



Bringing Women's Studies to life: Integrating a human library into Augustana's Women's Studies curriculum

Kara Blizzard, Dr. Yvonne Becker and Nancy Goebel

Abstract

A human library is an event in which “readers” listen to “human books” tell personal stories about specific topics related to prejudice and discrimination. At the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, the research team designed an assignment and collected associated data on the integration of the Augustana human library into an undergraduate Introduction to Women's Studies course. The assignment challenged

Kara Blizzard

Kara Blizzard is a Public Service Librarian at the Augustana Campus Library of the University of Alberta (Canada). She possesses an MA in English from Queen's University and an MLIS from Western University.

students to consider both oral narratives and scholarly journal articles as information sources. Results showed that the human library assignment contributed to increased empathy, critical thinking, and engagement with course topics.

She teaches information literacy and provides reference services in more than 20 undergraduate disciplines taught on the liberal arts and sciences campus. Kara is a co-organizer of the **augustana human library**, and she works to engage more and more of the campus and civic community at each event. Kara coordinates the chat service for all campuses of the University of Alberta.

Dr. Yvonne Becker

Dr. Yvonne Becker recently retired from the position of Associate Professor (Physical Education / Women's Studies) at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta in Camrose, AB, Canada. She has a passion for the intersection of sport and feminist issues, and she collaborated with the Augustana Librarians on the integration of the **augustana human library** into Augustana's liberal arts curriculum. Yvonne taught courses in

Introduction

In this article, the Augustana human library research team (consisting of the three authors) will describe the Augustana human library and how the team has used the event to take a new approach to teaching information literacy. The article will begin with an overview of the Augustana human library and how it is organized, followed by a description of how the event is connected to information literacy, with a focus on our Women's Studies curriculum.

Augustana is a liberal arts and sciences campus of the University of Alberta in Camrose, Alberta, Canada. It serves about 1000 undergraduate students. Nancy Goebel started the Augustana human library in 2009, and Kara Blizzard and Yvonne Becker began to collaborate with her in 2013. The event is organized by Nancy Goebel, Kara Blizzard, and select Augustana Library staff twice each academic year (fall and winter). October 2018 marks the offering of the 20th Augustana human library. Information about the Augustana human library is available at www.library.ualberta.ca/augustana/infolit/humanlibrary.

A human library is...

A human library is an event in which "readers" gather to listen to "human books" tell personal stories about specific topics. The readers and human books then have

conversations about those stories. Human books are people who have unique stories to tell: they have experienced discrimination and prejudice, hardships, and significant life challenges. At Augustana, both readers and human books may be students, staff, faculty, or community members.

What a human library “looks like”

Many human libraries involve only one person “reading” a human book at a given time (Watkins, 2014), but, at Augustana, human book sessions usually include groups of readers listening to a human book. The organizers promote a group atmosphere for several reasons:

- It makes students feel more comfortable, as a one-on-one setting can be intimidating when speaking to an unfamiliar person about a new topic.
- It brings more perspectives and voices, often inter-generational, to the conversation.
- It allows more people to “read” each human book.

At the Augustana human library, human books are scheduled for specific session times. The human book and reader(s) go to a private room for the session, which lasts for about an hour. In some cases, only one or two readers “check out” a human book, and in other cases, there can be a larger group (typically a maximum of about twenty readers). In all cases, the goal is to create a safe and intimate space in which participants can have informal conversations with each other. The human book speaks for most of the time, and then readers have the opportunity to ask questions and start a conversation about the topic.

Human book topics

Women and Sport and *Introduction to Women’s Studies* in addition to many other topics related to Kinesiology and Sport Studies.

Nancy Goebel

Nancy Goebel is the Head Librarian of the Augustana Campus Library of the University of Alberta (Canada).

Nancy’s strong interest in information literacy has led her to spearhead: fifteen annual “Augustana Information Literacy in Academic Libraries Workshops” featuring high-profile international speakers; the creation of information literacy awards for students and faculty; the production of the DVD “It Changed the Way I Do Research Period: Augustana Talks Information Literacy”; credit-bearing discipline-specific information literacy courses; the **augustana human library**; and the open source information literacy assessment

Human book topics usually relate to two primary themes at Augustana:

1. *Human books may share life stories based on prejudice or discrimination.* The human library concept originated with a focus on these types of experiences (Little, Nemutlu, Magic, & Molnár, 2011). The Augustana human library has included a wide range of human book topics. For example, topics include being transgender, experiencing Islamophobia, and recovering from addiction. The Augustana human library helps to address uncertainties and misconceptions that readers may have about these topics. For example, if a student has grown up with stereotypic ideas about what it means to be transgender, the human library can help change their perception.
2. *Human books may also share life stories based on experiences that are particularly unique or challenging.* Some of our human books speak about lived experiences such as coping with sexual abuse, surviving breast cancer, being deaf, or being autistic. These human books give personal accounts of extraordinary life experiences and provide readers with a fuller understanding of resilience in the face of hardship.

