Social Networking and Reading: A Learning Centre Initiative

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The Background to the Drive to Boost Reading Skills

Historically, reading has always been our students’ weakest skill in English at Dubai Men’s College (DMC) and across the Higher College of Technology in the UAE. With the recent switch from Cambridge PET to IELTS (General Training) as a graduation requirement for Diploma students, the need to focus on boosting the reading skills of our students has become imperative since the reading skills required for the IELTS test can appear much more demanding than those for PET.

Many ideas for tackling this problem have been aired at various meetings. However, it is often felt that whatever approaches are taken to address this problem, there are no ‘quick fixes.’ This view is often based on a number of commonly held preconceptions. Firstly, our students come from a predominantly oral culture which has not attached any great importance to the printed word. Secondly, formal education is still in its infancy in this young country. Thirdly, young men rarely display an avid attachment to reading. Finally, reading in another language is HARD. Overall, it is often felt that we have a student population of very reluctant readers for whom sustained reading for pleasure is an almost alien concept.

The only agreed long-term solution to the problem is to get the students to read more. But given such a student population, how could this be achieved?

Another Perspective: Meet Salem

Midway through the first semester, one of our diploma level students, Salem, approached the Learning Centre’s Reference Desk, with a graded reader, The Fox by D.H. Lawrence, in hand. He very excitedly told us that he had just finished reading this reader out of class time and he wanted to talk to us about it. Here is what Salem had to say: “This book changed my life! . . . When I read it, I forgot everything around me. . . . I want to tell everyone about it and I want to find another book to make me feel the same way.” Needless to say, we were very impressed with Salem’s enthusiasm. We were also encouraged that Salem had selected this book on a voluntary basis with the aim of improving his English outside the classroom.

All of Salem’s comments resonate with each and every one of us who are habitual readers ourselves and take for granted the reasons we still read. Salem’s comments echo our very own first experiences of discovering reading and connecting with books. His experience also describes, to a large extent, how we feel when we read and when we have just finished reading a good book. We become absorbed, we connect, and we want to share our experience with someone else. We tell others about the good books we read. If we have enjoyed a book we look for books on similar topics, or by the same author and we do this by talking to each other, indirectly seeking recommendations.

Our Challenge

Salem’s experience, as a second language learner coming from a ‘reluctant reader’ background was for him incredibly powerful and life enhancing. This feeling is one that we would wish all our students to experience and one which we wish to foster in students like Salem. His comments led us to question a number of key areas in our provision of service to our second language learners in the areas of reading. What is the Learning Centre actually doing to encourage our
students to become eager readers? What can the Learning Centre do to create a reading environment where students will want to read? How can we encourage students like Salem to delve further into the world of reading and to find other books which will provide a similar reading experience? Our challenge over the following months was to find answers to the above questions and to provide a solution. The result – a new Learning Centre reading initiative called, Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC.

Overview

This paper describes the design, implementation and outcome of the Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC initiative as a means of promoting and encouraging our students to read. Making use of Web2.0 social networking technology, the Learning Centre has developed a program whereby students can not only find any graded reader held in the Learning Centre’s collection, but can also enter and share their comments and reviews of these readers, thereby assisting others in the selection of reading materials. The results have proved extremely encouraging. We are now seeing students selecting their own reading materials outside of class time, for pleasure and without pressure.

The Existing Collection and Graded Reader Usage

At the time of initiating the new project, the Learning Centre’s reader collection consisted of over 1,100 individual graded reader titles. This figure does not reflect the number of physical copies held. Many titles are available as class sets or in duplicate format. Readers are shelved by eighteen very broad categories such as ‘Adventure,’ ‘Movies,’ ‘Mystery,’ ‘Biography,’ ‘Romance,’ ‘Sports,’ etc. Within these categories, students browse the shelves and select titles by colour-coded reading levels (Elementary, Intermediate or Advanced) according to their teacher’s advice.

A review of circulation statistics reveals that the Learning Centre’s collection is being utilized. In the first semester of 2007, there were 5060 check-outs, with 78.8% of the collection being borrowed. These positive figures reveal much about the types of graded readers borrowed and student preferences, which is beneficial in terms of future acquisition planning. However, our main concerns were focused rather on how the collection was being utilized by our students and their motivation behind reader selection. We suspected circulation figures were high because, in the majority of cases, selection appeared to be teacher and activity driven. Students borrowed graded readers because they had to complete tasks related to their programs of English study rather than selecting readers to read for personal interest. Many of our teachers also take the approach of borrowing class sets for their students with reading taking place during class time. We concluded that despite the high circulation figures, voluntary reader selection outside of class time was not taking place.

