Promotion of Reading Through Distance Library Services: A Successful Story From the Middle East During the COVID-19 Pandemic

M. O. Raghunathan

MLISC Librarian and GEMS Modern Academy,
United Arab Emirates
moraghunath@gmail.com

Abstract*: This paper explores how the operations of an academy library got transfigured during closures due to COVID-19. The author offers tips on how to maintain access to resources, how to engage students in learning, and support academy staff. This paper reflect how the GEMS Modern Academy school library promoted reading during distance learning.*

Keywords: *School Library, Pandemic, Covid-19, Distance Learning, Remote Learning, Learning engagements, 21st Century learning, Collaboration, Partnership, Arabic Reading Challenge, Middle East, GEMS Education, GEMS Modern Academy, GMA Library*

Introduction

We've been living through unprecedented times. Especially during the global pandemic of COVID-19. This pandemic has led, in numerous places, to abandoned thoroughfares, empty store shelves, and shuttered academy structures. How can we utilize this time usefully and how can the school library be transformed to a live online platform by various operational techniques? How can we continue the library services efficiently if the library space remains closed? All the school librarians might have faced this question for the past few months. Here, this paper discusses how we can find a solution for the same.

The school library is a hub of teaching and learning and the role of librarians have changed with the change and advancement in technology. The library will be a place to read, explore, collaborate, and do research. Just like a regular school year, it is up to the librarians to determine how to best engage our library communities. The librarians make this happen through the latest technologies and a wide range of e-resources and research tools. We should

be able to navigate this strange period we are going through if we offer these different resources and learning activities, at the same time ensuring to keep it manageable for us and the students. It has been observed that taking challenges and exploring new, ingenious concepts will help to improve library service efficiently.

Every student is unique and has a different taste in reading and it is not right to predict that all students read the same kind of books without acknowledging individual interests. Provision of library hours with a good collection of books in the school library alone is not enough to promote reading. The school librarians must guide children in choosing the right books and help them find their taste in reading. Lending common books to an entire class based on assumptions or trends in taste of particular genres in children of a particular class and gender, are often wrong. This is where a librarian plays an important role by introducing students to a world of reading that one may cherish.

This paper discusses different levels of online library practices and new roles during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the library has transformed into an active learning platform. The library period should be a 'joyful time' and the reading habits of students should be tracked through various interesting activities. It is not easy to track student's reading habits within the limited hours of the library period and it might be a challenge during distance learning. Here, we discuss how the librarian can promote reading habits among students and how to catch their preferences through various learning engagements.

Role of school library during the distance learning period in the pandemic:

Remote learning sessions were conducted efficiently and productively by implementing learning engagements. Ensured the effective utilization of digital resources by providing orientation for students and teachers. Introduced different projects and innovative ideas in the library to promote love of reading. The implemented activities and innovative ideas have provided the opportunity to promote reading as well as reflect students' skills. The implemented library activities had considered the uniqueness of each student and provided various opportunities for their inquiries. The reading and learning activities provided students to have voice, choice, and ownership. Student voice and choice allowed them to explore their passion and reflect on their skills and personalities.

- **Provision of digital resources:** The provision of digital resources through the library virtual platform played a significant role to promote reading and researching. The library virtual platform and the provision of digital resources played a significant role in inculcating reading habit in students and ensured the availability of resources for their Unit of Inquiry. Library website was frequently updated throughout the distance

learning period. Specialized databases for research in all subjects were provided through Follett shelf to stretch the research and reference skills of students. The Follett online platform has an online catalogue which has helped to share the information about the library physical books. The digital resources and library news was also shared through the Follett platform. Used library's social media accounts to share the news with staff, students, and parent community. Academic Honesty and Integrity which has been profoundly important in student's character development were taught to primary, middle, and senior school students. As part of the Unit of Inquiry, students were guided by the librarian as a media specialist to develop their academic prowess and taught them the importance of academic honesty & citations to enable safe and independent research.

- **Remote learning sessions**: Remote learning sessions were conducted efficiently and productively by implementing learning engagements since March 2020. The implementation of various learning engagements in the day-to-day practices has helped the children to enjoy their distance learning classes. Proper homework and systematic approaches helped in the successful implementation of various innovative projects.

- **Plan of Action:** All the library practices are measurable and time specific. The 'Plan of Action' must be a simplified, task-oriented version of a strategic plan for the school library. The 'Plan of Action' only needs to list the pretensions that the library will work on in the forthcoming academic time. The action plan helps to set out how the school library will address various challenges in its day-by-day practices. It is a useful tool for the implementation of various activities independently, in addition to the setting of the groups in the library. At GEMS Modern Academy, we functioned online library services effectively with a well-designed 'Plan-of-Action' by implementing various learning engagements to encourage students to read, research and reflect skills. It helped to prepare various activities to achieve the 21st century learning skills during the distance learning period. The 'Plan of Action' also aided in implementing different learning engagement programs effectively with intended results.

