

Strengthening Historical Literacy and Local Cultural Knowledge among Vocational High School Students in Semarang, Indonesia

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Submitted: 2026-01-29

Revised: 2026-04-23

Published: 2026-07-15

Abstract. Local history and culture constitute essential elements that shape Indonesia's national identity. However, in reality, many young people still lack a comprehensive understanding of their local history and cultural heritage. One of the primary factors contributing to this issue is the limited literacy of younger generations regarding these subjects. Therefore, this community service initiative aimed to organize educational activities to enhance historical and local cultural literacy among vocational high school students in Semarang Regency. The program employed the expository learning method to facilitate interactive two-way discussions between facilitators and participants. The results revealed that a number of students at Al-Ittihad Vocational High School were still unfamiliar with the history and local culture of Semarang Regency, indicating the need for further educational interventions to improve their knowledge. Throughout the program, students demonstrated considerable enthusiasm by actively engaging with the presented materials and responding through critical questions and discussions. Overall, this community service activity had a positive impact on the students and contributed to improving their literacy regarding the history and local culture of Semarang Regency amid the rapid pace of globalization.

Keywords: literacy enhancement; local culture; local history; semarang

How to Cite: Hartatik, E.S., Utomo, I.N., Pratama, O.S., Raharjo, B. (2026). Strengthening Historical Literacy and Local Cultural Knowledge among Vocational High School Students in Semarang, Indonesia. *Journal of Community Empowerment*, 6 (1), 17-23.

INTRODUCTION

Explaining Literacy is an essential and fundamental aspect of human life, encompassing the abilities to read, write, understand, and apply information in various contexts. Strong literacy skills enable individuals to solve problems encountered in everyday life. Literally, literacy refers to the ability to read and write, or literacy competence (Tim Penyusun, 2018). Despite its importance, several surveys have classified Indonesia as a country with a relatively low level of literacy (Tim Penyusun, 2018; Nasrullah & Asmarini, 2024). This low level of literacy has significant implications for daily life, particularly in individuals' ability to process and critically respond to information and societal issues.

The Indonesian government has implemented various programs to improve literacy levels across society. Nevertheless, these initiatives have not yet produced significant outcomes based on recent survey findings. One such initiative is the National Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Nasional-GLN), which integrates several programs, including the translation of children's storybooks to provide quality reading materials, the optimization

of village funds for community libraries, and the acceleration of digital literacy resource provision (Setyowati & Lubis, 2020; Utami et al., 2022). The limited effectiveness of government-initiated literacy programs is further reflected in the high number of online fraud victims, which exceeded 100,000 individuals in 2022 (Utomo et al., 2024). This substantial number suggests a low level of critical information literacy among the population.

Among the many regencies and municipalities in Central Java, Semarang Regency recorded a reading interest index score of 72.67 in 2024. Data compiled by the Central Java Statistics Agency (Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS) placed Semarang Regency below several other regions, including Batang Regency (73.95), Salatiga City (75.23), Demak Regency (75.26), Rembang Regency (75.35), Klaten Regency (78.09), Magelang Regency (78.10), Wonosobo Regency (78.14), Wonogiri Regency (78.20), Jepara Regency (78.24), Pati Regency (79.91), Kudus Regency (80.00), Pekalongan City (80.67), Kebumen Regency (80.77), Kendal Regency (84.69), and Magelang City (88.43) (Central Java Statistics Agency, 2025). These findings indicate the necessity of promoting reading habits among the

people of Semarang Regency.

Literacy issues are not the only challenges requiring serious attention. In the context of today's increasingly open and interconnected global environment, efforts are also needed to enhance public knowledge and awareness of local history and culture so that communities can develop a strong understanding of their historical and cultural roots (Sulistiyono, 2017). Recently, concerns have emerged regarding the perception that younger generations, particularly Generation Z, pay insufficient attention to local history and culture due to the growing influence of foreign cultures in Indonesia (Dauwi et al., 2024; Rusdi et al., 2025). Therefore, introducing local history and culture to young people through literacy-based approaches is of considerable importance.

Based on these broader issues, alternative efforts are needed to support the improvement of literacy levels, particularly among students at the senior high school (SMA) and vocational high school (SMK) levels. These students are entering a transitional stage toward adulthood and require well-developed literacy competencies. Al-Ittihad Vocational High School was selected as the target institution for this community service program because, according to the school's history teacher, a significant proportion of students exhibited relatively low interest in local historical and cultural literacy. Furthermore, the school is located at the southernmost part of Semarang Regency, bordering Salatiga City, and is situated far from regional libraries and bookstores. Through this community service program conducted at Al-Ittihad Vocational High School in Semarang Regency, it was expected that students' awareness and literacy skills, particularly regarding the local history and culture of Semarang Regency, would be enhanced.

