



NEWSLETTER

University Librarians Association of Sri Lanka

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Human library: a dose for mental wellbeing

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Mental well – being has become a prominent concern more than physical concerns in today’s fast-paced world. Due to the significant impact on each other, mental well-being is essential for physical well-being and vice versa. As human library (HL) concept is developed for empathy, understanding, open dialogue, and often challenging stereotypes, discrimination, personal issues, and social barriers, HL is among the global innovative approaches for mental well-being in the evolving library landscape.

Human library concept and its origin

HL concept marks a new chapter in the library context transforming “books from shelves to stories”. Voluntary individuals (human books) share their personal experiences and life stories to the readers in one on one or small groups. According to the HL organization, this concept works as (1) a hands-on learning platform to understand the cultural, religious, social, and ethnic diversity for more inclusive and cohesive communities. (2) a training center aiming at social understanding and cultural awareness; (3) a safe framework for personal conversations; and (4) a special dialogue room for taboos (Human Library Organization, 2024)

The “Stop the Violence” led by Ronnie Abergel was an active anti-racism, anti-violence Danish youth organization established in 1993 in Copenhagen, Denmark (The Early Years - The Human Library Organization, 2024). The initial start group of 5 people increased to 7000 in 1995 and gradually 30,000 within a few years. This activism was eye catching at the Roskilde musical festival in 2000 and well-known as “living library project”. This set the background for the initiation of “human library organization” today (Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). However, due to a copyright issue, the organization could not continue as “living library” and therefore, named their trademark as “human library”(Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). The human library events are active not only in libraries but in museums, festivals, conferences, schools, universities and in the private sector representing more than 85 countries (Human Library Organization, 2024).

Human libraries and mental wellbeing

HL concept contains a profound impact on mental health through storytelling, experiential learning, human interaction, community building, empathy, understanding diversity and especially unjudging people.

Storytelling as a mental healing

Human beings are natural born storytellers. Hence, they seek opportunities to share thoughts. In human libraries, individuals known as human books can reveal their story along with their emotions which drives towards catharsis. *“it’s an opportunity for you to actually just share who you are in the service of understanding”*(Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). When those expressions are empathetically listened by the audience, the story and the feelings of human book are validated. Release of pent-up emotions and sense of acceptance are therapeutic for stress relief, emotional pain. Additionally, some stories such as of prisoners, HIV

patients, or other marginalized groups are not accepted by conventional society. Stoke Heath Prison in United Kingdom as the prison where the first human library conducted aimed to understand different perspectives and reduce reoffending rates. (First Prison to Host a Human Library - The Human Library Organization, 2022). But the human library becomes a safe space where their stories are accepted and understood, and emotions are validated without a personal judgment. Thereby HL works as a therapeutic approach to emotional expressions and release.

Social connectivity and reducing isolation

As humans are social beings by nature, they look for community interaction, networking and gathering. People get isolated not because they love it, but they have no option other than isolation due to social, cultural, and ethnic barriers. Human libraries make a safe space for relationship building as the organizer of Lismore living library Shauna MacIntyre mentions “[human library] is an opportunity ... to share ... who is curious or has questions but wouldn't ever feel able to ask you. Or they don't know you and so therefore can't ask. In the hope that by meeting someone, through a conversation – it's about relationship building across lives of difference.” (Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). Thereby, HL challenges social distances and encourages social connectivity.

The readers perhaps find their own story or similar experiences among the human books which give the sense of belonging. It gives an idea to the reader that he or she is not lonely, or it is not only him or her these issues have been encountered. This common mental issue of loneliness or isolation is often among adults. The public libraries can use HL as an innovative approach to deal with isolated retired groups. Their life experiences will be tacit knowledge which has no access anywhere else. Such an initiative can minimize the conventional thought of society “adults are dependents and an extra weight for the society to maintain them”. Being human books in public libraries, they can silently contribute to the betterment of society.

Empathy and mutual understanding

Walter Fisher shows the effectiveness of the stories to understand others and our own than good arguments through his narrative theory. The ability to look at the world through others' perspectives, respecting others' views and challenging prejudices are unique features of HL. Moreover, HL creates open dialogues, and it supports in reducing misconceptions among people. As the motto of human library organization encapsulates how the concept encourages empathy and understanding through “unjudged someone”.

When the story of the human book is sensitive topic, a taboo, struggles, triumphs, emotions or a veiled area of someone's life, HL motivates its readers to unjudged the person and the story and connect with a deeper and empathetic understanding. The HL organized by University of California, Berkeley has focused on respecting diversity, understanding, and showing empathy among student.

Self-reflection and inspiration

The readers can find their own story among human books. The way that the story is defined, interpreted, and reacted to by someone else can be different. It can change personal perspectives and increase self – awareness. Therefore, HL gives a chance to reflect on their own stories and get deeper insight into themselves. The purpose of HL conducted at McGill University in Canada was exposing to new perspectives through shared stories. On

the other hand, revealing a story can be a way of empowerment, increase of confidence, identifying own strength and resilience. Furthermore, HL can inspire the readers to overcome similar challenges they encounter. Then the reader gets the idea that “it is not only me facing this”. This hope is a recovery or a motivation for them not to give up and hold on.

Conclusion

Embracing the psychological facet of HL drives towards the mental well-being of people through understanding, empathy, emotional release, self-reflection, and community building. Therefore, initiation of HL concept in library setting should not be considered as just another library service but a service with a significant impact on human psychology which is the most struggling, and challenging domain of people now. The impact to foster human well-being appears to be the remarkable benefit of HL initiative.

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APPOINTMENTS AND PROMOTION

Appointment as the President of Sri Lanka Iranology Society



Dr. C.C. Jayasundara, Librarian of the University of Kelaniya appointed as the President of the Sri Lanka Iranology Society at the Cultural Section of the Embassy of Islamic Republic of Iran on May17, 2024. The anniversary of the great Persian poet Omar Khayyam was held that day. A large number of artistic souls who love Persian literature joined the occasion. Mandawala Pangnawansa Thero, Mr. Mahinda de Lanarol, and Professor Balasuriya, who participated as special guests, gave very successful and meaningful interpretations of Persian literature.



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