

<<Good morning ladies and gentlemen

First of all I would like to thank people from BASMA and UNESCO for making possible for me to jump through 3 continents and be here today. An adventure I could not have dreamed when six years ago we started Tiflolibros.

The idea of this presentation is to explore if it is possible to adapt the Tiflolibros experience to other language communities.

I am going to tell you our story, what we have already achieved, what we are doing at present and what we would like to do in the future if we can. So, let's start by introducing who I am and what Tiflolibros is.

Tiflolibros is the first digital library for the Spanish speaking blind, created and managed from Buenos Aires, Argentina, but accessible worldwide through ICTs and adaptive technology. Now Tiflolibros has 14000 books and 2000 users in more of 30 countries, of America, Europe and Asia. The access to Tiflolibros is free and only for people with print disabilities.

As some of you may already have noticed, I am blind, as most of the Tiflolibros founding team is blind also. In 1999 I was a blind university student struggling to read what I had to read, and hoping to have more options to read what I love to read.

That was not easy for a blind person in Argentina, even when I had the privilege of living in the center of Buenos Aires, and work for a Braille and books tape library.

Text books I needed for university were not available and someone had to record them or read aloud for me. Fiction books were scarce and bestsellers on tape had long waiting lines.

But that as usually are in an under developed country.

When people are starving or unemployed, governments have always more important priorities than improving education or reading options for the little blind population.

But luckily, by then a computer was not as difficult to find and I managed to learn how to use it with a screen reader soon, I discovered the power of a scanner. If I ripped a book and was patient enough to scan it page by page I could read it!

And soon I also discovered I was not the only one: a group of blind friends were also exploring the benefits of ICTs, and we found that working together would help us all.

So, from a PC at home and using a free list group, and free space to posting webpages, we started to exchange scanned books and texts.

In less than 1 year 100 new users not only from Argentina but from Spain had joined us, and we had more than 1000 books.

During the years of the new century Tiflolibros grew expanded non stop.

Today, we have a real library with more than 14000 books more than 2000 users in 36 countries and a dedicated team of 4 people and about 100 volunteers but never is enough.

But the library has not lost the spirit of the exchange list: users are the main source for scanned books and may make friends, learn other people experiences, discuss about blind's problems, education or other themes.

We have also organized two through the e-mail lists tourism experiences which brought more than a 100 blind people together in 2004 in Buenos Aires and in 2005 in Bariloche, Patagonia.

We are also releasing soon a print book in which famous writers talk about blindness such as Saramago, Tahar Ben Jelloun and Borges to raise awareness among people of what we blind people can achieve with education.

These are some of the stories we hear everyday:

"My dad, the village doctor, had been planning his retirement for years, hoping to dedicate his time to reading. When he lost his sight, he believed his dream would never be fulfilled. When we discovered Tiflolibros, he started to go out, just to visit me and use my computer to read. Some months later, he bought his own computer, and nowadays he does not only read what he wants,

but scans, corrects, sends e-mails and comments books for the library. His dream is now a reality.”

This lady's father is 83 and one of our most avid readers.

“ Specially to the one, just like me, who stayed at home and read. I want to tell there is a world out there to live”

Pablo C., in his forties, had been blind for more than 10 years and dared to leave his house with a cane to attend the Tiflomeeting we organized this year. He is now promoting to develop a NGO to serve the blind in his province.

There are thousand of stories like these, and they all show access to reading is more that that, is access to society, employment, education, opportunities, dreams

Adapting the experience:

What have the keys to Tiflolibros growth been?

Which are the issues we should explore if we wanted to adapt the T experience to other language communities?

First of all we have to say it is still under construction, we built it every day, although we have already more books available than any Braille library in our part of the world.

Second, we have to tell a group of T users in Germany, all of them Spanish translators, is starting to develop one experience similar in T German.

