



# Designing for Children

## - With focus on 'Play + Learn'

### EXPERIENCE DESIGNING TOYS WITH SOCIAL VALUES IN THE SOUTH OF CHILE

Fundación Trabajo Para un Hermano (Work for a Brother Foundation), NGO, Concepción, Chile

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**Abstract:** This paper relates a successful social design experience facilitated by the Fundación Trabajo Para un Hermano of Chile, an NGO dedicated to the social growth of the marginalized whose first aim is to develop people's social abilities and to develop and support small businesses and artisans in the design of competitive products for the Chilean market. This paper examines how the foundation visualized and incorporated design as a tool to achieve their mission. The Foundation offered Creativity Workshops of Designing Toys geared towards underprivileged women. The workshops are based on learning by doing, a simple methodology that awakens creativity. Through the workshop each woman experiences social growth and develops skills that lead to a real business opportunity to design, produce, and sell toys with social values, to overcome poverty, and in the end, contribute to society.

*Key words: creativity, motivation, learning, underprivileged, ecological consciousness, overcoming poverty, sustainability, fair trade.*

#### 1. Introduction

This paper relates a successful social design experience in which a group of marginalized women who were helped by designers to develop a business that consists of design, production, and the sale of toys with social values. This experience was made possible by Fundación Trabajo Para un Hermano of Chile, which realized the importance of design and incorporated it as a cross-cutting tool. This paper examines how the foundation developed and facilitated Creativity Workshops of Designing Toys, and how implementing the simple methodology of "learning by doing" can awaken creativity and motivation.

#### 1.2. Fundación Trabajo Para un Hermano: Who We Are

Fundación Trabajo Para un Hermano is a non-profit NGO in Chile, established in 1988

whose mission is to promote development opportunities for individuals and communities who dream of and work to create a culture of trust and solidarity. Dedicated to the social growth and job training of the marginalized, the foundation's first aim is to develop people's social abilities, specifically, to develop and support small businesses and artisans in the design of competitive products for the Chilean market. The foundation's goal has been to help these businesses and artisans overcome poverty by providing them with life skills and educating them in design and product development to assist them in achieving sustainability.

The foundation uses the CEFE (Competency-based Economies through Formation of Enterprise) methodology, which espouses learning by doing; through dynamic activities such as games, role-playing, and creative workshops, people can experience different situations and can reflect on these experiences and develop abilities through practice.

## **2. Incorporating Design as a Tool for Sustainability**

Working on our mission we realized that we had achieved social development; over the years, we had helped people develop technical skills. But we were missing a step toward sustainability of those skills. We lacked the creativity and the tools to look at the real world and find opportunities to produce quality and competitive products that responded to the needs of the market.

From this reflection, in the year 2004, the professionals of the foundation decided to incorporate design as a crosscutting tool. So, among basic social and personal skills workshops, we started to introduce design through some creative activities. For example, in a self-esteem development workshop, we included a whole-group activity in which participants were asked to brainstorm a list of creative uses for a lemon, a fruit with little monetary value. Their ideas ranged from initially conventional (ex: using the lemons to make lemonade) to ultimately surprisingly innovative (ex: turning the lemon's exterior into an aromatic ashtray). The purpose of the activity was to get the participants to recognize how many possibilities exist to add value to not just a lemon, but to anything in their lives, if only they take the time to stop and reflect on what they want to change. This design principle is essential for successful business development, where with the help of a group of professionals in different areas, participants can define a business opportunity and respond to it, which can lead to sustainability.

## **3. A Real Business Opportunity**

For every class the foundation offers, each instructor prepares learning materials that become trash at the end of the class. This observation and our environmental consciousness inspired the idea to seal up the learning cycle with a real business opportunity. We considered the possibility of generating employment for the participants through designing materials and toys for the different adult education programs offered by the foundation. Additionally, we thought participants could design and produce toys and teaching materials for children from schools in the region.

#### **4. Methodology**

We decided to give Creativity Workshops of Designing Toys from Fabric. Geared to women who already knew how to sew, we started with their technical skills and tried to increase and convert them into tools that could produce objects that would be competitive in the Chilean market. The main objectives of the workshops were to awaken creativity through the innovative redesigning of traditional toys, to develop new toys, and to develop skills to finish products, emphasizing quality.

We gave five workshops (each consisting of 40 hours over a two-month period) with more than 100 participants in total.

##### **4.1. A Period of Social Growth**

For two months, two evenings a week, the foundation was prepared to welcome 30 women to have a six-hour long evening of socializing and learning, a real opportunity to forget the home problems and share with other woman in similar conditions the adventure to discover their potential.

