



Proposal

Reading Across Borders

Organization

Fundación La Fuente

Introduction

To change the state of the world is an ambitious goal that can only be achieved in community, but before we can even begin to tackle concrete problems, we must know what our 'community' is made of. Of people, from a multiplicity of national and cultural identities, all of which have wisdom and experience that deserve to be celebrated, discussed, and shared. The so-called communications age holds the promise of empowering people and facilitating the exchange of knowledge and culture, and most especially the Internet has emerged as a powerful tool with the potential to unite people across borders, cultures and walks of life. What, then, is not working? More than ever, we continue to witness eruptions of violence, strife, xenophobia, fundamentalism and exclusionary world-views that represent a clear failure to achieve this promise. Around the world, people are trapped in battles for land, sovereignty, freedom, dignity, and the right to exercise the democratic values that so many of us treasure.

This breakdown in communication, this ignorance and lack of understanding among so many members of the human race is a complex matter that cannot be solved by one approach, but efforts must be made because the need is urgent. It is this need that Reading Across Borders (RAB) aims to address, by attempting to instill, through an innovative program of literature in translation, the way in which our children learn about the world around them. Fundación La Fuente (FLF) firmly believes –and has learned through experience—that literature aimed at young readers has the ability to break through cultural barriers, create bridges between nations and, ultimately, effect change by inspiring children to learn about their global neighbors through the magical experience that takes place when a child sits down and reads an unforgettable book.

Reading Across Borders is, in essence, quite a simple idea: a digital library of thought-provoking, inspiring, entertaining, engaging children's books and stories from all around the world, translated from and into a variety of different languages, and made available through an Internet-based system that represents a paradigm shift in the way literature circulates, while also ensuring that the legal rights of the original publisher, author, illustrator and translator will be protected.

Book publishing is a massive, international industry. Why is it, then, that some of the most compelling children's stories and books do not reach the international audience they deserve? Over the last half-century the book business has had to compete with television, movies, video and electronic games in order to survive, and this often means that the worthiest books and stories from an educational or intellectual perspective get steamrolled by the cookie-cutter books and stories that offer more profits for book publishers—the television and movie tie-ins, the cynically-created cartoon characters designed as cheap entertainment to keep kids out of trouble, the bestsellers that may be enjoyable but do little to foster the kind of values that the Global Redesign Initiative champions and that are in such serious need of revival all around the world.

Reading Across Borders is an effort to address a problem that is the result of systemic failure. The big-picture problem is that too many of us have no knowledge of people and cultures beyond our own national borders. The small-picture problem is that today's publishing industry, which in an ideal world would serve as a conduit for transmitting this vital knowledge, is not delivering children the kind of cross-cultural literature that promotes international understanding, due to the constraints of an economic structure that encourages publishers to treat books as commodities rather than cultural treasures. In addition, the expenses associated with translation, printing, shipping, and storing physical volumes make any cross-cultural literary project extremely expensive, given that these factors raise prices to levels that make books an impossible luxury for the vast majority of children around the world. To make matters even worse, many first-world governments have extremely limited public support to promote their literature in other countries. The children's books that do get translated, by and large, follow a colonial 'north to south' pattern that we aim to correct. Far too often it is books and stories from the developed world that are translated for the benefit of less-developed countries, and yet there is a wealth of stories and books from all over the world that deserve to 'travel north,' so to speak, but do not because of ignorance, language barriers and economic and political obstacles. This is the situation that RAB aims to change, by radically redesigning the way in which children's books are translated and made available to the public. FLF has undertaken this challenge precisely because it has made tremendous strides in addressing similar problems in Chile.

About Fundación La Fuente

Fundación La Fuente (FLF) is a non-profit institution engaged in promoting and implementing educational and cultural initiatives that benefit at-risk communities. Since 2000, FLF has been creating school libraries, improving public libraries, equipping mobile school and community libraries and developing museums and cultural centers in urban and rural areas all over Chile. Its staff brings a diversity of backgrounds and experience to the organization and includes primary and secondary school teachers, specialists in literature, actors, musicians, artists, management experts, designers, sociologists, child development specialists, and librarians. FLF's landmark program, Creating Tomorrow's Readers, develops school, public, and mobile libraries for school children and communities at large. The project entails the implementation of a reading program, and to this end teaches educators and librarians how to develop and manage reading and related cultural activities. The goal of the project is to introduce and encourage reading among children, youth and community by providing reading and teaching materials that respect and celebrate each community's specific interests and needs. In the nine years since its

establishment, Fundación La Fuente has raised and invested US\$9 million for the benefit of its programs, which operate in over 72 neighborhoods in cities, towns and villages throughout Chile, a country that extends over 3000 kilometers from Antofagasta in the north to Puerto Aisén in the south. From our center of operations in Santiago, we have built libraries in and brought programs to some of the most remote corners of a country with a transportation infrastructure that presents tremendous challenges to these kinds of efforts. FLF belongs to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA); the Center for the Book, Library of Congress; and the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY). In 2009, FLF was named Institution of the Year by the Chilean Association of Publishers, Distributors, and Booksellers for its efforts in support and promotion of books and reading, and FLF's founder and executive director, Verónica Abud, was named Social Entrepreneur of the Year by the Schwab Foundation and the newspaper El Mercurio. In addition, the Palestinian Foundation of Chile honored Ms. Abud this year with the Edward Said Award, which recognizes outstanding contributions to the country's civic life.

