# The Human Library at the Louise Arbour Secondary School Library Learning Commons

## By Jonelle St. Aubyn

According to Canadian School Libraries, participatory learning does not allow for students to be passive in the learning process; rather that they be actively engaged in the process.  Therefore, hosting a Human Library is an excellent way to engage local communities to participate in building school culture, which is something that we wanted to do at Louise Arbour Secondary School.  This partnership between students and community would allow us the opportunity to provide meaningful and relevant learning opportunities for both groups. A Human Library is not a new concept.  In fact, "Human Library" is an international organization and movement that first started in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2000 (Human Library Organization, 2019). Yet when I discussed the possibility of having one at our school, very few people had heard of it.  Years ago I had read about public libraries hosting Human Libraries as a way of breaking down stereotypes and increasing acceptance and awareness of people from a variety of communities.  People tend to fear and hate what they don't understand; which can lead to bigotry, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc.  I wanted to bring a Human Library to my school to provide my students with an opportunity to meet and interact with people that they might never meet in their everyday lives.  I also wanted to give them an opportunity to ask questions, free of judgement, in the hopes that if they had misconceptions about certain groups of people, that they might learn and grow from this experience.

For those who don't know what a Human Library is, the OLA describes it as *a way for people to reach out and connect with individuals in their community that they might not normally engage with* (OLA, 2019).  It has also been described as a learning platform where personal dialogues are used to challenge stigmas and stereotypes (Human Library, 2019).  Visitors to a library have an opportunity during a planned event to borrow Human Books and to engage in conversation with the books. Human Libraries promote tolerance, celebrate differences and encourage understanding of people who come from varied cultural or lifestyle backgrounds (OLA, 2019). Human Books are described as *volunteers who are willing to share their stories with others in a safe environment* (OLA, 2019). Readers check out Human Books. By doing so, they have the opportunity, during a planned event, to participate in one-on-one or small-group conversations with Human Books to ask questions and to learn about other's life experiences or special interests" (OLA, 2019). This is the framework that I used when planning the Human Library at my school.

The first challenge in planning our Human Library was finding the "books", so starting our search early was critical (Granger, 2017).  Participants in a Human Library are not paid for their time and must freely and willingly come and answer questions.  Given that this event was run during the school day, it was difficult to find people who could do this for free.  Also, I wanted to be sure that the Human Books that were chosen felt comfortable working and speaking with teenagers.  As we know, teens can sometimes be a tough crowd and shy when asking questions, even in a small group.  So after looking at the recommendations on the OLA Human Library website as to the types of people/organizations to invite to a Human Library, I started searching.  Despite numerous phone calls and emails, I often did not get a response.  However, I remained undaunted and tried to look closer to home to find participants.  I asked family and friends, colleagues and associates, and finally started to experience some success. Two friends from high school agreed to come in and talk about living with multiple sclerosis and surviving testicular cancer.  My cousin, who is a midwife, agreed to come. My aunt, a heart transplant recipient, also signed on.  A family friend is a producer at CBC and is a wedding planner and also agreed to participate. Things started to move in the right direction.  Our equity resource teacher came to speak about her experiences as a gay woman, and our Neighbourhood Policing Officers Unit (NPU) officers at our school also agreed to participate.  Local politicians, an artist, a current teacher going through cancer treatment, and a health care worker who works primarily with refugees rounded out our Human Book list. A true Human Library is not a career fair, (Granger, 2017), and we tried to be cognizant of that when inviting people to participate We had twelve books in all and were ready to move ahead.

The next hurdle to overcome was getting the students and teachers to participate.  We decided to invite specific classes in grades 11 and 12 as they would soon be graduating and may not have an opportunity to participate in a Human Library before they left.  We also hoped that they would be mature enough to deal with some of the discussion that would occur with each Human Book.  Our plan was to have no more than six students at a time with each of the Human Books as to not overwhelm the Human Books, and to allow the students to feel more comfortable asking questions in a small group setting. Just like the adults in the building, most of them had never heard of a Human Library so I visited the classes in advance to explain the concept to them and to have them sign up for the "book" that they wanted to check out.  Giving them choice was important to us, as in a regular library patrons choose what they want to read about, they are not forced to learn about things that they don't want to.  Students signed up to spend time with four Human Books during period 3, and three Human Books during period 4. We had to have one less visit during period 4 because of time constraints.  We also asked their

teachers to help them formulate questions prior to the Human Library so that any questions they had for the Human Books would be ready to go.

Once our students were signed up our next concern was logistics. We wanted them to move quickly from book to book because they were only going to have 15 minutes with each book. Therefore, we felt it would be best to create a lanyard with their first name and last initial on it and the schedule of the books that they had signed up to "read". The lanyards would be picked up at the front of the library as they entered and they could go directly to the first person that they were scheduled to meet. We didn't want to give them the lanyards in advance for fear they might be lost before the day of the Human Library. Having the lanyards also provided our Human Books with the student's names so that they could address them directly without having to waste precious time asking each student their name.

