

# Enhancing Students' Generic Skills through Active Learning and Mentoring: A Qualitative Study of the Effectiveness of a Human Library Project

*Miki Yamashita*

**Abstract** *This qualitative study explores the effectiveness of an active learning project for a group of two male and four female Japanese students in my seminar course in the economics department of a small liberal arts college in suburban Tokyo, Japan. The students created and implemented a project called the Human Library (HL), designed to improve their generic skills, especially the relational ones essential to collaborative and healthy human relationships. The importance of active learning and mentoring to the project are described, and an account of the main HL event is provided. Relational cultural theory is then used to evaluate the project's impact on the students' generic skills. It is concluded that its effects were generally positive, but that improvements to the project and to the data collection about it are possible and desirable.*

**Key words:** Human library, active learning, mentoring, relational cultural theory

**Interdisciplinary Fields:** Mentoring, Higher Education, Communication Studies

## **1. Introduction: Generic Skills, Active Learning and Mentoring in Higher Education**

There is a growing perception in higher education that students need to be equipped not just with academic skills (such as those developed through attending lectures and the completion of research and report writing assignments), but also generic ones that will also continue to be useful to them after graduation. What are these skills? According to Clayton, et al. (2003), they include expertise in fundamental areas such as people-related skills, conceptual/thinking skills, personal skills, skills related to the business world, and skills related to the community. Many have concluded that traditional academic educational techniques alone cannot enhance such skills to the fullest, and that institutions of higher education need to include other approaches to learning in what they offer to their students in terms of teaching.

One important alternative methodology is active learning. This has been

promoted as a practice that goes beyond traditional pedagogies such as the banking concept of education whereby the teacher transmits knowledge to students to guide them toward an instructional goal (Freire, 1972, 1999). The aims and techniques of active learning differ markedly from this approach. Its goal is to enhance students' perceptive, ethical, social, educational, cognitive, and experiential competencies—in other words, their generic skills (Monbu-kagaku-sho, 2012). Some have sought to trace the lineage of this pedagogy back to the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1983), in whose writings they discern the belief that students' learning occurs through communication and interaction with their teacher and classmates in the context of purposeful activities such as group work, presentations, and discussion, which can of course be based on more traditional activities like academic research. Whatever its lineage, it cannot be denied that the central feature of the active learning approach is that it is process oriented rather than goal oriented.

In such a context, the role of the teacher undergoes a subtle redefinition, and the need for new instructional skills becomes apparent. Perhaps the most important ones here are mentoring skills, which are necessarily rather more wide-ranging than those required by conventional teaching. True mentoring is “a complex process that supports a mutual enhancement of independent and critically reflective thinking” (Galbraith, 2003, p. 9), so rather than merely giving advice, mentoring aims to enhance not only the total teaching and learning process, but also to create a supportive and open academic climate (Galbraith, 2003). Since the aim of mentors is to support, guide and provide counsel to the less experienced to facilitate their careers (Kram, 1988), there is no single template for them to follow; mentoring relationships in fact vary considerably in context and communication style. According to the definition offered by Zelditch (1990), mentors can combine a variety of roles, including those of: *advisors*, people with career experience willing to share their knowledge; *supporters*, who can give emotional and moral encouragement; *tutors*, who can give specific feedback on a student's performance; *masters*, in the sense of an employer to whom the student is apprenticed; *sponsors*, sources of information about and aid in obtaining opportunities; and *role models*, demonstrating by example the kind of person an academic should aspire to become.

Of all the opportunities for learning available in institutions of higher education, it is perhaps the seminar that offers the most favorable conditions for the development of students' generic skills through active learning and the presence of a mentor. It is for this reason that I began to experiment with these approaches and decided to use the Human Library project as a means to enhance the generic skills of my seminar students. This paper describes the implementation of that project and assesses the degree of success that it enjoyed based on the following research question; in what ways the students' generic skills were enhanced through active learning and mentoring during Human Library project.

