Worldreader: Creating a Culture of E-Reading Around the Globe

Overview

This case study explores how Worldreader's digital reading program, implemented by international and local partner nongovernmental organizations, provides children and their families in 53 countries access to culturally and linguistically relevant digital books. Outside school contexts, the organization has also developed Worldreader Mobile, a suite of free mobile reading applications (or "apps"), with access to its digital library content. These apps are built for a variety of platforms (from Android to mobile web browsers) and can be downloaded anywhere around the world. Overall, Worldreader pursues an integrated approach that combines context-appropriate technology, digital access to 37,336 book titles in 43 languages, teacher and librarian support, and community engagement.

Key Contextual Conditions

According to a 2008 study of 19 African countries, 18 countries faced serious supply shortages of textbooks, especially in noncore subjects—ratios of textbooks to students in urban areas ranged from 1:8 in Kenya and Uganda, to 1:40 in Zambia, and up to 1:100 in Mozambique. Only Botswana had close to a 1:1 ratio of textbooks to students for all subjects and all grades in secondary school. Students in rural areas suffered even more, with less than 5 percent of students on average having access to core subject textbooks (SEIA 2008). Efforts to expand access to books in these countries are often costly (for example, transportation costs, storage costs, paper and ink costs, and the risk of overprinting) and logistically challenging (for example, shipping cartons of books by sea, land, and air to remote rural areas). Overall, there is a general lack of appropriate reading materials for poor families in many low-income countries

However, greater availability of the Internet, mobile phone technology, and digital e-reading devices, along with the rise of digital publishing, are reversing the vast inequalities in access to information. Recognizing what leveraging technology could do for literacy globally, Colin McElwee, former director of marketing at ESADE Business School in Barcelona, and David Risher, former general manager at Microsoft and senior vice president at Amazon.com, tapped into this emerging market opportunity. In 2010, they founded Worldreader, a nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing the lack of appropriate books and other reading materials in developing countries by digitizing a variety of textbooks, storybooks, and reference materials that can be accessed through e-readers and mobile phones. From 2010 to April 2016, Worldreader reached 16 million people in 53 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 3 million of whom are readers (defined as people who opened an e-book and turned to the next page).

Development Challenge

The greatest challenge to improving literacy in Africa and in many other parts of the world is addressing the lack of access to reading materials, including textbooks, specifically because of the shortage of books—inexpensive and accessible texts that are culturally, linguistically, and age appropriate for children who are just learning to read.

Addressing Delivery Challenges

Project finance. By cultivating relationships with local and global publishers, Worldreader has been able to procure e-books for its school and library programs at tremendous cost savings—an average cost of US$0.50 per digital book compared with the average cost of US$2.25 per printed book. If one compares outfitting students with the same number of paper books as are deployed through the iREAD-2[1] program (140 titles), Worldreader's e-reader delivery system amounts to more than US$190 saved per student, even when taking into account the additional cost of providing one e-reader per student.

Stakeholder engagement. Fostering strong relationships with 150+ local and international publishers enabled the organization to build its digital library while simultaneously laying the foundation for a robust local and international digital publishing market. For many of Worldreader's local publishing partners, their collaboration with Worldreader was their first foray into the world of digital publishing and sales. Though Worldreader's larger international publishing partners were able to donate portions of their catalogs—some already digitized, some not—Worldreader's business model with local publishers was to pay them for the rights to their books or to help them sell their books directly to users.

Project design. Rather than focusing on the latest technology, Worldreader leverages the idea of digital reading, especially in local languages, to make e-reading easier, cheaper, better, and faster to scale up. Worldreader's technologies and program models are demand driven, customer designed, and market based, which also helps to make them cheaper and easier to use. For instance, Worldreader began to distribute reading lights to students upon receiving feedback that students could not read in the evenings on their e-readers; it piloted a solar charger that would allow schools and teachers to recharge their devices without access to the grid; and it set up an iREAD Vacation Reading School to enable students to come to their schools during vacations to borrow an e-reader from a supervising teacher, or to participate in a book discussion or spelling bee (USAID, Worldreader, and ILC Africa 2012). Commitment to meeting users' needs rather than to a focus primarily on the technology has also made Worldreader sensitive to the interests of libraries, a critical distribution channel for the organization

Lessons Learned

This case study captures lessons that may assist other implementers facing similar development and delivery challenges.
- To improve literacy, Worldreader focused on creating a culture of reading by leveraging technology to provide access to more than 30,000 books via low-cost e-readers and mobile reading applications that could be used by students, teachers, and families.
- Investing in teacher training not only helped garner crucial teachers' support for Worldreader, but also helped ensure that e-readers were integrated to their maximum potential into classroom teaching and learning.
- Worldreader benefited from extensive user data and impact tracking. Not only did the organization use actionable data to improve program design, delivery, and implementation, but it also used data and analytics to win over potential key partners, such as local publishers.

Endnote

1. In 2011, with the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and under the aegis of the Global Development Alliance, Worldreader continued to build on these promising findings with its next experiment: the iREAD (Impact on Reading of E-readers And Digital content) demonstration project in Ghana.

References

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