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Reading and National Development: What the Universities Can Do*

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'Reading maketh a full man....' (F. Bacon). 'Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body' (R. Steele). These are just two among several sayings about the value of reading. Universities, which are institutions for contributing to the nation's resource of highly skilled and educated manpower for the nation, must recognize the efficacy of reading in the pursuit of its objectives. As a 'centre of excellence' and learning, the university, in order to facilitate the unfolding of individual potential and talents to the utmost possible, must contrive to provide the opportunities, the incentives, and the environment conducive to the development within its sub-culture, for the art and the habit of reading.

It is an undeniable fact that most undergraduates spend 80-90 per cent of their study time reading. What does this activity entail? How effective is their reading? For what intents and purposes is reading pursued? While reading as an activity is generally desirable, the quality of the outcome of reading will depend a great deal upon the skills and the art of reading as well as upon the selection and judgement of the materials read. Most experts agree that reading at the college or university level goes far beyond the mechanics of 'barking at print', word-calling or word-gazing. Neither is reading merely the passive absorption of symbols, facts and ideas. It is now established that reading involves higher level linguistic and cognitive processes and that the processes of reading range from the developmental-language, cognition, decoding - to the complexities of the hierarchy of proficiency levels of the creative specialists and the performance artists.

The non-reader today is a severely handicapped person. Such an individual should be regarded as being among the disadvantaged who must be helped if he/she is to play an effective role in our society. Adult illiteracy could well be a concern of the universities which should undertake studies that could enlighten decision makers about the phenomena of reading non-literacy- its correlates, causes and effects, and how to redress the problem.

What can the universities do in respect of (1) promoting the proficiency and efficiency in reading, and (2) to cultivate the habit of reading among its undergraduates and the university community and the society at large?

This paper will attempt to present some ideas and views with regard to the needs of the universities and offer some suggestions for pilot or experimental projects towards desirable ends.

Promoting Reading Proficiency and Efficiency among Students and the University Community

Developing a Positive Attitude towards Reading

Reading, like all other acquired, developed skills, flourishes with practice. People who read regularly and heavily become skilled at reading. It is therefore appropriate and essential that pedagogical strategies practised by the universities have a reading component for every course in addition to lectures, demonstrations and practical and field work. Such strategies could enhance the growth of strong capabilities and competencies in reading which could well be part of the course objectives and goals for acculturation.

Reading is also one of the best ways in which to learn, particularly if the learning is abstract and ordered, or exotic and vicarious. Learners who combine a strong reading skill with a knowledge of how and where to secure the, reading matter they require, need never reinvent the wheel or rediscover fire; the combined accumulated knowledge of all civilizations is available to them, simply by scanning the right page. But, how do we develop a favourable attitude towards reading?

Several ways have been suggested by various writers. The normal practice of requiring book reports is said to be no longer 'in' as students tend to regard reading as tedious and burdensome rather than pleasurable, worthwhile and satisfying. Methods advocated towards fostering favourable attitudes towards reading include reading games, leisure reading programmes, and sustained silent reading/study as part of the course activity. Other methods which could contribute towards building this positive attitude towards reading include: identification, through rewards, through successful experiences, through adapting to student's individual needs in reading, and through habit building.

Developing Motivation to Read

What motivates people to read? There is a tremendous range of motives for reading for which university students could be made aware of. Schramm's topology is perhaps well-known. Pedagogically, motivation to read had been expressed as a ratio between expected reward and expended effort:

$$\text{motivation} = \frac{\text{expectation of reward to be gained}}{\text{expectation of effort to be expended}}$$

The student's motivation to read can be increased by either raising the value of the numerator or by lowering the value of the denominator.

Many readiness or introductory activities to reading stress the expected reward - such as posing questions, relating the text to students' relevance or interests. The reading material thereby becomes valuable simply because there is something to be gained by it. On the other hand, by introducing some of the difficult concepts and preparing the students for some of the more challenging parts of the reading section, the teacher is lowering the denominator.

This model is suggested even in situations of low reading motivation: asking students to read especially difficult texts, to do follow-up research, or reference reading in the library, or to make detailed stylistic analyses of literary works. Increasing the expected reward could go as far as promising extrinsic reinforcements, such as grades, prizes or release from other course assignments. Decreasing the effort could go as far as simplification of the material, such~ as by providing study guides and outlines to be followed during the reading, or providing specific help like model answers.

A good introduction to a reading assignment can provide students with additional reasons for reading while preparing them for a more pleasurable and less demanding reading experience.

Developing Reading Skills

The ability to read skillfully is often taken for granted where university and college students are concerned, It is generally assumed that those who have made it to the universities are already equipped with the high level reading skills to read widely as well as intensively, effectively and efficiently. While this may be a fair assumption to make in some cases, it should also be admitted that there are considerable differences among undergraduates in the universities today, in so far as their basic skills - notably the ability to read and comprehend well-are concerned.

How can we plan for the appropriate approaches and strategies within the undergraduate programme to help students cope with their reading and to improve their reading efficiency? Understanding the levels of reading skills is a necessary prerequisite by those concerned. The terms 'critical' or 'creative' reading are often used to denote the higher level response to reading materials, but the meanings given to these terms vary from one discipline area to another.

