

HUMAN LIBRARY INITIATION: A CASE STUDY OF USJ

Nayana Darshani Wijayasundara

Library, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

The Human Library, initiated in Copenhagen Denmark in 2000, fosters understanding and reduces prejudice by allowing 'Human Books' to share personal stories with 'readers.' This initiative promotes open dialogue on sensitive topics such as trauma, discrimination, and marginalized identities. Studies reveal that Human Libraries enhance cultural understanding and inspire action, making them powerful educational tools across diverse contexts. Operating like a traditional library, readers select human books categorized by themes. Libraries are particularly well-suited for these events, serving as platforms for knowledge sharing and community engagement while enriching the overall library experience. Grounded in social constructivism, this study views the Human Library as a dynamic space where knowledge, empathy, and new perspectives are collaboratively constructed through dialogue. By facilitating direct conversations, the initiative enables participants to question assumptions and build deeper understanding, illustrating how learning and attitudinal change emerge through social interaction. The narratives of Human Books often address personal challenges, cultivating awareness and empathy. Globally, Human Libraries have been implemented in diverse settings, from prisons to universities, exploring themes from addiction to racism. At the University of Sri Jayewardenepura (USJ), the Human Library was introduced during its 60th anniversary celebrations. Unlike traditional formats, the USJ event featured prominent figures and extended session times to heighten engagement. Feedback from both Human Books and participants was overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing eagerness for future participation and appreciation for the informal engagement with well-known professionals. Despite challenges such as managing preconceived notions and logistical complexities, the programme's success underscores the importance of human connection and lifelong learning. Given that the Human Library concept is relatively new in Sri Lanka, increased awareness and prioritization of such initiatives remain essential.

KEYWORDS: Human Library, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka, Academic Libraries

Corresponding Author: Nayana Darshani Wijayasundara, Email: nayanaw@sjp.ac.lk



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6487-2498>



This is an open-access article licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY) allowing distribution and reproduction in any medium, crediting the original author and source.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human Library programmes are events or initiatives providing a platform for people from diverse backgrounds and experiences to share their stories and perspectives with others. These programmes involve ‘human books’, people who have volunteered to share their personal experiences, expertise, and insights on a particular topic or issue with an audience of ‘readers’. This process is listening to people instead of physically reading material. The ‘Human Library’ concept originated in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2000 to promote dialogue, reduce prejudice and discrimination, and encourage understanding between people from different backgrounds (Human Library Organization, 2022). The Human Library Organization was founded by Ronni Abergel. Since its inception, the Human Library phenomenon has spread worldwide, operating in six continents and in hundreds of cities (Calderon, 2014).

Often, people who have experienced trauma, harrowing experiences and scandal would be involved in Human Library programmes. Human libraries are designed to promote knowledge and understanding about differences that arise among people due to ethnicity, religion, lifestyles, faiths, disabilities, sexuality and other personal characteristics that are often considered to be rare, unique or marginalized by groups in certain societies. During the event, the reader and the book engage in a one-to-one or small group discussion, where the book shares their experiences and insights and the reader can ask questions and learn from them. Human Library programmes are a powerful way to promote empathy, understanding, and connection between people and encourage diversity and inclusion in communities. Libraries organize ‘Human Library’ events to let people discover the unheard stories of people in society.

In an interview conducted by The Hindu, Harshad Dinkar Fad, the founder of the Human Library in Hyderabad, says that the Human Library is designed to build a positive framework for conversations that can challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue (Borah, 2017). “It is a place where real people are on loan to readers. A place where difficult

questions are expected, appreciated and answered” (Borah, 2017). This concept helps people to understand the social issues and personal trauma of others. It also allows people to explore the diverse impacts of discrimination due to various reasons. Further, this concept allows readers to gather the idea that these experiences are universal and shared; it arouses curiosity and awakens the knowledge about the world in the readers. This is a unique experience for both the readers and the storytellers.

The Human Libraries add a new meaning to the famous quote, “You cannot judge a book by its cover”, for there are no covers in the stories narrated at these sessions (Pope, 2013). When we keep the covers away, there are different personalities and different faces that would narrate stories from their life. The Human Library concept creates natural acknowledgement among the people and promotes societal equality. It also creates awareness among people about versatility and the dynamic nature of human existence.

In an age where technology is fast developing, and people are relying more and more on digital devices to initiate conversations, the concept of the Human Library can play a significant role. People initiate and continue their conversations more through digital devices, and thus, human relationships have stagnated, which has deteriorated social skills and connections of most people. The Human Library would add new essences and give more meaning to human connections in a fast-developing world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Process of Human Library

Human libraries usually operate similarly to those standard libraries. Just as in a library, the Human Library has a list of available ‘Human Books’; each reader is entitled to carry a Human Library card issued by one of the librarians. Human Books are categorized according to a list, and people can choose according to their preferences with the help and assistance of a library staff member. While this process goes on, the ‘Books’ await in a separate area allocated for them, and this place is often called the human bookshelf (Human Library Organization, 2022). Then, the

readers and the 'Human Book' move to a different reading room. Finally, the conversation begins for about half an hour. During the conversation, details will be shared by the 'Human Books' with the readers, followed by questions and answers as well.

