Benchmarking Framework For Reading And Knowledge Growth: A Malaysian Case

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Abstract:
Benchmarking though a daily activity that remains unnoticeable by many of us and researchers seem unaware of this quality approach. This paper highlights significance of benchmarking in knowledge growth discipline. The authors try to emphasise knowledge growth because it seems neglected due to variety of reasons. In this regard, benchmarking research method started with fieldwork (visits to the benchmarked libraries), informal interviews and literature review. This helped in formulation of workable Best Practices framework. A constant comparative analysis process (benchmarking) was carried out focusing mainly on data collection, coding and analysis. Consequently, this iterative process led to the development of a framework to find the extent of knowledge growth against workable Best Practices. This framework is prelude to a comprehensive one in future for the use of variety of stakeholders including heads of library institutions, librarians, NGOs involved in knowledge growth, teachers and library users.

Keywords: Benchmarking, best practices, knowledge growth, literacy, library

Introduction

This study discusses the nature and extent of library users' knowledge growth based upon library provision in Sarawak, Malaysia. It covers seven districts with twenty-one libraries (one urban and two village libraries in each district). The Research and Development Division of Sarawak State Library (Pustaka Negeri Sarawak) (PNS) embarked on this research to enhance knowledge growth and reading habits among the library users in Sarawak. This project explored reading habits using a standard comprehensive approach for all the districts. The proposed research covers investigation of 'present state' of library users' reading habits in Kuching, Sri Aman, Sarikei, Sibu, Bintulu, Miri and Limbang. This study shows that the Research and Development Division of Pustaka Negeri Sarawak (PNS) demands significantly on increasing the number of library users and has established substantial effort in the promotion of knowledge growth and reading habits in the whole state of Sarawak. The research study takes benchmarked libraries as a baseline structure to work on.

PNS' Contributions

The government has made a significant move to promote literacy and encourage life-long learning. For instance, a total number of memberships for all these libraries in 2012 was 10.01 million (35.8%) out of a total population of 28.5 million (NLM, 2013). Based on the report, the increased number of libraries and their membership in Malaysia are in line with the aim of Vision 2020: to achieve the status of a developed nation in 2020. The 'positive' trends reflect attempts by the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals in promoting Bangsa Membaca, Bangsa Berjaya (A Reading Society: A Successful Society).

Subsequently, the Research and Development Division of Pustaka Negeri Sarawak (PNS) has established substantial efforts in the promotion of of knowledge growth and reading habits in the whole state of Sarawak. To meet the above challenge, the Research and Development Division has formulated the following mission:

- To facilitate research and related activities on library science.
- To identify queries regarding library services to answer through research and promote the conduct of research to answer those queries.
- To review and make recommendations on studies/research and professional efforts pertaining to libraries and recommending inclusions, standards, procedures and policies as appropriate to Pustaka Negeri Sarawak (www.pustaka-sarawak.com).

The Research and Development Division also set up the following objectives:

- Undertake research and study on library and information science that is designed for the improvement and continuing development in the quality of library's roles in the society and library professionals.

- Promote the practical application of relevant research findings in library and information science.
- Promote standards, guidelines and best practices in library and information science.
- Provide support, input and advice in the establishment, expansion and improvement of library facilities through the administration of the State and Federal grants (www.pustaka-sarawak.com).

The above account suggests that there is a well-planned continuous effort involving Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to step-up knowledge growth and reading activities at all the levels i.e. from students, working adults and senior citizens. This is obvious from the Division's quality organisation, operations and improvement initiatives. To elaborate, the Division has a Total Quality Management (TQM) system in place to improve and grow faster. The Division is administering PNS by promoting the use of portal U-Pustaka and numerous other substantial activities such as 24-7 access to the library, reading strategies, literacy campaigns (e-Pustaka), workshops, mobile storytelling, English camp, annual calendar of activities, award schemes, book review competitions, weekend children activities and library week.

