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Literacy for Peace Final Report: Concretizing and Mobilizing the Wall-less Classroom in Abuja, Nigeria

The Difference

In August 2008, Teachers Without Borders' inaugural Wall-less Classroom was a single basic literacy course held in rented chairs under a rented canopy in the car-jammed sprawl of Jabi Motor Park. One year later, with the help of the Davis Foundation, the newly mobile Classroom provides classes and practical seminars in four different parks and is equipped with a blueprint that makes for easy program replication and expansion to other states and regions.

Before my arrival in Abuja in May, I worked with Teachers Without Borders (TWB) Africa Regional Coordinator, Mr. Raphael Oko, to plan our procedure in detail. Our experiences with the first Classroom allowed us to prepare well in advance for the particulars of our proposed material and logistical improvements, which would cover everything from stackable tables to formal timetables for course evaluations. Our efforts fell roughly into the following categories: a) finalizing the budget, b) scheduling new course cycles, c) improving the course curriculum, d) selecting and training instructors, e) researching and purchasing supplies, f) identifying potential sites and securing approval from appropriate local authorities, g) miscellaneous items, such as painting the van, creating the logo and designing the t-shirts that would serve as class uniforms.

We scouted out possible Classroom locations and received permission to launch in Karu and Dei-Dei. But a problem surfaced at our original Jabi site: a rogue former volunteer who had initially offered to help set up the first classroom had spread wild rumors that I was returning to Abuja with \$1 million that I had obtained using pictures of the original project. Chaos ensued, with people requesting a share of the nonexistent money. TWB later decided to open a separate site at Area 1 Motor Park while working toward rebuilding our trust relationships with Jabi.

We had anticipated that one of our biggest challenges would be finding sufficient outside funds to subsidize the purchase of a reliable secondhand van, to be used to store and transport supplies between sites. With Davis funds and \$3000 in contributions from TWB headquarters and private patrons, Mr. Oko traveled 12 hours to Lagos to find the best possible vehicle within our means. We then negotiated extensively for all of our other important supply needs, including canopies, chairs, tables, textbooks, notebooks, writing utensils, dry erase board, projector and screen.

Meanwhile, we met with local and federal representatives of the Universal Primary Education Commission to obtain copies of the national literacy primer. The primer, along with course books designed to meet national curriculum requirements, would allow our instructors to customize a curriculum in line with national standards.

The Classroom's most important resources would be its human resources. The quality of the project would depend largely on the instructors and the system by which they were selected and trained. Mr. Oko successfully requested the annual deployment of three National Service Corps members with an expressed interest in teaching literacy, each of whom would be paired with a TWB-trained volunteer and assigned to a park site as an instructor team. In June, we held our first instructor orientation seminar. I wrote a brief 10-page guide to supplement orientation materials, drawing heavily from challenges we had faced the previous summer with the first Classroom to make recommendations for the second. The guide includes a brief overview of the Classroom, as well as course requirements, the 2009-10 course cycles, potential complications, and suggestions for incorporating a variety of multimedia into the curriculum and implementing auxiliary initiatives for the benefit of students and their respective park communities.

As of September 2009, the Mobile Wall-less Classroom is on the verge of completing its first course cycle, accommodating 20 students in Dei-Dei, 27 in Karu, 17 in Area 1 and 45 in Okpoma Yala. Class is being held at each site three days a week for 12 weeks, for a total of 36 classes. The first two course cycles will take place successively in the summer and fall of 2009. Teachers Without Borders will collect data from both cycles and conduct an intensive, comprehensive program evaluation in December, when the classroom closes for the demands of holiday travel on motor park activities. Findings will be used to make structural and curricular improvements. Beginning in 2010, each year the Classroom will offer three complete four-month cycles, which will include a one-month course evaluation affixed to every three-month course.*

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Most recently, TWB has decided to add new Classroom sites at outdoor markets in Masaka and Okuku in Cross River State. On September 12, TWB will hold an open instructor training seminar for volunteers interested in starting a literacy class in their local market or motor park.

The Classroom is designed to serve as a platform for those who plan to take advantage of additional TWB educational initiatives such as computer literacy classes. But it is also structured to provide immediately useful information to those students who may not be able to pursue further opportunities following course completion. In addition to classes in reading and writing, instructors arrange regular seminars on a variety of practical topics, such as driving safety and customer service. The Classroom serves as a portal to community-building efforts, and instructors are encouraged to involve students in initiatives such as collecting books for a Wall-less lending library, and their wider communities in one-day events such as digging a latrine for park sanitation. In Dei-Dei, TWB has successfully incorporated a communication technology literacy component into the program and has connected students interested in developing small mobile phone businesses to private microlenders.

The Davis grant has provided the capital for the improvement and expansion of the Classroom, but the sustainability of its day-to-day operations will rely in part on the support of private donors. Present challenges include the costs of regular fueling and van maintenance, as well as procuring internet access and funds for small instructor stipends and coordinating multiple project sites. The Classroom email account has been linked to a blog, which is in its earliest stages but will eventually serve as an interface for attracting potential sponsors, as well as students, and keeping the program transparent and accountable for class developments.

At the end of the month, Mr. Oko and I spent an hour on K FM radio, discussing the transformation of the Wall-less Classroom through the Davis grant and taking suggestions from listeners. After the show, calls continued to roll in from listeners interested in donating time to the project.

Peace and Literacy

Peace is choice. A peaceful world is one populated by people with choices. And choices are overwhelming the luxury of the educated.

Most of our students have never had formal schooling; they have never had the choices and chances that come with education. The Wall-less Classroom's mission is transporting all of the classroom essentials, minus the classroom, to them. The idea is that poverty entraps, becoming as much a mentality as it is a physical reality. The vision is to extricate access to education from the preconditions that keep so many Nigerians on the social periphery. It is about giving the workers in Dei-Dei and Karu, in the motor parks and markets, the choices that ultimately make peace an option.

As stated in the introductory guide, "the Wall-less Classroom" is more than a straightforward description of place. Mechanically speaking, the name alludes to a teaching approach that relies on commonsensically fixing objectives and creatively relaxing constraints to increase the national literacy rate. But the Wall-less Classroom is much more than a stepping stone to literacy, or to the skill sets and job opportunities associated with it. It is about granting individuals more time and space, more personal resources, to make choices about their lives and the communities in which they live.

In 2008, Teachers Without Borders' original concept for an effective grassroots educational initiative involved something else entirely: establishing physically housed community teaching and learning centers in local communities. Within weeks, it became that pursuing this could amount to collecting pledges and promises, seeing plans stall indefinitely, chasing down collaborators, and starting all over again. The cycle of too much waiting and too little doing was delicately mired in the kind of red tape that was nobody's fault and everybody's problem.

This project is about laying down foundations for a less-than-ideal solution to a problem that is too real to wait for ideal solutions. The Wall-less Classroom—a canopy and fifty chairs set up in a motor park—was borne out of lack of choice. The Wall-less Classroom is a product of inquiry meeting practicality, of intentions meeting actions—of recognizing pressing needs, examining failed solutions, breaking borders and literally forgoing walls in favor of substantive change. The most valuable thing I learned this summer is where real progress in the pursuit of peace begins. It is where the journey of the newly mobile Wall-less Classroom begins—where all obvious options seem to end.

**For dates and other details, please consult the introductory guide, subject to ongoing revision but available online at http://docs.google.com/View?id=dd2m9fgv_0fqbb68f4 or www.walllessclassroom.blogspot.com.*

