



Big Brother Mouse

Newsletter :: August 2018

A Bustling School

Here in Luang Prabang, our summer school is in full swing, with 219 students at last count (half preschool, half of primary school age.) In two years we've grown quite an infrastructure: Two large school buildings, a larger kitchen and dining area about to be built, 3 "schoolbuses" (2 vans and a modified tuk-tuk) that carry kids back and forth, serving some 100 lunches a day (to adult staff, young adult students, and about 80 children whose parents pay 60 cents a day supplement).

The photo shows the site for the larger kitchen and dining area. We'll put in posts, so that it can extend out over the sloping land.

We've just hired a full-time person to help us grow more food on the hillside above our school, with help from other staff. It's a learning opportunity, too. Here, he tells students about what he's planned and what that involves.



Our publishing slogan is "Books that make literacy FUN!" You could say Big Sister Mouse's motto is "A school that makes education fun!" but I'm not sure that's the best word. Sometimes it's fun. Other times it a better goal would be satisfying, fulfilling, or exciting. Children (and, sometimes,

adults) are eager to learn. Our species couldn't have survived if learning was not an instinctive need for young people. We look for ways to help and guide that instinct, but we don't need to push it, if we do the other things right.



After lunch, and at recess on rainy days (of which we've had a lot lately), children come in to borrow games and construction sets. A big thank-you to everyone who has brought us Legos, they are endlessly popular. Several nine-year-old boys went into true rapture when some Lego action figures arrived yesterday. Chess is also a popular after-lunch activity, though if you're a moderately good chess player you have nothing to fear from our kids. Yet.

Finding good teachers



In June, we interviewed thirty students who had just graduated from the Teacher Training College. Anyone who has interviewed applicants for jobs or other positions knows how difficult it is to make good decisions based on a one-day interview. We spent a good deal of time setting up a system, with both Khamla and Siphone doing separate 10-minute interviews, and the applicants did some group activities with me.

We were in surprisingly close agreement about who would be best, and we invited three of them to join our young adult program for the summer, during which they learn our approach to teaching, and we evaluate their abilities. All three have turned out to be superb and next year, with a bit more confidence in

our interview abilities, we expect to look for a larger group.

Siphone's big move

Our biggest news internally is that Siphone, who has been with us from the start -- he wrote two of our first five books, with 95,000 copies in print now -- is leaving. He will build and open a school in a town about two hours to the north, which will be independent from us though we'll work closely together.

Siphone is from that area, and he was up there last December to interview applicants for our young adult program. Even arriving with low expectations, he was dismayed at how little they had learned by the end of high school. He'll begin with a preschool early in 2018, adding a primary school a year from now. Like us, he would eventually like to add middle school and high school. Like us, he knows that will be an enormous step and we'll all have to wait and see what we can handle.

Playing the odds

For all ages in the school, we look for hands-on approaches to learning. One week I introduced the concept of probability to our young-adult students.

First we played a game. I'd roll a dice and bet 2000 kip (in play money) that it would be a certain number, for example, a 3. Then I announced what they'd have to put up, to accept my bet. A 3 probably won't come up, so they have to bet more. If it's a 3, I collect their bet; if it's not a 3, they get my 2000 kip. The even-money bet for them is 10,000 kip; if we bet hundreds of times, their 10,000 against my 2,000, on average we'll all break even. (I'll win one time in six, collecting their 10,000. They'll win five times in six, collecting my 2,000 five times.) They should refuse a bet if I want them to put up more than 10,000, and accept if I ask for less.

I didn't expect them to be able to calculate these odds, and they could not. What surprised me was that no one even understood the concept of odds. They didn't understand that such a thing existed. They were as likely to accept or reject a 5-to-2 offer as an offer of 20-to-2. I got it up to 50-to-2 several times, despite a conscience that was feeling more and more guilty, and many of them accepted. It all just depended how they felt. If they'd been winning, they accepted anything I suggested.