There are many titles and themes under which these 'Human Books' or participants can narrate their stories. Some of these titles would be related to personal physical aspects such as blindness, chronic illnesses, or emotional aspects. The reading process takes place with people asking questions from 'Human Books' and answering those by them.

Places for Human Libraries

Human Libraries are often organized by libraries. Libraries bridge knowledge and people through various resources and services. It is also a platform to reach out to people. Therefore, libraries are the best places to organize Human Libraries. Many new concepts and arrangements are introduced to modern-day libraries. Present libraries can be considered treasures that allow users to borrow books and other items, such as toys, bicycles, tools, seeds, and telescopes (Johnson, 2018). USJ library started a service in 2014 to lend laptops to students. Allowing the borrowing of a 'Human Book' to 'read' definitely would be a novel and unique experience for library users. They can choose from various titles and 'borrow' 'Human Books' for some time.

The Human Library, which has positively impacted on readers in public libraries, was piloted at Stoke Heath prison in the UK to encourage incarcerated readers to ask difficult questions and discuss challenging topics (Human Library Organization, 2022). The hope was to find more similarities between people rather than allowing walls to divide them. Michael Lewis, Head of Shropshire Libraries in the UK stated that readers at Stoke Heath were able to challenge their perceptions and ask personal questions about how the Human Library books deal with prejudice and stigma (Human Library Organization, 2022). The pilot has been a success and has opened up new possibilities of using the Human Library concept in a prison setting as well. Another reported place was a bookstore where 'Human Library' was organized. It was held in 2017 at the Title Wave Book Store, Mumbai, India (Human

Library in India: 2020). During an exhibition in the UK, a Human Library session has been conducted with CEOs of companies (Issuu, 2023).

Human books

Usually, 'Human Books' are volunteers and people confident about sharing their stories with an audience. They usually answer the questions directed at them; and can dismiss any inappropriate questions forwarded to them. The 'Human Book' can also ask questions from his readers, and the continuation of the reading is assured through a thorough mode of communication and interaction on both sides. As communication moves on, it becomes a process of story-telling or narration that brings out one significant story or a series of authentic, connected stories. Usually, stories are fictional and narrated through different schematic structures, but in the Human Library concept, the stories are non-fiction and realistic. It is similar to listening to a memoir of a person.

The Human Library also allows people who have gone through harsh life-altering experiences a safe place to communicate and share their stories. For example, if someone with dyslexia communicates his story with listeners at a Human Library session, it would create awareness and empathy in the listeners once they have listened to the story. Likewise, certain business people who started their businesses as small-scale entrepreneurs can share their life stories of how they flourished, setting examples for the young generation.

Dreher and Mowbray (2012), who conducted qualitative interviews with 15 Books and event organizers in Australia, state that Human Library events create a non-judgmental atmosphere through open conversations. Pope (2013) found that a Human Library event on her college campus improved students' connections with diverse community members (The Human Library, 2013). Brown (2016) shared an anecdotal report of hosting a Human Library event where Books felt valued and believed they contributed to promoting tolerance and diversity.

What do participants say?

Bagci and Blazhenkova (2020) reported on a sequence of Human Libraries at Sabanci University, Turkey, between 2016 and 2019. The study found that

attending the Human Library resulted in a more positive outlook towards out-groups in general. However, the study also revealed that engaging in contact with the target groups by 'Reading a Book' had a more significant impact on improving attitudes towards the groups than just participating in the event or not attending the Human Library. Dreher and Mowbray (2012) also noted that all participants are considered equal, promoting interdependence that enhances knowledge production in Human Library sessions.

The De La Salle University Libraries organised the first Human Library in the Philippines in August 2014 (May et al., 2020). The initial target audience was undergraduate and graduate students at the University. They state that Human libraries are viewed as sessions that broaden the thinking power and intellectuality of people in society. However, it was reported that 'Human Libraries' have brought controversies in certain instances. For example, hosting a Human Library event in St. Petersburg, USA, in 2016 reported that "four of the books scheduled to appear – the sex worker, the person without a child, the ex-prisoner and the homosexual – should be asked not to be present" (Johnson 2018).

Clover (2014) conducted a case study based on a Human Library held at an art gallery in British Columbia, Canada, in 2013. According to them, the Human Library provides a platform for people to broaden their cultural and social understanding, challenge narrow-minded views of individuals who are different from themselves, and generate ideas for taking action, as seen in the case of the graffiti artist and the woman from the "cleansing group". This ability to stimulate action is seen as an essential component of genuine dialogue. Blizzard et al. (2018) observed that introducing a Human Library component in the women's studies curriculum at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, Canada resulted in opportunities for intergenerational and intercultural conversations between students and community members.

