

‘Don't ask me, ask the horse’:

## Evaluating resource-based learning

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*This study focuses on a resource-based learning unit, the ‘Chinese Idioms Cocktail’ and the results of its evaluation at a primary school in Hong Kong. The ‘Chinese Idioms Cocktail’ unit utilises a self-designed PowerPoint presentation with the “True or False” game, cartoon film show, worksheets, 80 thematic printed materials on Chinese idioms, an idioms dictionary and encyclopedia and 10 related websites. The unit was carried out in the library. The authors argue that all library programs should be routinely evaluated to assess their effectiveness and to identify areas that can be improved. The results indicated that all of the resources contributed to the successful completion of the unit, although there were some areas that could be improved.*

### Background

Y.O.T. T. K. P. Primary School is a coeducational, government subsidised school with over 1,100 students, aged from 5- to 12-years old, spread across 31 classes in

six forms (Primary One – Primary Six). The medium of instruction is both Cantonese and Putonghua (Mandarin). The socio-economic background of the school is working to middle class – about half the students come from the basic class of public housing estates, half come from the private dwellings. Surveys indicate that about 70% of the students have computers at home.

### *School library*

To support the mission and goals of the Y.O.T. T.K.P. Primary School, the school library promotes the learning and research activities of the school through collections, reference services, circulation services, instructional services and computing services. The library covers 50 square meters and has a collection in excess of 6,000 titles, mainly in Chinese. There is one full-time teacher librarian with no support staff. Trained student librarians assist in a range of tasks. Apart from standard library activities, the teacher librarian runs the school-based reading scheme (“Reading for Fun”) and a weekly thematic programme in media broadcasting produced in collaboration with students. The teacher librarian also arranges regular visits to the public library by each class.

Due to broadly based changes to school education in Hong Kong stemming from the 1998 “Reading to Learn” initiative, such as an increased focus on resource-based learning, there is a growing need for school libraries to access materials beyond their collections. In particular, primary school libraries lag well behind secondary school libraries in terms of staffing and collection size. Until 1998, most primary schools did not have libraries or librarians; they relied on classroom collections which resulted in duplicated and narrow dispersed collections. To ameliorate this problem, the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL) provides a block loan service to schools. Schools can borrow blocks of up to two-hundred items for a period of two months. Schools routinely take advantage of this service. Y.O.T. T.K.P. Primary School places at least ten requests for block loans from the HKPL each year.

### Chinese language resource based learning

During 2005, the teacher librarian collaborated with Chinese Language teachers on a resource-based learning unit called the “Chinese Idioms Cocktail” for Primary Three (P.3) students, aged from eight- to nine-years old. The Chinese Language teachers were responsible for the instruction in class; the teacher librarian assisted in designing the assignment, providing all the equipment and learning materials needed for the unit and assisting students to complete the worksheet in class. In order to assess the value of the unit and the usefulness of the materials supplied, the teacher librarian

initiated an evaluation comprising two elements:

- A survey of the students' satisfaction with the learning materials was administered
- After preliminary analysis of the survey, a focus group interview was conducted with all the Chinese language teachers involved in the Chinese Idioms Cocktail

Based on the results of the surveys and the focus group interview, various modifications to the Chinese Idioms Cocktail were suggested and agreed on by subject teachers and the teacher librarian.

### *Unit description*

The Chinese Idioms Cocktail was undertaken in a single 50-minute session held in the school library. Equipment included a computer with projector and screen, and ten computers for student use. There were 190 students divided into five classes, an average of 38 students in each class. Gender composition of the classes was 55% female and 45% male. The students' deliverables were:

- A two-page worksheet to be completed by the end of the class
- A drawn comic strip using one Chinese idiom as the theme

The projected learning outcomes were:

- To learn more about Chinese idioms; specifically to understand their meanings
- To learn how to find and apply information from books, websites and other resources

### *Materials*

Students are encouraged to draw on a variety of sources to complete the deliverables, including:

- A self-designed PowerPoint with the "True or False" game
- A cartoon film show
- 80 thematic printed materials on Chinese idioms (loans from the Hong Kong Central Library), an idioms dictionary and an idioms encyclopedia
- A list of ten websites related to the topic, bookmarked on the computers

## *Lesson structure*

The lesson plan is outlined in Table 1

*Table 1: Lesson plan*

Time	Activity	Responsibility
	<u>Warm-up:</u>	
10 mins	Students watch a cartoon film show illustrating the Chinese idiom, “Paint on Lily” ( )	Chinese teacher
	<u>Play the game: ‘True or False’:</u>	
10 mins	Students answer True/False questions concerning the characteristics of Chinese idioms	Chinese teacher
	<u>Introduction to resources:</u>	
5 mins	Each student can select one to two printed materials (eg books, magazines, journals) and/or browse through the bookmarked websites	Teacher librarian
20 mins	Students complete the worksheets	Teacher librarian
5 mins	Students complete in the questionnaire	Teacher librarian

### Purposes of evaluation

It is the authors’ experience that many library activities are undertaken in a routine fashion, over long periods of time, without formal attempts to verify their relevance and usefulness, even though there are a large number of books and journal articles that deal with (and encourage) evaluation of library services such as Shonrock, 1996; Hernon & Altman, 1998; Spiller, 1998; ARL, 1997; etc. Applying the principles of the ‘Evaluation Wheel’ (Hernon & Whitman, 2001), evaluation should be undertaken to see if activities are achieving their goals and to surface areas that can be improved. This echoes the principles of the PDSA cycle in total quality management (TQM). There is little point evaluating something if there is no commitment to a remedial response if problems are identified; actions need to be implemented if results do not reach expectations. Ideally, evaluation should be systematic, based on a model such as that proposed by Martensen & Gronholdt (2003), which is grounded in established customer service theory.

