

*From Solitary to Shared Experience: Lessons from Running a
University-wide Reading Program*

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Abstract

Reading in the second or foreign language is not an easy task for students, but it is undoubtedly an effective way to enhance students' reading proficiency. Voluntary reading programs are commonly used to foster ESL/EFL learners' leisure reading habit to enhance their language proficiency, but the challenge lies in encouraging students to participate in such programs. The READ@PolyU common reading program is the only one of its kind in the public higher education sector in Hong Kong. A partnership between the university's English Language Centre and the Library, this campus-wide reading program rallies the student population to read a common English language book each year, and hosts a series of events to engage student readers. While it takes its cues from similar reading programs in the west (namely US and Canada), it has, over the past seven years, evolved into a unique offering in the city of Hong Kong. This session aims to offer insights on the challenges and logistics of running a common book reading program from both a language and a library perspective. Learn from the language teacher's experience on book selection and reading group development, and from the librarian's experience with administering publicity, outreach, and logistics of the reading program. Program evaluation and outcomes on students' reading and university experience will also be presented to show how reading can both be transformed from an independent activity to an interdependent learning experience in such a program.

Keywords: recreational reading, reading habit, reading program

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Introduction

The campus-wide reading program of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, READ@PolyU, is poised to enter its ninth consecutive year of programming in September 2019. Piloted in 2011, it remains the only program of its kind among the universities in Hong Kong. Since its inception, READ@PolyU has selected eight common books in English, hosted over 70 events, and engaged over 15,000 students in the effort to cultivate a student reading habit and bring a love of reading to campus. The authors wish to share the lessons learned from running a community reading program in the Asian and L2 context.

The READ@PolyU program was modelled after the One City One Book programs that have evolved over the last twenty years. Various known as community-wide reads, city-wide book clubs, or state-wide reading campaigns, these projects engage everyone to read the same book and to join other readers in talking about it. The original One City One Book program was initiated in 1998 by librarian Nancy Pearl of the Seattle Public Library and Washington Center of the Book. The program sought to scale the interest generated by book discussion groups and author events to the city level (Pearl, 2005; Rogers, 2002). The program has since been introduced across the U.S.A. and around the world.

Like the One City One Book programs, READ@PolyU rallies the student population to read a common English language book, and brings readers together in a series of engagement events. It shares with other reading programs the common book, reading groups, book giveaway, seminars, film screenings, and author talks. In addition to these components, READ@PolyU also features a Library Exhibition, writing contest, and integration in the university curriculum via a freshman seminar.

Our Context

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) is one of eight government-funded universities in Hong Kong and the third largest by enrolment. Of its 30,000 students, the majority (57%) are enrolled in undergraduate programs, with the rest in postgraduate master's and doctorate programs. An overwhelming majority of students (79%) are local Hong Kong students, 15% from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Macau, and the remaining from overseas countries.

Although the majority of students are ethnically Chinese, they do not share the same levels of English proficiency. English is widely considered a second language for Hong Kong and Macau students, for whom Cantonese is a first language, and a foreign language for Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese students whose L1 is Mandarin or other Chinese dialects. For some of these students, arrival at the university, where English is the medium of instruction, can be a culture shock.

Students are not confident readers in general. In 2017, the majority of incoming freshmen (84%) reported being first generation university-goers. There is clear evidence that they face multiple barriers to adapting to the new linguistic, educational, and cultural environment and in mixing with students from different backgrounds. Of incoming students, only 31.6% rated themselves as being strong, or very strong, in English.

Students overwhelmingly view themselves as non-readers, and usually feel guilty or apologetic about not reading on a regular basis in either their L1 or L2. Students tend to hold common misconceptions about reading, such as the need to finish one book before starting another; that reading only applies to classical literature, and that reading non-literary genres such as comics and magazines, or that any form of online reading, do not constitute “real” reading. In other words, reading in L2 is a challenge for most students who face barriers in picking up an English book for recreational reading.

Program Goals

Articulating program goals is an important exercise in setting up a reading program. Sharing these goals can help the program gain traction among supporters, sponsors, partners, colleagues, and the reading public. Librarians have differed in their view as to what can be achieved in a community read program. Nancy Pearl, the librarian who started One City One Book, expressed the potential for such a program to achieve civic goals, with her “hope...that it’s a unifying experience in a city that’s very, very diverse...a way of bringing people together” (De Leon, 1998). The civic role of a community reading program was echoed by the Commissioner of Chicago Public Library, Mary Dempsey, who said of One Book, One Chicago in 2002: “If you can get a city excited about a book or even disagreeing about a book, then you’ve made a significant contribution to the cultural life of that city” (Rogers, 2002).

At its eight-year inflection point, READ@PolyU decided to step back and revisit its original goal of “bringing a reading culture to campus”. The timing was informed by the formation of a new grouping of librarians and language instructors overseeing program coordination, as well as the university’s process of formulating a new strategic plan. After consultations with students and faculty, the program articulated a new set of goals. The mission to “promote a reading culture via a campus-wide reading program” remained unchanged, but a new and ambitious vision, “to build an empathetic, imaginative, and courageous community of learners and global citizens for whom reading is a source of knowledge and creativity”, was articulated.

By referencing the university’s strategic plan, READ@PolyU has signaled its hope to work with campus stakeholders to meet the shared goals of enhancing the student learning experience and creating an inclusive campus. The new goals have re-energized the administrative team, and in the process of disseminating these goals, it is expected that the reading community will also be inspired.

