

Libraries by the people, for the people: living libraries and their potential to enhance social justice¹

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Abstract

This think piece examines the benefits of living libraries and how their implementation carries the potential to enhance concepts pertaining to social justice from both a local and global perspective. A living library, in its most rudimentary form, provides an opportunity for a patron to have a conversation with another human being based on that person's life experience. In this context, the person relating their life experience is considered a *living book*. Living libraries have the ability to become a reference service that provides multiple viewpoints on complex issues. They benefit the user by offering both an intellectual and emotional experience. In practice, the living library can enhance an understanding of various worldviews by disparaging stereotypes and engaging community conversations that give rise to an awareness of human dignity.

Keywords: library, libraries for the people, living libraries, social justice

¹ **Authors' Note:** This paper is a think-piece in the traditional sense of the term, in that it attempts to invoke thought and discourse on the potential of living libraries. To date, very little has been published on living libraries beyond anecdotal and organizational comments. The authors hope to promote awareness about living libraries and to raise more questions than provide answers. Therefore, this think piece intends to be more thought provoking than scholarly. Within the theme for this journal's call for papers, this think-piece addresses several issues pertaining to the relevance of living libraries to social justice. The authors acknowledge the inherent limitations of this paper, as it seeks to be forward thinking to the prospective possibilities that living libraries can provide on this topic. Also, the authors realize that most people who harbor stereotypes or prejudice don't actively seek mechanisms to remove them. Getting into the psychology of this fact is outside the scope of this paper. The authors hope to convey the thought that living libraries are a feasible and promising resource for people to learn more about other cultures and lifestyles and this in turn can help eliminate stereotypes or prejudice.

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“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it”
Atticus Finch in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Introduction: A brief history of living libraries and their link to social justice

The modern concept of the living library has been around since the beginning of the 21st century. In response to senseless youth violence, a group of Danish students founded the organization Stop the Violence (Human Library Organization, 2010). This organization hosted the first living library event in 2000 during the Roskilde Festival in Copenhagen, Denmark. This event featured anti-violence activists, who sought to stimulate dialogue and build relationships among festival participants with the hope that it would hinder violent activities. The success of this event prompted the founding of The Human Library Organization; to date, over thirty-five countries have participated in Human Library events (Human Library Organization, 2010).

Social justice has a multitude of definitions and interpretations. This paper does not rely on any one theory of social justice, but instead explores a few definitions as they may be utilized by living libraries. According to Pateman and Vincent (2010, p. 31), principles of social justice revolve around equal citizenship, social minimums, equal opportunities and fair distribution of resources. With these principles in mind, the living library is a tool of social justice providing equal access to a variety of viewpoints that are frequently underrepresented in a community. As a resource, the living library provides the opportunity for another person to checkout an individual’s life as if it were a *living book*. Books in the living library provide insight into the experiences and struggles of the socially excluded.⁴

The use of human libraries comes at an appropriate time due to the rapid changes in technology and communication channels. The increasing reliance on technologies has changed the way the world communicates and exchanges ideas and has also bolstered a dependency on text-based communication. Although this may be more convenient, the innate communication skills that enable us to understand the subtle subtext of meaning is lost along the way. An aspect of this is that individuals may not learn to respect opposing viewpoints; and as such, intellectual debates become problematic. This is often the case because people are tied subjectively to their ideas -and therefore; any introduction of a new idea which differs from their worldview is seen as an attack on their own being (Sire, 2004).

It is becoming increasingly difficult to evaluate information in a world where the most easily sought resources serve for the perpetuation of established cultural norms that favor the exploitation of cultural stereotypes. For instance, the bombarding of unfavorable Islamic stereotypes in American mainstream media after 9/11 fostered a hatred of Muslims that eventually created a public sentiment to invade Iraq (Trevina et al., 2010). Unfortunately, many of these stereotypes are still rampant in American society and once they are in the public consciousness they are hard to dispel (Beecher and O'Brien, 2011). Living libraries

⁴ Though the focus of this paper is on living libraries and social justice, there are also living library events focused on the transfer of knowledge and skill sets.

have the potential to counteract media mischaracterizations by establishing conversations between Muslims and non-Muslims. This interactive learning experience allows people to make informed decisions based on personal narrative in conjunction with the media's influence. Rather than establishing authority based on media depictions and propaganda, authority can be established based on the merit of an individual's firsthand account. In a world where agnotology is often effectively exploited and veracity lurks in the shadows, a *living book* can balance out duplicitous deceit and blatant biases to promote the awareness needed to generate social change. In other words, sometimes the only way to get at the truth is to talk to someone who has lived it rather than listening to a controlled media agenda. Although it may happen only through a one-on-one conversation, this is how change trickles down through society -one person, one story at a time.

