

Learning Innovation and Technology Consortium

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Meet a Social Entrepreneur

John Wood of Room to Read improves literacy in the developing world

John Wood, a former Microsoft executive, left behind a traditional business career at age 35 to launch Room to Read. This nonprofit organization works to improve literacy in the developing world by building schools, libraries, and computer centers. Changing careers was not without risks, he admits. “But I knew that what I was walking into was going to be extraordinarily fun. And ultimately, if we did it right, it would change the world.”

What is life like for a social entrepreneur? What prepared Wood to lead this global initiative? What makes the effort worthwhile? In this interview, John Wood shares insights he has gained along the way.

Where did the idea for Room to Read come from?

I grew up in a family that really valued education and learning. We spent a lot of time reading and making trips to the library. I can’t imagine a childhood without being surrounded by books and wonderful, inspiring teachers. During a trek to Nepal in 1998, I visited a village school that didn’t have books or a library. I was moved by that. I decided that something had to be done.

So what did you do?

The next step was really simple. I wanted to help this one school. I emailed my friends and asked them to donate books. My parents agreed to use their home in Colorado as a collection site. By 1999, we had collected 3,000 books.

What happened next?

My father and I returned to the village, a year after my first visit, with eight mule-loads of books. I was a little nervous. My dad is 73, and Nepal is not an easy place to travel. We were trekking for hours on end on unpaved roads, sleeping in not very comfortable conditions. But it was a wonderful father-son experience to be traveling together to a

place my father would never have gone were it not for my sense of adventure. It was a way to say thank you for taking me to so many places when I was a kid and teaching me the love of travel. But what made it really special was seeing the children in the village lining up to greet us, putting their hands together and saying the Nepalese greeting of “namaste.” And then eagerly tearing into the books—reading to each other, looking at pictures of sharks and African wildlife and the solar system. To see their excitement for learning, that spark in their eyes, felt like a wonderful conclusion of the long journey to get to Nepal with these books.

And that journey was also the start of Room to Read?

I didn’t start with a grand design of building thousands of libraries. That would have been overwhelming. A lot of times, people make things too complicated in life. The major thing is getting started, taking one step. We thought we would do one school library that first year, and we ended up doing 10. The next year, we did 30 or 40. This year, once every four days we break ground on another new school. On average, we’re doing 15 new school libraries every week. We’re reaching several thousand new students every single week with their first Room to Read library or Room to Read school.

What experiences helped prepare you for the work you are doing now?

The business background definitely helped me. From working at Microsoft, I learned a lot about how you make a business grow, how to think big. My business experience helped in the sense of setting ambitious goals and managing the organization in an efficient manner.

What other qualities go into being a social entrepreneur?

When I talk about Room to Read, I get excited. That tends to be infectious. The world needs more passion and optimism. With Students Helping Students, we’re now seeing students deciding to get involved in fundraising to help other kids gain the lifelong gift of education. So I definitely think it’s important to be enthusiastic, and that enthusiasm attracts more people. And it helps to focus on results. At Room to Read, we are not sitting around talking about creating change in the world. We’re out there every day creating amazing change.

Social entrepreneurship is a relatively new field. Are there people you think of as role models?

I’ve been inspired by a number of people. Andrew Carnegie worked with communities throughout North America to build a couple thousand new libraries. That has paid such amazing dividends for generations. He proved the value of being able to think very big about disseminating knowledge to people, regardless of their economic background. Another would be Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. He single-handedly invented the concept of microfinance and proved that it could work to

help millions of people. Also, Jimmy and Roselyn Carter. Since leaving the White House, they have invented a new life for themselves and are doing more good in the world.

Do you consider yourself a social entrepreneur?

I definitely do—not so much myself, but I consider my organization to be an amazing collection of social entrepreneurs. Sometimes in the talk about social entrepreneurship, people tend to canonize the individual. But the individual can't do much more than promulgate a bold vision. The individual has to be surrounded by dozens if not hundreds of talented people. Much as I'm proud of being the founder of Room to Read, I recognize that there are hundreds of people who have made the organization a success. I'm just lucky enough to be the guy who's at the center of the storm.

As your organization has grown, how have you managed to keep your focus?

For us, it's important to say that we're doing K-12 education in the developing world. Anything else, we simply don't do. We started in Asia. We're expanding to Africa next year, and eventually to Latin America. We also publish children's books, because children in countries like Nepal don't have enough books to read in their own language. So we started publishing books. But it's still part of our focus on literacy. Keeping that focus is important. You can get pulled in dozens of directions. If you really want to accomplish things, you have to decide: What is it you're doing? And then focus only on that.

It's interesting that Room to Read expects local investment from the communities where you are building schools and libraries. How did that come about? What do very poor communities have to contribute?

The challenge grant program was devised by our team in Nepal. When we wanted to fund the first two schools, they recommended that the village donate land, labor, and a small amount of money to the project. The idea behind this was that a village would not value a school nearly as much if it was just a gift as they would if they put their own labor and a small investment into it. Ultimately, it's the village that's going to run the school, the library, and the computer lab. So by donating its time and labor to these projects, the village really shows that they're going to be faithful stewards. They're going to feel a sense of ownership. When you visit these schools, there's such a look of pride on the faces of teachers and parents. They see the school as something that they did, with our help.

Why the focus on literacy, when there are so many other issues facing the developing world?

To make the world a better place, I think we have to get three things right: education, health care, and clean water. If we can get those three things right in our lifetime, then we will have made the world a massively better place. At Room to Read, we've decided to focus on the first one. There are great people out there working on the other two.

Why is literacy such a critical issue?

I view the problem of illiteracy in the world as an everyday disaster. It doesn't get a lot of headlines, but it's such a problem in terms of holding back progress in the world. We have 850 million people—nearly a billion—who are illiterate. Our goal at Room to Read is to help 10 million students. I've been told that's overly ambitious, but it still leaves 840 million we have not reached. It's going to be a long-term battle. I'm a marathon runner. I think of it as hitting the five-mile marker, and knowing we've got a lot of miles to go.

How does Students Helping Students fit into this vision?

I'm excited about Students Helping Students [a new initiative of Room to Read]. This new effort connects students around the world in a way that solves problems. Students in the United States, Canada, Britain, and other developed countries are natural fund-raisers. Once they get passionate about a cause, they can go out and raise money. Lots of adults are afraid to ask people for money. Students say, we want to help these kids in Nepal or Sri Lanka get a better education. And then they just go for it.

What will students learn from being part of Students Helping Students?

This is a chance to teach students here about how to be a philanthropist, how to be an entrepreneur. They will learn how to set a goal, then how to go out and achieve it. In the process, they'll learn about business planning, salesmanship, entrepreneurship, all from a young age. That's going to be an advantage for them. And it's a chance to forge amazing bonds between cultures. This will make students more global in their outlook. It allows them to look beyond their own community and see what the rest of the world is like.

What makes your work most satisfying for you?

What makes it worthwhile to me is just knowing that, everyday around the world, there are new libraries opening, new schools being built, more girls getting scholarships so they can pursue an education. The world can be a terribly depressing place sometimes. What keeps me going is that Room to Read is a force for positive change.

What does innovation mean to you?

To me, innovation is basically about looking at an absence of something that is positive and trying to fill that void. It means not ever taking no for an answer. Innovation is all about finding solutions.

- To learn more about Room to Read, visit www.roomtoread.org
- To learn about Students Helping Students and see the educational materials developed by LITC, visit www.roomtoread.org/shs