Reading Across Borders: Proposal

Reading Across Borders aims to create a library of children's books and stories from Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia representing a diversity of experiences, traditions and cultures in the interest of promoting cross-cultural understanding. The texts will be selected in committee, by an international council of advisers that will include experts in children's literature, educators, book editors, librarians, and international institutions already working in this field, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, the International Research Society for Children's Literature, and IBBY. In its initial phase, Reading Across Borders will assign the translation of these texts into the six official languages of UNESCO publishing, but the goal is to add more languages as the project matures. For the launch of the project, we will work with texts for readers from 7 to 10 years of age. Upon selecting the texts, Reading Across Borders will negotiate with authors, publishers, illustrators, and translators in order to publish them for the exclusive purposes of this project. Designed and adapted for the web in cooperation with the authors, translators and illustrators, the texts will reside on a digital platform and will be available in three different formats, for three distinct user categories: User One will gain access, free of charge, to a read-only version of the text; User Two will fill out an online form and user agreement and pay a fee for the right to download a printable PDF of the text they are interested in, paying a single fee for each individual title. The third user category is represented by governmental and non-governmental institutions wishing to pay for the right to print and distribute, free of charge, an RAB title in bound book format. For this category, users will negotiate with RAB to determine a print run and fees. Upon execution of the agreement, RAB will release a high-resolution, print-ready digital file.

We have structured the project so that it may begin on a relatively small scale, with a limited number of texts and a limited number of original and target languages, but as time passes, it can easily be expanded in a number of different directions: firstly and most obviously by adding original and target languages, by creating new collections for more age groups and even establishing collections with specific themes within the age-group categories. There are many possibilities for expanding this project, and they will depend primarily on the response we generate with the first collection we produce.

Why is the digital format so important?

The question of creating a digital archive, rather than a collection of bound books, is fundamental to this project for two main reasons. The first goal of this project is to establish a 'treasure trove' of great stories from around the world that will encourage reading and promote cultural understanding among young people. But equally critical to this project is its second goal: to make those books and stories accessible to as broad a public as possible, and the economic realities that affect the cost of publishing, exporting, importing, shipping, and storing bound books make digital texts infinitely more attractive than bound books, especially in countries where book prices are prohibitive for most. By offering the option of a read-only text that is free of charge as well as a downloadable, printable version for a nominal fee, we can accommodate the needs of a great many potential users. As of yet, the book industry has not learned how to use the Internet as an effective, viable platform for publishing, and though there are a great many unknowns to be contended with, our project aims to be a pioneer in this effort.

Reading Across Borders and the GRI thematic framework

The very essence of Reading Across Borders is an iteration of the first point of the GRI Thematic Framework, for at its core it is a project that aims to help children, parents and educators discover and rediscover the value of reading, both for the pleasure it brings as well as for the wisdom and knowledge it imparts. The marvel of the very best children's literature resides in its ability to introduce children to the values that are critical to fomenting and sustaining a democratic society: tolerance, understanding, dignity, respect, empathy, and optimism about the human spirit despite hardships and injustice. Through this program we hope to make children curious about the world beyond their front door, town, city, and country, because we firmly believe that by exposing children to people, places and situations that are different from their own, they have a better chance of growing up free from the prejudice and ignorance that fuel so many of the world's conflicts. It seems to us that children who are encouraged to think beyond national, cultural, religious and political affiliations are less likely to fall prey to stereotypes, discrimination, prejudice, violence and hatred, and more likely to resolve problems through civilized negotiation rather than violence. By giving children knowledge of other cultures we will be empowering them: to learn about others, to learn about themselves, to think with an open mind and to think critically, about themselves and others. Compelling stories and books from around the world can be a first step toward a humanities-based education that will give them tools for thinking openly, analytically and generously about the human condition and the world around them so that one day they might try to make it a better, more democratic, more just, more peaceful place to be than it is at the present moment.