Among the responses received from the participants of the Human Library of Shropshire Libraries in the UK, it was mentioned that attending a Human Library can

be an excellent opportunity to learn, grow, and connect with like-minded individuals (Human Library Organization, 2022). During Human Library sessions at Shropshire Libraries, it is stated that the participants had the chance to interact with several books that proved to be a great source of inspiration for all attendees. The participants found the books to be insightful, and they learned a lot from them. Further, they state that the Human Library was an excellent platform to connect with the books and the people who found them equally inspiring. Also, the sessions provided a platform for attendees to share their opinions and views, which the participants found touching and emotional. The respondents felt amazed at the depth and diversity of the opinions expressed by others. The sessions were given an opportunity to learn from people from different walks of life, and the participants felt privileged to have been a part of such an insightful discussion (Human Library Organization, 2022). One particular discussion topic that affected the participants most was bereavement. The participants found the discussion to be deeply personal, and it brought up past experiences that were both difficult and painful. However, the participants also felt that it was healthy to have such discussions, as they allowed emotional catharsis and helped in the healing process. Despite the emotional nature of the discussion, the participants felt happy to have participated in such a valuable experience. In conclusion, attending Human Libraries can be an excellent opportunity to learn and grow.

Human Library Programmes Worldwide

A Human Library event organized by the University of Nevada, Reno, USA, was held in 2021 with 13 'Books' available on addiction, single mothers, racism and social anxiety (University of Nevada, 2021). A Human Library was held in Wroclaw, Poland, with 'Books' available on topics such as Muslims, dark-skinned people, transgender people, and decreasing homonegativity (Groyecka et al., 2019). Algonquin Area Public Library in Illinois, USA, has invited refugees, veterans, those enduring a physical or mental illness, women in male-dominant fields, recovering addicts, disabled individuals, domestic abuse survivors, people from varying religions, amputees, previously unhoused, and many more to be 'Human

Books' in their Human Library (Algonquin Area Public Library, 2023). In 2018, Human Library Organization held events in Kenya, Panama and Botswana (Human Library Organization, 2022). Following that, in 2021, the Psychiatric Disability Organization in Nakuru, Eastern Kenya, used the Human Library platform to promote mental awareness in their community (CGTN Africa 2021).

Human Libraries have been held multiple times in India, with events organized in cities such as Bangalore, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, Gurgaon and Kolkata (Filming Indo, 2020). Jana and Rout (2021) attempted to propose a practical approach that will provide all the necessary information to the library users, library professionals and researchers on Human Libraries in India. Jackson et al. (2015) have studied about human books and their readers using 15 books and 38 readers from events hosted at six public and academic libraries in Central New York. Bring Your Own Story (BYOS) programme at the Harriet F. Ginsburg Health Sciences Library at the University of Central Florida College of Medicine has developed later to a BYOS/The Human Library project event (Gillum and Williams, 2022). These are just a few examples of past Human Library events. In addition, Human Library programmes have been held in many countries and have covered a wide range of topics and themes.

Human Library Programmes in Sri Lanka

The University of Colombo Library and the Faculty of Arts, in collaboration with GIZ (The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) organized a Human Library project on 6 May 2016 for the newcomers at the Main Library. Many experts from different fields shared their knowledge and experience with students at that event (Human Library-talk to an expert, 2016). According to the University of Colombo Library website, they have conducted 50 such Human Library programmes up to March 2023, providing a platform for participants to engage with individuals with unique experiences and perspectives. On 6 November 2016, Sri Lanka Library Association, in collaboration with GIZ, held a Human Library session. They invited not only readers but volunteering 'Books' as well. Theme was "Sports and

exercise for health". A consultant physician in Ayurvedic Medicine, a physiotherapist, an injury manager and a tape applicator were among many human 'Books' (Sri Lanka Library Association, 2016).

Also in 2016, Athurugiriya Public Library conducted a Human Library programme in collaboration with GIZ, selecting human 'Books' emphasizing to discuss how to prevent non-communicable diseases like cancer, diabetes, and strokes (Sepalika Jayasinghe, personal communication, 14 March 2023). Again in 2020, the same Public Library organized a Human Library programme in collaboration with United Lions Club, Kaduwela bringing out medical practitioners as human 'Books' covering how to prevent COVID-19, then a much more timely topic. Another Human Library programme was conducted by the Nugegoda Public Library on 15 December 2022 inviting artists, counsellors and medical doctors as 'Books'. They have discussed topics like reading a life, psychological counselling, how children can be prevented from accidents', 'indigenous food habits which lead to healthy living', 'non-communicable diseases and 'gynaecology problems' (Sepalika Jayasinghe, personal communication, 14 March 2023).

Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka provided five Human Library sessions as of 23 January 2023. Starting with their Vice Chancellor as a 'Human Book' on 28 January 2022, they have invited many professionals one at a time as 'Human Books' for their sessions (Human Library Project| Main Library, 2023).

