



Education

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# Scan

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# Scan

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Liane Pfister is a teacher librarian at Wollongong High School of the Performing Arts (WHSPA). In this article, Liane describes her experiences with the Wollongong City Council's *Living Books* Program.

# Living books: Celebrating diversity through collaboration

## What is the *Living Books* program?

The concept of a *Living Library* originated in Denmark in 2000. A group of young anti-violence activists thought they would *loan* themselves out at Rock Festivals, so that people could hear their stories and learn firsthand about people from different backgrounds. The idea has now become popular around the world, and in Wollongong, the Community Development Team from the City Council runs the program under the name *Wollongong Living Books*.

*Wollongong Living Books* involves a diverse range of volunteers with various cultures, faiths, genders, ages, abilities, sexualities, occupations and life



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*The shelves of libraries are stacked with stories but on the street walk many untold. These 'living books' are so much a part of us that we hardly ever stop and think of them. Years of conditioning have taught us to think about stories as only being important on a page or screen. We overlook the fact that our everyday lives are stories worth sharing...to celebrate diversity, to challenge stereotypes, to simply inform and enthrall us.*

Living Book Volunteer

experiences. The *books* come with stories to share that are not conventional everyday tales. Instead of sitting down and reading a written book, the *reader* sits down and listens to the *book's* story, and can interact and ask questions as well. By hearing the story from a real person, the *reader* can feel the



*Living Library:* Wollongong City Council



WHSPA students learning from real life in the library



emotions and the truth of the story. It puts a face to a story and makes it real. *Living Books* is an opportunity to bring together people who would not usually meet or share their life stories.

An [overview](#) of the program can be found on YouTube.

### WHSPA 2015

The list of *Books* in WHSPA's 2015 event gives an indication of the variety of *books* out there:

*Rising above* - overcoming sexual abuse and domestic violence

*In the shadow of the Black Dog* - triumph to tragedy, a descent into depression

*Things can change* - fear was my only certainty

*Mick on wheels* - musician in a wheelchair

*I have ADHD: an adult story* - attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

*When life gives you lemons, make lemonade!* - high school dropout to success

*The F# word* - finding feminism

*It's not black and white* - the story of a Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta woman

*When will I grow up?* - finding my path as a lesbian mother

*Elizabeth's story* - the journey of a Sudanese refugee

*Taking the power back* - living with anxiety and depression

### How does *Living Books* work in high school?

Every school does a slight variation on the theme, but the event typically runs on one day, and usually for a specific group. At WHSPA the target audience is Year 9, as it is understood that this is a significant time in the life of adolescents and a time when they formulate their lifelong views.

Contents	Editorial	Reflections	Teaching & learning	Research	Curriculum support	Share this	Resource reviews
<p>Organisationally, this program can be challenging because of the number of students involved. The large year group is usually split into three smaller groups of 40 to 50 students. Each group comes to the library to meet the <i>books</i> during one period. Each student has a chance to listen to two <i>books</i> for around 30 minutes, in groups of about five. Students are, of course, encouraged to ask questions and be part of the conversation.</p> <p>An essential part of a successful day is the preparation. About two weeks before the event, the Wollongong Council program coordinators come to the school to explain the event and give the Year 9 students an overview of the <i>books</i> that will be available. The students then choose their <i>books</i> and the coordinators compose a timetable.</p> <p><b>Is it valuable for students?</b> The most rewarding part of the <i>Living Books</i> event is seeing the enthusiasm of the students afterwards, especially the students who are usually not very engaged at school. I have recently revisited some student interviews that I filmed after the 2008 pilot program at Bulli High School. I was delighted all over again by the student's overwhelmingly positive response.</p>		<p>To quote one young student: <i>It's like, wow!</i> On the day of the pilot program, some of the Year 9 students took the day off because they weren't keen to be involved. The following day they heard all about it from their friends, and a number of them came and asked if I could run it again.</p> <p>The Bulli High School event was a significant event for one of the <i>books</i> too. He was a former student, who spoke about his difficult experiences at the school as a gay person. He had mixed feelings about returning to the school, but at least the library had been a place where he had felt safe when he had been at school. It was a difficult and emotionally draining day for him but he did make a difference for some of our students who were struggling with similar issues – they realised that they were not alone.</p> <p>Other, typical, comments from students about what they learnt from the <i>books</i> have included:</p> <p><i>Be who I am, no matter what</i></p> <p><i>Inspirational!</i></p> <p><i>Don't take life for granted</i></p> <p><i>You get to know how it feels to be in their shoes</i></p>					
							<p>the event, students are identified as needing support or are a concern, so the appropriately skilled staff member takes over.</p> <p>It was essential for me to build collaborative relationships with these staff members in order for them to understand the importance of this program and its effect and value for students. Through effective partnerships, I was able demonstrate how teacher librarians are able to contribute to student learning by assisting teachers to create unique learning experiences and positive learning outcomes.</p> <p><b>Community engagement and partnerships</b> Teacher librarians are well placed in schools to engage in community partnerships, and successful coordination of community events raises the profile of the school library within the school community. This partnership also includes learning from every event and implementing new ideas. Part of the <i>Wollongong Living Books</i> program is a debriefing meeting with the <i>books</i> and Council staff at the end of the day. This is essential, as the event is quite emotional and draining for the <i>books</i>. They have a chance to discuss how it went, and raise issues or concerns they had.</p>