Our initial focus

Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), according to Krashen (2004), takes place when an individual chooses to read a self-selected reading item with minimal accountability and without feelings of anxiety. They need to be reading for pleasure without pressure. Thus, students should be free to choose their own reading material to read at their own rate. Krashen asserts that “[Free Voluntary] Reading is the only way, the only way [sic] we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammatical competence, and the only way we become good spellers” (p. 37).
Encouraging FVR in practice

From Krashen (2004), we extracted three key principles to guide us in the creation of a reading initiative designed to promote FVR.

**Reading for pleasure.** This is of paramount importance in encouraging our students to become efficient readers. We decided to make reading a low anxiety activity with minimal accountability. That is, students were not required to write book reports, make presentations or even finish a particular book if they did not want to.

**Self-selected reading.** In order for FVR to take place, students should not be told which books to read or criticized for their choices. We decided that while guidance might be given, students should essentially be free to choose their own book, level and pace of reading.

**Accessibility.** Our initial focus regarding reading materials was on our collection of graded readers, as they seemed to provide a very accessible way for our students to enter the world of reading for pleasure or Free Voluntary Reading. Our Graded Reader collection, Fiction section and other light reading materials were not set out in a rational, easily accessible fashion. This was addressed when a dedicated ‘Reading Zone’ was created and the graded readers and other leisure reading materials were relocated to this area. The Reading Zone was set up so as to be highly visible, easily accessible and attractive to students.

In addition to these three key principles, Krashen (2004) also highlights other factors which can have an impact on FVR program. By considering these while setting up Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC, we were able to systematically address issues that could potentially affect the success of the initiative.

1. **Libraries:** As our Learning Centre at DMC is a fairly well-stocked library, we could easily answer that need.
2. **Comfort and quiet:** Quiet is not guaranteed, but comfort was introduced in the form of a beanbag seating arrangement within the Reading Zone.
3. **Providing time to read:** As many of our students did not engage in this activity in their own free time at the start of the initiative, teachers were encouraged to allow for reading time in their scheduled Learning Centre slots.
4. **Sharing reading experiences:** This is a natural process for most experienced readers, although students may not always do this spontaneously. In order to overcome this, we encouraged our students to do this using LibraryThing, a Web2.0 social networking application (see below for more details). LibraryThing offers a quick and enjoyable way for students to share their opinions as they know other students will read their reviews, not just teachers.
5. **Direct encouragement:** The benefits of reading were reiterated to the students and a reward system was implemented. Although Krashen does not believe that reward systems have a particularly significant effect on motivating people to read (Krashen, 2004, p. 116-112), we have found that many of our students enjoy having their reading efforts acknowledged through the use of loyalty cards, explained in more detail below.
6. **Reading promotes reading:** as the more skilled a person becomes in reading, the more they are likely to read. This has proved to be the case with a number of our students.
7. **Light reading:** Krashen has noted that even reading comic books and graphic novels has a profound effect on a person’s language ability (Krashen, 2004, p. 91-114). Having already obtained such publications as ‘Manga’ and ‘Anime’ for our Comic Club, we decided to expand our collection of these and of graphic novels and include them in the Reading Zone along with the graded readers.
The Read/Write Social Web – Library2.0

Parallel to implementing the above initiatives as the building blocks of our reading programme, we looked at the possibility of integrating these with some of the new technologies currently being explored within libraries throughout the world. More particularly, we were interested in utilizing social applications to encourage students to be interactive in the reading process.

The Learning Centre’s Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC initiative can be seen as one example of a shift towards delivery of a new type of service model becoming popular within libraries – often referred to as Library2.0. This model is focused on harnessing the collective power of various Web2.0 applications based on user participation to enhance library service delivery. When Web2.0 technologies are mentioned we think of blogs, wikis, RSS Feeds, social tagging and the resultant social tools and services which have emerged only very recently. (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007, pp. 14-15). Examples of these free tools being utilized by our users are: YouTube, Wikipedia, FaceBook, MySpace, Flickr, Blogger, and Delicious (formerly del.icio.us), to name a few. These applications are extremely popular; they are free, easy to use, customizable and are being shaped by the users themselves. Such applications are transforming the way people, including our students, meet, communicate, interact, share, translate and find information. As Stephens (2007, pp. 101-108) highlights with a number of examples, libraries are embracing the potential to incorporate these participatory networks to deliver better services, promote collections and enhance certain programs. The Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC initiative does just that integrating the web-based application LibraryThing.

