

HOBART HUMAN LIBRARY HISTORY



Human libraries are a hugely successful international human rights initiative which promote understanding and acceptance at a grassroots level. A human library creates a comfortable space for a two-way listening and learning experience. It is a simple yet highly effective way for people to build empathy and face their prejudices.

A human library, “a community project with its quirky analogy – calling people ‘books’ and listing them in ‘catalogues’ – offers a light-hearted, fun approach to serious issues: increasing social cohesion, it breaks down barriers between people belonging to different groups in society, potentially preventing social strife and worse. The simple idea behind it: it is difficult to maintain stereotypes and prejudices when meeting and engaging face to face. Sitting down with a ‘Living Book’ for a conversation allows you to go straight to the point – no need for small talk – which makes these conversations so special, very real and deep, sometimes raw and moving.”¹

Danish beginnings

The concept of a living library where the books are living people originated in Denmark in 2000. Ronni and Dany Abergel, Asma Mouna and Christoffer Erichsen from the Danish Youth NGO, Stop the Violence first presented a living library at the Roskilde Festival of music. It ran for eight hours a day over four days and featured over fifty different titles from human ‘books’. More than a thousand people participated as ‘readers’ during those four days.

¹ Resources Kit, 2008, Living Libraries Australia, www.humanlibraries.org.au.

Primarily, the aim of a library with living 'books' was to "...to create constructive personal dialogues between people who would normally not have the opportunity to speak to each other and thus challenge common prejudices and stereotypes."²

In 2003, the living library became part of the Council of Europe's programme. The Council recognised that this project enabled everyday people to connect the links between "abstract human rights: and individuals in their wider community. The inclusion of the living library in the Council's programme was underpinned by the knowledge that the promotion, defence and understanding of human rights is not effective when done only through legal texts. By comparison, the living library was acknowledged as an extremely effective tool to promote human rights as it has the crucial element of human connection.

The Human Library (the name having been changed from Living Libraries in 2010) has since spread, as a result of the work of Ronni Abergel to train local organisers, to 85 countries worldwide across a variety of fields including civil society and corporate environments.

Australian origins

The first Australian living library was initiated in 2006 by Lismore resident Sabina Baltruweit with support from Lismore City Council as was considered "*a proven, safe, and low-cost tool for communities to address controversial issues/polarised situations, local and national, by giving them a human face.*"³

Following in the steps of the Danish model, the Lismore Human Library invited people to 'borrow' a book based on a title and blurb written by the 'book'. The reader and the 'book' are encouraged to have an organic one-on-one conversation where they both are able to ask questions and share information with each other over the course of 10-30 minutes.

The Tasmanian experience

The [Launceston Human Library](http://www.launcestonhumanlibrary.com.au/index.php?Books) was created in 2008 as an initiative of the Launceston City Council in partnership with LINC and the community at large to promote diversity and perceived safety issues in Launceston. It has been a successful project that continues to run a monthly program with around 30 living 'books' currently catalogued – see www.launcestonhumanlibrary.com.au/index.php?Books.

In 2013, the Hobart Human Library was formed by a group of organisations including A Fairer World, Hobart Women's Shelter, Amnesty International, the Community Friends and Networks Programme of the University of Tasmania and Anglicare Tasmania. The Hobart Human Library further developed the human library experience to be a guided professional workshop which could be adapted for delivery in schools, workplaces and community groups. To date, the Hobart Human Library has presented over 190 workshops.

² Don't judge a book by its cover: The Living Library Organiser's Guide 2011, Council of Europe, www.coe.int.

³ Sabina Baltruweit, 2006

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Objectives

The main concept behind a human library is that through personal contact we can break down barriers, see the human in the 'other', and realise that a stereotype never does justice to a person. This idea is embodied in the international motto, **"Don't judge a book by its cover"**. The objectives of the Hobart Human Library follow those established internationally, to:

- encourage participants to 'walk in the shoes' of people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, religious, gender identities, sexual orientations and abilities – to that they gain a personal insight to the effects of discrimination;
- get to know human 'books' as individuals, rather than members of a stereotyped group;
- provide a deeper understanding to not only the difference between people but of the similarities we all share; and
- build empathy, respect and enthusiasm for diversity.

Who is the Hobart Human Library?

The Hobart Human Library is made up of human 'books', librarians and A Fairer World Staff.

Human 'books' are trained community educators who share their experiences of discrimination, prejudice and exclusion. Human 'books' can come from any walk of life and any background. They are supported and mentored by A Fairer World during their time as a human 'book'.

Librarians are volunteers who are trained to help support human 'books' during workshops as well as assist with the workshop delivery and set up. Librarians typically have a passion for promoting human rights and inclusion through education.

The Hobart Human Library is auspiced by A Fairer World, a local for-purpose (not for profit) organisation that empowers schools and the wider community to take action for social justice, peace and a sustainable world future. The Hobart Human Library operates through its Global Learning Resource Library and registered charity with Tax Deductible Gift Recipient status.

How it works

The Hobart Human Library delivers two hour workshops to schools, workplaces and community groups either face-to-face or virtually using Zoom. For adults, it can also be delivered in a series of six flexible virtual sessions.

Workshops are run like a speed dating forum with small groups of people 'reading' a 'book'. Everybody is given the opportunity to hear the stories of 4 different human 'books'. Group introduction and debrief sessions facilitate discussions about how empathy, stereotyping and discrimination are related and how these themes are connected to the experiences shared by the human 'books'.

Benefits

'Books' benefit from:

- the opportunity to improve their communication, leadership and advocacy skills;
- financial recognition of their contributions as a community educator;
- opportunities to further develop their skills through training and other A Fairer World programmes;
- validation of their identity and experiences through engaged listening;
- connecting with other 'books' and forming a supportive, understanding network; and
- representing themselves and reclaiming their narrative to educate others and create positive community change.

Readers benefit from:

- the opportunity to connect and build understanding of life from the viewpoints of others who are outside their normal sphere of association;
- feeling represented and seen; and
- generating a stronger connection to the wider Tasmanian community.

The **broader community** benefits from:

- the breaking down of stereotypes that lead to polarisation, discrimination, bullying and violence; and
- greater social inclusion – evidence shows that nothing builds empathy as effectively as personal connection.

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