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### **Bridges towards reading digital texts: ideas on how to cross them<sup>1</sup>**

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#### ***Abstract:***

*Banco del Libro is an institution dedicated to reading promotion activities since 40 years ago. During this time, we have faced the challenge of supporting real relationships with the communities that make use of our services, in order to benefit them in an effective way: understanding their needs and interests with regards to books and reading, making research for them, informing ourselves, offering training opportunities, showing them new perspectives and standpoints on the act of reading, supporting and enriching their initiatives and experiences. A little over three years ago, for instance, after understanding that the targeted population was beginning to read a new type of media –the digital one-, our institution contemplated the study and disclosure of digital formats such as the CD-ROM and web sites. The creation of training and recreational workshops, work projects in schools, librarian services and other communities began with the conception and sustained work of the evaluation committee and the selection of digital formats for children and youngsters. In short, a new and unpostponable goal has been defined: the creation of a digital readers' network. In this paper, we review our experience and present the strategies we have carried out, as ideas on how to cross the bridges that take from paper to bits.*

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<sup>1</sup> Paper to be presented at the 68<sup>th</sup> IFLA Council and General Conference: "Libraries for Life: Democracy, Diversity, Service" August 18-24, 2002. Glasgow, Scotland.

*Conjugating the future of the verb  
is the essential of the educational fact.*  
(E. Ferreiro<sup>2</sup>)

We have dedicated 42 years to reading promotion activities among children and youngsters, encouraging them to obtain pleasure and knowledge, but above all, offering them opportunities to become a part of the contemporary social and technological processes that are taking place in our country. It has been a dynamic story, filled with study, exercises, rearrangements, new visions and plans.

As proof of the abovementioned, last year we narrated to this same audience the creation of the Evaluation Committee of Digital Formats for children and youngsters: an answer to the idea that new publication forms are generating new reading possibilities. We told in detail every direction undertaken, every necessary turn, every achievement obtained (Cadenas, 2001). At that time, we had focused our interest on the creation of a multidisciplinary research group, on the creation of spaces for systematic reflection on new reading concepts that could be related to electronic publications, and on the disclosure of results, through workshops and publications. More than enough work to keep us busy for more than three years and to set – as a logical consequence – the following goal: put action to the test.

We had the certainty that we had to expand our reading promotion concept. We were starting to think we could promote the reading of digital formats, such as CD-ROMs and web sites, in schools, librarian services and communities; however, we had to find accurate formulas to achieve it and make truly useful proposals. We had to build bridges towards new reading situations: those that involve the digital media. To achieve it, as the research activities continue non-stop, we have put some ideas into practice. We take this opportunity to share them.

### **1. Starting from known roads**

This strategy consists in promoting the reading of new formats, from known formats: the printed ones. We are using our publication lines to edit new titles, which reading does not necessarily demand new skills... but indeed new attitudes. We are designing printed texts to invite to the reading of the digital world, starting from – in our opinion – two essential premises.

The first is derived from one of the most revealing findings of the Digital Formats Evaluation Committee (which also confirms its relevancy): the dedication of a great portion of the groups investigating the new media as resources to obtain information, knowledge and recreation opportunities, is transforming. In this context, how to develop good software or web sites is not the main issue. How to recognize it among a large production, under what criteria to test it and how to take advantage of it, is the main issue (Cadenas, 1999). Therefore, part of our work is offering a panorama of the products, presenting their characteristics and suggesting many ideas to explore them in a personal way.

The second premise has been to maintain the conception of our publications, such as:

- “Alive” and permanent resources: to be consulted and reread as many times as possible.
- Practical work instruments: to innovate, strengthen weak points and enrich achievements.
- Intellectual reflection tools: to become updated with regards to new topics, incorporate new concepts to the day-to-day, value new resources (such as technology), and develop new ideas.

To sum up and having understood that “... more and more, new technologies are imposing new ways of closeness, interpretation and interaction with the information and, above all, new reading rhythms”

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<sup>2</sup> Emilia Ferreiro makes this statement in 1999, paraphrasing G. Steiner.

(Repiso, 2001); we have worked towards the creation of printed publications so that those interested in digital media and publications can get an overview of them, grasp their potentiality, recognize their value, and incorporate them in a critical and progressive way to their day-to-day, answering to the reading needs and interests of children and youngsters.

