

Practice-Based Article

Human Books, Real Stories: Creating Space for Empathy at the Human Library in DCU

Eilís O'Neill and Gwendolyn O'Connor, Dublin City University

Gwendolyn O'Connor  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7852-5111>

ABSTRACT

This case study examines two Human Library events that were held in DCU (Dublin City University) in 2024 and 2026. Human Library events are licensed and facilitated by the HLO (Human Library Organisation), who originally created the concept in Copenhagen in 2000. At a Human Library event, volunteers share their experience of prejudice or social stigma with 'Readers', or members of the community. These volunteers take part as human 'Books' that can be borrowed by Readers for 20-30 minute conversations, where questions are encouraged and pre-existing biases are challenged. The event creates a safe space for open, honest dialogue that breaks down stereotypes and encourages empathy, allowing the Readers and Books to 'unjudge' each other. We examine the proceedings in DCU from the perspectives of the organisers or 'Librarians', the Books and the Readers.

KEYWORDS

human library, prejudice, stereotype, understanding, community, university

THE HUMAN LIBRARY IN CONTEXT

The HLO (Human Library Organisation) is a not for profit organisation and learning platform which was established in Copenhagen in 2000 (Human Library, 2026a). It has become a global movement and is operational in more than 85 countries worldwide. Its aim is to create safe spaces where people who have experienced stigma, bias or prejudice because of aspects of their person, heritage or life experience can share their stories. The human 'Books' are 'borrowed' by members of the public or 'Readers' at a Human Library event. The Books then engage in 20-30 minute open conversations or 'Readings' with the Books that create empathy between people from different backgrounds.

Organisers or 'Librarians' who wish to run a Human Library event are required to apply for a licence from the HLO. Once approved, they are given access to documents and support that will help them to plan, implement and deliver a Human Library event to an agreed standard. Typical HLO partners include libraries, schools, universities and museums.

The Books are volunteers whose life experiences are linked to topics represented by their Book 'titles'. They receive training from the HLO that prepares them for the Readings and they are taught that everyone carries prejudices and that we all judge. They learn how to answer challenging questions that might otherwise be considered taboo and how to create a dialogue that will help the Reader and Book to unjudge each other. Once they complete their training they are 'published' and become available as Books (Human Library, 2026b). The training process will be examined in greater detail later in the article.

THE HUMAN LIBRARY ORGANISERS IN DCU

In 2023, the Student Support and Development team in DCU proposed running a Human Library event in collaboration with the HLO, DCU Library, DCU People, the Students' Union and DCU Healthy. They were inspired to do this by The Human Library @IADT event, which took place in the [Institute of Art, Design and Technology](#) in 2023 (Buggle & Keogh, 2025).

To run a Human Library event, organisers make an application to the HLO. Once the application has been approved and the licence has been purchased, access is given to guides and methodologies that will lead the Librarians through the necessary processes. The documents provide support for budgeting, recruiting Books, branding and promotion, event management and evaluation.

Initially, the Librarians meet the HLO representatives for an online orientation session. A list of potential Book topics is shared with the Librarians, divided into 15 social categories that range from addiction to survivor. Hundreds of different Book titles have been published at Human Library events, linking into these categories. The Librarians are advised to aim for a variety of Books representing different themes, with a mix of genders, ages and content to ensure diversity.

In the weeks following the meeting the Librarians recruit and interview Books, whose information is shared with the HLO - both parties then complete online training. IADT connected us with participants who joined us as Books in 2024 and 2026. The remaining Books were recruited through an email invitation to DCU staff and students and through personal contacts. DCU published 16 Books in 2024 and 14 in 2026 - to view a list of DCU Book titles see Appendix A.

The DCU Librarians devised event plans in the approach to March 2024 and 2026. We worked with the DCU Communications team to promote the event and the DCU community and members of the public were encouraged to register as Readers on the DCU website. The Librarians communicated with the Books and invited them to lunch before the event. In the days leading up to the event, the Librarians printed evaluations forms, posted signage, set up the event space and finalised the Librarians' roles on the day.

Figure 1.