## **2. Developing Generic Skills, Active Learning and Mentoring in an Undergraduate Seminar**

At my university in suburban Tokyo, students entering the third year of their four-year program are encouraged to choose a seminar course that lasts for two entire academic years. The format of the seminar is not like that of other content courses in which students spend their time listening to lectures, making notes and taking exams in a large classroom. Instead, a small group, ranging from six to twelve in number, works closely together for their final two undergraduate years. This allows for a much interactive environment in which students can create deeper and warmer relationships with their peers as well as with the teacher offering the seminar.

Over the course of the first three years that I conducted such a seminar, the feeling grew in me that my students' generic skills were not improving as much as I wished, and I was also aware that the atmosphere of the group was not as collaborative as it could have been. I gradually realized that my approach was lacking in certain ways. I had begun by using traditional methods in structuring the seminar: third year students were encouraged to read textbooks, write up their findings and present them to the group; then, in the fourth year, they each decided on their own topic for research and wrote a thesis on it. Those with experience of guiding students in such enterprises will know that not all of them are equally enthusiastic about the process of writing a thesis, and that these days a supervisor has to be aware of challenges posed by the internet, such as exactly where and how the line between proper citation and plagiarism needs to be drawn. Unless one is very careful, such issues can make the teacher-students relationship a somewhat dry and distant one.

It also began to be clear to me that for a number of my students, the enhancing of their generic skills was at least as important to them as acquiring research and thesis writing competencies, since their proximate goal was not a postgraduate degree, but a career in business. I therefore began to search for activities that would give greater scope for the development of their generic skills, especially relational skills that would increase their capacity to form and sustain collaborative and healthy human relationships (a bonus here being that success would help to alter the atmosphere of the seminar itself). At the same time, I was aware that this turn towards active learning would make new demands on me, in particular pushing me to acquire the mentoring skills that are indispensable to the creation of a genuinely interactive and collaborative learning environment. However, first, I needed to settle on a particular active learning project, and in due course I decided to experiment with the Human Library to see whether it would meet the needs of my students.

### **3. The Nature and Advantages of the Human Library as an Active Learning Project**

The concept the Human Library (HL) originated in Denmark in 2000 and has since spread to more than 60 countries (Tsuboi, 2012). Its essence is to provide a space for dialogue between a Living Book (a teller, drawn from the local community), and a Borrower who “reads” the Living Book. In selecting the Living Books to be borrowed, the project had the broad aims of reducing prejudice and encouraging mutual understanding between people by combating stereotypical, prejudiced views about age, sex and cultural background.

One of the HL’s principal attractions for me was that it could be organized and implemented by the students themselves, allowing them to take center stage as active learners and leaving me free to focus on the development of their generic skills by taking on the various roles of a mentor described above. The students were to be in charge of the whole project from the planning stages onwards, conducting it themselves and then reflecting on it. They would act as Librarians in seeking out and selecting people willing to act as Living Books by asking them to recount their life experiences. They would then ask them to write out synopses of their stories, being mindful not to cause mental hurt to the Living Books in the process of getting them to disclose their personal stories. The students’ entire experience of working as a team to coordinate the project, together with their individual experiences of interacting with the Living Books, allowed them to create quality collaborative relationships both among themselves and with others outside the group. It was, therefore, hoped that they would have multiple opportunities to develop generic skills, particularly relational ones.

### **4. The Preparatory Stage of the Human Library Project: The Role of Mentoring**

For these reasons I decided to begin working with a group of six third year students (four female and two male) on a trial HL project. This was a test not only for the students, but also for me; during the months when the students were preparing all that was needed for the main HL event in July 2015, as mentor I had to learn to play the various roles noted above, those of *advisor*, *supporter*, *tutor*, *master*, *sponsor*, and *role model*.

As an *advisor*, I used my own career experience to share with the students my understanding of the essential nature of teamwork and leadership. I always had them work as a team and emphasized the importance of reporting and consulting with all its members. I also hosted small parties outside the classroom for team building purposes, and it was noticeable how after every one of these, the team members became closer to one another, which made cooperation between them

easier. The stronger the bonds between them became, the more deeply they were able to learn from one another. I also advised individual students on the kind of leadership roles that they could take on, again based on my own career experience (see section 6-4 below).

