



Discovery World & Learning Center



In 2006, Big Brother Mouse published our first books.

Since then we've published more than 300 new books. We've held 4,100 book parties at 2,450 schools in seven provinces of Laos, to get children excited about reading. At the end of every book party, each child gets a book, and the school gets a book collection.

In 2013, we began setting up daily reading programs in schools, and we conducted tests to measure the impact of these programs. We've also set up village reading rooms in the homes of volunteers.

Here's what we've learned:

- ◇ Lao people love to read... if the books are truly good.
- ◇ It's not easy to make high-quality books. But it's worth it. We spend up to 3 years on each book we publish. Several people read the manuscript, as we polish the language, working to make a book that clearly conveys its message, in a country which still has many regional language differences.
- ◇ Lao children are eager to learn... but like children everywhere, they don't want to sit all day and look at a blackboard. They learn best when they can use their hands and their bodies as well as their minds. We need to demonstrate effective ways for Lao children to get a better education.
- ◇ Lao teachers are devoted to helping their students. But they grew up in a world where school meant a teacher and a blackboard. They need an opportunity to learn other techniques.
- ◇ Some of the most important skills for success in life could be transmitted in school, but often aren't, and are outside of what we usually think of as school curriculum. These include perseverance; thinking about options before acting; checking your work; and creative problem-solving.
- ◇ We could do much more if we had more staff with these skills. Businesses and government in Laos also need staff with these skills.

Big Brother Mouse has begun a new project, with several inter-related functions, to address these issues, and make it possible for more individuals in Laos to develop the skills that Laos needs. Will you join us?



1. Discovery World

Some countries have Children's Museums, where children can experience learning in fun, active ways. Discovery World will draw many ideas from these museums, but it will be for both adults and children. We'll have many types of activities and exhibits that help children learn, and get them excited about it.



The human body: Models and charts make anatomy more interesting. Each organ comes out of this plastic model. As you try to put them back in, you learn how they fit together. Our book about *The Body* gives more details about each organ.



Gears. If you turn a gear in one direction, the gear next to it turns in the other direction. A small gear turns faster than the big gear that it touches.



Traditional culture. Puppets like these are an important part of Lao culture, but many children have never held one. Now they can see how they operate, and tell a story. When they return to their village perhaps they can find an elder to help them learn this ancient art.



Make a bridge. How can you span a wide river, using only small blocks? When this boy sat down, he said it would be impossible. You may not want to cross his bridge quite yet but he's getting valuable experience as he learns about arches, tests his idea, and then seeks to improve his skill. Most important, he's learning that what he thought was impossible, sometimes is not.

**“Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I’ll remember;
involve me and I’ll understand.” —Chinese Proverb**

These photos come from our Discovery Days. We held the first Discovery Day in February, 2012, and we’ve already given thousands of children and adults the opportunity to experience a different type of learning. We’ve tested more than 3 dozen activities at these events. We’ve seen children think, we’ve watched them learn, we’ve felt their excitement grow as they understand more about the world.



Rocks and minerals. We have samples of many minerals, gemstones, and other rocks. See several kinds of rocks formed by volcanoes, including obsidian (used to make arrowheads) and pumice, the rock that floats!



Microscopes. Freshly-hatched brine shrimp swim through a drop of water. With the naked eye, you can only see a moving dot. With a microscope you can see other features: the legs, and perhaps even the single eye in the middle of the head. Other slides teach about clean water, bacteria, and textiles.



Read! Even when surrounded by fun toys and games, children like to read books from Big Brother Mouse. Wherever we are, whatever we’re doing, we make time and space for children to discover reading.



How do computers remember pictures? By converting them to numbers. This gadget shows how. Each green rod is pushed out a certain distance when pressed against a face. Those distances can be expressed as numbers. Together, all those numbers represent an image of the face.

“Do not train a child to learn by force or harshness; but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each.” –Plato

The activities shown here are only a start. We have math experiments that show how scientists estimate the distance from earth to a star. Map puzzles make it fun to think about where the countries are located. A solar telescope allows you to see solar flares leap from the sun’s surface.