Proactive Role of PNS
Despite the above significant efforts, the results do not seem as encouraging (Zain, 2013, http://www.theborneopost.com/2013/03/17). It is obvious that knowledge growth is declining instead of growing for lifelong learning. Certainly, there is dire need to promote knowledge growth and literacy through inculcating reading habits both at national and state levels. In this regard, the Sarawak State Library, located in Petra Jaya, Kuching plays important role in promoting reading culture among people in Sarawak, particularly in Kuching Division initiating 'The Tower of Books Reading Challenge' and 'Read One Book A Month Challenge', and other relevant activities.

In terms of age groups, the majority of the PNS's reading members consist of adults (18 and above), students and children (named as patrons for ease). In 2012, the majority of PNS's library members were recruited through promotion exercises (2051 people or 40.6%), while the membership of children (1037 people or 20.5%), students (1023 people or 20.2%), adults (872 people or 17.2%) and others (74 members) may be considered 'voluntary.' The libraries provide a range of services to users, including book loans and advice. These situations reflected are crucial to understand rate og knowledge growth, library users' habits, their membership, and other socio-cultural contexts, including attitudes and physical environment.

The Methodology
The methodology consists of two phases i.e. initial fieldwork and formal fieldwork. The initial fieldwork comprised literature review, benchmarking, visits to town and village libraries, informal interviews and discussions and document analysis. The completion of initial fieldwork provided very valuable insights in the form of conceptual models. These models were developed by Jawaid

(2014). Based upon these models three extensive interview schedules were developed: head librarian, librarian and library users. A total of 847 library users, chief librarians and librarians were interviewed face to face for this study.

The interaction of fieldwork and initial review of literature helped to identify core benchmarks to follow for this study. These core benchmarks are self, immediate environment, outer environment. These core benchmarks were specifically drawn from the data by Jawaid (2014) for this research. Each benchmark comprises many standards. For instance, 'self' has 'passion', 'interest in reading', 'language and culture' and 'hobby'. This extension helped to investigate in depth, library users' mindset, leisure time activities and the extent of knowledge growth. Finally, a detailed review also throws light on the development of the three theoretical models (Jawaid, 2014) on chief librarians, librarians, and library users to benchmark rural and urban knowledge growth and reading habits with the current library guidelines/models/frameworks. Each element in these models is based on Self, Immediate Environment and Outer Environment explained as below.

Self

Reading has become an indispensable activity which is vital for the knowledge society comprising knowledge workers of a country. Palani (2012) has discussed various methods and benefits of improving the knowledge. According to the author, reading shapes good personality, ideas, right thinking and attitude change. So, people who are involved in reading habit create literate society in the country.

Passion

Passion for reading increases diverse knowledge which is central to learning other language skills and disciplines. Gleed (2013) defines passion as reading for pleasure. Rosenfeld (2007) supports the above idea by confirming that passion increases literary level and higher achievements. Whereas Brozo et al. (2007) detail out adolescent girls read more than boys. The above account suggests that reading for pleasure comes from love and affection and it is not accidental. The output of passion appears in the form of hobby.

Hobby

Reading passion obviously leads to habit formation and a person establishes reading as an earnest hobby. Hobby shows consistency in reading and life-long learning. Shahriza & Hasan (2007) defines reading habit as a kind of real experience and involves many complex skills.

Language and Culture

Linda S. K. (1995) found out in her study on the influence of library users that culture influences people's behavior and their way of communication is influenced by the values they hold. Whereas UNESCO (2012) stressed that special attention should be paid to groups which are often

marginalized in culturally diverse societies. It seems appropriate if this attention includes knowledge growth.

Interest in Knowledge Growth and Reading

Interest in knowledge growth and reading or learning obviously leads to life long learning. It is interest in reading that forces the individual to gain knowledge on their own, as opposed to reading that is assigned to them (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007).

