The impact of stories on facilitating empathy: A framing document for the Human Library and similar story-telling opportunities at Oregon State University

The members of the Civility and Inclusivity Campaign have been active for the past three years providing opportunities for the OSU community to develop an increased sense of empathy and support for individuals representing a wide range of identities on our campus (http://main.oregonstate.edu/civility). These efforts include a Civility Video and the development of the Provost Council Ethos Statement. Ongoing efforts by the group to enhance inclusivity and promote empathy include identification of civility hotspots on campus and providing opportunities for individuals to tell their personal stories to others in a safe and respectful manner. The latter efforts are modeled after the stories shared by staff in the OSU Division of Student Affairs (http://oregonstate.edu/studentaffairs/features?page=3.) The Human Library is one such effort http://humanlibraryuk.org/, and is complementary to a recent community story-telling effort proposed by OSU Human Resources http://diversity.risd.edu/index.php.

The Human Library event is designed to offer a safe space for one individual (the human book) to tell her/his/their personal story to another individual (the reader). In our daily interactions on campus it is difficult to create an environment for these types of conversations to occur. The event is entirely voluntary; story-tellers (human books) voluntarily participate in sharing their story and have complete control over what is shared and what questions are answered. The “reader” listens and asks questions, and both participants are encouraged to engage in a thoughtful, two-way dialogue.

There will be fourteen volunteers from a range of cultural and professional backgrounds, with different identities, ready to have unique, individual dialogues with each of their readers. The set-up for the event will emphasize the fact that each participant owns their own story, and that after the conversation, some differences between the two people will be better understood with the ultimate goal of enhancing empathy in both participants.

The orientation to and format for the conversation are also designed to offer a first step on how to have a conversation with someone different from yourself in a respectful manner. The event will be held in the Valley Library and will be monitored to ensure safety and comfort for all participants. Those facilitating the event will provide an orientation to the volunteers (human books), detailing the desired positive outcomes, as well as challenges to expect.
We will be particularly vigilant in acknowledging concerns regarding the risk of cultural appropriation and the danger of a “single story.” (Ngozi Adichie 2009)\(^1\) Participants (readers) will also receive an overview of expectations for their conversation. Anyone who feels uncomfortable going forward with the conversations may, without judgment or negative attribution, withdraw from participation in the conversation and/or event.

“A key challenge for Human Libraries is to address inequalities of risk and discomfort involved in conversations across differences.” (Dreher & Mowbray 43)\(^2\)

We acknowledge that some individuals on campus may have a negative reaction to or perception of this event. They may be concerned that asking a member of an identity group to share their stories gives the appearance of that person speaking for their group, that the analogies used to refer to ‘books’ and ‘readers’ may serve to objectify the story-teller, and that one person’s story cannot provide the educational background necessary to understand systems of oppression in our society and on our campus. Further, there may be a difference in privilege between the book and reader that must be acknowledged. To promote a dialogue on these concerns, resource information will be shared with participants to encourage further learning on these topics through classes, workshops, seminar series and other events designed to more fully understand systems of oppression and the obligations that we all have to empathize with others. The Human Library is one of many avenues towards building community.

Brenda McComb, Graduate School
Courtney Everson, Graduate School
Faye A. Chadwell, OSU Libraries and Press
Jennifer Dennis, Graduate School
Jillian Coleman, Research Office
Larry Roper, School of Language Culture and Society
Sue Theiss, Ombuds