##### **4.2. The Work Space is Essential**

The foundation is of the philosophy that it is a welcome home where people not only participate but became part of it. With that in mind we executed the design workshop in large rooms with the necessary conditions to do the theoretical 30% and the practical 70%. Specifically, all rooms are equipped with sufficient light, tables, chairs, and sewing machines; additionally, the foundation has computers with Internet access, a library, and a large kitchen stocked with coffee and snacks for participants to gather, relax, and socialize. The meeting place is defined as a place of equality and respect, where the first activity was for the participants to define the rules of coexistence.

##### **4.3. Working with Materially Specially Designed for the Workshop**

The foundation provides all the necessary materials and tools for work. All the toys and prototypes used to teach the students were specially designed for the workshops, with different levels of difficulty for each phase of learning. For each workshop the foundation designed 20 toys to show examples of: 1. How a pedagogical aim could be realized through a toy; 2. How to produce and replicate a product in series and quality; 3. Practice with different techniques, textures, fabrics, materials, and forms. 4. The manageability of different levels of difficulty class by class. 5. Awakened creativity through different activities.

#### **4.4. Learning by Doing**

The first challenge was to replicate a volumetric toy. We provided participants with the patterns, the prototype, and the instructions to do it. They were confronted with something new, and we could see in their faces the fear of sewing something volumetric (a toy) that looks so complex after having only sewn flat and straight designs (cloth). But we knew that the only way they could do it was by trying, and this task is accomplished with the first step: The participant must realize, *This is not difficult, I already have the technical skills, and I can try new things*. This is a big step that opens their minds to exploration, gives them self-esteem and confidence, and awakens their curiosity about how far they can go. We could see that in their dispositions, in their happiness while working, in the fact that they didn't want to stop working during the breaks because they tasted the pleasure of a new trade.

#### **4.5. Produce Quality**

Each day of workshop we provided participants with three different toys designed by the foundation. They were asked to copy the models, learning to see--to really see--the details of each toy, and were given tools to check the quality of their replicas. The focus was to see quality not after the product is finished but in the process of production.

#### **4.6. A Simple Methodology that Awakens Creativity**

In this process, learning by doing--replicating original toys, experimenting with new techniques, using textures, colors, and forms--creativity was surfacing and begging to be used. The participants began share their ideas for improvements on the toys that they were replicating and ideas that could be converted into new toys.

#### **4.7. Developing Their Own Ideas**

To create a tangible product from their ideas is the last step in the process. This was the

most anticipated, most challenging moment for the participants.

The process began with observation; the participants were asked to look at existing toys in stores and magazines and to think about how their own children play. Then they had to make a list of possible educational objectives for which they would design a toy. After sharing the list with their peers, they chose a specific objective and then brainstormed a list of toy designs to meet that objective. Once they selected their toy, the participants made decisions about the material, shape, color, etc. of their design.

Upon completion of the workshop, the foundation hosts an exhibition for the participants where they show their toys. Family, friends, as well as benefactors of the program are invited to celebrate the symbols of their achievement. The exhibition closes with the presentation of diplomas.

#### **5. Giving Skills for Sustainability**

A normal workshop could finish here, but the Fundación Trabajo Para un Hermano looks for a real solution to the condition of the underprivileged, and to make a real change in their lives with a sustainable possibility. To accomplish this goal, we took the product results from the workshops and visited primary schools throughout the region in order to adequately address the needs of these children and awaken creative ideas.

Many of the proposals that initially began as a series of creative ideas in the workshop in many cases resulted in the production of actual toys that are now sold directly to schools and through fair trade shops throughout Chile; recently, we've also begun micro exporting some products to fair trade shops in Europe.

Since 2005 the foundation has had a fair trade store that sells handmade toys and ethnic handicrafts from the people helped by our NGO. We adhere to fair trade values, believing that we can be competitive offering a high quality product and asking for a fair price that compensates the handicraftsperson for his or her work, creating an ethical and just circle of sustainability for many families.

#### **6. Conclusion**

Through design workshops, Fundación Trabajo Para un Hermano has helped underprivileged people propose and create original, inspired solutions to meet the educational needs of adults and children in the south of Chile. It is our belief that

*creativity creates creativity.* We design each class as a space of creativity and in the process of learning by doing creativity emerges spontaneously from the students, and under the guidance of professionals, the students obtain successful results.

This is a successful social design experience, in which underprivileged people design, produce, and sell toys to overcome poverty and have the opportunity to give something back to society.

The foundation continues to give workshops and to find ways to sell the toys produced by participants. We offer on the market original quality toys and learning materials. These products have the added value of being environmentally friendly, as they are constructed of fabric and wood and, most importantly, of carrying the history of the social progress of each person who made them.

This is a successful social design experience that relates a history about how through design we can help people to overcome poverty. This experience shows the importance of the social responsibility that we have as designers. Designers have the creative vision to see opportunities; we have the tools to design competitive products. We can share our power to create, helping and guiding underprivileged people to realize their abilities and develop them in a way that will make them profitable.