Selection/recruitment of human books

The best library acquisitions require careful selection, and human books are no different. It is very important to seek human books with credible narratives, who speak, collectively, to a diverse range of relevant and engaging topics. In most cases, the event organizers approach specific individuals who have been identified or

recommended, to ask if they will share their stories as human books. Occasionally, an individual contacts the organizers after hearing about the human library and asks if they can be a human book. To facilitate suggestions for new human books, the event organizers have developed an online form through which anyone can suggest a human book. When suggestions are made, event organizers contact the potential human book for a conversation.

Preparation advice to human books

In the weeks and months before the human library event, each new human book composes a compelling title and brief description of their topic. This practice helps them to focus their topic and also serves to pique the interest of readers. To help human books prepare for the event, the event organizers give them a few key pieces of information to consider:

- Your read is not a presentation; it is more of an informal conversation;
- There is no PowerPoint, and there are no handouts;
- If a reader asks you a question that you are not comfortable answering, you do not have to answer.

Although the read is not a presentation, the event organizers suggest that human books bring point-form notes about what they want to say, in case they forget something important in the moment. Developing those notes also helps human books to organize their thoughts before the event.

Logistics

There are many logistics to consider when planning a human library. Key areas include:

Budget

A human library can be offered for no cost. At the Augustana human library, the event organizers incur minimal costs through advertising, human book thank-you gifts, swag, and refreshments. A human library can be held in any location where there is some degree of privacy for conversations, so there is typically no need to rent any special equipment or space.

Scheduling

Each Augustana human library event is scheduled for one or two consecutive evenings. In the weeks before the event, human books sign up for specific session time(s). Typically, human books are scheduled for more than one session so that readers have multiple opportunities to read them. The event organizers aim to post the schedule on our website at least one week prior to the event.

Advertising and promotion

The Augustana human library is advertised via graphics displayed on library and campus LCD screens, signs around campus, the campus newsletter, slides shown during library instruction, and ads in local newspapers. However, word of mouth seems to generate the most interest; the human library is a difficult event to describe in a single graphic!

Reader registration

Readers register when they arrive at the event to check out a human book. They complete a brief form and show a piece of identification. The registration process helps to ensure a safe space for all participants.

Collection Management

Any library collection needs maintenance and development to keep it current and relevant. The Augustana human library has over one hundred human books in its catalogue, which is continually growing and changing. The event organizers frequently seek out new human books who can address specific topics that are relevant to the Women's Studies curriculum.

Information literacy and the human library

One focus of contemporary information literacy instruction is the many types and formats of information available in print and electronically. The human library introduces students to the concept of oral narrative as an information source. It also teaches students about primary sources (human books) and secondary sources (such as journal articles), and about how to synthesize ideas from both types of sources. While developing the research project, the research team speculated that the narrative nature of the human library would add a personal element to students' learning, through which students would experience empathy and introspection and encounter unfamiliar perspectives as part of their research process.

The research team has used two approaches to help students connect the Augustana human library with their courses and research:

1. We encourage students to use human books as information sources in their assignments, with the permission of their professors. Through this approach, students make their own connections between the human library and their research.
2. We partner with teaching faculty to incorporate the human library into specific course assignments.

This approach involves formal connections with the course curriculum.

Both approaches require students to learn how to credit human books in their assignments. The organizers have developed a document that shows students how to cite a human book in each citation style that is used at Augustana (Augustana Campus Library, 2014). The process of citing human books helps students to understand the role of oral narrative in scholarly research. It makes them consider contexts and constructions of authority. For example, in undergraduate research, journal articles are generally seen as more authoritative than an individual's lived experiences. The human library creates an opportunity for students to question this construction. Citing human books also allows students to explore the process of information creation, through examination and use of different information formats. There are many possibilities for connecting this student experience and research opportunity with the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2016).