The University of Sri Jayewardenepura Library organized a Human Library programme in 2019, where individuals from various walks of life acted as 'Human Books' to engage in conversations with participants. These selected individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences acted as 'Books' to promote multi-professional and intercultural understanding. This study is informed by the principles of social constructivism, which emphasize that understanding emerges through social interaction and dialogue. By applying this lens, the study positions the Human Library not merely as an event

but as a dynamic learning environment where knowledge and empathy are co-created.

Existing research highlights the Human Library's capacity to break down stereotypes and foster cultural understanding through personal storytelling. Such outcomes align with social constructivist perspectives, which underscore the role of social exchanges in shaping knowledge and attitudes. While the concept of the Human Library has been explored and implemented in various global contexts to promote dialogue and reduce prejudice, there is limited scholarly investigation into how this concept has been specifically adapted, operationalized, and perceived within Sri Lankan university settings.

In particular, there is a notable lack of empirical studies examining the implementation strategies, participant experiences, cultural adaptations, and long-term impacts of the Human Library in terms of Sri Lankan context. This gap highlights the need for a focused study to understand how the Human Library model is contextualized within the unique social, cultural, and educational environment of the university, and how it contributes to fostering empathy, inclusivity, and critical dialogue among its diverse academic community. Therefore, the research question in this study is: How has the concept of the Human Library been adapted and implemented at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura?

Objectives of USJ Human Library

The University of Sri Jayewardenepura was started in 1873 as 'Vidyodaya' Pirivena, where Buddhist monks studied, and it was bestowed with university status in 1959. Vidyodaya University was renamed as University of Sri Jayewardenepura (USJ) in 1978. USJ community celebrated the Sixtieth Anniversary of the university in 2019.

Among the various programmes to mark the 60th anniversary of the university, the USJ Library decided to organize a 'Human Library' event, a novel concept for the USJ. Though many events were organized by different university entities, such as invited speeches, guest speeches, and musical and art programmes, the 'USJ Human Library' brought out an exciting novel experience to all those who participated in the event. The main agenda of the 60th anniversary celebrations

of the university also gave prominence to the Human Library event.

We at the USJ library, deviated from the original concept of the Human Library to suit the needs of our users and to make the event unique to our library. The goal of popularizing the Human Library concept among our users is important, as it can help increase awareness and understanding of the Human Library movement and its values. We have also been hesitant to accept 'Human Books' according to the original concept due to social and cultural values, and we considered this when planning the event.

Recently, we have observed other Human Library projects which provide 'Books' deviating from the original concept of having books from socially marginalized groups. For example, in Sri Lanka, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka has conducted Human Library programmes with famous folklorists, award-winning writers, and a master potter (Human Library Project| Main Library, 2023). Another case was found in the literature where the Human Library was used to reframe library work with international students choosing 'Books' from different countries instead of different social conditions (Bordonaro, 2020). In the UK, Flexpo exhibition organized a Human Library with CEOs, Directors and Managers of companies as 'Books' (Issuu, 2023). Organizing the first-ever Human Library programme at our university was a significant achievement, and it showed our commitment to promoting diversity, inclusion, and empathy among our library users. Guided by social constructivism, this study views the Human Library as a space where meaning is actively constructed through dialogue between Human Books and readers. These interactions provide opportunities for participants to question assumptions, reflect critically, and collaboratively build new understandings of sensitive issues.

3. METHODOLOGY

Recognizing that knowledge in a social constructivist framework arises through interaction and shared experience, this study employed qualitative methods designed to capture the nuanced perspectives and

reflections of participants in the Human Library at USJ.

The sample for this study comprised a total of 42 participants, purposefully selected to capture diverse perspectives on the Human Library initiative at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. From the pool of 11 individuals who served as Human Books across all sessions, 6 were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews, ensuring representation of varied narratives and backgrounds. Additionally, 33 readers who participated across the 11 Human Library sessions were engaged through focus group discussions, facilitating the exploration of collective experiences and perceptions. To gain insights into the planning, implementation, and operational aspects of the programme, interviews were also conducted with 3 library professionals directly involved in organizing and facilitating the Human Library events. This combination of interviews and focus group discussions provided a comprehensive qualitative dataset, enabling a nuanced understanding of the initiative's impact from multiple stakeholder viewpoints.

Selection process of human 'Books'

Deviation from the original concept of 'Human Library' was done in two ways at the USJ. One was the decision to invite prominent figures in the society as 'Human Books' instead of socially marginalized people. Moreover, we were dubious about accepting 'Human Books' according to the original concept of Human Library by our users due to various social and cultural values. The other deviation was the time allocation for each 'book reading' session. According to the literature, the time given to 'read' each 'Human Book' usually is 20 – 30 minutes, whereas we made it to 120 minutes. Changing the original concept of the Human Library and making the event unique to our library was given priority in the initial discussions. These changes were adopted to popularize the Human Library concept among our users. As a trial run, we determined to organize the first ever Human Library programme at our university with the mentioned deviations.

