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World Literacy Day: Don't get lazy, get reading!

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THESE days, picking up a book feels like trying to lift a tonne of bricks — so much effort when we could just binge on television series instead! Who has the time to dance with words, unleash our imagination, or actually think when there's a new season of our favourite show to watch? With technology taking over, reading is slowly being shoved into a dusty corner, right next to our New Year resolutions and unused gym memberships.

Are we reading enough? When was the last time you picked up a good book and actually read it? Let's take a look at the data we have. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (Unesco) Institute of Statistics (UIS), Malaysia has a literacy rate of 94.64 per cent, while GlobalData reports a slightly higher figure of 95.71 per cent for 2021. However, from 2010 to 2021, the country's literacy rate had experienced a decline of 2.74 per cent, with a 0.4 per cent drop recorded in 2021 alone.

Interestingly, data from the National Library of Malaysia (PNM) reveals that Malaysians are turning pages more frequently these days. Up to May this year, the average Malaysian reads about 20 books annually, up from 15 in 2014. But let's not get too carried away with the celebratory bookmarks just yet.

In a 2019 global survey of reading habits, India led the pack with an impressive 10 hours and 42 minutes of reading per week. Our northern neighbour, Thailand, was hot on their heels with nine hours and 24 minutes.

For perspective, South Korea, the nation that came in last, managed a humble three hours and six minutes. As for Malaysia, we were so far behind that we might as well have been reading while stuck in traffic — if only we could find the time!

Blowing the dust off our books and diving back into reading isn't just a personal benefit. It's crucial for the nation's growth and development. Reading fosters critical thinking, enhances creativity and improves communication skills, which are essential for a well-informed and innovative society. It broadens our understanding of different cultures, perspectives and historical contexts, fostering empathy and a more inclusive community.

But despite the gaps in our reading habits, World Literacy Day, which is celebrated today, is a chance to celebrate the power and importance of reading. It's a reminder of how books can open doors, spark imaginations, and bridge gaps between people and ideas.

READING VS TECHNOLOGY

Encouraging a renewed passion for reading among students and the younger generation is crucial, especially when you consider the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report.

This global study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveals that Malaysia is among the top five countries with the largest declines in test scores for reading, mathematics and science.

In fact, our learning losses are so significant that we might need to schedule remedial classes in time travel to catch up — equivalent to about 1.6 years in mathematics, 1.4 years in reading and 1.1 years in science.

Since 2015, Malaysia's PISA scores have been sliding faster than a smartphone screen on full scroll. With average scores falling below the Asean-6 average, it's clear that despite our growing number of bookworms, something is amiss.

So, what does this mean for our young people? Are they not reading enough? The declining PISA scores suggest that despite an increase in the number of books being read, the quality and depth of engagement might be lacking. With students increasingly inundated by social media and technology, their attention spans are often fragmented by constant notifications and digital distractions.

It's not just about the quantity of books read, but also about how deeply students are engaging with them. If they're skimming through books while their minds are simultaneously absorbed in the latest TikTok trend or endless Instagram feeds, it's no wonder that their test scores in reading, mathematics, and science are slipping.

This highlights a need for more effective reading practices and educational strategies that can help students focus and fully engage with their reading material, despite the distractions of the digital age.

Indeed, we're battling a full-on digital circus with streaming services, TikTok, emojis and generative Artificial Intelligence, all vying for our attention. Our attention spans have been chopped up and commodified, sold off piecemeal to platforms and algorithms.

In this environment, it's no surprise that we're too busy, too lazy and too preoccupied to truly lose ourselves in books. To turn the tide, we must reconnect with the joy of reading and find ways to make it engaging and meaningful once again.

So, why should we bother with reading? Reading is more than just a skill; it's a fantastical blend of introspection and social engagement. It helps us understand who we are, while also letting us forget ourselves in someone else's story. It's like a personal workout for the mind — sometimes soothing, sometimes challenging, and always a bit like a treasure hunt for knowledge.

Embracing reading with creativity and enthusiasm might just be the key to reclaiming our focus, bridging the gap between current educational challenges, and making our future a bit brighter. After all, if we can't compete with TikTok, we might as well try to outwit it with a good book!

I get it: These days, we're bombarded with a constant stream of information. Our reading habits have been fractured by bite-sized text messages and social media scrolling, which gobbles up the time we might otherwise spend on long-form reading. I'm not here to slam social media; I'm as much a participant as anyone, and I admit to indulging in a few too many memes (and an inordinate number of cat videos!).

But reading texts isn't the same as reading a *text*. There's no intellectual equivalent to allowing oneself the time and space to get lost in another person's mind, because in so doing we find ourselves.

And in finding ourselves and rediscovering our love for reading, we're not just dusting off old books; we're setting the stage for our nation to soar ahead. By becoming a society of bookworms and deep thinkers, we'll turn our collective brainpower into a superpower.

So, let's swap some screen time for page-turning adventures — because a nation that reads together, grows together.

Happy World Literacy Day everyone!

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