METHODS

The community service program employed an expository learning method to ensure that knowledge and information could be delivered systematically, clearly, and efficiently within a relatively limited time frame (Suryaningsih et al., 2025; Basri et al., 2019). This method enabled the facilitators to organize the learning materials sequentially, beginning with general concepts and proceeding to more specific discussions concerning the historical and cultural literacy of Semarang Regency. Through structured explanations, the facilitators highlighted important historical events, local cultural values, and their relevance to

students' everyday lives. The expository method was selected because it allowed participants to acquire a coherent understanding of the subject matter while ensuring that all essential topics were addressed during the program.

Although the emphasis on structured content delivery, the program did not position students as passive recipients of information. They were given opportunities to respond directly to the materials presented by the facilitators through questions, opinions, and answers to reinforcement questions. These interactions created two-way communication between facilitators and participants and allowed facilitators to clarify concepts that students found difficult. Questions were also used to connect the learning materials with students' prior knowledge and experiences. Accordingly, the interactive component complemented the expository method by encouraging students to participate actively, communicate their understanding, and critically consider the historical and cultural issues being discussed.

The instructional materials were presented in both narrative-descriptive and visual formats to facilitate students' comprehension and retention of information. Visual media helped illustrate historical events, cultural heritage, local traditions, and other contextual information that could be difficult to understand through verbal explanations alone. The combination of oral explanation, written material, visual representation, and direct interaction created a more accessible and engaging learning process. Therefore, this community service program extended beyond the one-way transmission of information about the historical and cultural literacy of Semarang Regency. It provided students with opportunities to engage with the material, relate it to their social and cultural environment, and develop a greater appreciation of local heritage. This learning process was expected to strengthen their critical-thinking skills, encourage active participation, and increase their interest in historical and cultural literacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges in Learning Local History and Culture

Young people's interest in local history and culture can be considered to face significant challenges. This assertion is supported by the views of cultural figure Sujiwo Tejo, who emphasized the importance of using regional languages among younger generations. He also stated that young

people should not feel ashamed of speaking their local languages (Anonymous, 2018). Sujiwo Tejo's remarks reflect a declining interest among young people in local cultural traditions, particularly in the use of regional languages, and encourage them to take pride in communicating through their local linguistic heritage. Similarly, Indrini et al. (2024) argued that Indonesia's traditional culture is currently experiencing a serious crisis as a consequence of globalization.

This cultural crisis may be attributed to a variety of complex factors, including the educational content delivered to students in schools. Not all senior high schools (SMA) and vocational high schools (SMK) in Indonesia possess equal educational facilities and teaching quality. Furthermore, SMA and SMK institutions differ in terms of their educational orientation and graduate outcomes. Vocational high school graduates are generally prepared to enter the industrial workforce directly (Santika et al., 2023). In contrast, senior high school graduates are primarily equipped with academic and theoretical knowledge intended to prepare them for higher education at the university level. Consequently, instructional content related to history and culture in vocational high schools tends to be more limited than that provided in senior high schools, including extracurricular activities related to these subjects.

Such conditions contribute to disparities in access to knowledge. Moreover, history and cultural arts are often perceived as less important than science-related subjects. This issue was further highlighted by the emergence of proposals in 2020 to remove history as a compulsory subject (Carey, 2020). Such developments illustrate broader challenges in local history education in Indonesia. Therefore, dedicated efforts are needed to help students become familiar with and understand their local history and culture through alternative educational initiatives, one of which is community service activities.

Delivery of Community Service Materials

The community service materials were delivered directly to students of Al-Ittihad Vocational High School in April 2026. The sessions were conducted through presentations covering two main topics: (1) the scope of the history and local culture of Semarang Regency, and (2) alternative references for studying the history of Semarang Regency. These topics were presented sequentially using PowerPoint-based presentations. This approach proved effective because it enabled two-way communication, thereby enhancing

students' understanding of the material being discussed.

The first topic, which addressed the scope of the history and local culture of Semarang Regency, began with an overview of the regency's historical development. Administratively, Semarang Regency is located within Central Java Province and shares borders with Kendal Regency, Boyolali Regency, Magelang Regency, Salatiga City, and Semarang City. The regency possesses considerable potential in several sectors, including agriculture (tobacco, coffee, and vegetables), tourism (such as Gedong Songo Temple, Rawa Pening Lake, and Bandungan), and the textile industry. The diversity and economic potential of Semarang Regency today are inseparable from its long historical development. Historically, human habitation in the area is believed to date back to prehistoric times, as evidenced by the discovery of megalithic remains.