We collected the names of a pool of 'Human books' suggested by the library staff. The list included names

of famous film, stage and teledrama actors, actresses, singers and directors. We further expanded the name list with known Buddhist priests, cricketers, sportsmen, environmentalists, authors, artists, medical practitioners, educationalists, journalists, dancers, and other professionals. After selecting 20 such 'Human Books', it was directed to the organizing committee of the 60th anniversary celebrations for reviewing. The pros and cons of bringing each person as a 'Human Book' were discussed lengthily. There were very good suggestions additionally such as inviting the Chief of *Adi Vasi*, Uruwarige Vanilla Aththo to the USJ Human Library. With him, another ten names for 'Human books' were selected and finalized for the programme. Another few names were on the reserve list in case of non-availability of selected personnel on the scheduled date.

After consultation with each 'Human Book', the list of participants was finalized as follows.

- (1) An erudite Buddhist monk and one of the early students of USJ (Maha Nayake Thero)
- (2) Present Chief of *Adi Vasi*
- (3) A former Vice Chancellor of USJ and a Professor in Paediatrics
- (4) A Professor in Forensic Medicine
- (5) A veteran film and drama actress
- (6) A stage drama actor
- (7) An opera singer
- (8) An environmentalist
- (9) A folklorist
- (10) An environmentalist and an organic agriculturalist
- (11) A media person, composer

Procedure

Around a week before the event, we reached out to all of the Human Books who had been agreed upon for the event through email or phone and provided them with details on how the Human Library process would work as many of them were new to Human Library programmes.

The USJ Human Library project recruited participants from various campus faculties through different advertising methods such as posters, websites, and social media. We opened registration process via printed forms, telephone and Google forms. Some of the participants even showed up on the day of the event without prior registration. We allowed them as there were no specific eligibility requirements, and anyone interested was welcome to participate.

In the Human Book selection and scheduling process, a team from the library was assigned to choose various members and reserve specific time slots for them to be contacted. Before starting each contact session, participants were guided by Librarians known as "volunteer moderators" to the designated contact areas. Each contact session with a Human Book lasted for around 2 hours, and participants were free to return to the scheduling area and continue to contact other individual human books as they desired until the event concluded. We had 1 hour for Maha Nayake Thero, 2 hour parallel time slots for four other 'Books', then again a 2 hour session for the *Adi Vasi* Chief and continued the next 2 hour parallel sessions with another four 'Human Books'. Consistent with a social constructivist approach, data were gathered through participant feedback and observational insights, allowing the study to explore how individuals constructed meaning through their engagements with Human Books. This approach supports an in-depth understanding of how dialogue within the Human Library setting contributes to challenging preconceived notions and fostering empathy.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Range of topics covered

According to the feedback received from the respondents, all the sessions were informative and interactive at the USJ Human Library. As participants, 'Human Book' readers, raised many questions enthusiastically, and the relevant 'Human Books' answered them, sometimes giving their personal experiences. The role of moderators was to introduce the 'Human Book' to the audience and kick-start the session. In addition, these so-called 'moderators' were instructed to intervene if the participants raised unethical or uneasy questions about the 'human

books'. Fortunately, such situations were not reported throughout the USJ Human Library programme.

Starting the session with the Maha Nayake Thero was open to all, and no parallel sessions were conducted. After opening the session with religious activities, the USJ Human Library session started discussing the history of the USJ as the Venerable Thera' was one of the oldest students of the university. The participants in this session were enhanced by the Vice Chancellor, Deans, Registrar and many senior academics.

The Human Library session with the *Adi Vasi* Chief, Uruwarige Vannila Aththo, was interesting to all the participants as observed. All interested readers were allowed to participate in the session. Vannila Aththo participated the session using his language, *Vadi Basha*, and his interpreter translated it into Sinhala and vice versa. Among the participants, some lecturers were proficient in *Vadi Basha*, which supported making the conversation alive. The Chief explained how 'Uruwarige' was added to his name. Once his great grandmother was in labour in the jungle, she found a mud pit made by pigs and used that place to deliver a child. From that day onwards the name 'Uruwarige' was added to their generation. 'Uru' is the Sinhala term for pigs. 'Warige' is the race.

In response to a question made by a respondent on how the Vaddah community bring up children, he mentioned that they never make special food for their children. Instead they use the same food that they consume in mild form to feed their children. He specially mentioned the way of keeping the dead bodies of people, and positioning both hands together on the abdomen area shows how much people are concerned about their food. On the contrary, he stated that *Buddhila Aththo's* (Lord Buddha's) statues were never positioned in that way after the *Parinirvana* because *Buddhila Aththo* always practised *Madyama Pratipada* (middle path). Further he elaborated that '*Kiri Koraha*', a special dance unique for them, is performed to respect their forefathers.

