

# THE POWER OF STORIES: READING TO EDUCATE AND ENGAGE

## 最動人的教育：用共讀來教 養，用教養來共讀

*You can begin teaching your kids to love reading by sharing the experience with them, all the way from picking books to building a reading environment to exploring new worlds on the page. Let two veteran language arts teachers guide you through this process in clear, sensible prose.*

Many of us who were read to as children remember those memories with fondness, and those of us who still love to read oftentimes cite such family rituals as formative experiences. Yet with thousands of new books hitting shelves every single year, it can be hard for us to know where and how to start reading to our own children. Peng Yu-Liang and Chen Pin-Hsuan, a duo of veteran language arts teachers and writing coaches, are here to show us the way.

One of the great beauties of reading together is that the practice itself is an exploration of its own myriad capabilities. Reading can be a form of problem-solving, of storytelling, or of natural and cultural discovery. It can enrich both our imaginative and our everyday, practical lives, and doesn't have to be a chore or a spiritual calling. When Chen and Peng note that "if you can eat, you can read," they're reminding us that reading does not have to feel like an assignment.

Chen Pin-Hsuan and Peng Yu-Liang approach a complex and ideologically loaded question with the cool and practiced eye of experienced teachers. Committed to taking nothing and no one for granted, they help us face simple questions about reading (Why read? What happens if I don't?) from a practical perspective, and guide us toward useful – if sometimes uncomfortable – conclusions. They walk



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with you through the endless gallery of possibilities that reading presents so that you may one day show it to your children.

## Chen Pin-Hsuan 陳品誼 & Peng Yu-Liang 彭瑜亮

This husband-and-wife team of reading and creative writing educators has published work on educating children through reading, storytelling, and creative writing. They have also opened their own private enrichment center, *Shining Life*.

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By Chen Pin-Hsuan & Peng Yu-Liang

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### **Why must we read? What if we don't? – The real value of reading**

“Put your hand up if you ‘read extensively’ when you were young?”

This is a question I ask at every reading seminar I give, and only a scattered few of the parents attending ever put their hands up. In our day, many of us simply didn't have the opportunity to read a lot.

“So, those of you who didn't read extensively – has that made your life today more difficult?” This always gets a smile. After all, why are we telling our kids to read – and to read ‘extensively,’ at that?

I meet many worried parents asking questions like: “My child doesn't like to read! What should I do?”; “The little brat reads if he's got a test, but the rest of the time he's playing basketball or watching television. He never reads anything if it's not for school.” I always respond in the same way, with wide-eyed curiosity: “And why do they have to read?”

That response, coming from a high-school Chinese teacher, always confuses them. They reply: “Everyone says reading's so important! Of course they've got to read!”; “My colleagues' kids are all such good readers. If my child doesn't read now, what happens later?”; “I heard they have to read a lot now so they can write good essays later.”

You might notice that the above responses are all driven by a wish to do what is normal and to avoid being left behind. Trust me, your child spending all day buried in books won't make for better essays or a better future! I've seen kids out for dinner with their family or out on holiday holding books in front of their noses. They might be well-behaved, but they aren't engaging in conversation. That would worry me far more.

Reading is a good thing. It is a beneficial habit, to be encouraged, just like playing basketball or learning the piano. And since the Ministry of Education initiative to promote reading started, it has become fashionable. Suddenly everyone is best friends with their local librarian, more books are appearing on classroom shelves, and every week there seems to be another essay-writing or speech-making competition about the value of reading. But that doesn't mean every child has to enjoy reading, does it?

By this point, you might be expecting me to declare that reading is not important, and that you've been reading the wrong books. Yet this is not at all what I want to say. We cannot blindly encourage reading. We must understand its real value if we are to best help our children.

## What can reading do for us?

### **Acquire life experience: absorb what other people have learned to enrich your own life.**

“But I’m still alive and healthy, how am I meant to know what people think when they’re dying?”

“I want to write about ancient battles! But I wasn’t alive then and I’ve never been in a war. How can I make it realistic?”

Pei-Yu, a new sixth-grader, had a habit of asking questions anyone would struggle to answer in class. And there are many children like this, with limited life reference books I know to start a discussion:

“*Tuesdays with Morrie* talks about facing death, plus it’s got lots of good advice about life!”