Electronics: A carefully-planned series of experiments allows young people to make circuits, predict what their circuits will do, then test their ideas. They learn about transistors and capacitors, voltage and current, how a telephone can amplify a faint signal from the air.



3-D pictures. Why do those glasses make a picture seem three dimensional? Because each eye sees a slightly different image. This is a difficult concept to explain in a classroom, but 3-D glasses and Viewmasters make it real.



Construction toys. Easy-to-use construction toys are fun, and encourage creativity. Notched logs can build a house or tower. Tinkertoys build windmills and trucks. If eight-year-old boys are present, absolutely anything can be used to make a gun.



Fossils: Examine 400 million year old fossils with a magnifying glass. See the tiny teeth in a fossilized shellfish. Then read about them on the information sheets we provide.

“In real life, I assure you, there is no such thing as algebra.”
—Fran Lebowitz

Games

About half the children in Laos speak an ethnic minority language at home. Many of them enter school unable to understand Lao language, which is used for all teaching. We're developing games that will help them learn Lao as a second language. Other games teach math, geography, and visual skills.



Toothpick puzzles and tangram games help children improve spatial skills. James (white jacket) compiled and designed the two books about these games. He learned these skills in his job at Big Brother Mouse. Now he's explaining them in person.



To play “Number Bingo” each person rolls three dice, then combines the numbers with common math symbols to make a new number. If they roll 2,3,5 they can make 10 ($2+3+5$) or 18 ($23-5$) or 1 ($2+3/5$) or many other numbers. They cover their number, and try to get four in a row. It sure beats flash cards!



“Am I Edible?” is our most popular game. You must ask yes-or-no questions, to guess what it is you have on your forehead. It teaches the concept of starting with a general question, then working toward specifics. Children who don't speak Lao at home get to increase their vocabulary, while having fun with other children.



Another word game, “Charades,” also helps children learn a second language. One player is given a word or phrase, then must act it out, so others guess it. The best way for children to learn a new language is through playing with those who speak it. These games will help more children become fully bilingual, so they can attend a Lao school, while also taking part in the culture and life of their family and village.

2. Learning Center

There are many things we'd like to do, or do better, at Big Brother Mouse:

- ❖ Work more closely with village reading rooms, to help them develop their potential.
- ❖ Write more books that involve local research, such as food from the forest, oral histories, and stories about how individuals have improved life in their village.
- ❖ Translate significant books from other countries.
- ❖ Write and publish more non-fiction books that will improve education and quality of life in Laos.
- ❖ Spend more time with government ministries, working with them to develop ways to use books more widely.
- ❖ Hold more workshops for teachers, village volunteers, and others.
- ❖ Develop, produce, and distribute educational games and toys for use in schools and villages.
- ❖ Make videos so that reading-room volunteers in one village can see what is being done effectively in others.
- ❖ Give a starter set of books to all new mothers, working through the district health department.
- ❖ Get book clubs started in villages and schools.
- ❖ Try out new ways to make books more widely available, such as arranging with shops to rent books, or to sell them and buy them back at a slightly lower price.
- ❖ And much, much more.

Money is often a limiting factor on new projects, but more often what holds us back is a shortage of skills. Schooling in Laos is rising, but teaching methods are still largely rote: The teacher reads from the textbook or lectures, and students take notes, hoping to remember everything until the exam. Even the best university graduates don't have the skills that we, or other employers, need.

"Skills" in this case sometimes means tangible skills as traditionally defined: Translation, writing, using a computer, making a video. But even more important are what we call "life skills": Perseverance, conscientiousness, confidence (if based in reality rather than in fantasy), planning, and problem-solving.

Our best staff are those who have been with us for a few years, and whom we have helped to acquire these skills. We've gained some insights about how to teach these, and will continue to research and experiment with more.