DCU Human Library Event Poster 2026



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On the day, the Librarians welcomed the Books, briefed them about the event and the venue and

introduced them to each other. They were given blue t-shirts with the Human Library logo that identified them as Books, the Librarians wore yellow t-shirts. The event took place in O'Reilly Library in 2024 and in Cregan Library in 2026, where a registration table was set up in front of the main event space. A minimum of four Librarians are recommended for an event, we had 10 for both of our events. Two Librarians managed the registration table and welcomed Readers. They screened Readers to ensure that they were in the right frame of mind to take part, explained the procedure to them and asked them to complete photography consent forms. Books were not advertised in advance, so Readers browsed and chose a Book title and were then guided to the relevant table by a third Librarian.

The remaining Librarians ensured that the conversations remained respectful, that the Books felt safe and took breaks when required. A room was reserved where the Books and Librarians could take breaks together and a quiet space was also identified where Books could rest by themselves. Librarians also took part as Readers during the event, prioritising Books without Readers.

In a Reading, either a single or a small group of Readers can participate, but there should always only be one Book. If a selected Book was at a maximum number of Readers (four), the Librarians encouraged the attendee to select an alternative Book. 20 minutes into a reading, a bell rang to announce the session would end in five minutes.

After their session, the Reader had the option to choose another title. Before exiting the event, they filled out an evaluation form. Afterwards, the Books joined a debrief session where they shared their experiences and filled out a questionnaire. The Librarians collated this data and shared it with the HLO in an event review, which included reflections about running the event. The organising team then met to discuss the outcomes and lessons learned. See Appendix B for a sample Human Library event planner we created based on our experience.

Figure 2.

The Human Library in DCU 2026



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THE BOOKS IN DCU'S HUMAN LIBRARY

After signing up to be a Book, preparation for the event consists of meeting with an event organiser and completing the Human Library's proprietary training offered through an online portal. It should be recognised that the Human Library asks a lot of its participants, particularly the Books, who volunteer to share deeply personal and potentially traumatic experiences with strangers moments after meeting them. Between the training and the preparation with the event organiser, the Book will learn different

communication skills and strategies that, when combined with the structure of the reading session, offer the Book emotional support and situational control in exchange for vulnerability.

A Book's title is symbolic of this exchange. Participants are asked to choose a title that is direct and accurately reflects an identity subject to prejudice or stereotyping (Human Library, 2026b). They provide a Book with the power to choose which aspect of their lived identity to make the focus of a reading, which serves a practical purpose for everyone involved. Only 25 minutes is allotted to a session and there may be multiple Readers participating. They offer crucial context for the Reader, communicating likely boundaries for the conversation before the parties meet.

The thematic element of the event's language, the rigidity of a Book and Reader in the Human Library are also practical. This language formalises the act of the Reading session, freeing the Reader to ask questions in good faith without judgement and the Book to answer them in kind. How a reading unfolds is dependent on its participants. Books have control over their introduction, what questions they answer and how they choose to share their experience. Readers engage with the topic according to their interest.

The intention is to help the Reader to feel invited to ask questions of the Book. One Book who participated in both DCU events reflected on this dynamic, writing that the "story is informed by your conversation partner, which is something we don't really think of when we are reading and interpreting texts ... And even if your story remains the same, how you tell it changes depending on the person you are talking to" (O'Connor, 2026). Each session is unique to its participants despite the constancy of the Book and their title. This is because of the trust each side can place in each other.

BOOK FEEDBACK AND REFLECTION

After each event, participants are asked to fill out a feedback form reflecting on their experience and evaluating the support provided by the DCU organisers and the HLO. For the writing of this article, a follow up reflection form (see Appendix C) was sent to consenting Books who participated in the 2026 event. Of the 30 Books across both Human Libraries, 27 submitted answers to the feedback form, and of the 14 who were Books in 2026, five provided additional reflection. Examination of the feedback reveals a common thread of experience for the Books. They experience alienation or discrimination related to their identity outside of the Human Library, made connections between Book and Reader despite perceived differences, and view the opportunity for further exploration of their identities as a result of the experience.