Even though we were not paying the participants we thought it would be a good idea to host a luncheon for them prior to starting the Human Library. We wanted to give everyone a chance to meet and get to know each other as it would be difficult to find the time for that during the event. Nine out of twelve participants were able to make it for the luncheon and we were so glad that we did it! Our fabulous hospitality department provided a healthy, delicious and nutritious lunch to all of the participants based on their dietary restrictions/needs. I had collected this information prior to the event by sending out a Google Form requesting it. It was a relaxing, comfortable and social atmosphere that allowed the participants to ask their own questions of each other before the students had their chance. Our school also provided a small gift of a travel coffee mug or a water bottle with the school logo to each of the Human Books and I added a personalized thank you card as well.

On the day of the Human Library we had each of the Human Books spread out throughout our library and their names were posted on a large sign on the table. One of our participants had an emergency at work and could not physically attend the event so we set up Chromebooks and headphones at a table and set up a Google Meet to allow the students to see her and type questions in the chat. It worked wonderfully and also gave our students a chance to see that there are other ways of meeting and engaging even when you can't do so in person. The library team and their teachers helped direct students to be able to find their Human Book quickly and the questions started as soon as the students sat down. We were a little worried that students might not engage or skip the period but almost everyone was in attendance and most were pretty excited about the event. I was pretty busy circulating and taking pictures so I didn't get to listen to many of the Human Books speak. Every 15 minutes, I rang a bell to indicate that it was time to move on to their next "book" and that's how we continued until the end of

the period.  In order to be environmentally friendly the lanyards were collected as students left the Human Library to be reused again in the future.

At the end of the event, we sent out a feedback form to both the students and the Human Books using a Google Form.  This made it easy to collect data about the event and information as to how we could improve should we choose to run another Human Library in the future.  We did not require students to put their names on the feedback forms to ensure the feedback was honest, and the feedback received was extremely positive!  Many students wanted more time with the Human Books that they chose as they wanted to continue to hear their stories and to ask more questions.  The thing that they liked the most was that they learned from the personal experiences of the Human Books that they spoke to (50% of respondents) and they provided suggestions as to who they would like to speak to in a future Human Library, with a soldier and a doctor being the highest people requested.  Many were disappointed that they only got to meet with four books and wanted the event to be more than one period long; 55.9% of respondents got to spend time with all of the "books" they wanted to meet.  More time with the participant was the top suggestion for improvement.  Some direct quotes from the students are as follows:

*"Maybe give a little bit more time for each session so that everyone can ask what they want to."*

*"Give a little bit more time because some speakers didn't get to finish their thoughts or some students didn't get to ask questions."*

*"I know that we only have one period for the human library, it would be nice if we got more than one period to have a longer conversation with the participant because usually we'd get cut off mid-conversation with the person and some people would still have questions, etc."*

*"I feel that it was great, but I hope this is open to more classes and students because I think there is a lot one can learn. However, I do not think this should be voluntary, just because kids would not just go themselves, but if they were required to then they would actually learn a lot."*

*"It was great the only downside I saw was that some of the students just sat there when it came to speaking with the participants which I found was a big waste of both the participant and the student's time. To improve this I feel that it shouldn't be a mandatory event and can also be signed up for by students in different classes because it would be a great opportunity for them as well."*

The feedback from the Human Books was also very positive.  Those who attended the luncheon really loved the opportunity to meet each other prior to the event and enjoyed the food and hospitality.  Although some of the students asked questions, they did feel they had to prompt the students at times to ask questions (87.5% of respondents).

However, 100% of the respondents felt that the questions that were asked by students were very good.  Many of the students just wanted to listen to their stories and life experiences without asking questions.  All of the Human Books highly rated the event and everyone who responded to the survey indicated that they were willing to do it again in the future.  Some direct quotes from the Human Books are as follows:

*"I liked the fact that we had a chance to meet and have lunch with the speakers. Being able to share my experiences with the youth."*

*"I enjoyed the genuine interaction and interest from the students."*

*"I really liked the whole concept of the event."*

*"You did an amazing work, I would though include more social media awareness prior and after the event so other schools and community know about these, which is important."*

*"Perhaps help the kids with questions for those speaking about a life experience because they may not know what to ask."*

In the future, I would spend more time in the library preparing students on their development of questions.  Although the teachers tried to do their best to have students develop questions in class, time was an issue and they were not able to spend as much time as was needed.  Questioning is generally an area of weakness for many students and in order for students to become more proficient at asking questions, modeling by teachers is important (Acar & Kilic, 2011).  During the inquiry process, many students struggle with formulating questions, and, when surrounded by their peers, fear asking questions as they are worried about looking foolish to others.  Having a more structured format for the creation of questions, as well as ensuring every student had a question to ask their "books" would have helped facilitate the learning process.  Next time, I would also have students submit their written list of questions in advance to give the "books" time to prepare an answer, as well as take away the stress that some students feel asking questions in person.

My goal when planning the Human Library was to provide our students with a unique opportunity to learn from and meet people that they would not necessarily interact with, hoping that if they had any preconceived notions of biases that they would gain new understanding and perspective.  In this regard, the event was successful. I also wanted students to participate and be involved in their own learning by giving them multiple Human Books to choose from and giving them the choice of who they wanted to speak

to.  Given the positive feedback from both the students and the participants, I would definitely do this again in the future and it is my hope that more schools will bring the Human Library into their teaching and learning environments.

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