“*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has lots about the wars of the late Eastern Han. The characters are all brave and honorable, I promise you won’t be able to put it down.”

By the time they’ve finished their reading list, they’ve answered their own questions and learned plenty more. Often, those books lead them to other books, which they bring into class to show their classmates. This practice improves their writing over time, but more importantly, it gives them new ways of thinking about and understanding the world.

The world is huge and our lives are short. We cannot experience everything for ourselves. To borrow a famous phrase from Peng Yuan-Chi, the well-known teacher from Hsinchu Senior High School: “Reading is the best way to acquire someone else’s life experiences.”

A writer may spend a decade scaling mountains or exploring the mysteries of life, and then another year refining those experiences into a book. We need spend only a week, perhaps less, to read it and absorb what has been learned. We are fortunate to have such an effective and enjoyable method of enriching our lives.

### **Improving communication: talking better, writing better.**

“Mom, the fried chicken looks tasty. It tastes delicious too, I can still taste it when it’s gone.”

“Dad, the fried chicken looks lovely and golden, crispy on the outside and tender and juicy on the inside. Even when it’s finished, I can taste the salty sweetness on my tongue. It’s delicious!”

Which of those two children’s descriptions might start you drooling? Which one will persuade you to take them out for fried chicken?

Similar ideas, expressed in different ways, will result in entirely different outcomes. This is true in our daily conversations, but is even more apparent in writing:

“On a rainy day, the air smells of rain.”

“In the unreal haze of a drizzle, sniff with care. It is fresh, it is clear, it is new... and there is a hint of peppermint.”

The second description is by the great Chinese writer Yu Kwang-Chung. Isn’t it clearly more captivating than the first? If we want to improve our writing, wouldn’t we be letting ourselves down if we failed to learn from it?

As the saying goes – if you want wool, find sheep. If you want to write and speak well, find good writers and speakers. Reading the work of great authors will teach you about the world as well as boost your writing skills.

We'll look at the most effective ways to read later.

### **Foster good habits: reading teaches kids how to identify and solve problems**

It might sound like a cliché, but there's more to it.

In one writing class, the students and I were discussing the conflict between the Ukraine and Russia. They watched in fascination as I gesticulated and spoke energetically, but I couldn't go into too much detail, as they were still quite young. But something strange happened in next week's class: One 3<sup>rd</sup>-year student anxiously raised his hand:

“Miss, did you know that when Crimea was first separated from the Ukraine, both Russia and the Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union. So it was just an internal border. But then...”

The entire class, myself included, watched as this boy, a good-looking young lad named Cheng-Yu, placed a geopolitical conflict within its historical context and went on to discuss the stance of other powers and what the future might hold. By the time he finished the whole class was spellbound.

After the class, I spoke to his mother. She told me Cheng-Yu had always loved to read books and newspapers, and if he didn't understand something he'd figure out the answer from other books. Once he was old enough to use the internet, he became even more impressive, stumping his parents with questions one evening, and then amazing them with the answers the following morning.

And I'm sure you've seen my point: a love of reading involves the ability to identify and solve problems. This opens up the prospect of lifelong learning. Once a child is used to solving problems and acquiring knowledge for themselves, what more is there for a parent to worry about?

And I think this also explains that glint I often spotted in Cheng-Yu's eyes – a glint I believe will get brighter as he grows up.

### **A range of benefits**

Words are like mysterious symbols, and reading them is a magical process of decoding and interpretation. Reading constantly stimulates the brain – it might look like a quiet activity, but like a duck on the water, there is more going on below the surface.

We are living amidst an explosion of information. Every day we are flooded with hard-to-understand information, which reading teaches us to organize, analyze, and summarize. Over time we become able to evaluate information and use it to inform our decisions.

There are many other advantages to reading: it builds character, broadens horizons, and provides calm and self-control. But we do not have time to discuss them all.

**So should we read? It's a waste not to!**

Is reading essential? I would never advance such an absolute position. Yet now that you've read the above chapter, I will tell you this: it's a terrible waste not to read.

If children don't develop a reading habit when they're young, they can still read when they're older, and it won't make their life any less rich. Nor will a healthy reading habit assure a child's success. But reading can add a great deal of beauty to a child's life, and they will gain more from it if they start early.

So immerse yourself in books, and take your child with you. There are whole worlds to be explored.