As a *supporter*, I tried to give as much emotional and moral encouragement to the students as possible, both when we met and when communicating by email or via *LINE*. Frequent feedback of this kind is important to create and sustain motivation, so I took every chance to comment on their reflection notes, for example, using these opportunities to acknowledge their uniqueness, and individual talents and skills. This helped the students select the particular role for which they were best suited, making them more aware of their unique talents that could be used to make the group work more creatively.

As a *tutor*, I taught them how to write appropriate emails to the Living Books. I first provided them with a sample message that they could use as a template, and then gave specific feedback on the draft messages that they produced themselves before these were sent to the Living Books. Once the process of communication had begun, I kept an eye on it and gave further advice when needed, taking care to praise the students' efforts and making my comments as positive as possible when editing their writing.

As a *sponsor*, I acted to provide sources of information about the project and helped them gain opportunities to prepare themselves to run it effectively. Thus to enhance their understanding of the HL concept by showing them a concrete example of it, I accompanied them to an HL event organized by an NPO on 11 April, 2015. By observing and then reflecting on their feelings about this experience as a group over dinner after the event, they began to see their path more clearly. It was the first time they had ever been to such a meeting and they were all very nervous beforehand, but I knew it was vital for them so I just went ahead with it.

I tried to be a good *role model* by providing an academic environment in which the students could move from theory to practice and back again throughout the project. To achieve such an outcome, the teacher-student relationship needs to be "power-with" rather than "power-over." In a reflection note, I reminded myself of my own experience of taking an online course in the U. S., which had taught me how positive messages from an instructor had motivated me as a student to keep working in a distance learning environment, something that is just as necessary when contact is face-to-face.

As mentor, I constantly monitored both myself and the students to assess the quality of my mentoring; based on the data I collected, I reflected regularly on what was going well and what was not. This helped me to recognize and acknowledge how what I was doing had an influence on my students' behavior; I could then identify what aspects of my mentoring needed to be improved. For example, changes in the students' energy levels were linked to the way I, as mentor,

interacted with them; they stagnated and became reluctant to carry out tasks when given too much help, which I then tried to avoid; in contrast, they worked harder and took more independent action when encouraged by positive words and expressions of appreciation for their leadership from me. It was not always easy to judge exactly how much support to give but, in general, I tried to let them do as they wanted and assisted them only when needed, for example by sharing my own experiences. I also tried to keep balanced personal boundaries with them, since establishing and maintaining the proper personal distance between mentor and students is vital for a healthy relationship.

### 5. Implementing the Human Library Project: The Main Event

The main HL event, involving 43 people, took place on July 12, 2015. On this hot, sunny day, seven Living Books, five from the local neighborhood, and two from further afield, came to the campus. Each Living Book was assigned a classroom to ensure privacy for the group attending the session. Details of the HL schedule and the topics of the Living Books are as follows. Living Books were joined by 10 participants from the university (seven student Librarians [the seventh being a volunteer in his fourth year], two staff helpers, and myself), while the remainder were Borrowers from the local community. Together with an additional student

	Topics of Living Books	11:00- 11:30a. m.	11:45- 12:15p. m.	12:15- 1:00p. m.	13:00- 1:30p. m.	1:45- 2:15p. m.
1.	My struggles & successes: the life of a multi-talented, free spirited man as singer, English tutor, and baker.	A	A	Lunch & mingling (Living Books and Librarians)		
2.	A turning point in my life: A young mother who was bedridden for 3 years by rheumatism right after giving birth to her first child.	B	B		B	B
3.	A gift from heaven: The life of a man who has suffered from ptosis since birth.	C	C		C	C
4.	I am gay: The owner of a gay bar who was born with gender identity disorder.				D	D
5.	What I learned from my sister: A college student recently lost her sister, a professional singer, to cancer.	E	E		E	E
6.	My military service experience: A South Korean international student was conscripted for service in his country's armed forces.	F	F		F	F
7.	Frustrations and Perplexity: A man suffers brain damage but still appears normal, and so fails to gain understanding from people around him.	G	G		A	A