When the Learning Center opens, we will begin occasional one-month "Mouse Experiences" for our staff. This time will be devoted to learning some specific skills; those lessons will provide a context for developing the less tangible "Life Skills". When we feel we have a good plan, we will occasionally invite reading-room volunteers and potential staff from villages, and then individuals, perhaps working in local businesses and community organizations. Staff members who benefit most from the experience will come back. With time, we expect this to grow into sessions longer than a month, and very possibly into an actual school.

In the short run, we plan to focus on four elements:

1. SELECTED, TANGIBLE SKILLS, often taught with non-traditional methods. Laos has a critical shortage of teachers skilled in techniques other than rote instruction. We will rely heavily, especially in the first years, on finding other ways: Students helping one another; use of volunteers from abroad, especially for English; reading and writing.

“A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special.” —Nelson Mandela



Geography - and more

We made two jigsaw puzzles with the countries of Southeast Asia. Teams competed to see who could assemble their map fastest. It was an effortless way to learn geography.

Then, we asked them to discuss ways to improve the game, to make it more fun and to increase the educational value. Thinking about that question helped students develop another skill.

We will carefully select just a few areas in which to teach. Some possibilities are:

Writing. Our greatest single difficulty, in publishing new books is the extreme shortage of good writers. Some of our staff have improved their skills through the writers' groups that we have, and have written good original new stories. Non-fiction has been harder; students get no practice learning that skill in school, nor could they; there's no place to do the research, unless they can comfortably read another language.

Computer skills. We'll focus on just one or two computer skills, such as database programming, or website development. These will be valuable skills for Lao people to have as the country develops; and many people are eager to learn them.

Numeracy. As simple a job as taking inventory is a challenge for us. To count books, someone must count only the correct title, count each book once and only once, not lose track if there are several stacks of a title, record those numbers accurately, then add them together. Few people outside our management team can do that. They never had to do anything of the sort before. Lack of even basic number skills is a big handicap for an office, for an individual, and for a society. We have games which, simply by having players manipulate numbers in an exciting context, improve those skills.

English. Most young people are eager to learn or improve their English skills. Luang Prabang already offers many opportunities to do so, including our free practice sessions, every morning and evening. We expect to offer some English instruction at the Learning Center too, but it won't be our main focus.

2. KNOWLEDGE. “World War II ... is that the same as Star Wars?” one college graduate asked. Knowledge alone isn't enough, but it's an essential part of what is enough. We expect to do this largely by reading and writing, supplemented by educational videos (often available in Thai, which is widely understood.)

3. LIFE SKILLS. Do what you say you will. Review your work before you say you're done. If you encounter an obstacle, try to get past it instead of giving up.

In our office, we've learned some good techniques for transmitting these skills, and we're always watching for new methods. Setting up clear expectations, discussing why these traits are important, and giving prompt feedback, both for successes and failures, are key elements. Reading will help too. Novels provide a way to think about traits ranging from reliability and perseverance to honesty and friendship.

4. VALUES. We don't want to improve the education of some, if that just increases the inequality between them and those who didn't get these benefits. We believe that two activities will help: (1) Open discussions about issues of ethics and values. (2) Asking students to compose, then read aloud to others, a statement of their values goals, and how they wish to use the skills they acquire to benefit others, as well as themselves.

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” —Proverb

3. Library

From our new location, an unpaved road winds into the hills. It forks, climbs higher, forks and climbs again, eventually reaching about ten villages before each road finally ends. (The exact number of villages depends on just how you count three small villages that have semi-merged, and a large one that has somewhat split). Everyone in these villages will pass us when they go to the market, or into Luang Prabang. Two more villages are nearby, in the other direction.

Thus a single library can serve ten or twelve villages. People can stop and borrow books as they come past, or come for weekend activities.

We don't plan a large library. Our goal is to get people enthused about reading. It will be small enough to inspire visitors from other regions to consider the possibilities in their village. We'll invite volunteers in the ten villages we serve to set up branches in their homes, where they can make available a rotating selection of books, and have weekly story-telling or other activities.



The library is already open

We've already set up a small library in our shop in September 2014. It has books in three languages:

Lao, because that's what people can read most easily. But not enough Lao books are available.