We have created two booklets from our *Formemos Lectores*<sup>3</sup> (*Let's Build Readers*) Series, which titles express in an accurate way the trend we have mentioned:

- Many CD-ROM's for children and adolescents. A guide to recognize and name them (Ladrón de Guevara, 2000).
- How to choose a fine CD-ROM for children? Some useful tips (Ladrón de Guevara, 2001).

In addition, we dedicated a booklet from *Enlaces con la Crítica*<sup>4</sup> (*Critic's Liaisons Bulletin*) to the presentation of some of the findings of the Digital Formats Evaluation Committee, highlighting the work of certain publishing houses, mentioning particular types of CD-ROM's and reviewing particularly well-accomplished works.

Since halfway through the year 2000, and by means of our Education Coordination, we have carried out teacher's educational workshops on the same topics, in which the developed publications are actively used. In October 2001, the Reading Promotion Meeting in Los Llanos took place, in which updating professional activities for more than 170 public and scholastic librarians were carried out. There, a reading promotion workshop with electronic format materials was performed, and these booklets were also presented and handed out.

Likewise, these documents serve as handouts in seminars and academic courses about children and youth's literature, as well as introduction to technologies in educational environments. For instance, they are being used as basic reference material by the students of the Metropolitan University Education School and the Teacher's Updating Program, arranged by the Didactics Department of said university.

## **2. Instead of building bridges, helping build them**

The aforesaid experiences open the way to our second work strategy. The digital formats reading promotion can also be approached from real and concrete practice. But in order to achieve it, we prefer to focus on the interested ones and leave space for their contributions, instead of making it for them (probably a slower and more expensive alternative, but also a safer one). We have put into practice two ideas:

- (a) Dedicating enough time to the selection of the material to suggest as example
- (b) Creating educational spaces

Subsequently is the review of Proyecto Le@mos (*Let's Re@d*), in development since September 2001, where we have given a peculiar emphasis to both aspects.

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<sup>3</sup> The *Formemos Lectores* Series is aimed at parents, teachers and adults interested in stimulating children and youngsters in acquiring a taste for reading. Without a defined periodicity, every title approaches in a simple and pleasant manner a carefully chosen topic related to reading promotion. The content is in charge of a specialist, who is researching about the "artistic state" of the topic to be covered; organizes and integrates concepts, reviews and proposes strategies to help strengthen the relationship between children, youngsters and books.

<sup>4</sup> *Enlaces con la Crítica* is a quarterly publication aimed at specialists in the area of children's literature and to the general public, oriented to the disclosure of opinions, polemics, particular standpoints that can lead to reflection and critical analysis.

Let's Re@d has been implemented in more than 30 Fe y Alegría<sup>5</sup> (*Faith and Joy*) schools, as a reading promotion program supported on the use of new technologies. It has included 28 workshops with the participation of 485 teachers, librarians and specialist teachers.

With the training, each school incorporated in the project received a CD-ROM's series and access to a web site directory. The CD's series focused on applying quality criteria to national production and searching for new titles aimed at benefiting not only general knowledge in scientific areas, but reading related to art, history, and customs and traditions of our country. The scholastic relevancy of the samples and the usefulness of their content were carefully considered. The design of the web site directory followed the same orientation.

However... why did we offer the resources, instead of only offering orientation activities? Basically, because we were facing a real action proposal and to many specialists, the availability of good and concrete examples is a key factor in this type of initiatives. Upon overcoming the phase of initial approach to the technological resources, teachers and librarians must have the capacity to evaluate and adjust them, starting from the context and the targeted population (Rangel, 2000). The critical appropriation of the tools only comes from a direct relation with them (Gros, 2000).

In addition, the Let's Re@d workshops contemplated the joint design – between trainers and participants – of scholastic projects and activities; the definition of clear ideas on how to begin work with children and young people. Mariño (1988) says that training in the use of technologies must be highly practical and linked to concrete teacher's activities. Technology must be in favour of the educator, the librarian, and the community. Not the other way around. In the Let's Re@d workshops, our key help is based, as we believe, on:

- Consideration of trainers with ample experience in three areas: training of teachers, reading promotion and incorporation of technologies in scholastic environments. We have given a solid treatment to proposals.
- Working with groups not greater than 20 participants: we have guaranteed an adequate attention to the interests and doubts of each participant.
- Preparation of handouts: each teacher received a package of booklets, guides and complementary readings, as extension opportunities to the training events, for their individual study and application. The materials deal with subjects related to reading promotion in general and the new possibilities of reading in a digital format. Obviously, the publications mentioned in point 1 were included.