Replying to a question about his dress code, he stated that it is the same way he wears wherever he goes. He continued by saying he had visited many countries, including frigid European ones. However, he has used

his sarong and the shawl on one shoulder as clothes and the axe they refer as '*keteriya*' on the other shoulder. He confirmed that he never felt cold and could walk barefoot on all the streets of the main cities of those countries. These two sessions with the Maha Nayake Thero and with the *Adi Vasi* Chief were carried out as single sessions, without having any parallel sessions allowing all participants to take part in the USJ Human Library.

The consultant Paediatrician, participating as a 'Human Book', stressed the importance of immunization of children. There were queries on misconceptions about immunization, and he addressed all those queries by providing clarifications. The professor in Forensic Medicine gave the message that nobody can hide anything as long as Forensic Medicine is involved. The environmentalist popularizing organic farming discussed how our indigenous agricultural practices are essential in the present context. He introduced a few books he authored and many participants were interested in reading those books after listening to his views. The other environmentalist and nature lover pointed out the lessons that we can learn from nature.

Sessions with artists gave readers unforgettable memories. They exposed some personal experiences which we have never heard of. While the opera singer was sharing the secrets of opera singing, the stage drama actor explained how people could use their vocal varieties in stage drama performances. The film and stage drama actress shared the commitment people need in acting in films and stage dramas. The folklorist enthusiastically explained how far we can take our folk song culture to the world. Finally, the media expert mentioned the many roles he plays and talked about a journey of a journalist while he does other roles as a compere and an artist.

Outcome of the programme

The impact of Human Library programs depends on various factors such as the goals of the program, the demographics of the participants, and the resources available. However, by promoting empathy, dialogue, diversity, and personal growth, Human Library programs can create positive change in individuals and communities. The impact of USJ Human Library was

twofold: on the participants and the 'Human Books'. Our program helped build empathy and understanding by allowing participants to engage in one-on-one and one-on-many conversations with experts from diverse backgrounds. Through the USJ Human Library program, participants could gain a deeper appreciation for different perspectives and experiences, which could help break down stereotypes and prejudices. This fact was emphasized by their responses. Encouraging dialogue and communication provided a safe and supportive space for readers. Participants could ask questions, share their experiences, and learn from each other in a non-judgmental setting. As mentioned by the participants, sharing the experiences of 'Books' helped increase the enthusiasm of them towards certain professions.

USJ Human Library programme showcased the importance of diversity and inclusion by featuring 'books' with various professions, backgrounds and experiences. Participants further stated that they could learn about different cultures, religions, identities, and more, which promotes inclusivity and understanding within a community.

USJ Human Library programme provided opportunities for personal growth and development as respondents stated. In addition, participants could challenge their biases and assumptions, develop new skills such as active listening and critical thinking, and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their world. Further, it was noted through the responses that our Human Library programme helped to spread awareness and education about important social issues. By featuring 'Books' with life experiences related to social justice, diversity, and inclusion, the programme helped raising awareness and encouraged action around these topics.

Challenges and opportunities encountered

USJ Human Library programme allowed participants to engage in meaningful conversations with people from various professions. This engagement helped to expand their knowledge horizon, fostering empathy, and understanding.

Another opportunity through our Human Library was that it helped promote inclusivity and diversity within the university community. The programme showcased

the importance of diverse voices and perspectives by featuring 'Human Books' with different experiences. Further, the programme created a sense of community and connection within the university. Participants could bond over shared experiences and learn from each other in a supportive and welcoming environment. Organizing and participating in the USJ Human Library programme helped develop the communication and leadership skills of the library staff and library patrons. Participants could learn to listen actively, ask thoughtful questions, and facilitate meaningful conversations. The programme could inspire curiosity and a desire to learn more about the world by exposing participants to new ideas and perspectives. Hence, we could encourage lifelong learning and personal growth of our library users through these programmes. Libraries are the places that always promote information literacy which helps make the users life-long learners.

Apart from having too many 'Human Books' simultaneously, there were some challenges in organizing the USJ Human Library. Participants might have preconceived notions and biases towards certain 'Books' based on their gender, or other characteristics. Thus, we created a safe and welcoming space for all participants to facilitate open and honest conversations. Similarly, we ensured the safety and privacy of both 'Human Books' and participants. This included having clear guidelines on respectful behavior and ensuring that personal information was not shared without consent. Organizing Human Library programs can also be logistically challenging, from recruiting and training 'Human Books' to managing the event schedule and coordinating volunteers. Therefore, it is important to have a well-planned and organized event to ensure a smooth and successful program. Selecting according to the opinions of the authorities and finding suitable 'Human Books' willing to share their experiences and stories were challenging for us. Arranging many Human Books at the same time slots deprived the users of selecting many desired Human Books at this program. For example, if any user likes to read two 'Human Books' who fell during the same time slot would not be able to 'read' both of them. Instead, the

user had to select the best choice for him and forget about the other 'Human Book'.