※ A, B, C, D, E, F, G indicate the classrooms used.

and two staff members from the college who volunteered to help them, my seminar students acted not only as Librarians responsible for the smooth running of the HL event, but also as Borrowers who listened to each of the Living Books. As Librarians, the students carried out the following tasks: organizing an orientation session with the Living Books; preparing the space for the HL; manning the reception area; doing the time-keeping, one session being limited to 30 minutes; setting up the lunch tables and providing lunch boxes and drinks; guiding the participants, and so on.

The Living Books and those from outside attending the event judged it to have been a success. The Borrowers were asked to complete a questionnaire before leaving. One of them said, "The thirty minutes went by so fast. I definitely want to come again," while another noted that "It was very nice to meet people whom I had never thought about meeting before and to listen to their stories," while a third reported, "I was encouraged to overcome any difficulties by listening to the Living Book." The Librarians (students) and I also had scheduled a lunch meeting with the Living Books and this provided a good opportunity to mingle and exchange thoughts and reflections on the morning session; then, after the entire event was over, we got together for another reflection session. The Living Books themselves were very positive about the event. One remarked, "It was fun getting to know the students. I wanted to talk more with them," while a second said, "At the beginning, I was nervous, but during the second session, I found that I could in fact tell people what I wanted to pass on to them."

Of course, given that this was the first time that we had trialed a HL event, not everything went smoothly, and the reflection sessions helped us to identify areas for improvement next time. For example, some participants needed more in the way of explanation about the event, so we should have provided an extra Librarian at the helpdesk in order to help them understand the concept of HL event more easily. Also, since some sessions did not attract any Borrowers, we matched up two Living Books who collaborated to improvise a dialogue on a topic of relevance to both of them, such as learning how to live with particular challenges. In spite of such blemishes, though, there were plenty of reasons for saying that, overall, the event itself had been a success.

While the event can be judged to have been valuable in its own right and the response to it pleasing, the underlying rationale of the exercise was in fact to improve the generic skills of the students who organized it and my own performance as mentor, and we must now turn to evaluating whether or not the project achieved these central goals.

## 6. Evaluating the Human Library Project: Data Collection and Analysis

When assessing changes in generic skills, it is helpful to utilize the theoretical framework provided by Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), which was developed in the 1980s by Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues in a therapeutic context (Schwartz, 2013). RCT focuses on five key elements (increased energy, self-esteem, self-awareness, ability to take action, and desire for further connection), that it considers essential if individuals are to initiate and sustain healthy relationships. These elements are often referred to as “The Five Good Things” (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997) and they make RCT a very useful theory for highlighting the techniques that can help students to enhance their generic skills and so serve society better with mindsets attuned to accepting diversity and forming healthy relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds.

The present qualitative study attempts to answer the following research question; in what ways the students’ generic skills were enhanced through active learning and mentoring during the Human Library project. For my research participants, I chose to use all the students in my seminar class (two males and four females) as research participants. Data collection and utilization consisted of their reflection notes, individual and group performance, group discussions on *LINE* (a free application for any group able to communicate by smartphone) and my own reflection notes. The data, once collected, was coded by patterns and labeled by themes for analysis. Analysis of the data identified some elements of change in all of “The Five Good Things” (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997) and the findings for each of these are now presented in sequence.

### 6-1. Students’ energy

Meeting new people (especially the Living Books) and working with other members of the seminar as part of a team certainly had an enlivening effect on the students. At the HL event in particular, they were motivated and inspired by listening to the Living Books, checking them out themselves and listening to a variety of stories about intractable diseases, gender identity disorder, gambling dependency, mental illnesses, and so on. Learning about the lives of the Living Books had a huge and energizing impact on them.