Furthermore, during the Classical Hindu-Buddhist period, various historical relics such as temples, inscriptions, and statues were established in the region (Riyanto, 2013). During the period of Islamization, Semarang became part of several Islamic kingdoms, including the Demak Sultanate, the Pajang Kingdom, and the Islamic Mataram Kingdom. Subsequently, the region experienced Dutch colonial rule, Japanese occupation, and eventually Indonesian independence. These historical facts demonstrate the enduring significance of Semarang throughout various historical periods. As a result, the region has developed a rich diversity of historical events and local cultural traditions that continue to shape its identity today.

The diversity of historical events in Semarang Regency has left behind a wide range of historical artifacts in various forms. Some of these historical remains have now been developed as tourist attractions, including Gedong Songo Temple, Ambarawa Railway Station, and Fort Willem I (Azzahra & Maziyah, 2023; Prafiadi, 2022). Meanwhile, the region's local cultural heritage is reflected in its culinary traditions, folklore, customs, and indigenous knowledge rooted in local wisdom. Notable culinary specialties of Semarang Regency include Ungaran tahu bakso (tofu meatballs), Ngampin serabi (traditional pancakes), Pak Kempleng satay, and Bandungan tahu serasi (Adinda & Suwartiningsih, 2015; Rinawati et al., 2017). Folklore traditions include the Legend of Mount Ungaran and the Legend of Baru Klinting. Traditional practices that continue to be observed among local communities include *sedekah bumi*

(earth thanksgiving ceremonies) and *bersih desa* (village cleansing rituals). These traditions coexist with forms of indigenous knowledge and local wisdom that remain preserved to this day, such as *pranata mangsa* (the traditional Javanese seasonal calendar), as well as the communal values of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and *sambatan* (collective voluntary labor).

In addition to historical and cultural knowledge, various media can be utilized to enhance literacy among younger generations. However, these efforts often remain limited when viewed in relation to government-sponsored literacy programs. Such limitations may stem from several factors, including inadequate facilities, insufficient human resources, curricula that do not adequately incorporate local history and culture, and other constraints such as limited governmental support for research and the dissemination of research findings accessible to the broader public. Furthermore, history education in schools tends to remain stagnant due to limited updates in teaching materials and the persistence of a single historical narrative (Sumandoyo & Kresna, 2017; Anonymous, 2025).



Figure 1. Material delivery session

The books commonly read by school students are generally restricted to textbooks and student worksheets (*Lembar Kerja Siswa* or LKS), resulting in a relatively limited scope of information. Therefore, alternative references that are more accessible and engaging for students are needed beyond curriculum-based instructional materials. During this community service program, alternative sources for learning history and culture were introduced through travel accounts written by travelers in previous centuries. Travel narratives present information in a more accessible language and offer broader perspectives because they document the daily lives, customs, and social activities of people in the Indonesian archipelago during the past.

Many of these travel accounts have now been translated and published as books, making them accessible to readers who may face language barriers when engaging with the original texts. These publications are also widely distributed through both conventional and digital marketing networks. Such developments not only improve public accessibility to travel literature but also facilitate the dissemination of historical knowledge. Moreover, history should not merely be understood as a record of past events; it also contains knowledge, moral values, and information concerning various aspects of human life.

As part of the community service activities, historical travel accounts were presented to the students of Al-Ittihad Vocational High School as alternative references for understanding the local history and culture of Semarang Regency. These travel narratives are particularly valuable because many of them contain descriptions of historical and cultural elements associated with Semarang and its surrounding regions. The travel accounts introduced during the program included works by Ong Tae Hae (2022), Candranegara V (2024), S.J. Higginson (2025), and Thomas J. Reid (2025).

Hae (2022) was a traveler from China who visited Java in the eighteenth century. During his journey, he visited several locations, including Semarang, Batavia, Pekalongan, Banjarmasin, and Banten. Throughout his travels, he carefully recorded observations that he considered important and noteworthy. Hae remarked that Semarang appeared more attractive than Batavia in terms of its physical appearance. He also documented the fruits, flowers, animals, and everyday activities of the inhabitants of the Indonesian archipelago (Hae, 2022).

Approximately one century after Hae's visit, a Javanese aristocrat named R.M.A.A. Candranegara V undertook a series of journeys across Java. These travels were conducted in four stages between 1860 and 1875. Throughout all four journeys, he visited the Semarang Residency and recorded his impressions of the region. Among his observations were the beautiful scenery along the Salatiga–Semarang route and the pleasant experience of traveling by train from Ambarawa Station through Bringin Station and several other railway stations (Candranegara V, 2024).