LibraryThing

LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com) is a social networking application, which allows its users to keep track of, share and compare their personal book collections. It is also a way for users to communicate with people who like, or dislike for that matter, the same books. It is described by the site creators as “the world’s largest bookclub” with, at the time of writing, over 377,000 members and over 24 million books catalogued.

Pulling bibliographic data from Amazon.com and publicly accessible catalogues of 255 world libraries, including the Library of Congress, users can list their own books, organize their own bookshelves, add matching book covers, and review and rate books. Users can ‘tag’ or categorize their own books by entering key words to describe content or subject coverage. It is the use of these tags which provides the opportunity to share and compare books and discover recommended titles enjoyed by others. From a social aspect, LibraryThing is the place to go to connect with others who like reading and have similar reading interests – much like users connect with each other via applications such as Facebook or MySpace (O’Neill, 2007, p. 23).

Reviewing our initial aims of finding ways to encourage our students to read, to promote reading, to improve access to our graded reader collection and to find a way for students to share their reading experiences, LibraryThing appeared a suitable tool upon which to build and support a reading program at college - a program encompassing many of Krashen’s recommendations for encouraging Free Voluntary Reading. A life-time membership account with LibraryThing was set up for a small one-off payment allowing unlimited upload of titles. Details of 1119 graded reader titles were imported with links to Amazon book jackets. Existing tags and assigned reading levels were entered manually to generate our first ‘tag cloud’ (see Figure 2) and to aid in item retrieval. The result was an application integrating the main features of LibraryThing and tailored to suit our initiative. Students can now find a good graded reader, see what others are reading, build a reading list, contribute book reviews and ratings, categorize or tag books using...
simple, familiar vocabulary and vote for their favourite books. Through use of the application, students are encouraged to self-select interesting reading materials and to share their reading experiences with others, which, according to Krashen, are two influential factors in promoting Free Voluntary Reading.

How the Program Works

A simple graphic interface to the Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC program site provides quick and easy access to the new application, which is linked from the DMC Learning Centre home page (Figure 1).

Figure 1.  http://dbm.hct.ac.ae/learningCenter/GetReadingSite/indexLC.htm

From here, students choose a tag to find a book matching their interests through an ever-growing tag cloud of key words generated by students (Figure 2).

Figure 2.  Example of a tag cloud.
Student-entered reviews and ratings can be seen and used as an aid in the selection of a graded reader (Figure 3). Reading lists can be created and printed out.

![LibraryThing](image)

**Figure 3. Example of student entered graded reader review.**

The success of the Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC program rests on the fact that students can tell others about, or vote for the books they like through the site. Rather than entering comments directly into LibraryThing, it was felt that more guidance for students was required through the use of a simple web form where students are invited to tell others why or why they did not enjoy a book. They can include their name if they wish (Figure 4).

![Web form](image)

**Figure 4. Students enter and submit graded reader book reviews.**

At this point, students can also decide on tags to label the book (Figure 5). They are directed to "think of one or two words that will tell others what the book is about." Also, books can be rated
on a scale ranging from ‘Boring’ through to ‘Fantastic.’ All entries are submitted to an email account and all the comments are uploaded to LibraryThing manually within 24 hours.

How the program is being used

All English teaching faculty were informed of the reading initiative and invited to bring their classes to the Learning Centre for an induction session. All Foundations (Higher Diploma and Diploma) students attended during their LC slot. We also had some Higher Diploma and Diploma classes join the initiative. The students were invited to sign up on a sheet in the Reading Zone and were each given a bookmark and a ‘loyalty card,’ which has 10 blank, squares on one side. Each time a student finishes a book, the card is stamped. Students can earn an extra stamp by also completing an online comment on LibraryThing. We retain completed cards to be entered in an end of semester prize draw. Surprisingly many of the students are more interested in collecting stamps than the thought of winning a prize. Students can complete as many cards as they wish. Most reading takes place during a dedicated LC slot, some in the classroom and at least some at home or elsewhere by a few of the students. Some teachers book the beanbag Reading Zone for their classes and model good reading habits by sitting with the students reading a book themselves.

Outcome of the program

To date, a total of 133 book reviews were entered into the system for 86 different graded reader titles. Some students continue to read in their break time beyond the allotted class time. Other students are keen to share their thoughts about books they have read verbally. A few
have shown interest in progressing to the next level of graded reader. Anecdotal evidence is emerging that students are not only becoming more interested in reading for pleasure, but are also beginning to see the benefits which can accrue and why we, as library and teaching professionals, continually emphasize its importance. One student informed us he was very bad at writing and was going to continue reading because “you can see how it all goes together.” Another told us of the new words he had picked up. One student was surprised to realize that there were certain words he had always spelt wrongly and seeing them in his graded reader made an impact on him. This student also mentioned that he found it interesting to see how words were used and organized. Another commented that he liked seeing which words were used together. Many others voluntarily tell us about how many books they have read and what they liked about them.

