016). While it can certainly be used very fruitfully in an educational setting and as a means of developing skills, that rubric can also be slightly misleading. The Human Library is not at all about a paternalistic or formulaic transmission of skills or knowledge and adopting such a discourse might be perceived by some people as inherently judgmental or shaming of those who may understand the world and others through stereotypes and preconceived notions, or who may struggle to understand and accept emerging identities and difference altogether.

The Human Library as we practice it in Salzburg is not about reaching a specific outcome in terms of participants’ views, beliefs or values. It is not about indoctrination and there are no right or wrong questions or answers. The point of the session is precisely to allow participants – all participants equally,

whether they are Books or Readers – to explore others (and, through others, their own selves) from a position of equality.

If there is a pedagogic objective in this session, then that is fulfilled not through a predetermined curriculum. *It is the process of communication itself – the authentic encounter – that is the curriculum.* When that process of meaningful, deep communication is achieved, it will invariably lead to greater insights about the other and to a propensity for tolerance, hence creating the conditions for peaceful coexistence. As Yap et al (2017) put it: “Most readers thought that the most important learning experience they gained while reading the books was to accept and understand each one of us as unique individuals. The human library program encourages people to be more tolerant and embolden acceptance.”

At this point it is worth pointing out that the absence of digital technology has been critical to our sessions’ success. Huang et al (2017) highlight opportunities for increased community participation and technological innovation. They argue for “a broader consideration of computer-supported collaborative work in the context of human libraries and experience sharing”. While this is certainly an important avenue worth exploring (even more so in age of pandemics, lockdowns and social distancing), our experience suggests that it was precisely the *lack* of technology that enabled this experience to become so transformative: physical co-presence, contained space, lack of distractions and excuses for avoiding to establish eye contact and physical interaction. In a previous study of 24-hour media withdrawal, our participants reflected on how extensively they used their devices as social and emotional shields, so as to avoid confronting uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, and to avoid social awkwardness in the presence of others (Gerodimos 2017). It is a paradox that the very same tools that are supposed to facilitate communication, end up becoming the strongest barriers to it.

### **What does the success of the Human Library tell us about this moment in time?**

Previous studies have explored and documented the benefits of the Human Library from the angle of social psychology, and in particular the ‘contact hypothesis’. Watson (2015) demonstrated how it engaged people in a process of countering prejudice, increasing respect for difference and promoting human rights and freedoms through “an enabling relationship that involves three process concepts: raising critical consciousness, human recognition and enabling human rights activism”, while other studies (such as Yamashita 2016) found that running or participating in the HL can help develop generic skills such as confidence, self-esteem, self-expression and oneself and working with others.

The Human/Living Library methodology basically involves a group of people having verbal conversations in a room. The only material requirements are pen, paper, a pin board and some pins. Why is something so low tech, so primitive even, one of the most meaningful and rewarding experiences today?

Perhaps it is precisely because the HL consists of communication at its bare basics, at its most essential, that it is so powerful. Running a successful HL session can feel like pouring water in the driest patch of land. The way participants embrace this session and engage with each other is like the land immediately absorbing the water and turning into a garden that flourishes. Experiencing this session makes everyday occasions of social interaction seem almost superficial and agonisingly mistaken, in that we all desperately seek communication and partake in the choreography of social conventions (e.g. going out or browsing social media and dating apps) yet fail to achieve the one goal that we really crave, which is to truly connect. The HL provides us with an *excuse* to ask and share concerns, thoughts and feelings that would normally be outside the boundaries of social convention: a personal reflection or experience that is absolutely legitimate in the context of a HL session might be seen as ‘oversharing’ or ‘being indiscreet’ in a regular social context.

Clover & Dogus (2014) note that “the HL provided an interesting balance between the two somewhat paradoxical things adult and cultural educators call for to address difficult social issues such as bias. Although some argue there are no safe places, the HL provided a feeling of safety in which to articulate and challenge one’s own and others’ assumptions. On the other hand, it was a space of discomfort and confrontation full of unsafe ideas”.

Hence, this methodology appears uniquely suited to our current times. It could and should be scaled up and applied to other contexts, such as superdiverse urban communities facing segregation, ghettoization or tensions due to multiculturalism and perceived loss of identity and control.

The extreme polarisation and toxic social media discourse on Twitter and Facebook is built on a communicative culture based on shame: shaming others for their beliefs, values and opinions. The performance culture of visual social media such as Instagram and TikTok is about crafting, performing and projecting an image of the self, through filters and carefully edited posts.

While exploring and (re)presenting the self can have multiple benefits and one should not disregard the instances of meaningful communication on social media, their architecture is not necessarily conducive to authenticity or to opening up to difference. The HL is about having a conversation, as opposed to storytelling and this is something emphasised in the training materials. While a conversation may partly involve storytelling, it is deeper and broader than that. In the context of the HL, storytelling is not the ends, but the means to sharing a moment of empathy and the realisation that we are all part of a unified human ecosystem.

Finally, the experience of the HL invites us to rethink the meaning of learning: what it entails, where/when (we think) it really happens, and how we know it has happened when we see it; because in some minuscule or profound way, learning changes us, by enriching our perspective. This is related to the discussion around the role of libraries as learning commons in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mihailidis and Diggs 2010). Brown 2016 argues that school libraries are uniquely placed to foster a culture of empathy and respect and shows how hosting a Human Library can help them build a culture that celebrates, rather than fears, diversity and difference.

The Human Library method serves the essence of media pedagogy, as it empowers people to articulate their voice, as well as the curiosity and ability to ask questions of others and to be genuinely interested in their stories. It is always fascinating to notice that when conversations between people from the most different backgrounds go deep enough, then similar fears, hopes and experiences emerge. At the very core of this chemistry, the nucleus of its power and impact, is the removal of artificial obstacles – borders, stereotypes, emotional, physical and cultural boundaries – and the realisation of the shared/common humanity, i.e. that we are all made of the same material.

As we saw, the Living/Human Library project took off in the late 2000s, as it spread around the world, followed by a flurry of studies. Scholarly and community activity around the practice seems to have subsided somewhat as the organisation restricted the use of the methodology and materials. Yet, the core ideas at the heart of this methodology (meaningful, open, purposeful interaction without distractions – an opportunity for deep authentic human connections) cannot and should not be limited. In my 18 years as an academic, I have never come across a more potent tool for establishing human connectivity and gaining all the by-products of that (empathy, tolerance, understanding etc). The HL methodology ought to be supported, implemented, scaled up and evaluated further.

“For me, what made the Human Library so amazing was the example it set for human relationships. The extent to which people were willing to learn about and listen to one another was really breathtaking, and whenever I look back, I see that as something to aspire to” (CG, 2017 Salzburg Academy participant)



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<sup>i</sup> For the purposes of clarity and brevity, in this chapter I am using the term Human Library to refer to the generic concept, rather the organisation itself, as this has become the standard term commonly used in the literature.