Establishing a Human Library

The primary resource for learning about and conducting living library events is found at the organization's official website, humanlibrary.org.⁵ This site provides a wealth of information about the history, practice and nuances of the living library experience. Included in the site is the resource: *Don't judge a book by its cover!: The Living Library Organizer's Guide*. This document serves as a primer for understanding the details and intricacies involved with setting up a living library event from the conception of the idea, recruiting volunteers and *living books* -all the way up to grassroots marketing and ideas for hosting the event. Another component of the guide is that it provides insight on evaluating the event as well as patron feedback. These comments serve as a good way to anticipate potential problems and gain an understanding of what makes an event successful.

One of the key reasons living library events have flourished is that they are relatively low cost affairs. This is due to the fact that they are volunteer intensive and normally take place in community settings such as libraries and schools (Ashmore, 2010). Additionally, the use of social media tools like *Facebook* and *Twitter* have become one of the primary means to market the events (femwriter, 2011⁶), minimizing costs and marketing endeavors. This is especially vital as recent library budget cuts threaten the ability of libraries to offer community services. Additionally, it should be noted that living libraries have taken place predominately at public libraries, which tend to have a greater social justice mandate, but this does not exclude the potential living libraries have to flourish at academic and school libraries.

In practice

For the purposes of this paper, the authors conducted an interview with Lucy Kinsley, a librarian at the Richmond-Tweed Regional Library in Goonellabah, New South Wales, Australia. She has been managing a Human Library program for over five years in the Lismore branch, which offers an event on the first Friday of each month. This program is

⁵The term "human library" is a branded idiom by the organization and much of the content on their website regarding hosting events is designed to protect the integrity of the term and the principles behind its foundation.

⁶ This contact was established using the Twitter #HumanLibrary. This is an effective way to stay in touch with current events in the Human Library movement.

one of the most successful and enduring living library initiatives in the world.⁷

Who are living books? *Living books* are volunteers from the community who offer up their life experiences as a resource for community learning. Additionally, some *living books* are recruited by library staff, because they know people would be interested in learning their stories. Some of the most popular titles in the Lismore Living Library catalogue include indigenous people, an ACON affiliate (a community that helps people live with HIV), Sudanese refugees, and a Catholic nun. *Living books* write their own catalogue entry, which includes the title to their own life story and short biographic description; currently there are fifty-eight people in the catalogue.⁸

What do they do? Typically, *living books* engage in one-on-one conversation with “readers” to share their story. Additionally, Kinsley pointed out the living library conducts outreach within their community, frequently at schools and nursing homes. Groups determine how the *living books* will be utilized during their sponsored event (e.g. one-on-one, as a group, or full class). Thus, living library events are agile in their undertaking, as they mold to meet the needs of their community.

For what purpose? Without prompting, Kinsley articulated a number of social justice concepts when discussing the value the living library holds for the community. She noted that the ACON affiliate was effective at removing barriers and promoting understanding of same sex relationships in the community. The *living books* present readers with something different - a personal context for which to place societal issues. The instrumental aspect of this is the training that *living books* undergo to ensure the aims of the living library are not compromised by raising money or proselytizing their own views. The living library exists, in the context of social justice, to offer a variety of viewpoints on complex issues. Along these lines, a living library is a reference tool for library users. Kinsley provided an excellent example on this point when she spoke about a young man who was researching the Vietnam War and sought out a living book who was a conscientious objector during the war. This *living book* provided incites, opposing views, and a personal context that could not be found in his textbook, thus making his paper better-rounded for understanding the complexity of the event (Stewart and Richardson, 2011).

Living Books as an Educational Resource

“Lifelong learning, rather than education, has been the heart and spirit of traditional knowledge”, in this regard, the living library is as old as knowledge itself (Battiste, 2010, p.31). Unfortunately, modern institutionalized education does not properly implement this most basic form of transferring wisdom, because it is continuously changing to keep pace with new information and communication technologies (ICTs). For instance, the Internet has prompted us to transfer materials and facilitate discussion in an online environment. Despite this benefit, the opportunity to comprehend the subtlety of tone is lost when relying solely on text. This hinders the ability to communicate complex ideas through a fluid

⁷ The text in italics represents questions asked to Lucy and the following text is a summary of her answers, trying to preserve her word choices.

