Living Literacies – The *Orang Asli* Literacy Project

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Abstract

This paper highlights the challenges and experiences of the researchers in an academic institution where the research project which initially began as part of an academic research initiative expanded to helping a marginalized community in need. As social science researchers in a technological university which emphasizes natural science research, opportunities and motivation to carry out social research is a challenge. Furthermore, as minorities among academicians from the Engineering and Technology disciplines, obtaining funding and carrying out community based research is also difficult. In this paper, we share the conception of *Living Literacies*, a literacy programme for the *Orang Asli*, an indigenous community in Malaysia, and share the challenges we faced in executing this project.

Keywords: Academic Research; *Orang Asli*; Literacies; Community Service.

Note: In this paper, the pronoun "I" refers to the first author; "we" and "our" refers to the first author and co-authors.

1.   Introduction

All academics in higher learning institutions are required to do research. With many higher learning institutions in Asia striving to obtain the "Research University" status, emphasis has been on academics and their research. Each academic year, an academician is evaluated mainly on the number of journal articles that has been published and the amount of grant the academician has successfully secured. With such emphasis on research among academicians, I will begin this paper with some questions which I asked myself as an academic who is required to do research. What should I research on? To what extent, doing research, having grants and publishing scholarly articles in reputable journals dictate what needs to be researched? Is "contributing to new knowledge" a sufficient reason to embark on research?

Being a researcher in the field of social science and humanities and a minority among colleagues who are mainly from the Engineering and Technological fields, doing research in an area that is "not Science and Technology" is itself a challenge. Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP) is a technological university offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the Engineering and Technological disciplines. The only social science courses offered in this university are from the department I belong to, the Management and Humanities Department. The courses we offer support the Engineering and Technological students. As such, the Management and Humanities Department does not have its own undergraduate or postgraduate students. Although with such limitations, the academicians in the Management and Humanities Department are still required to carry out research and publish scholarly articles on par with the other academicians in this university.

The primary research and development plans for UTP are identified as the Mission Oriented Research (MOR) areas. The nine MOR areas for UTP are Carbon Dioxide Management, Deepwater Technology, Enhanced Oil Recovery, Green Technologies, Energy, Health, Nanotechnology, Sustainability Sciences and Mega cities. As such, UTP strives to be an internationally recognized research university in these areas. Among these MOR areas, opportunities and scope for social science and humanities based research fall vaguely under the area of Sustainability Sciences. Furthermore, a lecturer's Key Performance Index (KPI) for research activities which contributes to career promotion and evaluation includes requirements such as securing at least one internal grant, publishing at least two journal papers and presenting at least one conference paper per academic year. I believe it is difficult and challenging when the quality of the research carried out is determined by the number of journal papers published as an outcome of the research project and the amount of money secured from grants.

2. Research on *Orang Asli* and education

My specialized area of research is on educational issues concerning the majority and minority population in Malaysia. The research project discussed in this paper can be classified as a project on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) which sees education as helping people "develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future, and to act upon these decisions" [1].

I wanted to work on a project that emphasized the practical contribution of my research. As the *Orang Asli* is the most marginalized community in Malaysia, I believe that working on a research project with them would be valuable. It has been reported that a total of 147,412 *Orang Asli* live in Peninsular Malaysia [2]. The *Orang Asli* remains as one of the poorest community in Malaysia due to poor educational performances [3]. Furthermore, our literature search indicated that there is very little written about education and the *Orang Asli* and these are either a one-off study or merely reports which lack empirical data [4,5,6]. We were very fortunate that we work in the state of Perak, which has the largest *Orang Asli* community in Malaysia. To begin, I managed to get a small internal grant to pursue my research with an *Orang Asli* primary school near my university. This was primarily to fulfil both the university requirement for my KPI evaluation and at the same time, I felt happy to embark on a research area which I was interested in. For this research project, I worked with another colleague who shared similar interests.

Working with the *Orang Asli* school and interviewing the teachers and students, my colleague and I realized that very little is known about the *Orang Asli* community. Therefore, we knew that in order to understand the children's experiences in the school, we needed to understand the practices of the community they come from. Thus, it was important for us to have access to the *Orang Asli* community. The objective of our study was to look at the literacy practices of the *Orang Asli* children in school and in their homes. After obtaining the necessary permission from *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli* (JHEOA), the Department of Indigenous Affairs in Malaysia, we managed to meet the *Tok Batin* (Village Headman) of one of the *Orang Asli* village and through him, we managed to talk to some of the parents of the *Orang Asli* children we observed and interviewed in the school.

Our initial research findings indicated that the children's literacy practices in their homes are different from what is expected of them in the school [7]. Some studies suggest that children's experiences at home influence the types of skills they develop to succeed in formal learning environments [8, 9]. Many of the homes that I visited did not have chairs or tables where the children can do their school homework or read. Teachers we interviewed informed us that they were reluctant to give homework or allow the children to take schoolbooks home because the children will most likely not bring the schoolbooks back. Furthermore, the teachers also believed that it is very likely that those books will be torn or lost. However, when I visited the *Orang Asli* homes, I realized that many of the children's homes did not have specific areas where personal belongings of a child such as school books can be kept neatly. This could explain for the loss or damage of the schoolbooks. This highlights one of the disparities between home and school literacy practices.

