



Big Brother Mouse

Newsletter :: August-September 2016

This month's quiz

The year is 1884. Your ship sank in the South Atlantic, far from land. You and two other crew members, plus the cabin boy, have been in a lifeboat for too many days, and you're really hungry. The cabin boy makes the ill-advised move of drinking seawater, so he quickly got and is on death's door. Should you speed him on his way, and then eat him? While you chew on that one, and ponder why I'm asking, here is more recent news.

Introducing: Big Sister Mouse

On June 8 (opening day photos at the top of the newsletter), after a year of construction, we opened our new "Learning Center & Discovery World" in Ban Nadaet on the outskirts of Luang Prabang. It was the beginning of summer vacation for school children, so immediately it was filled with kids, and we've offered free activities every day.

Ban Nadaet is the name of the village. We needed a name that would represent the various activities at Ban Nadaet, and ideally which also showed a relationship to Big Brother Mouse, and now we've agreed on one. The new learning center is "Big Sister Mouse."

How quickly can kids learn to read?

By mid-June, we were delighted to see so many children come into the library, pick out a book, plop down, and get immersed in it, perhaps for just ten minutes, then go out to play. Many of them couldn't read, they were just enjoying the pictures. So we've launched a new activity that we hadn't considered before: a 2-month summer school aimed at children who can't read yet (despite, in some cases, having finished grade 2 or 3). We opened on July 4, and quickly had 33 students enrolled.



This is an opportunity to help them learn reading, as well as number skills and other things, but it also helps us: We are trying out techniques that we think will work better than the traditional teacher-and-blackboard system. When we set up a reading program in schools we can get schools to agree to allow 15 minutes a day of free reading time. (Even that that takes a strong push, and some still don't do it.) But we think more is needed. In our summer school, we have three 30-minute reading periods (photo above), with our staff helping students individually as needed. In only a month, we've seen students who couldn't read at the beginning of July, but can now read and enjoy our very simplest books.



We're also trying out other ideas. Here, two boys play Number Bingo. (Literacy rates are low here. Numeracy is even lower.) You take turns rolling dice, cover a number, and try to get 4 in a row. We've developed variations that help children move up, each using a slightly different board:

1. Learn to count. Just roll one die, count the dots, and cover that number. (That board has just numbers 1 to 6, repeated many times.)

2. Roll two dice. You can cover either number or add them and cover the sum. (This board goes from 1 to 12, it's shown in the photo.)

3. Roll two dice. Add or subtract to get the number that you cover.

4. Roll three dice, and use the arithmetic operations suitable for your level. You can also combine two to make a 2-digit number: 1 and 3 can be 13 or 31.

In short, it's a fun way to hone basic arithmetic skills, which are usually drilled with a teacher and a blackboard. Here's a full page of [summer school pictures](#).

Older students, too...

Laos is turning out more and more college and university graduates every year. This sounds wonderful, if that's all you hear, and often, that's all you hear.

But then ask another question: What happens to those graduates? Very often the answer is: They go back to their village and work on the farm, because there are no jobs for them. What they got in college isn't what employers need. And what Laos needs even more, is young people with the spark of creativity to see a need, see an opportunity, and figure out how to create a new business out of it all.

So in September we're starting classes which will be largely for students who have finished high school, and who would like an alternative to college, which will nurture different sorts of skills than memorization of facts.

For the first year we're starting with a small group, 8 to 12 students, so that we can work intently with them as we look at other methods of learning. Our focus is on helping students take the initiative. Reading, discussion, and writing will be the main way of improving knowledge. There will be lots of hands-on experience. And we'll have projects, such as brainstorming ideas, then testing them out, to get more books and enthusiasm for reading into villages.

About that cabin boy...

This approach is entirely new for the typical Lao student. To help them understand it, we invited applicants to attend a one-day open house at which they tried out some of these experiences. (One unanticipated but satisfying outcome: Many of them were in grade 4 or 5 when we started Big Brother Mouse; they still vividly remember our book party at their school, and getting their first book, from us.)

For reading and discussion, we took an excerpt from Michael Sandel's book "Justice." He describes the real-life dilemma at the beginning of this newsletter. As the cabin boy lapsed into semi-consciousness, the others had a discussion: He would die soon, but by then, they might be too weak to, ahem, take advantage of the situation. Was it ethical to kill him now, so they could survive a bit longer on his blood and flesh?

