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# Making a Difference: The Cartonera Comes to Mexico.

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## Making a Difference: The Cartonera Comes to Mexico



Workshops emphasize learning through creativity. Photo by Doris Sommer

**By Doris Sommer**

Chalco is one of Mexico City's poorest neighborhoods, far enough away from the center along the traffic-clogged highway to Puebla to feel isolated as well as arid. There, migrants from several indigenous and mestizo communities settle alongside one another in precarious constructions. Though the Federal District government has begun to construct an administrative infrastructure here, the unpaved streets are still lined with makeshift dwellings put together from any available materials, including cardboard. The arts of recycling are no news here. But before the Cartonera came to town, no one had yet made books from used cardboard.

In July 2008, José Luis Falconi and I – directors of Cultural Agents at Harvard University – were hosted by Worldfund to train educators in the Mano Amiga Catholic school in a literacy program we call the “Cartonera.” The name honors the recycled material that paper pickers use to make artisanal books, from Buenos Aires to Boston. The project develops higher-order thinking among students of all ages, through interpretation of fairly difficult literary texts in a range of arts. Mostly local artists worked with us in Chalco, as elsewhere, to insure sustainability of the collaborations, but we also invited Mexican artist Pedro Reyes, who developed a block-type poster with Mano Amiga students.

The Cultural Agents Initiative, which seeks to identify and promote arts as social resources, has brought the Cartonera to other Mexican sites, including Puebla's Museo Amparo and the University of Guadalajara. We have also collaborated with the Secretary of Education in Puerto Rico, where artist Antonio Martorell helped facilitate a week-long training workshop; with Caribbean University in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, invited by resident artist Anaida Hernández; and in training teachers and artists in Bogotá's main library, the Luis Angel Arango, where workshops will resume in August 2009.

In Puebla, the Fundación Amparo hosted the week's training program especially to benefit its Proyecto Roberto in developing communities. At Puebla's beautiful Museo Amparo, with the collaboration of Puebla's office of public education, two distinguished artists, Paloma Torres (a student of Martorell) and Betsabé Romero invented activities to take advantage of the Museo's pre-Colombian collection. Later, a city initiative expanded into new school sites and planned to establish Cartoneras in market places to benefit residents at large. Similarly, the Arts Academy at the University of Guadalajara hosted training for already sophisticated arts educators last summer. At the 2008 International Book Fair in Guadalajara, we directed a workshop for over 120 “promotores de lectura” (literacy coaches) with generous help from Cultural Agents abroad, including Antanas Mockus, Angela Pérez, Cultural Coordinator for Colombia's Banco de la República, and Doris Moromisato, director of the International Book Fair in Lima. But nowhere has the success of the Cartonera been more stunning than in Chalco.

But first, we should say something about the origins and philosophy of the Cartonera.

## Origins

Following our general practice of inviting creative agents to give public lectures, then multiplying their contributions through workshops, Cultural Agents hosted two young Cartonera founders in 2007. Javier Barilaro – the painter who helped establish Eloisa Cartonera in Buenos Aires – and Milagros Saldariaga, one of the initiators of Sarita Cartonera and its pedagogical program in Lima – stayed for a week-long residency at Harvard. [See the six-minute video on our website: [culturalagents.org](http://culturalagents.org). Go to programs, and to Paper Picker Press.] With an “Idea Translation” grant received by one of our members, Nathalie Galindo, from Harvard’s Professor David Edward’s class on creative entrepreneurship, three pilot programs were launched in the Boston area (with the Brazilian American Association in Framingham, the Boys and Girls Club in Chelsea, and Zumix in East Boston), eventually developing into the entertaining and efficacious Cartonera program. Student participants become so engaged in acting, painting, making music, photographing, and dancing their interpretations of difficult texts that they hardly notice how hard they work at critical reading.

## Concept

Learning through creativity energizes the Cartonera, aka the Paper Picker Press. More than “learning by doing,” which can mean the repetition of useful models, creative interventions of materials on hand promote exploration and originality. Given situations and texts become points of departure or stimuli for critical thinking and therefore for judgment about social as well as personal issues. Our goal reaches far beyond advancing a better understanding of literature. How far would literary interpretation get us, if it were not also a training to interpret everything else: non-literary events, film, family conversations, and the discourses of politics, love, and work? As human beings, we constantly interpret whatever happens around us, so that the more we stimulate our critical and interpretative capacities, the better we will live as active citizens engaged in promoting social justice. Existing material, including literature, offers points of departure or stimuli for critical thinking and therefore for judgment about intellectual, social as well as personal issues.

In the Paper Picker Press, each participant authors books through a series of artful interventions in texts written by literary masters. Youth learn to appreciate great art by trying their hand at “improving” on it or at least developing personal and imaginative interpretations.

The Cartonera/ Paper Picker Press develops the educational contributions of good literature for everyone, no matter what cultural background or tastes he or she may bring to the workshop.

## A Lo Chalco

Maybe it is the intensity of dedication of Mano Amiga School director, Lilia Garelli, and her devoted faculty that determined the exceptional success of the Cartonera in Chalco. Maybe it is also the refreshing contrast of a creative – even iconoclastic – approach to teaching in an otherwise traditional Catholic school where convergent responses had been the standard value, and where divergent varieties of possible responses tended to be unsolicited and undervalued. For example, when on the first day of the week-long training workshop we asked the ten teachers and ten artists to say what came to mind after hearing a reading of “Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos” by Jorge Luis Borges, all but one gave the morale of the story, convinced that the coherence was a sign of correct understanding. The only outlier, a young Oaxacan painter who took time to warm up to the group, asked, “What color is the sand,” suggesting a path out of the intellectual gridlock. By week’s end, everyone was taking brilliant risks and multiplying the possibilities of the one-page story. Later, throughout the ten-week implementation and up to the present they have been inspiring innovation in their students. [See the weekly photographic reports from Chalco on the [culturalagents.org](http://culturalagents.org) website.] Maybe success there also stems from everyday practices of recycling in a poor but resourceful neighborhood, making the Cartonera a natural and giving this scarcity-induced resourcefulness a new legitimacy as art and interpretation.

Garelli would typically address a challenge that required more resources than those available by doing things “a lo Chalco.” Dark crepe paper, for instance, substituted for room-darkening window shades. Salaries for five artists, in addition to the five teachers paid for extra-hour collaborations, stretched the school’s purse, so two mothers donated their skills in photography and music to complete the design of rotating multiple arts. However one describes the combination of personal, economic and pedagogical factors, they came magically, or providentially, together in “Amiga Cartonera” at Mano Amiga. It is to date our most inspiring success and also our inspired instructor for new developments of the Cartonera.

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See also: [Making a Difference](#)