⁸For a the catalogue of *living books* at Lismore’s Human Library:

http://www.rtrl.nsw.gov.au/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=85&Itemid=232

conversation and construct knowledge and views of reality from experience (Jarvis, 2006).

Regarding social justice, textbook learning rarely invokes emotion in the same intensity as a conversation. The relaying of human experience can have a profound effect on people, one that is much more powerful than the impact felt through passive reading. Sometimes a simple conversation can have more influence than a thousand read books, because it is human nature to feel empathy for others. In isolated communities, it is easy to maintain an ideal perception of the world and disregard social injustices that exist outside the purview of the community. This is because there is no emotional or tangible connection to these injustices. To this end, living libraries can be an instrumental tool for removing benign ignorance by allowing people to establish a human connection to events outside of their worldview.

Social Justice & Globalization

Globalization and increased use of ICTs have allowed us to transfer economic and intellectual capital, goods, people, images, and discourses worldwide. This has facilitated the linking of global economies, cultures, politics and community organizations (Blommaert, 2010). As a result, the world is more open in a sociological and economic sense while connected through relationships based on control of the previously stated capital. Participation in this open society is no longer optional. Although this has provided increased access to unveiling the depths of other cultures and economies, it has also created the need for new types of literacies - digital, social and cultural -just to interact in the evolving global society (Gee, 2002).

The year 2011 was extremely volatile and marked by revolutions and uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, rioting in the United Kingdom, and demonstrations in various financial districts under the heading "Occupy Wall Street." To an extent, these movements were spurred on by an awareness of globalization. As economic Nobel laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz (2011, para. 1) points out:

Globalization and modern technology now enables social movements to transcend borders as rapidly as ideas can. And social protest has found fertile ground everywhere: a sense that the "system" has failed, and the conviction that even in a democracy, the electoral process will not set things right-at least not without strong pressure from the street.

Within this concept of evoking social change, living libraries operate at the street level. Now, more than ever, these movements demonstrate the vital need to understand social, geographic, and political movements on a global scale. As a tool that identifies the dignity of all people, living libraries have the potential to increase understanding of the human experience and to provide a framework to bulwark against the unquestioned presence and exploitive nature of neo-liberalism.

It is easy to socially exclude people if one does not perceive their natural dignity. The concept of dignity is an attribute that marks humanity and leads to an essential understanding of everyone's innate value. One of the fundamental benefits of the living

library is its ability to respect the value of each individual's life experience. It is hard to carry prejudice and hatred when you look someone in the eye and realize that their dignity is the same as your own.

It is important to define the needs that contribute to the dignity of individuals. The global society is composed of many cultures and since the concept of justice is largely socially constructed, it is viewed differently within various cultures. In order to recognize social justice on a global level, ideas of social justice must be compatible with global realities.

The overlapping of cultures, although not a recent phenomenon, is more common than it has been in the past due to the development of mass transportation systems, transnational industries, and ICTs. While individuals identify citizenship through nationality, nations tend to affiliate themselves with larger, less descript entities such as international organizations and corporations. Social exclusion has increased in many areas as the result of increased nationalism, while the nation state has declined with the exploitation of the open market (Capeheart and Milovanovic, 2007). These contrasting events make policies oriented towards correcting global inequalities less likely, since the correction of inequalities would likely infringe on the efficiency and capital gain of the open market -whose impetus is always global capitalism (Nafstad et al., 2009). Therefore, when discussing the idea of social justice it is important to understand how globalism is expressed through society and capital assets, because both play major roles in the justification of inequalities.

In a democratic society, political advancement often manipulates demographics, thereby catering to the majority. While geographic borders are less relevant in a globalized world, individual identities become more important for the purposes of political advancement (Capeheart and Milovanovic, 2007)). A multicultural community is likely to contain many identities distinguished by different religious, ethical, and sexual orientations. Inequalities within multicultural communities are likely to be imposed by pre-existing constructs that are enforced by hegemonic entities within these communities. These entities operate through the manipulation of existing local values. From a community perspective, the questioning of these values is a precarious endeavor, but one that falls under the purview of information professionals.

Duty and Responsibilities of Information Professionals

A fundamental role of information professionals is to ensure that people have access to relevant information. This is in accordance with the driving principles of the profession, as it leads to an informed citizenry capable of stimulating social change (ALA, 2008). In the beginning of an article about social responsibility and the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), Kagan (2005, p.33) asks: "How can we think locally and act globally, and how can we think globally and act locally?" This paradoxical question of "globalization" is an effective launching point to contemplate living libraries and frame much of their potential, as one of the ambitions of the living library movement is to utilize local resources to address global concerns. Kagan also points out that social responsibility in librarianship is a vast topic and is not easily understood, nor does it allow itself to be written about concisely. Therefore, it is difficult to directly address social responsibility due to the myriad of definitions and approaches of understanding what social responsibility is and how it

relates to the mission of libraries.

