

A Study of an Online Community for Promoting Chinese Reading among Primary Schools in Hong Kong

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Abstract: An online community for promoting students to naturally develop true interest and sustainable habit of Chinese reading has been set up among six primary schools in Hong Kong. The approach of Reading of Tomorrow is adopted, which integrates the rationale of Modeled Sustained Silent Reading (MSSR) and the use of a game-based learning platform “Bookstore of Tomorrow”. This paper shares the first-phase experience of this online reading community, of which a total of 534 students across Grade 4 to Grade 6 in the six collaborating schools participated in the half-year Reading of Tomorrow activities for reading books according to own interest, sharing personal reading records, making book recommendations to peers, and reading peers’ book recommendations. In the student questionnaire survey, the participating students positively perceived the impact of the Reading of Tomorrow approach on motivating them to not only keep habit and increase interest in Chinese reading, but also to explore new reading topics and develop new thinking ways through sharing book recommendations with peers using the “Bookstore of Tomorrow” platform. In the focus group interviews, the participating teachers acknowledged the potential of the Reading of Tomorrow approach to influence students to increase reading frequency and widen reading topics; and suggested the need to focus on promoting students to interact with peers more for sharing personal comments and feelings after reading books. Implications are discussed for the online reading community to sustain students’ motivation and interest in reading extensively for learning new knowledge and developing creative thinking.

Keywords: Online reading community, primary schools, reading interest, reading habit, game-based learning platform, Modeled Sustained Silent Reading (MSSR)

1. Introduction

The primary school sector in Hong Kong has put effort to enhance students’ competency and interest in Chinese reading in the recent decade. Local primary schools have many related initiatives such as arranging a “morning session” right after the morning assembly for students to read books in their own classrooms. According to PIRLS 2011 International Results in Reading (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012), Hong Kong primary school students rank top in the competency in Chinese reading (ranking 1 out of 49), but rank low in the interest in Chinese reading (ranking 39 out of 49). This may be due to the over-emphasis on the assessment of students’ Chinese reading competency by assigning students to submit book reports once they finish reading books. This discourages students to take initiative and so to develop interest and habit in reading extensively, as students easily link book reading with formal learning coursework (Kirby, Ball, & Geier, 2011; Tse, Lam, Lam, Chan, & Loh, 2006).

An online community for promoting Chinese reading among Hong Kong primary schools is therefore established. It aims to promote students to naturally develop true interest and sustainable habit of reading. This paper shares the initial experience of this online community in adopting the approach of Reading of Tomorrow, which integrates an established model on reading promotion with an emerging trend of game-based learning, for enhancing students’ competency and interest in Chinese reading.

2. The Reading of Tomorrow Approach for Promoting Chinese Reading

The online reading community has adopted the approach of Reading of Tomorrow, which integrates the rationale of Modeled Sustained Silent Reading (MSSR) and the use of a game-based learning platform “Bookstore of Tomorrow”. This approach targets at fostering students to naturally develop interest and habit of reading. A good reader has the capability to read actively; and the development of such capability requires a strong interest-driven motivation (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Malloy, Marinak, & Gambrell, 2010). Researchers find that once students develop such a strong interest-driven motivation, they will develop a habit of regular reading and, in turn, advance proficiency in language use and skills in independent thinking (Kirby et al., 2011; Krashen, 2004).

The rationale of Modeled Sustained Silent Reading (MSSR) addresses the importance of fostering students to naturally develop interest and habit of reading. MSSR is originated from Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), which has a principal assumption that the more the students read, the more they enjoy reading, and then the better their reading ability. SSR consists of three core elements: Sustained, Silent and Reading. SSR emphasizes the process that students read books in classrooms silently, at the class-, grade-, or school-based level, in a fixed period every day. In this process, students are allowed to freely select the books that they are interested in, change the books to be read at any time if they wish, and extend reading process after class time (Gardiner, 2005; Pilgreen, 2000). It is found that students and teachers consider SSR can positively influence the development of reading ability initiated in school environment and extended to home environment (Garan & Devoogd, 2008; Gardiner, 2005).