There are two major reasons for evaluating the lesson:

- To measure the effectiveness of the learning materials provided by the library in supporting the resource-based learning programme

- To provide data for decision making regarding additions to, adjustments of, or deletions from existing instructional programs for the next academic year's implementation

### Methodology

The teacher librarian designed a questionnaire for the students and complemented it with a focus group interview for the Chinese Language teachers. The focus group interview was audio taped and transcribed.

#### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire contained 10 closed questions in Chinese. Closed questions were chosen rather than open-ended questions based on the ages of the subjects and the focus on evaluating predetermined dimensions of the programme. Eight- and nine-year olds have difficulty in framing responses to open-ended questions. Closed questions also allow easier analysis of the results.

Prior to the activity, the questionnaire was distributed among a small group of the students to see if they understood the questions. As they had not yet completed the activity, this was an imperfect exercise.

The questionnaire was delivered to the students, and completed during the last five minutes of the lesson to maximise the response rate. All 190 questionnaires were completed and collected at the end of the lesson.

#### *Limitations of the questionnaire*

- As the evaluation was administered to primary-three students (ie eight-year olds) there was a concern that they might not accurately understand the meaning of some of the questions. Piloting the questionnaire was an attempt to reduce this risk
- The placement of the "neutral" category could increase the percentage of students choosing it. It was unknown if the respondents were more likely to choose it either because they were undecided or they thought that their satisfaction level was really mid-range
- The absence of open-ended questions allowed little flexibility for the students to elaborate on their answers or make comments not covered by the questions

### *Focus group interview*

After the data from the questionnaire were analysed, the teacher librarian and co-authors held a focus group interview with the five Chinese language teachers involved to gain more insight into the effectiveness of the learning materials. As noted by Hughes-Hassell & Bishop (2004), the social interaction involved in focus groups helps participants focus on the most important aspects and the format allows the interviewer to probe for clarification or solicit greater detail to enhance the completeness of the data. Focus group interviews tend to encourage more open and honest responses than other techniques (Glitz, 1998).

The open-ended questions for the focus group interview followed the pattern of the questionnaire and also provided scope for additional comments. Specific issues that the questionnaire surfaced were discussed, especially the appropriateness of the learning materials in supporting the students' research activities.

The goals of the focus group interview were:

- To surface the views of the Chinese language teachers concerning the positive and negative aspects of the activity
- To get additional understanding of the views of the students based on the teachers' observation of them
- To generate some ideas for improving the activity from the teachers' points of view

### *Limitations of the focus group interview*

The major concern was that the teachers, when relating observations they had made about the students during the exercise, might transfer their own views to those of the students or make assumptions about what the students were thinking. In order to reduce the chances of this occurring, when they made comments about the students, they were asked to describe the situation and repeat the students' comments.

Teachers did not make notes during the Chinese Idioms Cocktail lessons; they relied on their memories during the focus group interview.

## Results

### *Questionnaire results*

The students were asked to rate their agreement about the effectiveness of the learning materials in helping them to learn Chinese idioms. Overall results indicated that the activity was successful in achieving the learning objectives. The questions (translated into English) and the results are recorded in Table 2.

*Table 2: Survey results*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The content of the cartoon was clearly related to the class worksheet	93%	5%	0%	2%	0%
2. The True/False game was clearly related to the class worksheet	92%	7%	0%	1%	0%
3. The worksheet content correlated with the lesson	88%	10%	1%	1%	0%
4. The worksheet instructions were clear	50%	38%	11%	1%	0%
5. The worksheet's directions were clear, that is, I can understand what I am expected to learn	30%	53%	15%	10%	2%
6. The worksheet contributed significantly to my understanding of the library and research process	12%	68%	5%	12%	3%
7. The worksheet design helped me to learn more Chinese idioms.	10%	61%	15%	13%	1%
8. The resources (e.g. books, websites) provided helped me to finish the worksheet.	10%	35%	40%	15%	0%
9. The teacher librarian's instructions helped me to finish the worksheet	14%	65%	10%	5%	6%
10. The learning materials aroused my interests in learning Chinese idioms	54%	26%	11%	7%	2%

Summarising, most students considered the cartoon (98%) and the game (99%) to be relevant to the deliverable. 71% agreed that the worksheet could help them to learn more Chinese idioms. Concerning the learning materials, 80% agreed that the overall learning materials could arouse their interest in learning Chinese idioms; however 55% disagreed or were neutral about the value of the resources in contributing to their completion of the worksheet.