Immediate Environment

Objectives of Reading

A study on reading and achievement relationship in Ghana (Owusu-acheaw & Larson, 2014) confirmed that reading habit has influence on academic performance and there is a relationship between reading habit and academic performance. This is good source of motivation for students to increase their knowledge more and achieve better targets.

Inderjit (2007) attempted to show that reading trends relate to conditioning of this behavior towards a habitual way of life amongst Malaysian students. The researcher has provided some of the methods of improving reading among students' participation in classes, homework to improve reading comprehension. These methods, for example are, Study, Question, Read, Recall and Review (SQ3R) method and peer teaching. This clearly shows that librarians have to coordinate with the local schools to enhance reading and using library facilities.

Akanda, Hoq, & Hasan, (2013) attempted to put forward recommendations for improving the reading habit of young students in particular and the larger cross-sections of people in general. The researchers recommended in general many useful insights: the students read books and other materials with a sense of purpose and with specific targets, not aimlessly or for fun. Reading materials, especially books, should be constant companions to all people, especially students, majority users indicated that textbooks are the books of their choice, the World Wide Web has grown in popularity and use in recent years and cyber cafés have become major places for people to use the Internet for gaining knowledge.

Parents

A study established that family factors strongly and positively influence pupils' reading (Yusof Najeema Mohd, 2010). This research clearly indicates that pupils' reading habits are significantly affected by parents and family. Similar views have been highlighted by Kaur, Rasiah, and Nagaratnam (2011) in their study on parental influence on reading habits. They also added that female respondents enjoy reading and they read to gain knowledge. However, the male respondents disliked reading and were not interested in acquiring knowledge. Similarly, seeking parents' influence on children's reading Mngoma (1997) concluded that parents, regardless of their

cultural and socio-economic and geographical backgrounds were readers, providing their children with positive role models to copy.

Teacher

As a teacher, the school librarian empowers students to become critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers, skillful researchers, and ethical users of information. The school librarian supports students' success by guiding them in: reading for understanding, for exposure to diversity of viewpoints and genres, and for pleasure, using information for defined and self-defined purposes, building on prior knowledge and constructing new knowledge … (American Association of School Librarians, 2010). This suggests that a librarian needs to know his library users' fully well by focusing on their learning needs to share their ideas with peers to become critics of their own learning. This is in other words scaffolding of the library users for knowledge growth.

Family

Valeda (2008) found in the study of rural libraries and highlighted the importance of role of families in helping the users' reading that the library users of the rural village libraries in Ghana reading to others in their families.

Choice of Books

Saikia (2013) found in her study that the user's first preference of choice is printed books. This suggests that printed material influences the users and attractive prints add to their reading value. Similar results reported by Noorhidawati & Forbes (2008) who found that most of the users preferred to use a printed book for "extended reading" for knowledge growth.

United Kingdom Ó Library & Information Commission (2000) examined one-in-five of those borrowing less said this was because the library always had the same books/not enough new ones, while one-in-seven mentioned that there weren't so many good/interesting books available in the library now. Kamla-Raj (2011) indicated that majority of the LIS students (79.53 %) are interested in reading LIS course material frequently.

Chief Librarians

John (2014) takes libraries as organisations and highlights that one of the main issues was a seeming lack of shared vision among campaigners.

Another research conducted by Bergan (2009) suggests implementation of an intensive and extensive reading program to promote reading among library users. Phillip (1981) carried out research in Papua Guinea and stated that librarian should perform the job by considering it as a project. This clearly suggests that they need to follow industrial best practice i.e. input - process – output to see a change in their performance. The most important Stakeholders of Libraries (Chief Librarian). Librarian Agreement (1998) of University of Alberta provides explicit definition of a chief librarian as follows:

"Chief Librarian" means the chief executive officer of libraries" ie
"An officer responsible for the management of information materials such as books, periodicals, videocassettes, audio-tapes, computer databases and CD-ROM diskettes, micro-filming materials and other relevant documents" (Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, Nairobi, 2008). The same ministry adds other duties including networking of Information Services and Libraries and Information Centers; training, supervising and guiding staff working under the officer. This clearly suggests that a chief librarian is head of the library (an organization) and has important roles to perform and deliver his responsibilities in an efficient manner.