The online reading community has proposed MSSR, which adds an element of “modeled” into SSR framework, to promote students to enhance competency and interest in Chinese reading. The process of MSSR emphasizes that teachers should act as a model reader when students are reading in the designated reading session, that is, teachers also select a book that they are interested in, and sit down in front of all students to read the selected book with their students in that designated reading session. Teachers in the process of MSSR also need to lead the class to creating a silent reading environment through the ways of, for example, asking the whole class to keep quiet, and allowing each student to take two to three books at a time so that students need not to walk around the classroom for selecting books. This is different from traditional reading sessions in which teachers monitor students to read books and at the same time perform class duties or make class announcements.

The students will individually perform the post-reading activity by using the online game-based learning platform – “Bookstore of Tomorrow”. This online platform is specially designed for peer sharing under the approach of Reading of Tomorrow. It aims to support students to complete the post-reading activities through the steps of answering simple questions related to the books read (for engaging students in reading comprehension), recommending the books read via rating, drawing, audio-recording and/or short writing (for engaging students in reflecting on the book contents), publishing personal comments on recommended books (for engaging students in peer sharing), and finally collecting virtual coins in the game-based learning environment (for motivating students to read comments on books recommendations).

3. The Online Reading Community among Hong Kong Primary Schools

An online community named “The Hong Kong Reading Community of Tomorrow” has been built for reading promotion under the Reading of Tomorrow approach in daily non-teaching sessions on campus in Hong Kong primary school contexts. This online community targets at engaging students in a culture of reading community that provides natural contexts of interactive sharing and supportive recommendations on book reading. This community building is innovative among those young primary school students, whom are often considered unable to demonstrate full autonomy in their learning process and therefore are provided with limited opportunities for learner-initiated peer exchange tasks on book reading within their learning process. The building of online reading community among primary school students in this study enables these young learners to initiate peer sharing and discussion about book reading habits and experiences; and in turn experience an approach of peer recognition that is different from traditional classroom approach to promoting reading.

Six primary schools in Hong Kong that are highly interested in reading promotion through e-Learning have been purposefully invited to be the collaborating schools in the online reading community. Each collaborating schools selected at least two senior primary classes for the school-based implementation of the Reading of Tomorrow approach at the intra-class and inter-class levels for six months. A total of 534 students from 18 classes across Grade 4 to Grade 6 in the six collaborating schools have joined the online reading community for the technology-supported Reading of Tomorrow activities inside and outside school (see Table 1).

Table 1: The demographic data of student participants in the online reading community.

Collaborating schools	No. of participating classes	No. of participating students
School 1	3 classes (with 1 P4 class, 1 P5 classes, and 1 P6 class)	77
School 2	5 classes (with 5 P4 classes)	156
School 3	4 classes (with 4 P4 classes)	126
School 4	2 classes (with 1 P4 class and 1 P5 class)	46
School 5	2 classes (with 2 P5 classes)	72
School 6	2 classes (with 2 P4 classes)	57
Total	18 classes (with 13 P4 classes, 4 P5 classes, and 1 P6 class)	534

In the first-phase online reading community, the participating students needed to complete two main online reading activities on the “Bookstore of Tomorrow” platform. The first activity was to recommend books via the “Bookstore of Tomorrow” platform, in which students “registered” the basic information of the books read; “recommended” books they read by at least two ways of “rating”, “drawing”, “texting” and/or “audio-recording”; and then “posted” the book recommendations in their own “online bookstores”. The second activity was to read peers’ book recommendations via visiting the “online bookstores” of other students on the “Bookstore of Tomorrow” platform.

4. Methods

For investigating the first-phase impact of the Reading of Tomorrow approach on students’ development of interest and habit of Chinese reading, two methods were adopted to understand the perceptions of the students and teachers in the Hong Kong Reading Community of Tomorrow.

Firstly, a student questionnaire survey was completed by all of the 534 participating students in the end of the first-phase online reading community, in order to gain an understating of students’ self-perception of the benefits and effectiveness of the Reading of Tomorrow approach. The participating students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a number of statements on a 5-point Likert scale about the impact of the Reading of Tomorrow approach on supporting them to enhance competency and interest in Chinese reading. The survey consisted of 30 questions on six areas: five questions on “developing interest and habit of reading”; five on “widening knowledge via reading”; five on “enjoying thinking via reading”; five on “the use of “Bookstore of Tomorrow” platform”, five on “self-challenge” and five on “sharing peers’ joy of reading”. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of reliability for the survey is 0.945.

