



# Don't judge a book by its cover!

## The Living Library Organiser's Guide 2011



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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
Preface	5
How to use this guide	7
<b>Section 1: The History and Methodology of the Living Library</b>	<b>9</b>
What is the Living Library?	10
Where does the Living Library come from?	12
Why Living Library?	14
<b>Section 2: The Main Ingredients</b>	<b>19</b>
Are you ready to be an organiser?	20
Defining your objectives	23
Choosing your setting	24
Your team: who is who in the Living Library?	33
The catalogue	38
<b>Section 3: The Living Library in Practice</b>	<b>45</b>
Budgeting, venue and physical setup	47
Preparing the content and running the library	52
Materials, promotions, and evaluation	56
<b>Section 4: Materials and Resources</b>	<b>67</b>
Visibility items	68
Infrastructure	73
Texts	78



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Above all, the most special gratitude is due to all Books, Readers, Librarians and Organisers of Living Libraries across Europe and beyond. Without their commitment, vision and hard work the Living Library would be but a concept. With them, it continues to live and flourish.

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## PREFACE

Those familiar with programmes promoting intercultural dialogue, human rights, pluralism, and democratic participation – be it in civil society, adult education or youth work – are frequently confronted with the challenge of coming up with something truly ‘new’ and inventive, something that attracts widespread attention and makes genuine impact.

The Living Library methodology presented in this guide is one such concept. Its primary aim is to create constructive personal dialogues between people who would normally not have the opportunity to speak to each other and thus challenge common prejudices and stereotypes. It is particularly suitable for large-scale public events, such as festivals and other gatherings attended by hundreds or even thousands of people. The Living Library is essentially an opportunity for intercultural learning and personal development aimed at people who have little or no access to or time for non-formal educational programmes.

Our social divides are defined by socio-economic, political, and cultural differences and, sociologically speaking, the notion of the ‘stranger’ is defined by the remoteness we may feel from those others who move and live near us. A 16-year-old student from Finland might find it easier to connect with another 16-year-old from Spain or Turkey than a 50-year-old unemployed factory worker from his or her hometown, living in relative physical proximity. Surrounded by images and fragments of information about others, we are left to our own imagination and assumptions or, just as often, to our prejudices and stereotypes. The Living Library gives people an opportunity to speak in private and personally to a ‘stranger’ in a structured, protected, yet practically unconstrained environment. This framework is probably one of the main reasons for the popularity and success of the Living Library: the readers can predict the ‘risk’ they are taking by meeting the ‘other’.

The Living Library became part of the Council of Europe’s programme in 2003 and the driving force behind its inclusion was the realisation that human rights cannot be defended and promoted by legal texts alone. There is – today more than ever in the recent past – a need to raise awareness among the wider public about the importance of human rights to the fabric of our democracies and the responsibility of the individual citizen in realizing abstract human rights in his or her everyday



interactions. Through its 40-year history, the Council of Europe's youth sector has gathered unique and important experience in the field of non-formal and intercultural education based on the principles of human rights, pluralist democracy, and cultural diversity.

With this publication, the Council of Europe aims to continue its support and promotion of the methodology of the Living Library. We believe that the Living Library remains a uniquely useful tool to foster peaceful coexistence, understanding, and tolerance and to bring people closer together in mutual respect for the human dignity of the individual – whether as books, readers, or organisers.







## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to provide support and direction to Living Library organisers in Europe. The guide has drawn upon the knowledge and experience of Living Library organisers from across the continent, many of whom have been working with the concept for over 10 years. We believe that the knowledge and experience presented here will be of value to new organisers, helping them to plan, manage and deliver successful Living Library projects. In addition, we believe that the examples of best practice we have included will improve and strengthen Living Libraries everywhere.

The guide has been designed to be flexible and can either be read from cover to cover or on a chapter-by-chapter basis. However, we would recommend that new organisers read the guide in its entirety in order to ensure that the methodology of the Living Library is fully understood.

The guide is presented in four sections:

- The History and Methodology of the Living Library**
- The Main Ingredients**
- The Living Library in Practice**
- Resources and Materials**

We recommend that this guide is used in conjunction with the Council of Europe Living Library web portal: [www.eycb.coe.int/LivingLibrary/WebForms](http://www.eycb.coe.int/LivingLibrary/WebForms) and the Human Library website: [www.humanlibrary.org](http://www.humanlibrary.org)

Please note that until 2010, all activity took place under the name Living Library. In 2010 the Living Library Organisation was renamed the Human Library Organisation and since then all activity in the UK and US used this name. It is worth remembering that the Human Library and Living Library are the same project, with the same aims and values. Throughout this publication the term Living Library will be used to refer to the overall concept and general events, unless expressly referring to the Human Library Organisation and its specific projects.





**Section I:**

**The History and Methodology  
of the Living Library**



## WHAT IS THE LIVING LIBRARY?

The Living Library is an equalities tool that seeks to challenge prejudice and discrimination. It works just like a normal library: visitors can browse the catalogue for the available titles, choose the Book they want to read, and borrow it for a limited period of time. After reading, they return the Book to the library and, if they want, they can borrow another.

The only difference is that in the Living Library, Books are *people*, and reading consists of a *conversation*.

The Living Library attempts to challenge prejudice by facilitating a conversation between two people: Books and Readers. Books are volunteers who have either been subjected to discrimination themselves or represent groups or individuals within society that are at risk of suffering from stereotype, stigma, prejudice or discrimination. Living Books often have personal experiences of discrimination or social exclusion that they are willing to share with Readers. Most importantly, Books give Readers permission to enter into dialogue with them, in the hope that their perspectives and experiences will challenge commonly held perceptions and stereotypes and therefore affect the attitudes and behaviours of wider society.

Those of us who attempt to initiate programmes that promote intercultural dialogue are frequently faced with the challenge to come up with something innovative. We are constantly looking for something that can attract the attention of many and make a real difference to those involved. The Living Library is an innovative approach to equality and diversity because it addresses the broad subject of prejudice without emphasizing one specific case over others. At the same time, it manages to successfully navigate around some of the sensitivities that accompany anti-prejudice work, while maintaining an element of fun and interaction that makes the project immensely appealing to both potential organisers and participants. This is achieved by creating a safe environment for Readers and Books to engage in open dialogue whose explicit aim is to discuss topics that in almost any other setting would be considered too delicate. At the Living Library these discussions are possible, indeed, they are surprisingly easy. Becoming one half of that exchange is a rare privilege and one that leaves no one who experiences it unaffected.



The simplicity of the Living Library means that it is flexible enough to be used in a wide variety of settings and it is particularly suitable for use in public spaces and buildings, festivals and large gatherings. Wherever it is employed, as long as the decision to organise an event is motivated by the desire to challenge prejudice, the Living Library has the potential to change the feelings, perceptions and opinions we all hold about each other. The diversity of our communities is celebrated, the language and labels of stereotype are undermined and challenged, and new attitudes and behaviours are shaped by new and personal experiences. Above all, the Living Library has the potential to affect the way we all see the world, each other, and the future that we share.