In retrospect, an ethical dilemma about a homeless puppy might have been easier to handle, but this one did prompt lively discussions. The point we wanted to make is: Rote education teaches that there is a right answer, and your job is to get that answer from a higher authority. It requires no thinking, just memorization. But with this question, there was no teacher telling you what to think. The "right" answer depends on the premises of your moral system, and this question pushes people to think about the unspoken assumptions they make, and the implications of those assumptions.

Now we need scholarships!

We've already offered a spot to two applicants who have shown the types of initiative that we'll need. One seems very interested but he isn't ready to commit yet. While he likes what we offer, he also knows that employers, when they do hire, feel safer if they see a college certificate.



Tadam, in the red shirt in this photo, did accept. She stands out on several levels. She lives in the countryside where books are scarce but she has taken a great interest in reading and writing. She's sent us several well-written stories to consider for publication; and reads everything she can get her hands on; more than anyone else we have met. At the end of the day we let all participants select several books from a variety that we offered. She had already read all of them, including the lengthy diary of Anne Frank, so she went back to our shop with us and picked out a couple of new releases that she hadn't read.

Now, we need scholarships! We have enough to cover four students, but want to

accept more. One year (12 months) will cost \$2900. That includes room and board. Right now, most students work part- or full-time while they attend college, and it means they simply don't have the time or energy for the studying, and the range of other activities, that we feel are needed for these young people to really develop their talents.

Will you provide a scholarship for one of our students? We'll tell you who you sponsored, and either we or they will give you occasional updates. (One possibility is for them to get a Facebook page on which their updates can be seen by others, too.) Our [Donations](#) page stands ready...

Progress on co-payments



Two years ago, we began asking that where they can afford to do so, villages co-pay a share (typically about 25%) of the cost of the reading program. Lots of them said they would; but when the time came, it was much harder. Far fewer came through than we had hoped or expected.

Khamla and Siphone recently came back from one province where we set up reading programs in three districts last year, but faced a lot of resistance at first, with good news. After seeing the actual results of the program, 100% of them readily signed up to do it again.

There ought to be a word for...

...for a pastime that's enjoyable for it's own sake, but also provides some modest payoff. Browsing dictionaries is one of mine.

In 1972, after a decade of research, Allen Kerr produced an impressively thorough and accurate 1000-page Lao-English dictionary. Here I stumbled across a word derived from Pali, the language of Buddhism in India, for a "coronation ceremony to consecrate the superiority of a conquering king." The word is

intarapisate, should you ever need it.

There is also a word defined as "bad man, sinner; nude nun", but I don't think you need that one, and I'm not telling it to you because if you want to talk about that, you're nothing but a... a... just a second, let me check the dictionary, I'm sure it's got a word that nails you. This dictionary was originally published by the Catholic University of America Press, which may be more concerned about nude nuns than most of us are.

The Monkey is Elected to be King of the Animals

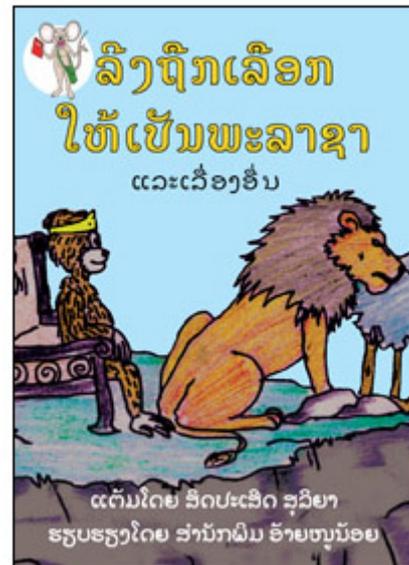
The animals of the forest had a meeting. The monkey did a funny dance so they elected him to be king. But too late, they discovered that the monkey was simply an idiot that liked to dance...

Aesop told this tale more than 2,000 years ago, and we began preparing the Lao version in mid-2015. Little did we suspect that soon, the presidential elections in the United States would... oh, never mind. We'd just like to know: Would you like

to sponsor, [The Monkey is Elected to be King of the Animals](#)? We also, of course, have other [books waiting for a sponsor](#).

with best wishes from all of us at Big Brother Mouse,
Sasha

Replies: We love to hear from you, but if you click Reply, Yahoo puts your message in a long "conversation" with every other reply, and it's easy to miss new messages. Please create a separate email. Thank you!



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