An amount from the internal research grant we obtained was used to purchase some books and literacy materials for the school children. However, most of the money was used for travelling expenses to and from the *Orang Asli* village. The findings from our initial research suggested that there is a gap between the literacy practices experienced by the children at home and the literacy practices that are expected by the teachers in school [7]. Therefore, we believe that in order to assist the *Orang Asli* children's literacy practices it is important to bridge this gap which exists [10]. However, to help the *Orang Asli* community we faced a few challenges as academics. These will be described and related to in the following sections.

3. Academic research

To work with the *Orang Asli* community, we needed to carry out a qualitative based research where physically we needed to work with the community in their village. Unlike in the other departments, the academicians in the Management and Humanities Department do not have any postgraduate students or research assistants to assist their research. Only two of us were working on this research project. During the first part of the research, between the two of us, we managed to make a few trips to the village and weekly visits to the *Orang Asli* primary school for five months. Both of us had teaching commitments in the university and it was extremely challenging and time consuming to carry out our interviews and observations in the school. However, the initial internal grant we obtained for the research project was only for the duration of 12 months. At the end of the research, we completed two project reports and presented a conference and a seminar paper. Although officially our research project ended after 12 months, my

colleague and I decided to continue helping the community. We believed that we could start a literacy programme in the village to encourage literacy practices in the community where the *Orang Asli* children can also experience literacy in out-of-school context. We thought we would do it on a voluntary basis and see what the response from the children and parents in the village would be. However, as this was outside of the university we needed the support of our department head. We managed to convince our head of department that the literacy programme will also be part of our research project. However, we did not have any funds or grants to support us and decided to apply for a second research grant. In the meantime, not knowing whether we will be successful in obtaining our second grant, my colleague and I decided to pay for our own travel to the village and contribute to the community in whatever possible ways.

4.   Applying for research grant

The motivation for applying for our second research grant was to assist the *Orang Asli* children. We proposed a research project which included a voluntary literacy programme with the main objective of helping a marginalized community. We submitted a proposal for a research grant to the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). However, again we were not able to request for a research assistant or a graduate student who could assist us full time on this project. Thus, we were very fortunate when another colleague who newly joined our university was interested to be part of our research team. Now, as a three-member research team we decided that we would carry out the *Orang Asli* Literacy Programme. We were not sure of the number of children in the village who would be interested. With the help of the *Tok Batin* (Village Headman), we decided that we would use the general community hall in the village for our literacy programme.

5.   *Living Literacies* – The *Orang Asli* Literacy Project

We wanted a name for our literacy programme. The name should stand for the everyday challenge of being literate as well as the historical and sociological stance of sustaining literacy practices. The name must also refer to the *Orang Asli* both "living out" their literacy practices and having their literacy practices 'live on". We decided to call our literacy programme *Living Literacies*.

We started this programme in March 2010. Every Friday from 3:00pm to 5:00pm, the three of us will carry out literacy activities for the children. At present, we have about 50 to 80 children ranging from toddlers to secondary school children coming voluntarily to this programme. As it was difficult for the three of us to handle all the children, we asked the secondary school children in Form 4 (16 years old) and Form 5 (17 years old) to be our assistants. Furthermore, we also made a call for students in our university to volunteer to help us in this literacy programme. We managed to enlist about 10 students who responded to our call. We gave them a briefing and told them that at any one time, one or two volunteers will accompany us to the *Orang Asli* village. Moreover, we emphasized that this is on voluntary basis only. We also had to seek permission from the Director of Undergraduate Studies in UTP to recruit some undergraduates to be volunteers for the programme. Although the Director of Undergraduate Studies supported our programme, he suggested that we use our grant money to pay the students who have volunteered to assist us. We decided that as much as possible the grant money should be channeled to the *Orang Asli* community. Thus, the students were told that by volunteering they would not be paid. We were very pleased that the students who did volunteer were very happy to assist us.

The money from the grant was used for minor repair works and to make the general community hall suitable for the literacy programme. The hall was re-painted and broken window panes were replaced. We bought some literacy materials such as books, papers, and writing materials. We also bought nametags for the children so that we could easily call them by their names.