Were they being carefree because it was just play money? The next day we played again, but I offered a prize of 50,000 kip (about \$6, a couple days salary for many workers) to whoever ended up with the most. That created quite a bit of excitement, but little or no change. The student who has been best at math

seemed likely to win, but then got wiped out after he accepted very bad odds a couple of times. The winner was the second-best math student, but only because he sat out a lot (avoid both good and bad odds, he could see that the whole thing wasn't working out well for bettors) rather than because he specifically avoided bad bets.

With that background, I introduced the concept of probability and odds. There were audible "aahs" as the concept quickly took hold, and we did a couple of lessons in how to calculate odds in a simple situation.



Those lessons didn't get far; number skills are just too weak. So we've been playing a fractions game. You are dealt four pairs of cards, one above the other. These represent fractions. An ace above a three is $1/3$. You take turns drawing a card, and replacing one of your cards with the new one, until you have a sequence running from lowest to highest.

(Though not shown here, we've cut circles into pie-slice shapes, representing different fractions, to help students visualize that $1/3$ is actually bigger than $1/4$, even though 3 is smaller than 4. And that $5/6$ is bigger than $3/4$, because in each case you can start with a full pie, then remove $1/6$, or $1/4$. The more you remove, the less pie you end up with.)

Parents and feedback

It's been two years since we opened Big Sister Mouse, trying to introduce some new approaches to teaching and learning. We try to make it fun, and kids appreciated that right from the start. We thought parents might be concerned that we're too different from what they expected, but they're largely quite appreciative, especially when their kids come home from school excited about what they learned. The parents' main request is that we should assign more homework. As for teachers, we are asked them to do things differently from what they always thought teaching was all about, but they are coming around as they see the results. And there are good signs.

At a recent parents' meeting, a father came up to thank us. He works at an international company which will pay up to \$75 per month for each of his children's tuition. He had previously sent his son to two private schools in the city, for \$50-\$70 per month. The boy didn't like either one and the father thought he wasn't learning much, he prefers Big Sister Mouse. (Our fee is \$18.)

In September, Siphone went to visit his parents in the countryside and unexpectedly came back with his nephew. The boy was entering grade four but couldn't even read his own name. And he was a bit of a menace. During his first week, he indignantly declared, "In MY school, we can have FIGHTS during class if we want to." Within a couple more weeks he saw that this was all interesting and often enjoyable if he paid attention, six months later he was reading, and there were no bloody noses.

We've condensed one of our teaching philosophies to three words: "Ask, don't tell." While sometimes telling is necessary, we encourage teachers to think about ways to ask questions, if questions can help a student figure out an answer on her own.

Nampeng is a remarkably bright girl who finished grade 2 in May. (After grade one, she and at least 3 others were reading 200-page books, with no pictures on most pages. Now she also reads Thai -- a similar language but with a somewhat different and much longer alphabet -- and can speak some English, and some sign-language. She's also good at math.)

During summer school she was teaching something to a couple other students. A friend, new to the school, came over and started telling the answers to the problems she was helping them with. "That's not teaching!" she scolded them. "You need to ask questions, not just tell them." As far as we know, she had never heard our "Ask, don't tell" slogan, she had just seen from her own experience that questions got students thinking and that simply telling kids an answer didn't do much good.

An American Girl

On our list of books that need a sponsor is "An American Girl." It's the story of a Native American girl, perhaps 200 years ago, who wants to help with the potlatch ceremony that her family is planning. She is too small to weave a suitable basket, but she finds other ways to help. It is told in very simple English, to be suitable for children who are learning the language, and we'll print it with English, Lao, and phonetic English. (The phonetic system is one we developed, which makes use of Lao characters as much as possible, and is thus much easier to learn than the international phonetic system.) I've no doubt that Nampeng and others will be using this combination to acquire English skills on their own, with occasional help from visitors who volunteer.

But first we need a sponsorship of US \$1500 to help with printing. Would you like to help? Details are on our page of [Books to Sponsor](#).



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That's all for now, thanks for reading!
 With best wishes from all of us at Big Brother & Sister Mouse,
 Sasha

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