Information literacy: Integrating the human library into the Women's Studies curriculum

For the past few years, the Augustana Library has partnered with an Introduction to Women's Studies course, adding a unique human library component to a course assignment. The assignment has three parts:

Students participate in the Augustana human library and read a human book whose topic is about sex, gender, or sexuality. Rather than starting with traditional scholarly research, they listen to a

personal narrative about lived experiences. Topics relevant to the course have included:

- Intersex person
- Transgender sexual politics and reproductive rights
- Celebrating being a lesbian
- Gay man who experienced conversion therapy
- Gay father in a rural community
- Being fat and queer
- Healing from childhood sexual abuse
- Sex addiction
- Disordered eating and exercise addiction
- Having a brother who died of AIDS in the 1980s
- Teen mom
- Parenting a premature baby
- Infertility, miscarriage, and preterm birth
- Designing a duplex for the family to share after divorce
- Surviving breast cancer
- Experiencing workplace gender discrimination in the 1960s

After reading the human book, students write a reflection on that experience. Students are provided with the following reflection prompts:

- What was the life experience of the human book – summarize their “topic.”
- In what ways was “difference” created in the life of the human book? How did that difference affect their life?
- What aspects of their life were affected?
- Did the human book note experiences of prejudice or discrimination in their life?
- What does the future hold for the human

book?

1. Students then use library databases to find and read three scholarly journal articles on the same topic and create an annotated bibliography. For example, if a student read a human book who is transgender, they would find and annotate three articles on transgender topics.
2. Finally, students reflect on the process of collecting and using these two different types of information. They address which type of information they prefer and why, and they compare the two experiences.

Methodology

The research team gathers a variety of data for analysis as part of the research project. The two types of data referred to in this article are:

- Responses to pre- and post-questionnaires given to readers and human books at the augustana human library event, and;
- Content submitted for Part 3 of the Women's Studies assignment.

The pre- and post-questionnaires include a variety of demographic questions, which can be taken into consideration during data analysis. Demographic questions include age, gender, the discipline of study, and whether the participant is a student, staff member, faculty member or community member. Because the augustana human library encourages people of any gender to participate, the questionnaire lists a range of genders as response options instead of providing only female and male response options. The questionnaires also offer readers and human books the opportunity to reflect on their experience, and to explain whether and

how the human library impacted their understanding of a topic. The research team uses the Women's Studies assignment to gather reflective comments on the process of research via human narrative, as well as more traditional library-based research.

Findings

The research team has found the research results to be very encouraging. Provided here are a few of the findings.

In the post-read questionnaire, readers in the Women's Studies course have provided responses such as:

- “This was excellent. First human book experience and I’m blown away.”
- “This was a fantastic experience that really opened my eyes to the matters of discrimination that still exist in Canada.”
- “So eye-opening! Amazing experience – there was so much I did not know. I’d definitely come again!”
- “It was a great experience, I will definitely check out another book. :)” When students in the Women's Studies course submit the reflective components of the assignment, they have included comments such as:
 - “After my human book experience with [human book name] and reading the scholarly articles I was able to appreciate them both while comparing and contrasting their meaning and objectives. I think they are both important aspects regarding a well-rounded representation of lesbian relationships and experiences. The human book allowed for personal communication between the “reader” and speaker so that the reader was able to

visually acquire the verbal and non-verbal cues from the speaker as well as the direct first hand experiential knowledge of their story.

Therefore, as an undergraduate student in this Women's Studies class, I found it helpful to see the difference between the research regarding lesbians and the direct communication through the human book experience. In conclusion, both the human book and the scholarly articles play an important role in acquiring a well-rounded outlook on lesbian differences and life experiences."

- "The human library gave me a better, more empathetic approach to information as it related to gender issues. In contrast to this, the scholarly articles do offer a more scientific approach, and as such afford the reader more quantifiable results. It seems useful then to consider both ways of accessing information in the social sciences, as both ways offer their own benefits to the study of gender issues."
- "Overall, it is a very different experience to learn about a particular subject via scholarly articles and via talking to an actual person who has lived the subject in their day-to-day life. This was exactly the case when learning about lesbian marriage during this assignment. The three articles I read were all well researched and contained some valuable information about same-sex marriage and the treatment of homosexuals, but in all cases was simply an observer recounting what their studies show."
- "[human book name]'s presence reminded me that she was a real person going through real

struggles rather than simply a book that I could pull off a shelf and return. In this way her voice was heard and she was able to speak...”