Both the American Library Association (ALA) and IFLA have a scattering of references relating to social justice interlaced in their statements on core values and within their code of ethics. These statements are intentionally vague and are open to interpretation. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this point. The ALA (2004) refers to social responsibility in their synthesized core values as:

... ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society...support for efforts to help inform and educate the people...and to encourage them to examine the many views on and the facts regarding each problem.

Similarly, IFLA (2011) states:

...people, communities and organizations need universal and equitable access to information, ideas and works of imagination for their social, educational, cultural, democratic and economic well-being.

Obviously, a living library cannot tackle all of the elements inherent to social justice and librarianship, but it can easily be argued that the establishment of a living library initiative could serve as a benefit towards many of the aspirations intrinsic to the ideals of IFLA and ALA. Without delving into definitions of the public good, many of these principles boil down to the fact that one of the primary duties of information professionals is to ensure the availability of adequate and multidimensional resources that can lead to beneficial social change. In terms of the scope of this paper and intended audience, this bodes well for progressive information professionals who seek to expose the subtle and insidious consequences of globalization.

Another broad topic that elicits substantial coverage in the professional literature is the concept of “library as space”. Many of these publications deal with the impact of the digital revolution on the future of libraries. Librarians need to explore and put into action innovative ideas and events that add value and relevancy to libraries—outside of being a mere repository for information and entertainment materials (Warren, 2011). This includes elements of community engagement and initiatives demonstrating how the library can become the epicenter for community and lifelong learning. Implementing living library events are a way that libraries can provide information services that are both unique and have the power to invoke an educational experience that cannot be found in mainstream resources. Due to its already established stature in the community, a library provides an ideal non-threatening environment where strangers are more comfortable in exchanging ideas (Vårheim et al., 2008). Additionally, living library events often require or utilize partnerships with other public service organizations, thus promoting outreach services and creating relationships that strengthen the library’s place in the community. It is these types of relationships and activities that will assist libraries in becoming a focal point for lifelong learning and promote public involvement in the public library (Goulding, 2009).

Conclusion

Living libraries hold tremendous potential to raise awareness for issues regarding social justice. They do this through the benefits they provide to *livings books* and *readers*, as a supplement to modern education, and by providing empathetic awareness of social issues on a global level.

The living library is a service that provides access to people, for people and make seemingly unapproachable people, approachable-so that they can engage in real conversation beyond social protocol and politeness. This eliminates social barriers that would normally prohibit the initiation of a meaningful conversation. These interactions assist in the removal of stereotypes, biases and misperceptions of foreign cultures or the socially excluded. Through the telling of their story, the *living book* may benefit from knowing that they have facilitated a change in the way an individual views them. This contributes to an increased sense of self-worth and dignity by giving the *living book* control over how it is perceived by the general public while simultaneously allowing them to re-evaluate their own perceptions of how they are viewed within society.

Many events occurring around the world are not part of an individual's perceived reality. Although one may read about current events or see them in the news, they are still, somehow, not a part of one's worldview. In Western education, students learn about different worldviews through textual documents, formal lectures, and media depictions. Living libraries provide a means to supplement and enhance these methods through provision of direct access to people with different viewpoints, identities and experiences - assisting in the development of social and cultural literacies. These are the skills that are needed to create lifelong learners able to cope with a constantly changing global society.

It is important to have an understanding of what is outside one's direct realm of influence, because globalization is a reality that cannot be denied. A multicultural society needs the tools to communicate within a myriad of cultures and viewpoints. Although ICTs connect the world seamlessly, these tools have limitations in that they cannot convey the subtleties of tone or non-verbal cues. This leads to misunderstandings, especially when people are communicating outside of their own culture. Without a respect and value for other cultures, these occurrences will become more prevalent. A living library can help people acquire these valuable skills.

Living libraries create a tangible awareness of issues related to social justice based on a mutual understanding and respect for the dignity held by every individual, culture, and history. The concept of social justice can be taught in a textbook, but the realization of social change requires a level of action and understanding that is outside the confines of a static book. The living library provides the personal context needed to understand the empathetic passion and inspiration necessary to invoke and encourage real social change.

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