Since this is a novel concept for USJ library patrons, they were enthusiastic to participate in the program, according to the feedback given. Always libraries need to find ways to attract their users to the library by practising different activities among their routine services. Human Library programs are one such. Moreover, the most significant point to note at the USJ Human Library was the generosity and the enthusiasm of everyone who participated as 'Human Books'. All of them were there on time to participate in the program, and most said it was a novel experience for them. Their willingness to participate as Human Books and their generosity were key factors of the success of the USJ program.

We understood that providing 11 'Human Books' in one day was overloading to our users. If we could run the programme by distributing them for more days, the chances of participating in different sessions with the patrons would have been higher. However, the first session with *Maha Nayaka Thero* and the second with the *Adi Vasi* Chief were individual sessions where all participants could take part in those sessions.

Since the number of staff in our Library is around 70, we could manage the sessions in parallel. Otherwise it would have been a tedious task. A Human Library programme with 'such nature' should provide a maximum of one to three 'Human Books' in one day. 'Such nature' includes the deviation from the original concept and having well-known professionals as 'Human Books'. Finally, measuring the impact and effectiveness of the Human Library programme was difficult. We collected feedback from participants and 'Human Books' to evaluate the success of the event and to identify areas for improvement.

Recommendations and best practices

When organizing a Human Library, it is vital to identify the target audience for the Human Library programme to determine the themes and topics that will be relevant and engaging for them. We at USJ Library followed this idea by consulting the organizing committee of the 60th Anniversary Celebrations of the university. That particular committee comprised of academics representing all

the faculties and some administrative officers. Their views were vital in selecting human books for the USJ Human Library programme.

Some Human Library programmes make participants to agree with the Human Library rules and receive validation when they arrive at the event site. At USJ Human Library programme, we did not provide any rules to the 'readers'. However, it is recommended to provide Human Library rules to participants to prevent unpleasant situations from being reported, like at the Human Library event in St. Petersburg, USA in 2016 (Johnson 2018).

It is recommended to provide prior training for 'Books' to help them understand their role and responsibilities and to prepare them to handle difficult questions and conversations. We contacted each selected Human Book prior to the programme through telephone or email to explain the aim of the programme and how the programme would be conducted. Also it is needed to ensure that the event venue is a safe and welcoming space for both Human Books and participants and that appropriate measures are taken to ensure the privacy and comfort of all participants. Therefore, we used attractive and enclosed areas as much as possible for all the sessions. The first session with *Maha Nayaka Thero* and the second with the Chief of *Adi Vasi* were conducted in the lobby area of the library, which was welcoming and spacious. Thus, it allowed many readers to participate in the sessions.

It is important to reach out to different departments and student organizations to ensure a diverse audience. We posted the event on Facebook and other social media to popularize it. Attractive posters and flyers were displayed and distributed among the university community and outside as well. Using various channels to promote the event, such as social media, posters, flyers, and emails, is vital. We took measures to facilitate the conversations by assigning library staff as moderators to each 'Human Book'. It ensured that conversations were respectful, productive, and within the agreed time limit.

We collected feedback from both categories, Human Books and participants, and their responses were overwhelming. Most of the 'Human Books'

participated mentioned that it was a novel experience for them, and they showed enthusiasm to be a 'Human Book' in the future. Participants were delighted to meet well-known professionals and have useful discussions with them, more importantly, in an informal way. The only concern they raised was not having the opportunity of meeting all 11 'Human Books'. The participants stated that they need our library to organize more and more 'Human Library' sessions in the future. Since the feedback was collected through ad-hoc interviews, it is better to have pre-prepared forms next time to collect suggestions and comments. Evaluating or measuring the impact and effectiveness of a Human Library programme can be difficult. Therefore, it is important to collect feedback from participants and 'Human Books'.

Compared to the other library events, the 'Human Library' is a new idea in Sri Lanka and has yet to be discussed often among the reading community. However, this concept needs to be given more priority to bring out its significance, and the public must be informed of it as this concept could generate more experiences through exciting, educational and realistic narratives of diverse groups of people. Therefore, these library events are essential significantly when technology is diminishing and overruling human inter-relationship. Future research on human libraries could usefully explore the effectiveness of virtual human library models, especially in fostering empathy and reducing prejudice in digital environments. Investigating how human library concepts can be culturally adapted across diverse populations would also provide valuable insights, ensuring that such initiatives are sensitive to local norms and contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the sustained impact of human library experiences on participants' attitudes and behaviours, helping to establish the long-term value of this approach in promoting social inclusion. By identifying these avenues for further exploration, this study underscores the potential of the human library model not only within the current context but also across evolving platforms and diverse communities. Continued inquiry in these areas will strengthen the understanding and

application of human libraries as meaningful tools for dialogue, empathy, and social cohesion.

5. REFERENCES

Algonquin Area Public Library (2023) *The Human Library: Breaking Down Barriers Through Dialogue*. Available at: <https://www.aapl.org/archives/75830-the-human-library-breaking-down-barriers-through-dialogue/> (Accessed: 8 December 2023).