Thai, a language closely related to Lao, so many Lao speakers have learned it. We can get a much wider selection of books in Thai.

English, because many people want to learn or practice English, and good English is a valuable skill for them.



The library lets us develop our systems and techniques. Providing books is only the start. We also create interest in books and reading. Here, a dozen young people selected a book that looked interesting. They spent some time reading it, then made a brief report to the group, explaining why they liked it.

The first time we tried this, the presentations were weak. No one had experience speaking to a small group. They didn't know how to think about what would keep the attention of their audience. That's a valuable skill; now they're learning it.

“A public library is the most democratic thing in the world.” —Doris Lessing



From our work with village Reading Room volunteers, we already have experience teaching the skills to get people excited about reading. These photos are from some of our workshops. Volunteers practice reading aloud with just a few others in the group. Then, we go to a village and split into several groups. There's an audience for everybody, and adults as well as children enjoy it. By the time we've finished, some children get in on the fun by being the readers.



We teach other skills at our workshops, such as how to lead songs and games. The Learning Center will provide a place where we can do more, for longer periods. High on the list are the games that teach reading, thinking, number, and language skills.

“I received the fundamentals of my education in school, but that was not enough. My real education... I got out of the public library. For an impoverished child, the library was the open door to wonder and achievement.” – Isaac Asimov

4. Office and Warehouse

Our office is in central Luang Prabang town, and our warehouse is on the outskirts. They're both big enough for another year or two of growth. While we expect our outreach to greatly expand in the next few years, office and warehouse space won't need to expand at the same rate.

But eventually, we'll need more space, and it's not feasible to expand at our present locations. We bought enough land at the new location so that we'll have the option to build additional facilities, and move some of our work there.

Who benefits?

The Discovery World and the Training Center will benefit people in Laos on multiple levels:

- ❖ Ten villages lie on the road above the site, or nearby. They'll all benefit from the library and Discovery World. They'll benefit as we experiment with new ideas and techniques.
- ❖ We will host events, especially on weekends and when schools are closed, that encourage reading and learning and interaction.
- ❖ Luang Prabang is the hub of northern Laos. It has the major university, teacher college, and hospital, important temples, the major airport, festivals, sports events, and other activities. Families from all over northern Laos, and occasionally from the south, come to Luang Prabang. They can come for a few hours, or a full day and have a good time. Some will take back inspiration for things to do in their village.
- ❖ Big Brother Mouse sets up reading programs throughout northern Laos, and before long we expect to reach the entire country. The Learning Center will help us develop the staff skills to do this.

Developing as we grow

When we published our first books in 2006, we didn't know where that step would lead. In the eight years since then, our approach has been to figure out what's needed, think about how we can fill those needs, test ideas, and look at the results. That process has led to a program that is making dramatic changes in literacy for children in Laos.

Likewise, with the Discovery World and Learning Center, we don't have a firm road map planned out. We've got several initial activities planned. With time, we'll see what works, and we'll have new ideas.

For example, we'd like to buy a bus to bring a classrooms of children (and some chaperones!) for a 2- or 3-day experience. You probably remember single days that shaped your life, as you saw and experienced something new. A visit to Discovery World has the power to benefit more than a thousand children a month.

We'll also experiment with ways to improve education in all areas, not just reading. Does using an abacus improve number skills? What if children make their own abacus, with seeds and other local materials? What word games will help children who don't speak Lao at home, to learn it better? Would learning sign language not only give children a needed break from the blackboard, but also the mental stimulation of learning another language, while also reducing the social isolation that deaf people experience? There's no end to the possibilities we can try.

**There is no such thing as a child who hates to read;
there are only children who have not found the right book. —Frank Serafini**



The Future

Kit, on the left, is from a remote village, a day's travel from Luang Prabang. He moved here and stayed with his older sister so he could attend high school.

In summertime, on weekends, and whenever else he could, Kit came to the free English practice that we offer every day. He can now converse in English much better than students who have spent 3 or 4 years studying the language in school. He also attended our free “Book Ambassador” workshop, where we teach young people (mostly students, whose home villages are far away) some techniques for reading aloud.