Kramer (1994) states that the new chief librarian is, like others assuming new jobs, must "build an image or role, build relationships, construct a frame of reference, map relevant players, locate themselves in communication networks, and learn the local language". There is very high expectation from the chief librarian who will provide proactive strategic direction and professional leadership and direction in advancing the Institute's teaching and research mission through a clear vision of the library's role, comprehensive strategic planning, adoption of emerging technologies, and sound fiscal management (see figure 1). This definition seems quite comprehensive and indicating to have a whole and holistic view of library as an organization whose leader is a chief librarian.
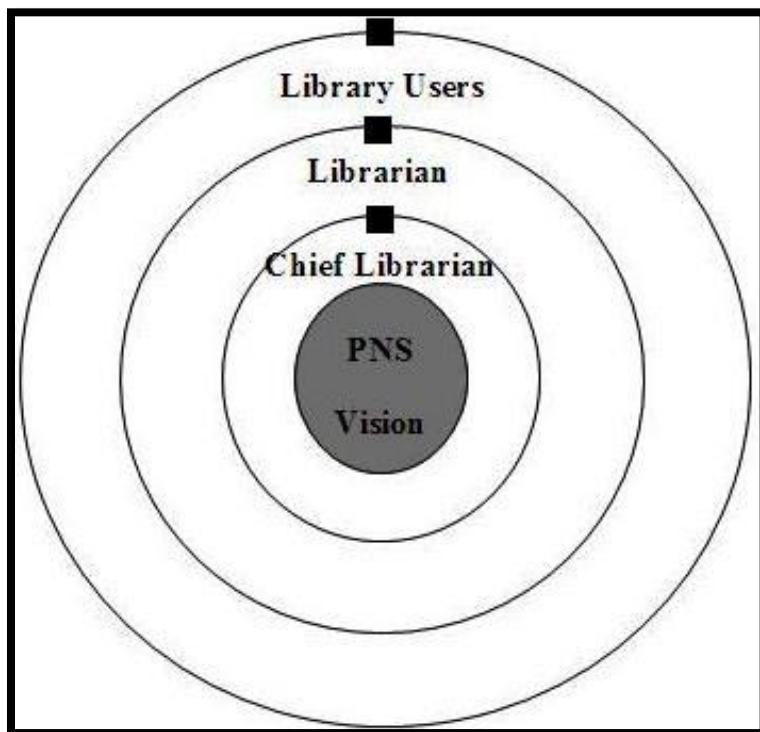

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of PNS' Vision (Jawaid (2019))

Librarians

Braxton (2008) indicates that it is essential, teacher librarian roles also include fostering of reading in students. According to Daniel, Ferguson, Gray, Harvey, Pachtner, & Troost (2011) librarians have leadership responsibilities. Leadership on the part of subject librarians includes activities such as contributing to goals and strategic library directions through active participation on committees and task forces, locally, nationally, and internationally, and sharing expertise throughout the library in order to further library and university priorities. Similar views have been shared by Jurow (2000), Hahn (2009), Yaacob (2009) and Miller et al. (2012) that librarians can develop their visionary ability by working on projects that involve organizational analysis and abstract thinking.

The traditional role of the librarian of providing information to users by answering questions on the reference desk has changed in this age. The librarians need to provide appropriate responses for a more in-depth information search different academic librarians provide new information with the use of technology, design, review (Celinmar, 2021; Illangakoon et al., 2021; Rokonuzzaman & Hattori, 2021). All of the above researchers emphasized that librarian's role has changed to a greater role due to flood of information pouring these days. Nair (2006) moves one step farther by saying that the only great scholars were allowed to become librarians.