In literature courses, for example, instructors may require their students to respond emotionally to reading: to the rhythm of the language: to the nuances of denotation and connotation attached to the author's words; to tone, to point of view, or even to certain symbols supposedly present in much good writing. Here, the teacher will probably advise students to let themselves go, to let the author carry him away on wings of his words. Thus, highly responsive, stylized reading ability is called for.

On the other hand, in the social sciences, the opposite advice may be just as strongly advocated. Propaganda techniques may be pointed out, as well as the verbal tricks or appeals of the politician or the advertizing media would need to be analysed and noted. Students might be advised not to be taken in and not to allow themselves to be emotionally moved by the verbal trappings of the message. They should be cool, rational readers, not emotionally responsive ones. In this case then, 'suspended judgement' and not 'suspended disbelief' is called for, even though in both cases the term critical reading may be applied.

Perhaps the best available guide to reading skills is Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension, which every undergraduate should be familiar with. For ease of reference, we reproduce below an abbreviated outline of Barrett's Taxonomy.

Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension

1.0 Literal recognition or recall

- Recognition or recall of details
- Recognition or recall of main ideas
- Recognition or recall of sequence

- Recognition or recall of comparisons
- Recognition or recall of cause and effect
- Recognition or recall of relationships
- Recognition or recall of character traits.

2.0 *Inference*

- Inferring supporting details
- Inferring sequence
- Inferring comparisons
- Inferring cause and effect relationships
- Inferring character traits
- Predicting outcomes
- Inferring figurative language

3.0 *Evaluation*

- Judgements of reality or fantasy
- Judgements of fact or opinion
- Judgements of adequacy or validity
- Judgements of appropriateness
- Judgements of worth, desirability and acceptability

4.0 *Appreciation*

- Emotional response to the content
- Identification with characters or incidents
- Reaction to the author's use of language Imagery

This taxonomy could serve as a useful guide to the student to identify the purposes of his reading a given text. In addition to the skills presented in this list, there are also the skills associated with speed reading - scanning, selection, eye-movements, highlighting, text-breaking and so forth - which are necessary for students to acquire in view of the deluge of reading materials they are bombarded with daily.

A number of universities in the US are now stipulating a minimum level of these basic competencies as part of the admission requirement into undergraduate studies. Perhaps such a requirement could also be adopted by our local universities, especially if we have to choose from a large number of students with minimum qualifications for admission.

Reading skills should also be considered as a subject or course at the Form Six level. In this way, undergraduate time would not be wasted for referral to reading clinics or compensatory programmes. Universities, however, should not leave the responsibility entirely to the schools. There should be reading improvement projects within each university to emphasize the importance of reading at tertiary level general education as well as on the skills and levels of reading efficiency required of adult students.

The university could also undertake research in the development of standardized tests of reading skills. The tests could be used both as diagnostic instruments as well as means of helping institutions

to decide whether students have sufficient basic skills to meet the requirements of admission into the universities.

Programmes and Projects for the Universities

The following programmes and projects are suggested:

1. Train teachers with a specialization in reading skills, or train reading specialists with particular attention to the diagnosis and remediation of deficiencies in students reading and study skills, and also specialists for the needs of graduate students.
2. Conduct research on the causes of reading and learning problems and propose suitable reforms and remedial measures.
3. Work with schools and teachers in the improvement of reading instruction at the school level.
4. Determine and publicize the university's requirement and expectation of the level of preparation needed by secondary school leavers seeking university admission.
5. Create remedial programmes to assist students with specific deficiencies in reading in the various discipline areas, and in subject matter preparation.
6. Develop learning centres to assist undergraduates and graduate students in the improvement of advanced reading skills, whenever it is needed throughout their university careers.

The University and the Community

Reading is much too important an issue to be left entirely to the schools or to educators. The community can and should help in the development of a reading society. The university is usually well-endowed with reading materials - the library collection, publications of the academic staff, and student projects or assignment reports. Thus, the university can co-operate with community organizations to initiate projects whereby reading materials could be made available to members of the organizations or to enable members of the organization the use of the facilities available in the university. Besides being a service which the university could render to the public, it could also generate some income from the services rendered.

Reading services by academic staff and students could also be explored as a community service. Reading by academic staff could be in specialized disciplines and technical areas as needed by policy-makers and consultancy groups. Students could offer reading services to various handicapped groups, to hospitals and welfare homes, and also to school children to arouse their interest in various fields of study and careers.

Book fairs, book clubs, and book promotions in various ways are strategies which the university could consider from time to time to focus on the reading interests of the community.

The university could also promote the reading habit by its publications activities. Academic staff should be encouraged to write for publications. The university, however, should be discriminating as to what it sponsors for publication. This is to ensure that the public is not flooded with mediocre reading materials which may have little value either to knowledge advancement or enjoyment. The counter reaction of such materials would be to kill the desire to read.

Reading should be encouraged in as many languages as possible. While reading in Bahasa Malaysia is necessary as it is the nation's national language, reading in English should be encouraged as it

serves as a window to the world. Reading in Chinese and Tamil is, of course, valuable as this provides an insight into the Asian cultures existing within our domain. Each language is unique in presenting the world view of its respective communities. It is through reading that we can promote better understanding among constituents of our plural society. Such understanding can contribute towards building better unity among the citizens of this country.

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