## *Focus group results*

Comments from the Chinese language teachers included:

*Resourced-based learning can help students learn more on the topic, Chinese idioms, than from the textbooks alone.*

*There are multiple resources in this lesson.*

*I appreciated that some of the students could share the books together.*

The teachers also conveyed some comments that they had overheard from students during and after the exercise, such as:

*I found that the book chosen by the classmate sitting at the next table was more useful than the ones I had.*

*There is a long queue behind the computers so I don't bother to stand in the queue.*

*I know where to locate this book in the Central Library. [The Hong Kong Central Library is the largest and most modern of the Hong Kong Public Libraries.]*

*If we were allowed to finish the worksheet after school, I would have finished the worksheet in a better way.*

The teachers unanimously revealed that:

*We didn't know that there is a Chinese idioms dictionary and a Chinese idioms encyclopedia here in our library. Now we have more reference materials to use in preparing our lessons.*

Suggestions by teachers included:

*If they can do the assignments in groups, it can save time and promote their communication and collaboration skills.*

*The Art teacher can help train the students to create and draw comics so that they will produce better artwork and have more time to spend on research.*

Summarising, all the Chinese Language teachers expressed satisfaction with the cartoon, the game, the worksheet design and the prepared materials. However, they all agreed that there was not enough time for students to search through a large range of books and websites. Also, as there are only ten computers in the library, few students were able to browse the recommended websites bookmarked in the computers. Some

teachers indicated that some printed materials like magazines were too difficult for P.3 students to negotiate. Most importantly there was general agreement that, despite the identified problems, the activity provided the students and teachers with multiple resources that support and enhance both teaching and learning. This exceeded the potential of the textbook to satisfy students' quest for research around the topic.

### Discussion and recommendations

#### *Improving the activity*

Recommendations for improving the activity should first focus on the main concerns identified by the evaluation, namely:

- Limited time for the students to access the materials and complete the activity
- Suitability of the materials to the task
- Limited access to the computers

Recommendations addressing these issues include:

- Pursuing interlibrary loan service with other local school libraries to expand the capacity for obtaining a wider range of suitable thematic publications and multiple copies of suitable thematic publications
- If interlibrary lending can be arranged with other local school libraries, the teacher librarians and Chinese language teachers can investigate the possibility of collaborative collection development, and cooperative teaching among local schools respectively
- Inviting teachers to participate in the choice of the learning resources
- Encouraging the students to browse through the loans and resources provided in the library before and during the implementation of the unit
- Allowing the students to use the computer room with the selected websites bookmarked before and during the implementation period of the unit
- Extending the opening hours of library and computer room after school during the implementation period of the unit
- Extending the due date of the assignment so that the students can have more time outside of the actual library session to finish the worksheet

Recommendations should also address other issues that surfaced during the focus groups relating to improvement of the activity, such as:

- Inviting Art teachers to collaborate by teaching students some rudimentary skills for drawing comic strips
- Inviting IT teachers to collaborate

Collaboration with the Art and IT teachers could also expand the available time for the unit, if these teachers could allocate some of their class time to the Chinese Idioms Cocktail lessons. This would require some reworking of the unit to match the Art and IT syllabi.

### *Improving the evaluation*

Restricting the students' evaluation to closed questions reduces their opportunity to raise issues. To give them greater opportunities to express their views, the teacher librarian can:

- Provide space for students to elaborate on any of the closed questions
- Include a single open-ended question to give them the opportunity to make any observations they wish about the activity
- Conduct a focus group interview on a small group of students covering a range of performance in the activity, ie low, middle and high performers in the activity

The evaluation could be expanded to include the roles of the teacher librarian and the Chinese language teachers. Also, the Chinese language teachers could be encouraged to make notes of their observations of students' behaviour during the activity

### Conclusion

The incorporation of the variety of learning materials in the resourced-based learning unit is effective in arousing the students' interest and helping them to learn more about Chinese idioms. Although the time for the unit is a constraint on the depth of learning, the students are offered the opportunity to identify different types of resources so that they have some idea where to look for more information on Chinese idioms. Now, more than ever, school libraries have great potential for supporting and collaborating in curriculum and instructional programs.

Evaluating programmes and units can verify if they are achieving their learning goals. Even for successful programmes, evaluation will always suggest potential areas for improvement. Having evaluated the collaborative "Chinese Idioms Cocktail"

unit, we have confirmed that its participants view it as a successful activity. Furthermore we have identified some areas where it can be enhanced from the perspectives of both teachers and students.

We argue that evaluation can have some other beneficial results not directly related to the goals of the target activity. In this case, after the evaluation, the subject teachers displayed a heightened awareness of the role the library played in planning the activity, identifying relevant materials and assembling the resources. They also recognised that a variety of resources can contribute to a richer learning experience outside the boundaries imposed by the textbook. This has raised their perception of the value of the library and stimulated them to consider ways to enhance the unit in future and has also resulted in them considering how the library can assist them in other units.

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