To finalise, librarians fill a fundamental role in educational institutions by providing and preserving critical current and historical information resources, enabling individuals and groups to be self-sufficient researchers, developing the habits for critical thinking and lifelong learning, and supporting diverse intellectual communities through services and spaces available in-person and online (Self-Study Report, 2012; Agung et al, 2022). The above account clearly suggests that librarians have got new challenging roles instead of traditional roles (see figure 2).
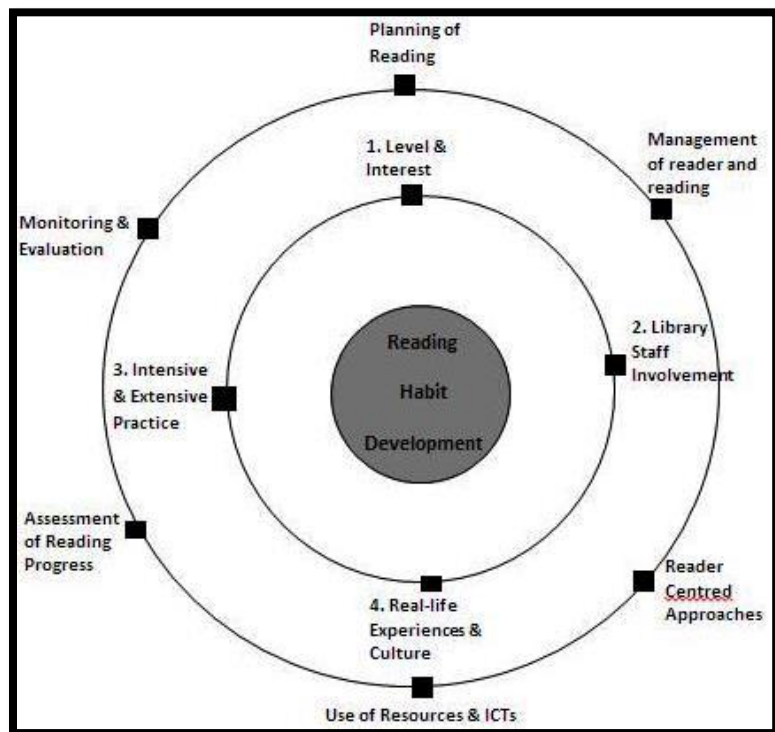
Figure 2: Conceptual Model for Librarians (Jawaid (2019))

Outer Environment
Internet
Shazwani (2008), Kassim (2009) and Jafre, Pourmohammadi, Nalini, & Lean, O.C (2014) found the users' best interest at heart is library providing longer hours for Internet access. The latter also added that the respondents were active Internet users and online reading is a highly potent strategy in enhancing knowledge and reading habits among these students. Similarly Abdul Karim and Hassan (2007) and Miller, Purcell & Raine (2012) the provided the context of digital era and cautioned that we need to check ICT (digital) is expanding reading opportunities respectively (Alamanda, Ahmad, Putra, & NAA, 2021; Rahman, Suffian, Ghani, Said, & Ahmad, 2021).

E-Books
Oklahoma Legislature (2008) informs that accessing digital libraries over mobile devices has the potential of reaching a broader community of users whereas Trina (2010) found that a majority of respondents preferred to use an e-book both for "fact finding" and "finding relevant content".

Iran goes a step farther to implement latest developments. For example, Isaias, Ilya & David (2012) stress that all Iranian libraries and NLAI as leader of them use unique mobile phone facilities to represent library services in new era. Similar views about ICT becoming indispensable these days to promote reading have been put forward by Hussain, Khan & Zaidi (2013) and Ntui, Inyang, & Usang (2014).

This suggests clearly that developing countries are improving library services based upon immense advantages of ICTs including digitalization to equip the users with smart knowledge seeking and growth.