### **3. Crossing the bridges coming and going, in a permanent way**

The third suggestion we make today is related to our conception of reading promotion as a set of actions that overcome the circumstantial. Medina (2001) says that reading promotion is formed through the systematisation of activities that enable the encounter of the beginner reader with quality books, provided that it is for a sustained time. This also applies to the reading promotion of digital texts.

After the Let's Re@d training, for instance, we began to carry out accompanying activities as opportunities to evaluate the putting into practice of the ideas, the solution of difficulties and the exchange of joint achievements with the project's actors. Proven the inefficiency of punctual formative interventions when trying to incorporate technological media and resources in schools and other community services (De Llano, 1996), this moment in time is conceived as a space to carefully analyse the impact of

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<sup>5</sup> Fe y Alegría is the name of a Popular Education Movement, which seeks to offer a quality education model to the poorest sectors in Latin American countries.

proposals, “listen” to the context, and adjust the ideas. The follow-up must involve “coming and going” actions; allow the establishment of bi-directional links with reality.

In Let’s Re@d, the accompanying has included:

- The reproduction of the workshops with the directive and coordinative staff of schools, giving them the opportunity to review the CD-ROM’s and web site directories in detail, obtain their own reading experiences, participate in the same activities as their teachers, and – above all – grasp the implications of the proposals.
- The performance of systematic meetings and gatherings of teachers and librarians to facilitate the analysis and enrichment of concrete ideas and experiences.
- The creation of electronic resources of ongoing, not presential, exchange, such as electronic forums.

At this point, any return to proposals 1 and 2 will surely be beneficial. In the accompanying activities, printed texts can be used to reread concepts, establish their value, or condition them. We can go back to traditional practices to determine which have expired and which have any innovative potential left. In other words, the follow-up can be attached to the better-known roads since it generates great security. However, new roads must be travelled. Shyly, narrow bridges, which allow a careful and slow step towards the use of technology as a context to promote recreational and informative reading, can be built. That is how it has been with the forums, our digital magazine *Caleidoscopio*<sup>6</sup> (Kaleidoscope) and other electronic resources. For now, they are used as consultation means and not practice means. With complete security, this use will come later.

In the follow-up of our digital texts reading promotion projects, all the ideas we have shared are joined in a type of spiral, giving feedback to each other.

#### **4. Inviting everyone**

The last strategy is avoiding prejudices on who might be digital reading promoters or who could lean on digital texts, to promote book reading. A promoter is one who reads, researches texts and their characteristics; who mediates between publications and their readers; who is seduced by them and is capable of transmitting their values in an intimate way (Medina, 2001). For that reason, it is convenient to invite everyone: so that many discover in electronic texts an unsuspected pleasure, rich knowledge and exchange sources, and – above all – development and transformation opportunities (Fuchs, 2000).

In February of the present year, in the framework of the Agreement with the Chacao Municipality, we organized a social gathering called “From town square stories to Internet chatting”. This activity, which was part of a very complete meeting’s schedule, aimed at motivating a group of senior citizens and incorporating them in a training program as storytelling grandparents. We received more than forty grandparents, surfed the net, described the visited pages, and offered them a publication and web site directory on reading promotion, storytelling associations around the world and general information for the elderly. They promised to dedicate time and effort to get familiarized with it all. We do not want to simplify the implications that could derive from this experience, since its analysis takes a great part of the previous pages (like for instance, for the promotion of digital formats reading, it is necessary to have skills in the handling of the products, with concrete proof of it and training in the area)... but you should have seen their eyes, when they discovered the possibilities those digital texts offered them.

#### **Towards the invisibility of the resource**

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<sup>6</sup> Available at our official web site: [www.bancodellibro.org.ve](http://www.bancodellibro.org.ve)

Gros (2000) says that the greatest challenge for the appropriation of technology is, in fact, to make it invisible. While it is visible, we are preoccupied with its dominion; we study it “without touching it”. The process towards invisibility begins when we integrate it to the day-to-day. Maybe we will refer to reading promotion once again, without specifying the format of texts, be it printed or digital. Perhaps we will think in the value of reading, without taking into account the presentation of the letters and images. It is possible that, a few years from now, bridges between paper and bits will not be necessary. Meanwhile, we are testing these formulas. Try them yourselves and let us continue this exchange.

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