The Living Library for Learning (L3)

The Human Library was started by an international organization in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2000. Today, the concept has evolved into a social change event with participating organizations in more than 70 countries. The concept was designed to challenge “stereotypes and prejudices” through dialogue between the “readers” and their ‘human books” (humanlibrary.org).

The human books are volunteers with different backgrounds and social experiences who are “on loan” to their readers for face-to-face conversations during organized events. These conversations help the readers gain different perspectives on life and society and help break down barriers and address implicit bias. Readers can interact with volunteers from groups or cultures with whom they may have had little or no previous experience. The list of available “human books” is continuously growing and includes stories shared by people who live with developmental disorders, people from a wide spectrum of religious beliefs and experiences, people who cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), people who are refugees, and so many more. Readers “check out” a human book in one of these categories and spend from 15 minutes to an hour conversing with the person and learning from their experiences.

Where traditional authors may have done extensive research about a topic or have lived the topic but must convey their story through the lens of a book, human books have lived the topic and are physically present to share their experience. Not only can students learn perspective, depth, and context of knowledge, but they also can experience authenticity of content and can build a connection with these human books, thus expanding their social capital.

Traditional books transmit information to readers but do not allow for much interaction or exploration, so the Georgia Tech Commission on Creating the Next in Education (CNE) recommends adapting the Human Library concept to higher education in general. This project aims to develop a Living Library for Learning (L3) that affords students a very different learning experience. A traditional book, regardless of whether in paper or some electronic format, only conveys information to its readers in a linear, one-dimensional way. Readers can be semi-passive recipients of information and are dependent on the author to convey that information in a way that is meaningful.

Students may understand that a traditional book is a product of a vast amount of behind-the-scenes work. Such understanding is implied and would become explicit and more experientially powerful when students learn about the process directly from the storytellers themselves. Authors of physical books research, digest, organize, and write about a topic, saving the reader from countless hours of doing individual research. In contrast, a human book can convey detailed information to its readers in a much more experiential manner.

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Learning from human books could help Georgia Tech students in whole-person development. Georgia Tech equips students with strong technical skills through rigorous academic programs but also strengthens students’ soft skills like communication, inter- and intrapersonal skills, career development, management, and problem finding, among others.

Borrowing from the spirit of the Human Library, Georgia Tech could recruit a collection of human experts for particular subject areas so that students could combine learning a discipline with learning about a discipline, both in innovative ways. Georgia Tech already has world-renowned content experts in various areas. This project will provide students with access to individuals with career-spanning life experience out in the field.

For the initial experimentation, the candidate subject area needs to be a well-defined area that has broad appeal. The topic should benefit students from all majors yet should also be specific enough so that a manageable size of experts could be easily identified and recruited.

Intellectual property (IP) is an example of one subject area that could meet both conditions and is a topic that every Georgia Tech student needs to understand so that they will be able to adequately protect personal creations and scholarship through patents, copyrights, and trademarks. In addition, an L3 collection on IP could support many Georgia Tech campus programs, including the Vertically Integrated Projects (VIP) Program, Integrated Program for Startups (IPS), VentureLab, Enterprise Innovation Institute (EII), CREATE-X, the Technological Innovation: Generating Economic Results (Ti:GER®) program, and the InVenture Prize™ program.

Many IP experts are already involved in general IP education at Georgia Tech. Since 1946, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office has designated the Georgia Tech Library as the only Patent & Trademark Resource Center for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.
(PTRC) in Georgia, which indicates that library staff must be available to help inventors find the information they need to protect their intellectual property. The library also has an IP attorney on staff to support general IP education on campus. There are also Georgia Tech faculty members, engineers who are patent agents, and alumni involved in our IP education. These experts contribute to the community through teaching IP courses, serving as guest lecturers, leading IP initiatives, and offering office hours to help students. Conceivably, the initial collection of human books on IP could be recruited from these subject experts.

To facilitate the collection of human books and the interactions between them and their readers, the Georgia Tech Library is strongly positioned to be the lead unit. As part of the Library Next project, Georgia Tech Library buildings soon will have the space and technology needed for readers to converse with their books both in person and virtually. The Georgia Tech Library also has the necessary resources to launch an IP-focused pilot of this innovative endeavor with minimum cost.

Given the above considerations, a one-year pilot program would allow Georgia Tech to experiment with whether a Living Library for Learning (L3) could help students learn both cognitive and soft skills.

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