Experts

Transforming UMPSA’s Reading Habits: The Reading Circle Programme Chronicles

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Reading is one of the most important skills that students need to succeed in their academic and professional lives. However, in an age dominated by digital distractions and the ever-growing allure of bite-sized information, students are gradually veering away from the age-old practice of reading. This has far-reaching consequences, affecting not only academic performance but also the development of critical thinking and analytical skills.

The issue of declining reading habits is a national concern. According to an interim study by the National Library of Malaysia, as of May 2023, Malaysians read an average of 20 books annually, compared to 15 in 2014. However, the reading rate of Malaysians is still considered low compared to other developed countries. It does not reach the ideal number of books that should be read, which is 30 copies a year.

This problem is particularly pronounced among university students. Various studies conducted by institutions such as the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Universiti Malaya (UM), and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) reveal that a significant number of university students are reluctant readers. Specifically, the IIUM study revealed that about 80% of students possess the ability to read but choose not to. As digital distractions increase and screens replace pages, the profound benefits of reading are being eclipsed. Therefore, it is crucial to address this issue and promote a reading culture among students.

The Centre for Modern Languages (CML) at Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah (UMPSA) has been committed to fostering a love for reading and critical thinking among its students through various initiatives. One of these initiatives is the Reading Circle Programme (RCP), which was developed as an English Extensive Reading Project (EERP) in 2014. The RCP aims to not only encourage students to read but to engage them in meaningful discussions, enhancing their critical thinking, socialisation skills, and open-mindedness. We at CML strongly believe in the cause and have been continuously working on improving and sustaining the programme for nearly a decade.

What sets the RCP apart is its adaptability and continuous evolution over the years up to the present day. It has taken an innovative approach to engage students more deeply, fostering meaningful learning. Recognising the importance of motivation, the RCP transitioned from traditional graded reader novels to the unconventional yet effective use of comic books. This strategic shift has captured the interest of our students and served as a powerful tool to combat reading discouragement.

Understanding the limitations of brief one-hour discussions, the RCP introduced graded, meaningful tasks such as poster making and later transitioned to video creation. This move extended the time dedicated to discussions and tapped into the digital affinity of the current generation. The synergy between visual arts and the RCP is more than a pedagogical experiment—it has been a key to

unlocking higher-order thinking skills.

The evolution of the RCP demonstrates the programme's dedication to continually adapting its approach to meet the changing needs of students. This has already started to positively influence the reading habits of our UMPSA students. We are optimistic that this trend will continue, leading to further improvements in the future. It is not just a hope but a commitment backed by observable progress. We believe that with sustained effort, we can foster a robust reading culture among our students.

Moreover, the story of the RCP by the CML is a rallying cry for all stakeholders within UMPSA. We have high hopes that the RCP will continue to be a catalyst for change at UMPSA. It is not just about one programme; it is about a collective effort within our university. We call upon everyone—educators, administrators, and students themselves—to invest in this cause. Cultivating a reading culture is not just an extracurricular activity; it is a fundamental investment in the intellectual growth and future success of our students. The RCP, with its innovative approach and adaptability, has shown us the transformative power of reading. Together, we can make a difference within UMPSA.



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