- “Overall, both components of this assignment assisted in giving me a better holistic understanding of the topic of LGBT community members and the difficulties they may face privately and publically.”
- “Both the human book and the scholarly articles helped in understanding the topic. However, the human book was much more useful and helped me understand it better and more in depth. I think there is a part of direct human interaction that can never be replaced by text. You can read their body language and tone of voice in addition to what they are saying to derive things you wouldn’t be able to get in a scholarly article.”
- “Both part 1 and 2 of this assignment had merit for learning about childhood sexual abuse. Both of the information sources were able to expand my knowledge and pushed me to think beyond myself. However, I found the human book was a much more compelling source of information. By speaking with a victim in person, sexual childhood abuse became more real. The articles were impactful but because they were journal articles the issue felt removed and distant.”
- “As this was my first time attending the human library, I can certainly say that I am very fond of the whole idea behind the human book. There is a vast difference in having someone

look at you and telling you their story, and you being able to hear their voice, and see their emotions. However, the second part of the assignment which involved reading articles related to the human book, was very beneficial in terms of developing a better understanding of the human book. Having already received a very live and interesting presentation on the material, makes researching the related articles that much more fascinating, and as you are reading through the supporting articles you are able to make associations back to what was previously discussed by the human book.” Students’ reflections demonstrated that the human library made their topics seem more “real,” because it involved listening to an individual speak of their lived experiences. Multiple students noted that the human book’s body language, tone of voice, and emotions allowed them to understand and engage with the topic on a personal level and to increase their empathy for the human book. Instead of choosing one preferred source of information, many students reported that both the human book and the scholarly articles added to their understanding of a topic related to sex, gender, or sexuality. Some students reported that the human book provided a way of enhancing their engagement with the scholarly research.

Program success

The augustana human library has had positive effects on participants, the library, the campus, and the broader community. A few of the successes that have contributed

to the sustainability and profile of the augustana human library are:

Raising the profile of the library through media coverage

The augustana human library has been covered by local, regional, and national media. Media coverage has brought positive attention to the library and university. This attention affirms the need for and appreciation of this kind of event.

Facilitating community engagement

While the augustana human library is organized primarily for the campus's undergraduate students, all persons associated with the university and the local community are invited and encouraged to attend. The event creates excellent opportunities for intergenerational and intercultural conversations about potentially sensitive and controversial topics. The Augustana human library engages the community and provides a great "town and gown" bridge.

Benefiting all participants

While it was assumed (and quickly affirmed at the first event in 2009) that the Augustana human library would be a positive learning experience for readers, human books have also provided positive feedback regarding their experience of the event. Many human books have thanked the organizers for the opportunity to share their story in a safe space in which they can experience personal healing and growth. Human books often return to subsequent human library events to tell their stories again and, in many cases, to be readers.

Enabling a low-cost outreach event

One great feature of a human library is that it incurs minimal financial costs and can even be offered at no cost. All expenditures are optional; for example, organizers can decide whether to offer thank you gifts to the human books, provide refreshments to participants, or arrange for paid advertising. To make logistics and planning simple and inexpensive, organizers can invite a very small “collection” of human books.

Enhancing librarian/faculty collaboration

Curricular collaborations between librarians and teaching faculty are another key aspect of the program’s success. The human library creates an opportunity for librarians to engage with faculty on new and creative information literacy initiatives. It also provides students with a unique learning experience and makes plagiarism virtually impossible.

Bringing students into the library

Each time students have a new reason to visit the library and engage with staff or participate in programming, they are likely to become more comfortable with using the library and its resources to their advantage. They are more likely to ask questions when they need assistance, to study in the library, and to have a more positive experience with the library in general.

Building compassion and empathy

In a world that struggles daily with intolerance and the resulting violence and fear, the Augustana human library celebrates its role in building compassion and empathy in participants. Event organizers and the research team value the human library’s potential to contribute to the acceptance of diversity.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The Augustana human library successfully engages students, staff, faculty, and the Camrose community in a learning experience that benefits both readers and human books. The human library provides an opportunity for unique information literacy assignments that increase students' engagement with relevant topics and demonstrate the importance of consulting a variety of source types during the research process. The Augustana human library grows and changes each time it is offered, in response to curricular goals, feedback from participants, and efforts to maintain and increase engagement. For future Augustana human library events, organizers will consider additional ways of embedding the event into Women's Studies assignments.

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