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BEYOND AI: THE HUMAN LIBRARY IN HIGHER EDUCATION – A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

As universities increasingly embrace digital tools, the value of genuine human connection can be overlooked. The review examines the Human Library (HL) as a dialogue-based approach that brings authentic narratives into higher education to foster empathy, critical thinking, and social inclusion. A comprehensive search was conducted across five major platforms which are Web of Science, Elicit AI, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, and Academia. The study is also supplemented by hand-selected sources, covering literature from 2000 to mid-2025. Following PRISMA guidelines, 267 records and 30 additional items were identified; after removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts, 30 full-text articles were assessed, resulting in 17 studies included in the qualitative analysis and seven in the quantitative synthesis. Findings indicate that HL research primarily employs qualitative case studies, practitioner reflections, and thematic analyses, with fewer mixed-methods or controlled designs. Reported impacts include reductions in prejudice and social distance, enhanced cultural awareness, and strengthened empathy among participants. The Human Books often describe increased confidence, self-reflection, and therapeutic benefits. Notably, empirical evidence on HL's role in Malaysian universities remains scarce, leaving its potential to address soft-skill development, intercultural competence, and social cohesion largely unexplored. The review recommends that future studies in Malaysia adopt rigorous, context-specific methodologies such as longitudinal or experimental designs and integrate HL into curricula to cultivate both cultural literacies and the deeply human skills inspired by personal storytelling.

Keywords: Higher Education, Human Library, Social Inclusion, Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

INTRODUCTION

As higher education increasingly embraces digital tools like AI, the importance of human-centered learning remains critical. The Human Library (HL) offers a pedagogical model that emphasizes empathy, dialogue, and cultural understanding. HL events involve “human books” sharing lived experiences with student “readers,” fostering authentic conversations that challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion. For example, HL has been used in occupational therapy programs to enhance cultural competence (Pope et al., 2023), and in social work to explore intersectionality and oppression (Blizzard et al., 2018). Globally, HL has expanded to over 80 countries and is integrated into university courses, diversity programs, and workshops. Despite its growing popularity, empirical research on HL in higher education institutions (HEIs), especially in Malaysia, remains limited (Malhi et al., 2024). This review aims to evaluate HL’s pedagogical value and explore its potential to complement technological advancements in education.

Malaysian Context

Malaysia’s national education policies, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 and the EXCEL Playbook (2021), emphasize the development of soft skills including empathy, communication, and leadership. HL aligns with these goals by promoting respectful dialogue and multicultural understanding (Davis et al., 2024). In Malaysia’s diverse society, HL can support social cohesion and inclusive learning environments (Badiozaman et al., 2019). However, localized research on HL is scarce. Studies suggest that HL can reduce prejudice and improve communication skills (Pope et al., 2023), but its adaptation to Malaysia’s sociocultural context requires further investigation (Bagci & Blazhenkova, 2020; Lam et al., 2023). Tailored HL models may be necessary to address sensitive topics such as ethnicity and religion (Bagci & Blazhenkova, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review followed PRISMA guidelines and included studies from Web of Science, Elicit AI, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, and Academia. The search spanned from 2000 to mid-2025 and used keywords such as “Human Library,” “Living Library,” and “Human Books.” Inclusion criteria focused on HL in higher education, with outcomes related to empathy, prejudice reduction, and intercultural competence. Theoretical frameworks included Vygotsky’s Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984). Out of 267 screened records and 30 hand-selected sources, 27 studies were included: 17 qualitative, 7 quantitative, and 3 mixed-methods. Most studies were Western based, with limited representation from Southeast Asia.

FINDINGS

HL as a Pedagogical Tool

HL has been implemented across disciplines such as medicine, social work, and occupational therapy. In medical education, HL exposes students to rural healthcare experiences, reducing biases (Malhi et al., 2024; Perez et al., 2024). In social work, it helps students understand oppression through direct dialogue (Blizzard et al., 2018). HL also enhances mental health literacy and challenges stereotypes (Chung & Tse, 2022; Bagci & Blazhenkova, 2020). Some universities embed HL into course curricula, linking sessions to learning outcomes and using pre- and post-event reflections to consolidate learning (Malhi et al., 2024;). Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and emotional safety, are essential (Chung & Tse, 2022).

Research Designs and Limitations

Most studies employed qualitative designs, including case studies, reflective journals, and interviews. While these methods provide rich insights, they are often limited by self-report bias and lack of control groups. Quantitative studies, though fewer, offer stronger evidence of HL’s impact on empathy and prejudice reduction. For example, Pope et al., 2023; Blizzard et al., 2018 used pre- and post-intervention surveys to measure changes in student attitudes, revealing statistically significant improvements. Mixed-methods studies also show improvements in empathy and communication (Pope et al., 2023). However, challenges persist including self-report bias, lack of control groups, and difficulty measuring long-term impact (Lam et al., 2023). Volunteer dependency and logistical hurdles also affect scalability (Lam et al., 2023). Logistical issues such as recruiting diverse human books and scheduling sessions can hinder implementation. Ethical concerns also arise, particularly regarding the emotional safety of both books and readers. Additionally, measuring long-term impact remains difficult due to the subjective nature of outcomes like empathy and personal growth. Figure 1 below presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the systematic process of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion for this Human Library review in higher education.

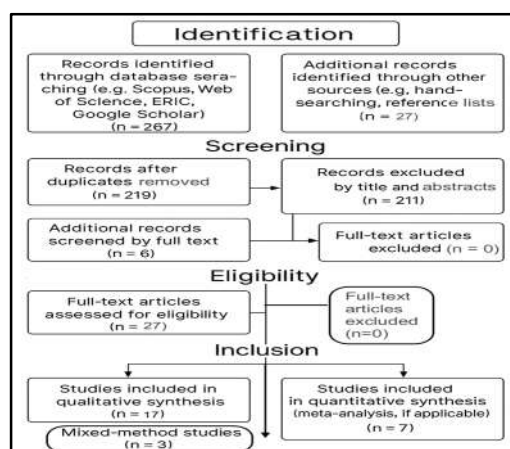


Figure 1.: PRISMA 2020

CONCLUSION

The Human Library offers several strengths as a pedagogical tool. It creates a safe space for sensitive discussions, encourages experiential learning (Pope et al., 2023), and is adaptable across disciplines. Its emphasis on dialogue and storytelling makes it especially effective in promoting empathy and critical thinking (Lam et al., 2023). In an AI-driven era, HL emphasizes the irreplaceable value of human connection in education. It cultivates empathy, reduces prejudice, and promotes cross-cultural understanding (Davis et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the model is not without challenges. Dependence on volunteers, emotional vulnerability, and inconsistent assessment methods can limit its scalability (Lam et al., 2024). These issues are compounded in contexts where cultural taboos or institutional constraints restrict open dialogue.

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