- **Library Curriculum:** Reading is important for the pleasure that it can give and having a reading habit early in life has a positive impact on future academic outcomes. Reading ability is also one of the most important indicators of students' future career success. The library reading curriculum helps to promote reading and evaluate the growth of reading. In the same way the school librarian's involvement and initiative has a keen key role in the creation of the library curriculum. The library curriculum incorporates activities for students to foster love for reading and other creative capabilities. It is an important document to reflect the vision, mission, and policy of the school library.

Information Literacy and Academic Honesty is an integral part of the library curriculum. To share the content of the library, the library curriculum has been discussed with students in the library classes.

- **Arabic Reading Challenge:** The implementation of the 'Reading Challenge' with the collaboration of Departments of Languages, using sequential reading books has a key role in not only promoting reading in other languages but also creating awareness of the different countries they are spoken in. To improve skills in Arabic reading and writing, we conduct Arabic Reading Challenge liaising with the Arabic language department. The implementation of Arabic Reading Challenge in the library with collaboration of the language department was a great success. The circulation of 'sequential reading' books played a major role along with the digital resources during the distance learning. We also issued books during the distance learning by using 'Online Book Circulation Form.'

  The provision of the sequential reading story books helped students in their active participation in the Arabic reading challenge. Students got the opportunity to borrow Arabic language books along with the English language books. A separate notebook has been maintained by students to write down the new words and summary. The 'Arabic Reading Challenge' helped to promote the host country language and made students aware of the cultural heritage of U.A.E.

- **Virtual author visits:** Author visits always help to create a lasting impression on school students. Authors can build the relationships between readers and books through the interactive story telling sessions. When authors discuss writing and the creative process, students connect with the books in entirely new ways. Students will be inspired when seeing an author talking about their creative career in an honest way and also help students to recognize how the writers utilize their skills. The virtual visits of authors and the interactive sessions with the authors had brought vibrant effect on students during the distance learning; especially the Arabic language authors.

- **Online Platforms for book reservation, circulation and recording reading progress:** Framed various online platforms to borrow books and record students' reading progress.

  i. **Online Book Circulation Form**: It is vital that children have access to books during distance learning. To promote reading, we issued physical books to students by using 'Online Book Circulation Form.' Students could borrow the real books to home and enjoy with their families. The provision of this online platform ensured that the children are engaged in choosing the books. The circulation of

physical books helped to reduce students' eyestrain due to the continuous use of digital resources.

ii. **Online Reading Log:** The online reading log is an online form used to record students' reading details during the distance learning. It helped to record students' reading progress. Digital reading logs allow students to share their reading details (title, author, category, form of reading material, time of reading, etc.) with comments. The online Reading Log brought a positive change among students by reading books and recording their reading progress simultaneously.

- **Library Newsletter:** Commenced termly online library newsletter to promote students' creative writing. Library newsletter helped to promote students' research skills and creative writing by active participation. Library newsletters provide writing opportunities to parents and have given special opportunities for students to translate phenomenal literary works to home languages and international languages. Students have translated famous poems/poetries in different languages and published them in the library newsletter. The book recommendation by librarian, the list top readers, and various library services will be published in the library newsletter. The vocabulary walls in the newsletter express the tides of the students' emotions as well as language.

- **Online surveys:** Online surveys were conducted to know students' perception and opinion to enhance library practices and book collection during the distance learning. The student surveys are very important in the regular library practices particularly in the time of the distance learning. School library collected many ideas and suggestions from students through the online surveys.

- **Celebration of International Days**: The United Nations state that, the international days are occasions to educate the general public on issues of concern, to mobilize political will and resources to address global problems, and to celebrate and reinforce achievements of humanity. The celebration of the international days helps the students to get an awareness on important political, social, cultural, humanitarian, or human rights issues. Celebrating the cultural differences, as well as the common interests, helps unite and educate the children. Celebration of various international days helped the students to get an awareness on issues of concern, to mobilize political will and resources to address global problems, and to celebrate and reinforce achievements of humanity. These celebrations show respect and importance to various cultures.

- **Promotion of Student Blogs:** Blogging provides students the openings to speak their' unique voices' through their creativity and helps students be courteous and thoughtful.

Student bloggers get practice on communication and conversation skills when they comment on others' postings or reply to others' feedback on their blogs. During the distance learning, the school library discussed the importance of blogs and promoted students' blogs through the library newsletters.