But this is a very recent experience, so let's concentrate on the issues we should explore for adapting T concept to other languages:

Understanding language social context:

The Spanish language is widely extended, is quite uniform in the several countries it is spoken, and there are several Spanish information and other resources on line. At the same time, with the exception of Spain, Spanish-speaking countries are underdeveloped countries where handicapped people are usually underserved. So, we should understand the social and language environment to adapt the concept.

Understanding Technology context:

Although not universally extended, TICs are available in most urban areas. Technology for the blind is expensive and still not widely known (for example, many schools for the blind do not teach how to use a computer). But there are many resources for the Spanish language, such as Ocrs, reading devices or voice synthesizers. We should then explore what technologies are already available in the new language and what should be adapted if we were to create Tiflolibros in other language.

Know local institutions:

Institutions for the blind in Latin America tend to be small and have little articulation among each other. There are not many services for reading. Blind people have restricted access to books (for example, the biggest Braille library in Buenos Aires, offer about five thousand books, while we already have fourteen thousand). So, we know where to work. We are working to articulate institutions and make them have access to new technologies, through training and technical support.

Understand cultural context:

Although there are not many resources or a system of inclusion in Latin America, there is a growing group of blind people, who has had access to education and employment. These are the first users of Tiflolibros, together with users from Spain who liked the idea of exchange and social participation in Tiflolibros. They act like ambassadors, informing other blind people about the benefits of reading through a computer.

Fit in a Legal context:

This is an issue difficult to understand for the developed countries, in which laws always are first than action. But in most of Latin American countries, not even Braille or books on tape are covered by copyright exemptions, although widely accepted. In cases where the copyright exemption is explicit, it needs to be free and only for blind people, when there are not accessible options. That is why Tiflolibros offers its reading services free of charge, and accept users who present proof of their disability. At the same time, we have been

approaching publishers and writers who are supporting our work, and even sending their books to Tiflolibros in digital format, making it easier to make them available for blind people.

To adapt to other languages, we should need to explore the legal context in the countries involved. We are in fact already collaborating with Bookshare, a similar service in English in the United States, but with a very different approach given the economic and legal context.

Work with users.

Tiflolibros is made by users, we are users, so we are very close to the needs of readers.

Use existing technology.

We have combined the use of existing and widely used technologies to create the Tiflolibros concept. Yahoo groups, Microsoft Windows, Jaws, combined with a few developments and put together with an specific purpose create an easy to use and affordable system of reading.

Create a sustainable funding model:

them, we are working on this everyday. Started almost as a hobby, today we are a team of 4 people full time and as our user base growth we are not enough. Funding has come until now from users and companies donations. We also offer technical support to institutions, and are involved in several projects related to our activities which help us get funding for the library, while being an independent institution.

So, if we wanted to adapt to other languages, we should explore funding and institutional models in the countries involved.

Face new challenges:

Tiflolibros has a lot to do with facing new challenges. Find a way to use existing technologies to read being blind, find a way to start an NGO without funding, find a way to work with users geographically distant, tell this experience in English!

Our biggest challenges at present are, as I said, find long-term funding to concentrate in making Tiflolibros accessible for lower levels of the pyramid. To this end, we are exploring for example the use of mp3 format, as mp3 makes devices to read less expensive than a computer.

But overall, the basic pillar of Tiflolibros is networking: working with blind friends to create the library, working with users to make it grow, working with other institutions to expand reach, working with you today to explore possibilities to replicate or adapt our model for other communities.

We believe Internet allows to share join efforts. We have been working for the spanish-speaking blind community through these possibilities and we believe more people should have the opportunities reading offers, speccially in underdeveloped countries where in most cases we are not looking for better ways to read, but for A way to do it., not for better access, but for a chance to leave the isolation disabilities plus poor country usually mean. Reading is education, leisure, employment, independent thinking and life. We can read and we want to share the experience.

Thank you very much, and if anyone is interested in exploring Tiflolibros for another language, please contact us. Thank you.