One day, Kit joined two of us for a bike ride. We stopped in a village, and he immediately warmed to the idea of reading to some children. So did the children. One boy is clearly captivated by the book; another seems to be thinking, “When I’m older, I want to do what Kit is doing.”

Soon a local woman came over and watched. With a little encouragement, she took over the reading. As we got back on our bikes, she and the kids were sharing a book.

We sometimes calculate just how long it will take, at the rate we’re going, for our teams to reach every village in Laos. Perhaps the answer is: We won’t need to. We’re offering people an opportunity to do something that’s enjoyable. It’s educational. It helps others. It can be a social activity.

Books are still a new thing here. We’ll need to keep making more books that people want to read. We’ll need to keep teaching techniques that work. But in the long run, when it comes to spreading literacy, we expect that the more we do, the easier it will get.

Work begins...



As we made plans, we've met with the villages involved to invite their participation. We've already held Discovery Days in several villages nearby, and we'll continue to do more. Bridge-building, kaleidoscopes, and View-Masters were, as always, big hits.



We held an introductory festival on our site for headman and family from each village. They are not required to be involved with us, of course, but every one of them was enthused about our plans. Villages have offered help with labor and local supplies for building.



We spent a week clearing the land, to be ready for construction. Siphone did his best, but finally insisted we get some help for the bigger stones. Of which there were many.... we don't have plans yet for most of the 3 hectares, so in the short run, at least, we'll have plenty of space for a rock garden.



The construction crew dug foundations in March. On 1 April 2015, after the traditional basi ceremony, construction began.



In 2006, 14-year-old Chittakone won our art contest. Over the next few years he illustrated seven books including *New Improved Buffalo*, *Doctor Dolittle*, and *A Fantastic and Frightening Place*, each time with a different style. If you've seen any of his work, you've surely been impressed.

Chittakone finished high school, went to college, studied architecture, and became an architect. We told him what we wanted for the library and asked him to be creative. The drawing on the left shows what he proposed. We loved it, but there were technical construction issues that we weren't able to easily resolve. Also, by then we had decided it was best to start with a larger multi-purpose building. Initially the library will operate from this. Then we can add the smaller dedicated library -- hopefully using Chittakone's design -- and other facilities as we grow. The drawing on the right shows what we will build first. Most of the top floor is open, allowing for breeze and an open feeling, with several rooms in back for secure storage.

“It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom. Without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail.”
— Albert Einstein

We invite you to Become a Founder

We purchased the land using a loan that we can repay over a long period. We already have 12 founding sponsors, each contributing \$8,000 toward construction and other costs, such as equipment, leveling the land, and books. We need to find 8 more.

Eight years ago, we began publishing “Books that make literacy fun!” We didn’t know just how that would develop; in fact, it has grown into more than we ever dreamed, and in ways that we didn’t plan. Once again, we’re starting on a venture that will undoubtedly take directions we haven’t yet imagined, as we work to improve education and literacy throughout Laos. Will you join us?

Display your favorite quotation: We invite sponsors to select a favorite SHORT (Sorry, Einstein!) quotation or proverb about education, reading, libraries, or literacy, which we’ll display at the entrance in both Lao and English, along with the sponsor’s name. Propose a long-time favorite of yours, or do a bit of internet searching, or adopt one from this proposal.

We’ve already begun construction. We’re still a bit short of what we’ll need for the initial building, but now that we’ve begun the work, we believe more supporters will want to become Founders. If we have 8 more Founders by June 30 2015, we’ll be able to continue without interruption and can begin other work, including a small separate library building, fun spots for children to sit or hide in as they read, accommodations for people attending workshops, and more Discovery World activities.



Our Discovery Day activities (page 2) include wedge-shaped blocks from which to make a bridge. These students figured that out, then went a step further with a bridge design we hadn’t even considered.

We lit a fire that day. With your support, we’ll light many more.



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