Secondly, a focus group interview was conducted with each of the six collaborating schools in the end of the first-phase online reading community, in order to gain an understating of teachers’ ways and opinions on promoting the Reading of Tomorrow approach. The questions discussed in each focus group interview were designed to be the same as the ones for the student questionnaire survey for the purpose of data triangulation. This gives six questions for the in-depth discussion of teachers’ opinions. A content analysis was conducted for the audio-taped interview records for a systematic summary of opinions from the participating teachers on encouraging students’ peer interactions within the Reading Community of Tomorrow for developing motivation, interest and habit of Chinese reading.

5. Results and Discussions

5.1 Students' Perception of the "Reading of Tomorrow" Approach

The results of the student questionnaire survey indicate students' positive perception of the benefits and effectiveness of the Reading of Tomorrow approach (see Table 2). The participating students agreed that the Reading of Tomorrow approach could promote them to develop reading habit. They thought they could read various kinds of books and read about new things. They became attentive when they read books with interesting topics, and could learn information that interested them via reading. The students indicated they hoped reading could make them like to think more, so that they could develop new ways of thinking via reading.

Table 2: Results of the student questionnaire survey on the Reading of Tomorrow approach.

Item	Mean (1-5)	S.D.
<i>Develop interest and habit of reading</i>		
I am attentive when I read books with interesting topics.	4.369	0.803
I can develop reading habit.	4.146	0.917
I can read various kinds of books.	4.071	0.949
I can share my favorite books with my peers.	3.987	0.939
My peers can share their favorite books with me.	3.893	0.965
<i>Widen knowledge via reading</i>		
I can read about new things.	4.247	0.841
I can learn information that interests me via reading.	4.148	0.907
I can make meaningful connections of related information when I read.	3.876	0.977
I can learn different reading strategies.	3.867	0.986
I can approach a problem from more than one perspective.	3.856	0.990
<i>Enjoy thinking via reading</i>		
I hope reading can make me like to think more.	4.199	0.896
I hope to develop new ways of thinking via reading.	4.007	0.950
I can analyze deeply my own thinking.	3.981	0.914
I hope to share with my peers about my thinking after reading.	3.854	0.989
My peers hope to share with me about their thinking after reading.	3.727	1.026
<i>The use of "Bookstore of Tomorrow" platform</i>		
It is fun to use the platform.	4.307	0.901
The platform has interesting interface designs.	4.283	0.952
It takes only a short time to learn how to use the platform.	4.245	0.980
It is easy to use the platform.	4.184	0.946
It is easy to navigate the platform.	4.144	1.034
<i>Self-challenge: When I recommend books via the "Bookstore of Tomorrow" platform ...</i>		
I can read more deeply the books in the topics which I am interested in.	4.206	0.854
I can become more interested in sustainable reading.	4.144	0.938
I can increase my interest in reading.	4.137	0.959
I can read more widely the books in different topics.	4.105	0.924
I am more willing to design my plan of reading.	3.978	0.960
<i>Share peers' joy of reading: When I read the books recommended by the peers on the "Bookstore of Tomorrow" platform ...</i>		
I can increase my interest in reading.	4.152	0.925
I can become more interested in sustainable reading.	4.133	0.938
I can read more deeply the books in the topics which I am interested in.	4.107	0.888
I can have a wide range of information for me to choose.	4.103	0.952
I can read more widely the books in different topics.	4.094	0.941

Note: 1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree

The students thought it was fun, interesting and easy to use the "Bookstore of Tomorrow" platform to complete online Reading of Tomorrow activities. They agreed that the online activities on producing their own book recommendations and reading other peers' book recommendations could increase their interest and enjoyment in reading, and promoted them to read more deeply the books in the topics which they were interested, and so become more interested in sustainable reading.

5.2 Teachers' Perception of the "Reading of Tomorrow" Approach

Besides students' positive perception of the Reading of Tomorrow approach, the participating teachers in the Hong Kong Reading Community of Tomorrow also had positive feedback on the promotion of Reading of Tomorrow in the local primary school sector (see Table 9).

Table 9: Feedback from the participating teachers in the focus group interviews.