Bagci, S.C. and Blazhenkova, O. (2020) 'Unjudge someone: Human Library as a tool to reduce prejudice toward stigmatized group members', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 42(6), pp. 413–431. doi: 10.1080/01973533.2020.1792298.

Blizzard, K., Becker, Y. and Goebel, N. (2018) 'Bringing Women's Studies to life: Integrating a human library into Augustana's Women's Studies curriculum', *College Quarterly*, 21(3). Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1203529.pdf>.

Borah, P.M. (2017) *Read the humans: Human Library*. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/read-the-humans-human-library/article18303622.ece> (Accessed: 5 May 2023).

Bordonaro, K. (2020) 'The Human Library: Reframing library work with international students', *Journal of Library Administration*, 60(1), pp. 97–108. doi: 10.1080/01930826.2019.1685271.

Brown, D. (2016) 'School libraries as power-houses of empathy: People for loan in The Human Library', IASL Annual Conference Proceedings, Tokyo, Japan. doi: 10.29173/iasl7197 (Accessed: 31 December 2023).

Calderon, A. (2014) 'The Human Library's many books', *Poets & Writers*, 42(3), pp. 12–14. Available at: <https://0-search-proquest-com.library.svsu.edu/magazines/human-libraris-many-books/docview/1519059047/se-2?accountid=960>.

Clover, D. (2014) 'In case of emergency, break convention: A case study of a Human Library project in an art gallery', *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 26(3), pp. 75–90. Available at:

https://cjsae.library.dal.ca/index.php/cjsae/article/view/2839/pdf_24.

CGTN Africa (2021) 'The human library project' [Video]. *CGTN Africa*, 27 September. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com> (Accessed: 1 March 2023).

Dreher, T. and Mowbray, J. (2012) *The Power of One on One: Human Libraries and the Challenges of Antiracism Work*. New South Wales: UTS Publishing.

Filming Indo (2020) 'Human Library in India: Setting a new trend of storytelling', *Filming Indo Blog*, 18 July. Available at: <https://filmingindo.com> (Accessed: 2 January 2024).

Gillum, S. and Williams, N. (2022) 'Bring Your Own Story: The evolution of a library program to celebrate diverse voices', *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 41(2), pp. 138–147. doi: 10.1080/02763869.2022.205417.

Groyecka, A., Witkowska, M., Wróbel, M., Klamut, O. and Skrodzka, M. (2019) 'Challenge your stereotypes! Human Library and its impact on prejudice in Poland', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 29(4), pp. 311–322. doi: 10.1002/casp.2402.

Human Library Organization (2022) *How to run a Human Library event*. Available at: <https://humanlibrary.org/how-to-run-a-human-library-event/> (Accessed: 10 November 2023).

Issuu (2023) *Other features of Flexpo Human Library – Issue*. Available at: https://issuu.com/enviroarorb2b/docs/digital_showgui_de_-_flexpo_4_/s/18495980 (Accessed: 12 January 2025).

Jackson, C., Huang, Y. and Kasowitz-Scheer, A.S. (2015) 'Face-to-face matters: Inspirations from the human library', *International Journal of Mobile Human Computer Interaction*, 7(3), pp. 42–54. doi: 10.4018/ijmhci.2015070103.

Jana, A. and Rout, R. (2021) 'Designing metadata schema for a human library: a prototype', *Digital Library Perspectives*, 38(3), pp. 346–361. doi: 10.1108/DLP-07-2021-0052.

Johnson, A. (2018) *The Human Library: Where the “books” tell their own stories*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/human-library-volunteers-equality-challenge-prejudice-the-book-list-a8450506.html> (Accessed: 13 August 2023).

May, C., Olivar, J.F., Bundalian, J.B. and Ramos-Eclevia, M. (2020) ‘Conversations with human books: Promoting respectful dialogue, diversity, and empathy among grade and high school students’, *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 69(3), pp. 390–408. doi: 10.1080/24750158.2020.1799701.

Pope, K. (2013) *You can’t judge a book by its cover! Using Human Libraries in schools to engage, explore, discover and connect*. (Accessed: 12 March 2023).

Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (2023) *Human Library Project | Main Library*. Available at: <https://www.sab.ac.lk/lib/hlp> (Accessed: 19 November 2023).

Sri Lanka Library Association (2016) *Human Library at Independent Square, Colombo on 6th November on Sports and Exercise for Health*. Available at: https://www.slla.lk/images/stories/docs/activities/publications/slla_newsletter/newsletter_33_2.pdf (Accessed: 26 November 2023).

University of Colombo (2016) *Human Library – Talk to an expert*. Available at: <https://cmb.ac.lk/human-library-talk-expert> (Accessed: 2 February 2023).

University of Nevada (2021) *Human Library*. Available at: <https://www.unr.edu/writing-speaking-center/events/human-library> (Accessed: 22 August 2023).

Wentz, H. (2013) *The Human Library: Sharing the Community with Itself*. Available at: https://publiclibrariesonline.org/2013/04/human_library/ (Accessed: 23 May 2023).