In terms of the Learning Centre’s initial aims and focus in setting up a reading program where students select their own reading materials without pressure and without feelings of anxiety, implementation of the Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC program has proved successful. The program provides a means for students to express their opinions about books; it has encouraged readers like Salem to delve further into the world of reading by finding books they are interested in through the use of tags and ratings. Students are now able to read others’ reviews and make selections accordingly. Making use of a Web2.0 application such as LibraryThing has resulted in the building of a reading program which incorporates student participation. It has opened up access to the Learning Centre’s Graded Reader collection, and has resulted in creation of a physical reading space in the Learning Centre which students find inviting and are drawn to.

The growth of the program meets all aspects of Krashen’s model for encouraging free voluntary reading. The program has been established and is focused in the library. Readers now have improved access to titles in a comfortable and improved environment that encourages reading. Teachers are providing encouragement and also time for their students to read and we are noticing students coming to the Learning Centre to select their own reading materials outside of class time. Reading is, in fact, promoting reading and the Learning Centre has responded by providing an additional and more diverse range of titles.

The Way Ahead

Despite the clear success of the initiative, there is scope for expansion. One problem encountered, and perhaps the only criticism of the program to date, rests on the fact that student tags, reviews and ratings are submitted to Learning Centre staff before direct upload to LibraryThing occurs. Whilst all students’ comments are entered without teacher correction to spelling or grammar, a review of tags is carried out as a small measure of quality control. Whilst some may consider this a move away from the whole notion behind the freedom of reader generated subject classification, there is argument for a small degree of moderation given the fact that our students are second language learners, and that our main aim in providing a tag cloud of subjects is to improve access to the graded readers. Misspelling of tags and submission of tags such as “interesting” and “quickly,” is seen as problematic in the provision of fully descriptive terms – some students perhaps not fully understanding the reasoning behind our capture of these tags as a means of encouraging others to read the same book and to find other appealing books to read. As the tag cloud grows and as students begin to use this cloud to find other books to read, it is hoped that the necessity to moderate tag entry will reduce.

Now that the program has been running successfully for one semester, there is reason and scope to collaborate with other colleges. Work is underway to integrate tags, reviews and ratings generated by our students into the Learning Centre’s online public access library catalogue. As
many of our college libraries share graded reader titles, there is opportunity to open up linking of student recommendations and reviews through the catalogue interface. The HCT is presently investigating a direct relationship with LibraryThing developers to incorporate these features with our catalogue. Testing is presently underway and if successful, the HCT would be the first library system in the region to do so. In the meantime, there is opportunity for other colleges to follow in DMC’s footsteps by creating individual library accounts and sharing their own collections and reviews via LibraryThing. DMC is presently considering expansion beyond our initial collection of graded readers, to include our growing collections of comic books, graphic novels and fiction titles. We are also pushing ahead with expanding our Arabic collection as research shows that good reading habits in the first language has a spillover effect in the second (Krashen, 2004, p. 146–149). There is also scope for making use of LibraryThing’s group and social features by using inbuilt discussion forums and blog links. There is a planned link from the Learning Centre’s homepage to RSS feeds of new titles added, and also new reviews entered. Students can also connect directly with LibraryThing’s mobile features, to read reviews and find books remotely via their mobile phones. Moving much further ahead, there is also the option to encourage students to generate their own LibraryThing accounts and to build their own collections and libraries of favourite books – much the same as the majority of LibraryThing users do.

Conclusion

As set out in the introduction, the Get Reading Graded Readers @ DMC initiative has a twofold interlinked purpose. One is to encourage Free Voluntary Reading or reading for pleasure among the students by which we hope to impact on the rate of student success in the skill of reading required for their studies. Certainly, the initiative seems to have piqued student interest in reading for pleasure with anecdotal evidence emerging that some students are realizing the value of reading to enhance their mastery of the English language, not only in the field of reading but in other skill areas as well. As for the impact on the skill level of the students, it is too early to make any judgment on that as, according to research, it takes a sustained approach to extensive reading over a period of up to a year for significant improvement to be observed and measured (Krashen, 2004, p. 2). At the moment we are not in a position to be able to make any measurement of improvement in the students’ reading skills as we have not gone the route of setting up any formal method of assessment. Rather, convinced as we are about the many benefits of reading, our intention is to continue to make reading an attractive activity which the students will want to engage in on a regular basis. If this proves successful, then, we feel, improvement in English language skills is practically guaranteed.

References