During each session, we will organize the literacy activities based on a theme. As there is a huge possibility that the students who come on Fridays might miss a week or two and thus will not know the activity that was missed, we decided that each literacy activity carried out will not depend on previous activities. Thus, the children can participate every week without worrying about what they have missed. We have had themes such as Mother's Day, every day of the week, ambitions, games, story writing and so on. We always start the session with a fun activity such as songs or games. The children love singing. We conduct the activities on the floor as there are limited number of chairs and tables in the village community hall. We always guide the students so that each session ends with a literacy-related output. Thus, some of the children have written stories, submitted personal diaries, produced their own cover page for filing their own literacy materials and made their own Mother's Day cards. Although as researchers we all are more

familiar with mainstream educational practices, we consciously try to bridge the *Orang Asli* children's community experiences and knowledge with that of mainstream literacy that is expected in schools. For example, we encourage the children to speak in any of the languages they are comfortable with. The main language of instruction is Malay while all our printed literacy materials are in English language or bilingual (Malay and English). Whenever necessary we would ask the children to translate to their own Semai language. Furthermore, with the help of our secondary school assistants, we also translate and write in the Semai language.

Figure 1: A student volunteer assisting the *Living Literacies* Programme.

Recently, we organized a book-donation drive in Universiti Teknologi Petronas to set up a permanent literacy corner (see Figure 2) in the community hall. We appealed to the lecturers in UTP to donate storybooks and toys for our literacy corner.   We also bought some bookshelves and a filing cabinet for the literacy corner. Many of the other staff in the university responded to our call and some even asked whether they could volunteer to join us on Fridays for our literacy programme. Many of the UTP lecturers were not even aware that there are *Orang Asli* villages nearby our university.
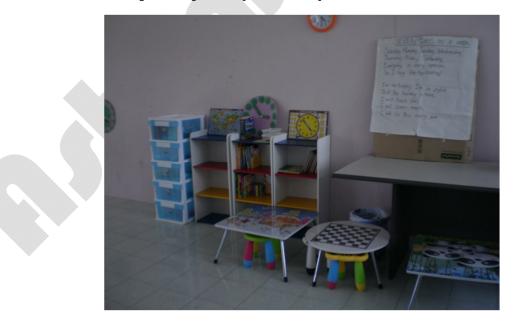

Figure 2: The *Living Literacies* Corner.

6. Combining research and community service

Our research project can be classified as participatory research [11]. Therefore, as researchers it was important for us to establish and maintain trust with the community. An important aspect of this participatory research is to establish mutual understanding on equal basis with the *Orang Asli* community. Currently, we are also working towards establishing a partnership with the community with the hope that more members from the community will come forward to work together with us. Thus far, it has really been challenging because as a marginalized community in Malaysia, the *Orang Asli* believe that they are "inferior" in dealing with educational issues. It is heartening to see that lately some mothers have come to join us during our literacy programme.

We also wanted the *Orang Asli* children to take full ownership of their literacy corner. We encouraged the children themselves to form the rules and regulation to use and take care of their literacy corner. Moreover, some students volunteered to be in charge of making sure that these rules and regulation were adhered to.

For the research aspect of the *Living Literacies* programme, we have now placed a video camera at the corner of the hall and when necessary, move it around to capture the literacy activities of the children. The three of us, whenever possible, keep a diary of the activities we carry out and note interesting observations or experiences encountered during the sessions. Through this literacy programme, we got to know the children's experiences in their community. Where at the beginning, many of the children were very "shy" and hardly spoke, we now have children who come to us individually to ask for things. Initially the children used to only follow our instructions, but now only after five months, some of them will ask us permission to do things the way they like. The three of us also meet weekly on Thursday and Friday mornings to prepare for the Literacy Programme and discuss the research aspect of the project. Some of the undergraduate volunteers who are free on Thursday mornings will help us with the preparation of the literacy materials. We anticipate that we will be publishing a few journal articles and conference presentations from this literacy research project.

7. On-going challenges

Thus far, this article has reported the activities of the *Living Literacies* programme for the first five months since it first started. As the research project and the voluntary literacy programme advanced to its eighth month, one of my team members left to pursue her PhD and the other team member left this project to work on non-empirical based research. This was a huge loss for the voluntary *Living Literacies* programme. However, due to the overwhelming response from the *Orang Asli* children, I continue going to the village every Friday with the help of the undergraduate volunteers. Many of the older *Orang Asli* children have also taken responsibility to assist whenever needed.

At present the younger children are encouraged to write, colour and read books. While the older children who are interested are encouraged to do small projects (of their own choice) involving literacy practices. One group consisting of 10-year-old boys documented a local game they play in the village. The boys were given a file to write the rules and regulations of the game. They were also given a digital camera to take pictures while playing the game. Another group of 12-year-old girls is working on creating a recipe book on local dishes. There is also a group of 13 and 14 year old children working on documenting a traditional dance called "Tarian Sewang". Some of the other children have also voiced out that they would like to work on projects where they can document the history of the village and interview some of their elder-community members. Although at times it is extremely difficult to handle such a big number of children at any one time, it is still manageable with such divisions in the activities for the *Living Literacies* programme.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we briefly described the *Living Literacies* Programme with the *Orang Asli* children. This project combines academic research and community service. Although at times carrying out the activities for this project can seem overwhelming, the benefits and positive experiences for both the researchers and the *Orang Asli* children outweigh the challenges faced. It is hoped that by establishing a partnership with the *Orang Asli* community, the *Living Literacies* programme will continue to be successful.

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