Rural and Urban Reading Habits

Lone (2012) studied thoroughly the reading habits of the rural and urban students with the aim to identify their attitudes, purposes, preferences and tastes of reading. The reading habits of rural and urban college students of the 21st century show that the reading culture is more developed in urban students than rural counterparts.

Conclusions

Focus of this study was to identify the strategies to enhance knowledge growth and reading habits. The researchers utilized benchmarking to find the extent of these strategies. It has captured diverse influences to benefit not only the readers but also the researchers. In this approach information is not collected by using just one tool (questionnaire or interview) rather many tools were used. Initially, benchmarks were identified by interacting literature review data and extensive fieldwork (informal observation, document analysis, discussions and interviews) to not only meet requirement of triangulation but also to validate the data. These benchmarks have been shown in the form of three separate theoretical frameworks (see figure 3). These are library users, chief librarians and librarians interacting systematically.
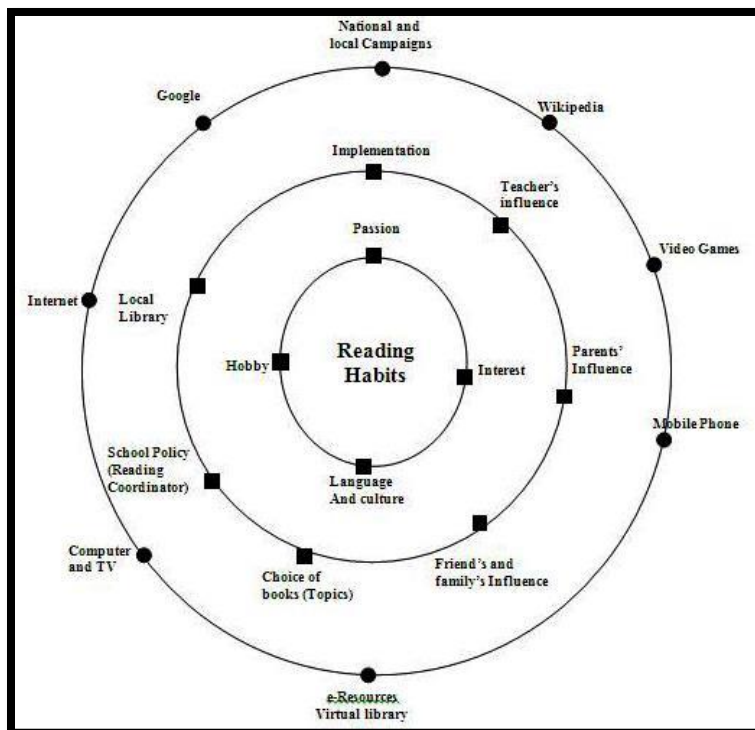

Figure 3 : Conceptual Model for Library Users (Jawaid (2019))

Our research in Sarawak, indicated that the participants read to gain information and knowledge; however, the majority of the students showed preference for non-academic reading materials (e.g. comics, story books and magazines) for knowledge growth.

Our benchmarking methodology helped to inform that research activities in Sarawak on 'knowledge growth' and 'reading habits' are significantly low and the attempt by PNS to sponsor research in this niche is a very positive attempt to address the imbalance in terms of research and knowledge growth.

This study found that gender, race or ethnicity, parents' educational levels, academic success or grades and citizenship did influence middle school students' knowledge growth and reading success.

The research informed that knowledge growth and reading habits are affected by many diverse variables that need to be considered before inculcating them in a patron. The inner tier of Figure 1 shows the variables affecting the self of a person. These are his passion for reading, language (mother tongue) and culture, hobby and intrinsic motivation. The middle tier depicts influence of patron's immediate environment comprising learning objectives, teachers, parents, family and friends, school and local library. Finally, the outer tier reflects the variables impacting the patron continuously due to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), digitisation and other developments in the environment.

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