The first commonality among Books is unsurprising as their participation is indicative of belonging to an identity group subject to the prejudicial biases the Human Library seeks to address. The stigma varies, but it consistently manifests regardless of identity. For example, a 2024 Book, titled *Gender Queer*, described their stigmatisation as "passive unrecognition of my gender identity," (DCU Library, 2024). *Past Drug Misuse*, a 2026 Book, described this succinctly, having experienced "discrimination about who an addict is. What they can do" (O'Connor, 2026). However, experiencing stigmatisation and prejudice did not prevent the Books from making connections with their Readers.

Some of these were nostalgic, such as when one Book discovered their Reader was of a similar age and from the same hometown. Other connections achieved an emotional catharsis for both parties, such as *No Contact with a Parent*, who described how it felt to have a Reader become visibly emotionally affected by hearing their story (DCU Library, 2026). How Books and Readers connect with each other offers insight

into ways Books engage with their identities. Several Books described being drawn to the Human Library by the opportunity to advocate or raise awareness for their identity (DCU Library, 2026). Others perceived it as an opportunity for self-reflection. For *Past Drug Misuse*, it was “another way to help reclaim a bit of my own identity” (O’Connor, 2026). For *Mental Health & Recovery*, it was a chance to explore, writing “every time you are read, you get a new take on your title. You grow and expand” (O’Connor, 2026).

The collected feedback ultimately indicated satisfaction with being a Book in the Human Library. When asked to rate their agreement with the statement: “Sharing my experiences at the Human Library has made me feel better understood”, 25 of 27 respondents expressed that they agreed or strongly agreed. The remaining two Books rated their agreement as neutral (DCU Library, 2026). This is a promising signifier of success for this style of event.

HUMAN LIBRARY READERS IN DCU

In 2024, 16 Books were published, 60 Readers visited the event and 53 readings took place. 15 of our Readers filled in evaluation forms and their ages were evenly distributed across the 21-35, 35-50 and 51-75 age groups (Moloney & Sicard, 2024).

In 2026, 14 Books were published, 30 Readers visited the event and 73 readings took place. 12 Readers filled in the evaluation forms and their ages mainly fell into the 21-35 and 51-75 age groups, with two 36-50 Readers and one 76+ Reader (Moloney, 2026a). Attendance numbers were impacted by heavy rain in 2026, which resulted in a low attendance rate for registered Readers and discouraged passersby.

The majority of the respondents at both events identified as women and they were mainly in employment. A smaller number were retired, unemployed or home-makers. Only a small percentage of our Readers were students (Moloney & Sicard, 2024; Moloney, 2026a).

The Librarians managing the registration tables in 2024 and 2026 noted that Readers were hesitant when they first approached, even after the process was explained to them. The Readers grew more assured once they finished their first Reading and most of the participants borrowed more Books. In one evaluation a Reader stated, “I found it difficult to ask questions first but as the conversation went on, I became more confident” (Moloney, 2026a). This initial uncertainty was experienced by several Readers who reported feeling uncomfortable asking questions at the beginning of the Reading. By the end of the Readings all the Readers stated that they felt at ease asking questions (Moloney & Sicard, 2024; Moloney, 2026a). The Librarians observed the resulting engagement, “once a reader sits down and connects with the human Book, magic happens” (Moloney, 2026b).

All the Readers agreed that they learned new things about the topics of their readings and the majority of the Readers stated that the way they felt about the topics had changed, “I feel more compassion towards those who suffer from difficult issues” (Moloney & Sicard, 2024). All but one Reader stated that they now felt more open to exploring unfamiliar subjects and that their Readings had made them more conscious of how they engage with certain groups of people (Moloney & Sicard, 2024).

Recording event highlights, one Reader described how much they appreciated connecting with the Books and learning from them, “I enjoyed this opportunity to engage with someone I really would not have access to” (Moloney, 2026a). The Readers were inspired by the bravery, passion and openness of the Books, “The

honesty and vulnerability shown by the books was genuinely inspiring and it is something I will definitely be trying to emulate in the future” (Moloney, 2026a).

All of the Readers rated the quality of the event and of their experience as excellent or very good, noting the “welcoming and friendly” Books and Librarians (Moloney, 2026a). Their final comments captured their deep engagement with the Books and their appreciation of the opportunity to converse with them, “It was very difficult to move on. I had so many questions. A very emotional experience” (Moloney, 2026a).