Program Impact

In addition to documenting the measurable data of a reading program, coordinators can reflect upon ways to capture thick data through participants’ written reflections as well as photographic documentation of engagement.

The Reading Groups, also called Book Chat Groups, were a component of the reading program that the coordinating team felt was significant, if undersubscribed. Some 250 students join a Book Chat Group each year, a modest number when compared with target numbers such as the 2,700 incoming freshmen or the 2,000 books distributed.

While not the only component of the reading program, thick data gathered from participants of these Book Chat Groups helped supply a picture of what was happening inside the closed groups and deliver evidence of how students were actually experiencing this aspect of READ@PolyU.

The coordinating team sought to better understand what was happening in these groups, and the data gathered enabled the program to better connect with its participants. Beginning in 2017, two new questions were built into the post-program survey asking students to identify, and describe the impact of, their “peak moments” in the groups. The questions were “What was the most memorable moment during the Book Chat Groups?” and “How did that moment impact your university or campus experience?” Using two years’ worth of data, the team analyzed the responses, coded them, and drew out four broad themes characterizing the impacts of READ@PolyU. Consistently across the two years, students described how the Book Chat Groups helped them in four domains: (1) a positive introduction to university life, (2) the acquisition of new soft skills, (3) the formation of new friendships, and (4) a motivation to read more.

What are the outcomes of participation in the Book Chat Groups of READ@PolyU?

1 A positive introduction to university life

- “It surprisingly changed my entire image of university life, especially discussion methods. The event opened the first door for me to truly understand the university teaching system.”
- “Gave me the university feeling like I was starting a new life, very different from secondary school.”

2 The acquisition of new soft skills

- “It helped me to try to understand other people more fully, to walk in their shoes and understand why they were different from me.”
- “The discussions were thought-provoking and helped me think more deeply about different issues during the first semester.”

3 The formation of new friendships

- “I am able to meet some new friends from other faculties and years.”
- “The chance to communicate and build relationships with students who are different from me was really valuable.”

4 A motivation to read more

- “Inspired me to pay more attention to reading both academically and non-academically.”
- “Joining these discussions made me see the power of reading. I want to read more.”

We shared these outcomes widely, in a brief report (with more visuals and fewer words) and a full report (with more thick data). We believe the community, especially Library and the English Language Centre colleagues, as well as members of the READ@PolyU Program Committee and volunteer faculty facilitators, were informed and encouraged by these outcomes.

In addition to enhancing the post-program survey and reporting the results widely, we made an effort to capture images of students in their Book Chat Groups. We took care to schedule a photographer to take snapshots of each of the 30 reading groups, and spent time selecting, sharing, and posting the photos to Flickr, the Library's photo sharing platform.

Book Selection

Selecting the right book is the key to achieving the desired reach and appeal. The selection process begins with a campus-wide call for nomination, followed by a shortlisting process led by the selection committee. The shortlisted titles are then previewed by PolyU students in a mini-survey, in order to understand their responses and glean any insights to be considered in the final selection process. The Program Committee identified the following book selection criteria:

- The book will be in English, preferably less than 300 pages
- It should be engaging for the PolyU community
- It should be accessible, not difficult to read
- It should appeal to students' imagination, and should include some elements of exploration of and reflection on multi-cultural issues
- It should preferably have been adapted for film
- It should preferably have won international and critical acclaim
- Ideally, the author would be available to visit PolyU

Advice on book selection abounds, and the Program Committee has kept to advice relating to making bold choices, and sampling a variety of themes and genres (Laskin, 1995). Young adult fiction titles have been popular, and in the coming year, a graphic novel has been selected.

The Reading Groups

The English Language Centre (ELC) has been promoting reading for pleasure and to enhance students' confidence and English proficiency in the form of an interest club called the ELC Reading Club. Students voluntarily join small reading groups (4 to 6 students), each paired with a teaching staff from the Centre, to read a book of their choice. Groups meet regularly over the semester to discuss the chosen book. Students are offered book coupons as incentives for regular attendance and the writing of a reflection or book review. The ELC Reading Club has been popular among students, and when the university decided to launch the READ@PolyU campus-wide reading program in 2011, it was used as a model for the program's Book Chat Groups.

Leading the discussion group is no easy task. Language teachers tend to be most familiar with the facilitator's role in such small group discussions. If the program requires the involvement of non-language teachers, or those who are less familiar with the facilitation role, extra help should be offered to equip future facilitators to ensure the smooth running of discussions. One easy and important intervention is to provide a facilitator resource package that would include a basic plot synopsis, guiding questions, suggested activities to be used in the book discussion groups. Materials or suggested activities can be easily found online, with help from the language teaching staff.

Another important aid is to offer skills training and guidance for faculty members who volunteer as discussion group facilitators. Ways to start a discussion, elicit responses from students, use existing resources, manage group dynamics, and respond to common challenges are essential for successfully leading the discussion groups. Predicting potential issues or conflicting viewpoint that may be elicited in a reading of a specific book would also be useful.

Conclusion

The READ@PolyU program has not always been an intuitive fit for the former polytechnic. The program has, however, been surprisingly welcomed by university students for the opportunities it has afforded to experience the social, cultural, and linguistic novelties of university life, and university learning. In spite of the difficulties, students show that they can, and do, embrace the risk of picking up an English book, reading it, and talking about it with peers and facilitators in the Reading Groups. The program is not without its challenges but has proven a worthwhile endeavor in the Asian L2 higher education context.

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