Learning engagements:

A virtual library might be a challenge in the beginning, but it can also be fun later! We must involve students to engage online just like we manage in our physical library space. Students must get a chance to work independently and cooperatively to explore new ideas and innovative strategies. Through an efficient virtual platform (Microsoft teams, Zoom, Flipgrid, Quizizz.com, Kahoot, or any social media platforms), students are able to check out the links or challenges timely shared by the librarians. Like the regular library practice, continuous self-care strategies like e-mails for the students help maintain the work-life balance during the distance learning. Engaging students with various ideas and activities will provide them a glimmer of normalcy and fun ways to interact with the school library as well as each other. Learning engagements' helped students, not only to be good readers but also to think critically and reflect on their inquiries. Students' participation and collaborative approaches brought interactive and open discussions opportunities to expose their ideas and skills along with reading. The activities based on reading and learning have provided an opportunity to reflect students' skills confidently during their library period.

- ☐ **Book talk:** Talking about a book is about reading more deeply into that book. If a child really loves the story of the book, he/she will share the same and may form the basis of an open discussion. Book talk is an activity which has been conducted in the library to convince someone to read a book. A long book talk is usually around five minutes long and a short book talk is generally three minutes. This activity was traditionally conducted in some classrooms to create an awareness on reading. During the distance learning time, the school library could prove the possibilities of book talk activity in a library setting. This could be performed in the library with different age groups. The book talkers give an idea about the book content and the characters without providing the resolution of the story. Book talks helped to develop good care among listeners about the content of the book and given an opportunity to develop vocabulary. Cultivated a reading culture among students during the distance learning through the regular practices of 'Book talks.'

- ☐ **Book talk with parent:** Children need to recognize the importance of books and share their creative and innovative ways of having fun with books. Talking about

books provides opportunities for children to be completely immersed in communication. In the book talk, a child can lead the parent to spend quality uninterrupted time together. Parents can engage their interest in reading by listening to them. The 'book talk with parent' helped to create a 'book rich' experience at home and has provided a good time to the parents to extend children's vocabulary during the distance learning. This activity has provided an access opportunity to children and families to the library that they can enjoy together and also encouraged the parent involvement in the library practices. Book talk activity also encourages parents to read with their children in some way by providing additional tips, support, and resources that can make a significant difference.

☐ **Book review:** Book review is a form of literary criticism in which a book is merely described or analyzed based on its content, style, and merit. It discusses what the children particularly liked about the book and mentions something they disliked about the book. That is, children will get an opportunity to rate the book through a way of criticism. Through the book reviews, children become closer to the characters and more invested in the story. Traditionally, book reviews are in the form of writing, with a couple of sentences describing what the book is about. Nowadays, children are preparing book review presentations with the support of the latest technologies. The 'book review presentation' is a digital form of book review to discuss about the book. During the distance learning, children made book review presentations individually and presented the same in their library period. Students selected books in advance and decided what they wanted to make as a presentation. They have collected information about the author, content, and other readers' reviews by reading and researching. For the book review presentation, children used various tools like PowerPoint and some online platforms (eg: prezi.com). This activity helped to reflect students' presentation skills, public speaking skills, technical skills along with an open discussion session during the distance learning.

☐ **Read aloud:** Read aloud activity helps to develop stronger vocabulary skills along with enjoyment for children. It helps to build connections between the spoken and written words. This activity also provides an opportunity to the students to increase attention span, strengthen cognition and is a safe way to explore strong emotions. Commonly, read-aloud is an instructional practice where teachers, librarians, and parents read texts aloud to children. But, during the distance learning library practice, students gained the opportunity to read aloud individually by reading the books in front of their classmates. The read aloud activity has given the benefits of sharpened

focus, self-confidence, improved vocabulary, increased comprehension and strengthened listening skills of the young minds.

☐ **Poem recitation:** Poem or poetry recitation is literary work where ideas and feelings, accentuated with the use of distinctive style and rhythm. It is delivered through a public speaking activity with a focus on rhythm, alliteration and some repetitions. As an art, poetry breaks across grammar and syntax to create something new and imaginative for the children. Poetry recitation also provides an adventure for the children's mind by the active participation. Poem recitation helped to engage students in the library period during the distance learning. This practice has given an opportunity to develop self-confidence of the students along with phonemic awareness, self-expressions, and memorizing skills.

☐ **Portfolio Projects on famous authors:** This activity is a brief collection of a student's writing about an author for his/her presentation. Students can utilize the latest technology and develop portfolio sites for the same. It is different from the traditional writing folder that contains all of a student's work. A portfolio contains only the student's best research efforts on a specific writer. Usually, students were preparing the portfolio of their favorite author as a team project; but during the distance learning each student was preparing their own works individually. As part of these projects, students were able to utilize the latest technology for the development of the portfolio sites as well as their individual research. Portfolio Projects on favourite authors helped to raise awareness on writers and increase the reading habit.