School	Feedback in the teacher focus group interviews
School 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believed that teachers should be the models to motivate students' reading interest and lead their reading habit. ● Observed that the initiatives promoted students to read more which is good for their learning. ● Reflected that the monitoring of students' reading record by the game-based learning platform can be upgraded. ● Planned to find more ways to sustain students' reading motivation besides the game-based learning platform.
School 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believed that teachers modeling can influence students' willingness to read extensively and sustainably. ● Observed that students read more kinds of books and increased their interest and frequency in reading. ● Reflected that the game-based learning platform promoted students' interest in sharing books by various ways. ● Planned to enhance students' ability to share personal comments and feelings in online book recommendations.
School 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believed that the success key was students' free selection of any kinds and topics of books in the initiatives. ● Observed that students were promoted to read different kinds of books under more reading topics. ● Reflected that the game-based learning platform increased students' interest to read more books for sharing. ● Planned to work more on promoting students' hobby of reading for learning new knowledge.
School 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believed that reading is not an assessment tool, but a way to broaden horizons for creative thinking. ● Observed that the game-based learning platform motivated students to build up personal reading records. ● Reflected that the initiatives provided a space for students to record and share the books they read. ● Planned to work more on promoting students to love reading for nurturing reading interest and habit.
School 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believed that reading is not an assessment tool, but a way to broaden horizons for creative thinking. ● Observed that the free selection of books for reading and sharing motivated students to read more. ● Reflected that students can read what they loved and write what they thought through the initiatives. ● Planned to combine more the reading of printed books and the application of online reading or media resources.
School 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believed that reading is foundation of knowledge building as students can link up different kinds of knowledge. ● Observed that the game-based learning platform promoted students to read more and make more book sharing. ● Reflected that students may not keep when the initiatives only linked with reading award schemes. ● Planned to work more on increasing students' reading interest for their natural development of reading habit.

The feedback in the teacher online reflective writings indicated that the participating teachers among the six collaborating schools valued the belief of Reading of Tomorrow that teachers had an important role in provoking students' reading interest and modeling students' reading habits. The participating teachers observed that the Reading of Tomorrow approach using the "Bookstore of Tomorrow" platform positively influenced students to read more books and make more book recommendations. The students widened their reading topics and increased their reading frequency, because they could freely select books according to their own interests. The students were more willing to make personal reading records for book sharing, because they could freely use the various recommendation ways on the "Bookstore of Tomorrow" platform. The participating teachers among the six collaborating schools reflected that the Reading of Tomorrow approach was a good start to support students to develop reading interest and habits. They hoped the "Bookstore of Tomorrow" platform can be upgraded to increase the attractiveness to students to sustain reading motivation, and improve the support for teachers to monitor students' reading record. The participating teachers planned to maintain the school-based Reading of Tomorrow initiatives, with more focus on promoting students to interact with peers more for sharing personal comments and feelings after reading books, and finding more

ways to sustain students' motivation and interest in reading extensively for learning new knowledge and developing creative thinking.

6. Implications and Conclusion

This paper shares the initial experience in building an online community named the Hong Kong Reading Community of Tomorrow among senior primary school students in Hong Kong for the goal of developing the interest and habit of Chinese reading among young learners. This online reading community adopts the approach of Reading of Tomorrow, which attempts to integrate the trend of game-based learning into the existing guiding framework of Modeled Sustained Silent Reading (MSSR). From the results of the student questionnaire survey and the teacher focus group interviews, the Reading of Tomorrow could open alternative pedagogical opportunities for reading promotion among students with a higher flexibility in terms of time, location and activity design.

The Reading of Tomorrow approach does not emphasize the submission of book-reading reports or the number of books being read. It emphasizes teachers' inputs as a role model to provoke students' interest in and mobilize their actions on reading. Teachers' enthusiastic dedication is expected to mobilize students' reading behavior. The use of game-based learning platform is expected to sustain a relaxed ambience of reading, which helps to provoke students' reading interest and then their intrinsic motivation in reading different types of books recommended by peers. The direction of the online reading community in next phase will focus on further extending the Reading of Tomorrow initiatives across different subjects for promoting students to sustain motivation and interest in reading extensively for learning new knowledge and developing creative thinking, and building foundation for self-directed learning and lifelong learning in the long run.

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