This impact was noticeable not just in increased mindfulness but also in an access of creativity; the students themselves took the initiative in creating a Facebook page to advertise the HL event on July 14, 2015, and they also publicized it via the Social Network Service (SNS) to bring it to the attention of individuals and organizations that might have been interested in it. Communication between group members was also livelier throughout the project; the students created a more cohesive and inclusive atmosphere by sending encouraging words or cute

emoticons on *LINE* to one another. Given the many other demands on them, they could not all devote their time and effort to the project fully, but when they felt they were perhaps not doing enough, they checked on one another via *LINE* and tried to make up for their diminished involvement by supporting and helping others in their tasks. Thus, increased energy levels helped them to develop healthier relationships.

### **6-2. Self-esteem**

Conducting the HL project clearly enhanced the students' self-esteem, as reflected in their rising levels of confidence in themselves. At the HL itself, I witnessed this happening as they interacted with the Living Books and staff members. They betrayed an initial nervousness when meeting new people, especially Living Books like the hostess of a gay bar who came from backgrounds they had never previously encountered, or had even thought of encountering. But they gradually relaxed and some of their reflection notes indicated how they had enjoyed the experience and now felt it would be easier than before for them to interact when meeting people for the first time.

The students also gained confidence through making presentations to others. On the first occasion they met each of the Living Books, they made a presentation to explain the purpose of the HL project to them. They also presented with me at an academic conference called, SIETAR (Society for Intercultural Education) Japan. One student wrote in a reflection note about how "We improved our presentation skills by presenting together," while another commented that "We always work together. It helps to reduce the distance between us." Their collaborative work helped one another to gain their generic skills, too.

Another crucial change occurred as they learned how to write email messages in the appropriate manner by using honorific terms. Japanese culture is rather formal and hierarchical, and people are expected to write to one another in an appropriate manner, paying special regard to whether the other person is senior in age or status, or is a guest, when making initial contact. Generally speaking, students are not sufficiently well trained to be able to write in the correct manner and so may unwittingly give offence to the recipients of their emails. When this is revealed, a student's self-esteem can suffer.

Improving the students' writing skills certainly helped to boost their self-esteem. As one student wrote in a reflection note, "I gained team work, positive attitude and manner of speaking and writing toward older people through the HL project." But it would also, of course, be beneficial to them in terms of future job-hunting; recruiters evaluate positively those students who can talk and write in the appropriate manner and form.

### **6-3. Self-awareness**

Students certainly gained greater self-awareness as a result of participating in

the project. One of them in particular made considerable progress here. At the beginning of the project he was something of a passenger in the group, not taking on any role and not even replying to messages from other group members, including myself. This was frustrating, but we tried not to react negatively to his attitude, acting mindfully instead by continuing to email or send him messages on *LINE*. Whenever he still did not reply, I talked with him in person, and this gradually had an effect. He began to build positive relationships with his team members and started to work better. He acknowledged that he had not made much of a contribution at first, but became more aware of his attitude and changed it as a result of support from his fellow team members. His reserved personality meant that he preferred to avoid taking risks; however, he was responsible for working with a Living Book who had had ptosis from birth, and who told him that it was a gift from heaven. This had a big impact on the student, and he learned something about the importance of liking himself and being confident, which changed his frame of reference and allowed him to become more positive about himself. He wrote in his final report that he had become better able to understand himself over the course of the project. Another student also shared with me how he had changed his frame of reference in respect of homosexuality by listening to a Living Book. He told me that he noticed his own prejudice on the subject, and this experience had made him more objectively aware of his frame of reference. At the same time, he learned the importance of discovering diversity in society.

For students to increase their self-awareness and change their frames of reference, self-reflection is necessary. Frequent feedback from me on their reflection notes helped them to think again about what they had experienced while working as a team. I also assigned a final written report in which they had to reflect on their own performance, on the way the team had worked, on what they had gone well and what had not, and what they had learned from the project. I also asked them to evaluate and write positive assessments of the other members of the team.