☐ **Story writing:** Story Writing is a fictional writing activity that is written in a simpler way and has its own natural flow. Story Writing is a creative writing opportunity for students. It will be written in a simpler way and developed in natural flow. Story Writing mainly covers the elements like Character, Setting, Plot, Conflict, and Theme. Creative writing encourages kids to exercise their creative minds and practice using their imaginations. Story writing activity helped to develop the imagination skills along with students' creative writing. It's also provided an opportunity to develop self-expressions and self-confidence among students during the distance learning.

☐ **Quiz:** Quizzes are a test of knowledge, especially as a competition between individuals or teams as a form of entertainment. Quizzes can boost self-esteem and confidence among students by their active participation. Quizzes can support individualized learning by their active participation as well as their presentation. Quizzes are great for end of topic assessments and curriculum revision. The events like quizzes helped to enhance the literacy across the curriculum. Organized quizzes on various topics in the library classes during the distance learning. It encouraged pupils' self-awareness of progress and self-assessment.

☐ **Script on a book:** A script is a written document that outlines every aural, visual, lingual and behavioral element required to tell a story preparing for a play, film, or broadcast. The 'Script on a Book' is an activity to create a script for a play/skit based on a story book. It creates a visual concept on paper and targets a particular audience. This task gives an opportunity of creative writing as well as the promotion of individual reading and researching.

☐ **Skit from the book:** Skit is a short dramatic piece**.** This might be a short comedy sketch or piece of humorous writing, especially a parody. As part of the library practice, students can participate and perform as various characters by their active participation in the skit. Students can choose any script or their own scripts for the same. It helps to improve communication skills of the children along with teamwork skills by the dialogue, negotiations, and socialization. Students effectively utilized the technology for their active participation in the skits. Children presented the skit in the library period, by the effective utilization of online platforms with proper collaboration during the distance learning.

☐ **Peer teaching:** "Peer teaching is a teaching and learning strategy where students, by design, teach other students." In peer teaching, one or more students teach other students in a particular subject. As a media specialist, librarian recommended peer teaching in the library classes on inquiry based learning and digital technology. Peer teaching helped to enhance learning by enabling learners to take responsibility for reviewing, organizing, and consolidating the existing knowledge.

☐ **Poster Making:** A poster is a large piece of printed or written paper which has a message, with the support of pictures. Posters can spread awareness easily and effectively. Designing a poster means presenting the ideas in a visually appealing way. Through the active participation of poster making, children get opportunities to reflect their skills of creativity. During the distance learning, students utilized online support and digital platforms for their active participation to research, design, share and publish the poster.

☐ **Blackout poetry:** 'Blackout poetry' is when a page of text is completely blacked out except a few words. This is an artwork on a printed page by coloring over with permanent marker. Usually, the pages from the books or articles from the magazines will be selected for this activity. The visibility of a few words, a new story is created from the existing page. It is a creative work as well as a learning engagement. Children get critical thinking opportunities along with the creative work. Throughout the distance learning, students brought their results in, surprisingly with meaningful art by the active involvement in the black out poetry.

Conclusion

In this modern world, the school library is a hub of teaching and learning and the role of librarians has changed with the change and advancement in technology. The librarian is not just a bookkeeper but a teacher, collaborator, leader, lifelong learner, facilitator, and media specialist. GEMS Modern Academy school library proved it is a 21st century learning place by managing the distance learning library classes efficiently and effectively. Challenges taken by the librarians during the distance learning and exploring new, ingenious concepts improved library service efficiently.

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from other sources are referenced.

Biography

M. O. Raghunathan MLISC Librarian, GEMS Modern Academy, Dubai, United Arab Emirates has been working in a multicultural environment since May 2007. He is of Indian origin, working in the Middle East region for the past 15 years. He has more than seventeen years' experience in the field of education and is a well-experienced librarian in CBSE, IGCSE, ICSE and IB curriculum. He has transformed the GEMS Library Network from the traditional system to 21st Century Library Network through collaborative and partnership approaches. Raghunathan has achieved many appreciations and awards in his professional life. Nominated for the IASL 2016 School Librarian Award, Finalist in the ELF School Librarian Award 2017 & 2021, Nominated for the ELF School Librarian Award 2018. Presented papers in IASL 2015 Maastricht-The Netherlands, SIBF-ALA2015 Sharjah Conference, ILN-GCC Symposium 2018, Library Seminar 2017 at Ahmedabad-India, Young Scholars Congress 2019 Thiruvananthapuram-India, IASL2019 Dubrovnik-Croatia.