Reading Across Borders cannot pretend to solve such massive, complex and delicate problems as those of xenophobia, intolerance, violence, terrorism, human rights violations, armed conflict—in fact, it is hard to imagine any proposal to the GRI capable of such an achievement. The kinds of issues mentioned in the fourth theme of the GRI, "Enhancing Security," are vast in scope and must be addressed from many different angles and disciplines. In one sense, it may seem beyond the purposes of this project. But in a deeper, and perhaps less quantifiable sense, Reading Across Borders aims to make progress in all these areas by translating and disseminating books that just might change how people

think and, consequently, act. Would terrorism occur if there existed true understanding between factions in conflict? Would weapons of mass destruction be quite so plentiful if ignorance, doubt and suspicion were replaced with the trust and good faith that comes from genuine comprehension of the other? Would human rights violations occur with such impunity if humanistic values were the cornerstone of educational systems around the world? FLF believes, and has seen through its own experience in Chile, that books can be powerful tools for changing how people think about the world around them. Arts-based social entrepreneur programs such as Reading Across Borders are particularly well positioned to respond to many of the problems mentioned in the “Enhancing Security” section precisely because the arts offer a relatively neutral, non-partisan, and depoliticized forum for bringing otherwise incompatible groups together.

Reading Across Borders as a response to a need that has arisen as a result of market or governance failure

One need not be an expert in childhood education or children’s book publishing to realize that there is a crisis in reading among young people all over the world.

The reason for this crisis is complex: the movie and television industries are more focused on entertaining rather than educating their youngest customers, and by creating simplistic ‘name brand’ characters delivered straight to movie theaters, television channels, and the Internet as well as video, book, toy, stationery, department and other stores, it is now harder than ever for quality children’s literature to reach the audience it deserves. For financial reasons many book publishers regard books as products that must compete with movies, television, video and other digital games for children’s attention. This is true all over the world: very often it is those books with the greatest name-recognition that manage to get translated into foreign languages, thanks to the sales numbers they can often guarantee publishers. This is the failure that needs to be addressed. This is what needs to be rewritten: the process by which children are inspired to engage in a world of imagination and possibility that cannot be accessed by passively watching a television show or playing a video game for the thousandth time.

There is another systemic failure that Reading Across Borders aims to address: the book business and the Internet enigma. Unlike the music industry, which has adapted to the changes brought by the digital age, the book industry has not yet successfully taken advantage of the Internet as a constructive tool for the dissemination of literature, and for the past few years has been agonizing over what to do. We believe that the Internet must be embraced as the very backbone of Reading Across Borders, because the digital platform is the very best one for meeting our project’s objectives. At present there exist immense libraries of quality children’s books all over the world; they are marvelous but static. There are great collections of children’s books that never reach the audience they deserve because of the great expenses associated with producing, printing, shipping and storing bound books. Reading Across Borders ventures to break free from the logistical and financial burdens implied by the publication of bound books, by making texts available on the internet through three distinct user categories that protect the legal rights of the copyright owners.

A free-market economy and a sluggish book publishing industry are not solely to blame for the situation that Reading Across Borders aims to address and correct. Though there are exceptions, far too many governments fail to support cultural endeavors such as the one we are presenting. A surprising number of countries do not even have a ministry of culture at all, a fact that underscores a very grim reality: the realm of culture, which is such an ideal space for building bridges, healing wounds and establishing lasting alliances among disparate nations and cultures, has been sorely overlooked, disregarded or inadequately supported on the governmental level. How do we know? A project such as ours should already exist, and it does not.

Conclusion

Reading Across Borders is based on the premise that culture can go where politics and economics often cannot. It is a project that aspires to open the door to international communication and understanding by providing meaningful, compelling children's literature all around the world, in a multiplicity of languages, from a multiplicity of cultures in the firm belief that children who learn about their fellow man will grow up to be adults who care about their fellow man. Culture and education ministries, to say nothing of book publishers, should have undertaken a project like this a long time ago, not only for its cultural value but also for the potential earnings it could produce if administered properly. But this kind of project is an anomaly in today's world because the kinds of organizations that should sponsor them have not yet adapted to the changes and challenges of our digital, global 21st century world. They have failed to see that great literature can also be a very good business. They have failed to see that great authors can open channels of communication that politicians cannot. They have failed to see that the arts in general and literature in particular have the power to make people see the world for what it is and also for what it can be.

Reading Across Borders sees all this. It sees these systemic flaws as challenges that must be undertaken and conquered with a new set of priorities, values and beliefs. The institutions and organizations that determine what kind of literature is published for children are in dire need of a redesign, and it was only by rethinking this system entirely—looking beyond commercial enterprise, beyond governmental institutions, beyond dominant languages and nations-- that Reading Across Borders was conceived, as an enterprise that will work from the ground up, with local advisors around the world who can orient our book-selection process away from the hype and background noise of the commercial publishing and entertainment industries, and focus on the shared objectives and values that we have presented in this proposal.

It is our belief that books have been gravely underrepresented in the circuits of international cultural exchange, mainly because traditional book publishing is a cumbersome, high-overhead business that is hard to adapt to the multilingual, multicultural world in which we live. But the Internet has the power to change this, and when it is used intelligently, as a tool for communication, the dissemination of great literature—and the values conveyed through it—can become a reality, and that is what Fundación La Fuente aims to achieve through Reading Across Borders.

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