In addition to accounts written by Chinese and indigenous travelers, travel narratives were also produced by S.J. Higginson (2025), an American writer who traveled through the Dutch East Indies

during the second half of the nineteenth century. Higginson described Semarang as a city with a large harbor, broad and clean streets, beautiful parks, and residential areas inhabited by Europeans (Higginson, 2025). Another traveler, Thomas J. Reid (2025), an English visitor to Java, also documented his experiences in Semarang. During his journey, he traveled to Semarang by train and noted the hospitality of the management of Hotel du Pavillon in the city (Reid, 2025).

Books based on historical travel accounts also portray Semarang from the perspectives of travelers and explorers. Such narratives provide alternative sources of information for understanding local history and culture, particularly in relation to Semarang Regency. History is not merely a collection of past events or memories. Rather, it is closely connected to culture, and historical consciousness generates knowledge and understanding of cultural heritage (Kartodirjo, 2014).

Implications and Contributions of the Community Service Program

This community service program was conducted through face-to-face sessions at Al-Ittihad Vocational High School, located in Bringin District, Semarang Regency. The activities were generally divided into two stages: material presentation and discussion sessions. During the presentation stage, the facilitator delivered the materials directly using PowerPoint media. More than forty students attended and carefully followed the presentations. Following the presentation session, an interactive discussion was held. The students of Al-Ittihad Vocational High School demonstrated considerable enthusiasm, as reflected in the critical questions they raised concerning the local history and culture of Semarang Regency.

The emergence of questions from the students indicates that they actively listened to and paid close attention during the presentation sessions. In general, the questions they posed represented a form of response to the learning materials. Educational theory identifies three primary dimensions of response: cognitive, affective, and conative (Kurniawan & Hidir, 2022). Cognitive responses relate to knowledge acquisition and intellectual activities that emerge when individuals learn something new. In contrast, affective responses are associated with attitudes and emotions and reflect observable behavioral tendencies. Meanwhile, conative responses involve actions that represent the tangible manifestation of intentions or motivations (Kurniawan & Hidir,

2022; Hwang et al., 2017).

The responses demonstrated by the students reflect their attention to and interest in the materials presented, which in turn contributed to increased knowledge and a desire to further explore the topics discussed. Furthermore, the alternative references introduced during the community service program, particularly the travel account books, are publicly accessible, allowing students to obtain and read these materials independently (Hae, 2022; Candranegara V, 2024; Reid, 2025; Higginson, 2025). Consequently, opportunities for sustained learning are created through SMK Al-Iyyihad students' independent efforts to deepen their understanding of the subjects presented.



Figure 2. The audience is students of Al-Ittihad Vocational School

Based on these observations, the community service program made a meaningful contribution to students' understanding of the local history and culture of Semarang Regency. The differences between the vocational high school (SMK) curriculum and the general senior high school (SMA) curriculum result in disparities in students' exposure to historical and cultural knowledge. Vocational education places greater emphasis on practical skills and workforce readiness, leading instructional content to focus primarily on technical competencies, with relatively limited attention devoted to local history and cultural studies. Therefore, it is expected that the contributions of this program will have a lasting impact, enabling students of Al-Ittihad Vocational High School not only to excel in vocational skills but also to understand and preserve historical memory and local cultural heritage, particularly those associated with Semarang Regency.

Furthermore, the community service activity received positive appreciation from the administration of Al-Ittihad Vocational High School. Hafidz Bahtiar, S.Pd., S.P., Gr., Vice Principal of the school, stated that the program was beneficial for the students. Through the activity,

students acquired valuable new knowledge regarding the local history and culture of Semarang Regency that they may not have previously encountered. On this basis, the program generated tangible impacts and made a concrete contribution to enhancing students' knowledge and awareness of the local history and culture of Semarang Regency.

CONCLUSION

This community service program, which aimed to improve students' knowledge and understanding of the local history and culture of Semarang Regency through literacy enhancement activities, was successfully conducted through face-to-face sessions at SMK Al-Ittihad. The students demonstrated enthusiasm throughout the program by attentively following the presentations and posing critical questions during the discussion sessions. Overall, the activity contributed to increasing both students' knowledge of and interest in local history and culture. In addition, students expressed interest in obtaining books that they could read independently. This response indicates that the community service program generated not only immediate pedagogical benefits but also a genuine interest among students in further exploring the local history and culture of Semarang Regency through literacy-based activities. Moreover, these outcomes suggest the sustainability of the program's impact, as students are encouraged to continue learning independently by reading and studying local history and culture through the recommended books introduced during the presentations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Research and Community Service Development Unit (UP3) of the Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, for supporting this community service activity. We also extend our gratitude to SMK Al-Ittihad for hosting us, ensuring the smooth running of this community service.

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