Advice for improving future events is often given. For example, a valuable suggestion made this year was that more education should be given to all staff regarding what *Living Books* is about so that student experiences with the books can be incorporated in curriculum planning and built into learning activities.

Suggestions for relevant curriculum links for Stage 5 include:

#### PDHPE:

- Outcome 5.1-valuing difference and diversity
- Outcome 5.2-responding positively to challenges and strengthening resiliency
- Outcome 5.3-developing equal and respectful relationships and affirming diversity

#### Geography K-10

**Human Wellbeing** GE5-6: *A student analyses differences in human wellbeing and ways to improve human wellbeing*

A *Living Books* event could also be run for Stage 6 as a way of providing access to primary research for students completing a Personal Interest Project in [Society and Culture](#) or an Independent Research Project in [Community and Family Studies](#).

#### Conclusion

Participating in a *Living Books* event is a very powerful experience for both the reader and the book, and an excellent opportunity for whole school collaboration around the school library. In the words of one of the books,

*Our challenge is to prepare young people to not only survive in this world, but also transform it so that it is always locally viable, personally meaningful and socially beneficial. I see the Living Library as a vital tool in assisting young people to grow into competent, democratic citizens who understand the complexities and tensions of life and the need to reconcile incredibly diverse views and lifestyles.*

At WHSPA, we look forward to continuing our partnership with the program as a way of promoting understanding of difference and celebrating diversity and resilience in our community.

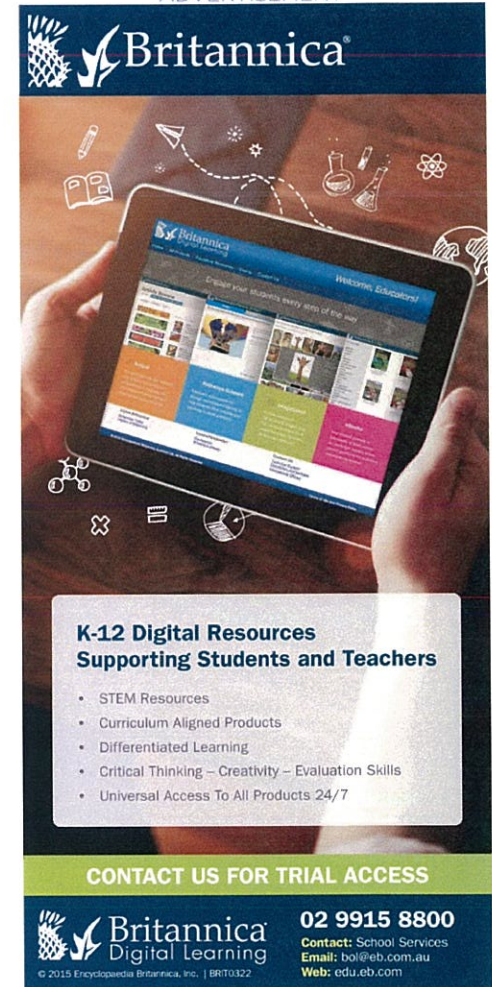
#### References and further reading

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