#### **6-4. Ability to take action**

One student wrote in her final report that she learned how to take a leadership role by showing consideration for other team members. This student was very responsible and efficient; every time we had a meeting, for example, she wrote up the minutes and sent them to me the same day. She was definitely a leader in the group, but was too reserved and needed some encouragement to take on an overtly leadership role. We talked about how she might become more comfortable about doing this, and I outlined some different leadership styles. She said that she could best take on a leadership role by asking her team members if there was anything she could do to help, rather than becoming a recognized director of the team. In other words, she was most comfortable leading the group from behind.

Other students also made contributions to the team by finding suitable Living

Books. This was the hardest part of the project, but they took the initiative in asking around and found some people willing to taking on the role of a Living Book. By advertising the HL event and in particular by creating a Facebook page, as noted above, they attracted a response; one Living Book volunteered after viewing the Facebook page. He was the one of the first Living Books in Japan and so was able to give us much useful advice about running the event. The students also created posters and delivered 1000 fliers in the neighborhood of the college. Observing them in action demonstrating their autonomy and taking risks was very pleasing.

#### **6-5. Desire for further connection**

Through the project, the students demonstrated an enhanced desire for further connection as a result of their involvement. Both orally and in their final written report they let me know that they were now more willing to connect with strangers to broaden their worldview. For example, one student wrote that the HL could serve as a beginning for solving many other problems including school violence, aging issues, and dependence/addiction issues, since listening to other people in this way was a very powerful incentive for change. One commented as follows:

In order to learn from people from different cultural backgrounds, we need to talk in person. It is important to see their facial expressions and discern what they are thinking. The HL allows us to do that. If I had not experienced the HL, I am sure that I would never have felt like this.

The Living Books' courageous attitude in facing reality made a huge impact on the students, and stimulated them to talk more freely about themselves; after the event, one student told me about his own experience of having intractable disease, while another reflected on her experience of working with her Living Book as a partner and said, "I want my Living Book partner to know about me; it is not enough that I only got to know about her."

The students were also clearly proud of having provided this opportunity for the benefit of the community and were enthusiastic about continuing the HL program into the future to sustain the links between the college and the community. The HL project also stimulated their desire for further connection by providing multiple opportunities for communication, both via the internet and *LINE*, and face-to-face when reporting to, and consulting with, the group. The whole process helped the students to enhance their generic skills and this also stimulated their desire for further connection.

### **7. Limitations of the Study**

The major issue here concerns the dual role that I played in this project as mentor and as researcher. Switching between these is not easy, and it could have

been confusing to the students. In responding to my researcher's persona, students may not have felt sufficiently comfortable to be entirely open with me when talking about their HL project experiences. I really needed to conduct individual interviews with the students to uncover their true feelings about their work as a group, and to get their real views on my own interventions during the project. Additionally, conducting focused group interviews would have been helpful, since these would have given the group the chance to reflect on the HL event collectively and could have generated more insights. Reorganizing the data chronologically would also have been helpful in revealing how and to what extent my mentoring helped to reduce students' uncertainty about team-working.

## 8. Implications for the Future Research

In order to enhance students' generic skills, especially their relational skills, the differences between how a teacher mentor students and how students mentors other students need to be investigated to promote more effective student learning. If future research demonstrates that student-student mentoring is more effective than teacher-student mentoring, I will need to train students to act as mentors for the next generation of students in my seminar class as we carry the HL project forward.

## 9. Conclusion

Active learning, especially project based learning, is not easy to facilitate, but it is effective in enhancing students' generic skills, especially the relational skills that are vital in fostering collaborative and healthy human relationships. The experience of mentoring students during the HL project taught me a great deal more than I had expected; in fact my students acted, albeit unwittingly, as my teachers, which was very rewarding. Learning is only really possible when people are connected, and the closer such connections, the better the quality of the learning. For the students, the whole experience brought about very considerable changes in their outlook, and it is also safe to conclude that the HL project clearly resulted in the enhancement of their generic skills, and particularly the relational skills that are essential for global citizenship and leadership.

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### **Autho's Profile**

\*Miki Yamashita, Ed. D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Economic Studies and Business Administration at Reitaku University.