OUTCOMES

The core aims of the Human Library events in DCU were to: challenge prejudice and stereotypes, foster social cohesion, promote human rights and develop empathy and understanding (Moloney, 2026b).

The Reader evaluations demonstrate that the events achieved these aims and more. They show that Readers who were initially nervous about asking questions became more comfortable exploring challenging topics with Books. The majority of the Readers stated that their pre-conceived notions had changed, illustrating that the conversations helped challenge stereotypes and create empathy for the Books. They developed an understanding of the Books’ experiences and many Readers expressed their admiration for the Books (Moloney & Sicard, 2024; Moloney, 2026a).

The majority of the Books agreed they would now be more conscious about how they engaged with certain groups of people. The Readers enjoyed meeting people from diverse backgrounds and left the event feeling more open to exploring unfamiliar subjects (Moloney & Sicard, 2024; Moloney, 2026a).

The welcoming, safe space created at the event helped foster empathy and connection and provided an opportunity for the Books to feel perceived and empowered, “I am often met with disbelief, upset, awe, very mixed, rarely will they actually ask questions - makes people uncomfortable” (Moloney, 2026a). Another Book felt heartened by his conversation with a Librarian about the library’s provision of digital books to students, “I found it interesting and encouraging that DCU Library were coming to understand the accessibility needs of disabled students” (O’Connor, 2026).

In 2026, the Books met before the event and built a rapport over lunch. One Book reported that they monitored each other’s wellbeing during the event and in the last hour when attendance was low, the Books became Readers for each other. As noted in the 2026 event review, “This created a wonderful dynamic, fostering warm and encouraging engagement between the Books themselves and the Human Library working group” (Moloney, 2026a).

The event also helped foster a culture of health and wellbeing in the DCU Community. It provided DCU staff members taking part in the event as Books with a sense of belonging and provided a space for them to engage in an honest, open dialogue about their experiences, contributing to a positive community culture. One DCU Book described their experience as “insightful and healing” (Moloney & Sicard, 2024).

Figure 3.

Books and Librarians at the 2026 Human Library in DCU



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LESSONS LEARNED

We recommend planning a Human Library event at least 6 months and up to a year in advance. This will give the Librarians time to review the HLO documents and formulate a project plan. It will also allow the Librarians to recruit and interview Books and give both parties sufficient time to complete training with the HLO.

Initially, it can be difficult to grasp the concept of the Human Library and understand the processes around planning an event. We advise attending an online event as a Reader, an opportunity offered by the HLO to key members of the organising team. This allows the Librarians to understand the format of a Reading and experience the positive benefits of the interaction.

Involve a relevant university course through a lecturer, to encourage more students to attend. Linking a course assignment with the event would boost student attendance numbers significantly. At the IADT event, two lecturers attended with students from their classes. The IADT team advised staggering the attendance times of larger groups, to avoid overcrowding. (Buggle, personal communication, April 23, 2026).

Involve other local groups and your local public libraries when recruiting Books and Readers. Link in with events run by community, cultural and county council teams if possible. IADT were part of the 'Festival of Inclusion' programme organised by the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown Co Council in 2023 (Buggle & Keogh, 2025).

There will likely be Book dropouts before the event so recruit two or three more Books than you think you'll need. Two Books were unable to attend the DCU Human Library event in 2024 and four Books in 2026.

Promote pre-registration to potential Readers, but as there will likely be a non-attendance rate of up to 50% encourage walk-ins. Interaction between the Books is important - give them time to get to know each other before the event. This offers them a support network beyond the Librarians during Readings.

This is a valuable, life-affirming event and we strongly agree with one Reader who stated, "This is an important event and it should be continued" (Moloney, 2026a). It takes time, effort and funding to plan and deliver an event, so we aim to run the next DCU Human Library event in two years' time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no known conflicts of interests to declare.

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See supplementary documents on HSLJ website - <https://doi.org/10.33178/hslj.2.1.4>.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Titles of DCU Books from 2024 and 2026

Appendix B: Sample Human Library event planning document

Appendix C: Responses to Human Library Book Survey

