

How I took Aussie storytime to children in Dili

ALEX SEFTON talks about the experience of organising in a multilingual storytime event in Timor-Leste.

Arriving at Xanana Gusmão Reading Room (XGRR), the only public library in Dili, visitors enter past a pair of shattered four-wheel drive vehicles: crumpled bonnets, flat tyres, smashed windscreens. These cars were carrying Xanana Gusmão, Timor-Leste's first President and convoy during an assassination attempt in 2008. It's a matter of fact representation of Timor-Leste's traumatic past – a country brought to ruins yet remaining unflinchingly optimistic. While pain lingers, it doesn't impede the future. XGRR was established by Kirsty Sword Gusmão – the Australian born wife of Xanana Gusmão – in June 2000, two years before Timor-Leste became an independent nation after 400 years of Portuguese occupation and 25 years of brutal rule by Indonesia. Today I am part of a small group of Australians travelling with Kirsty being welcomed to XGRR with traditional dance and music. We will explore the Reading Room, and I am running a dual language storytime.

In March when I joined the tour I had some hazy library-related ideas, one resulted in me collecting 22 kilograms of donated Duplo for XGRR's children's programs. The other idea was a dual language storytime. As a public librarian I've conducted storytimes but I wasn't sure if this would even be a 'thing' in Dili. Would it be imposing, not needed, or unwanted? Incredibly Kirsty took my idea and turned it into a reality.

The most challenging aspect of preparing storytime for Timor-Leste was finding appropriate books in English, and the national language Tetum. I emailed foreign language bookshops, googled, contacted authors, despaired. Via external loans I obtained a Tetum copy of Mem Fox's *Whoever you are*. This arrived with the threat of a \$300 fine should anything happen to it, so I decided I wouldn't use that! A Tetum copy of *Hattie and the fox* came from another external library but couldn't be renewed. In June I emailed Kirsty to say 'this storytime thing really isn't going so well because I have no books.' I should've confessed earlier – Kirsty already owned a copy of *Whoever you are* in Tetum. Gaspar Freitas, the manager of XGRR, had a Tetum copy of *The boy and the crocodile*, a local legend of kindness explaining how Timor got its shape, which incredibly I could buy here in Australia. Unsure of the resources

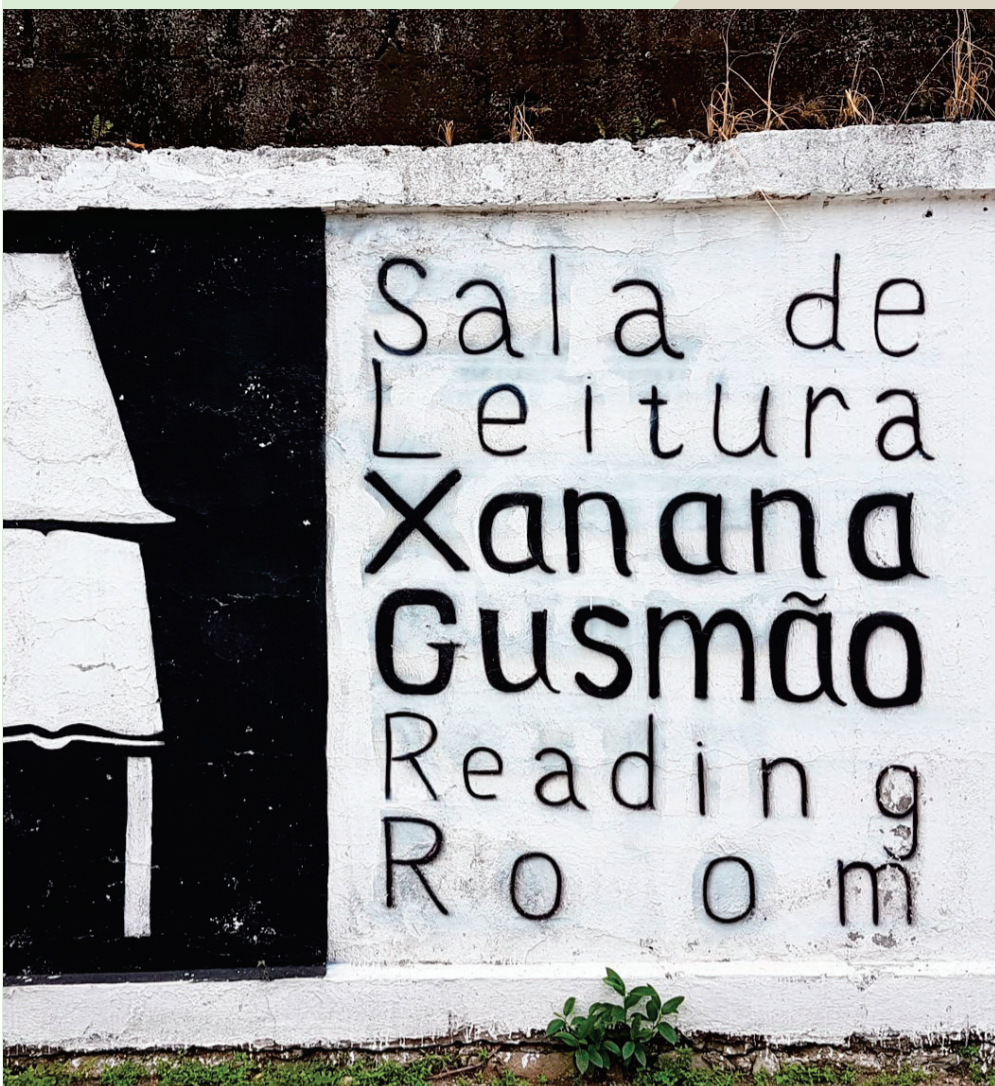


The dual language storytime in action. Photo by Nandy Gurr

at XGRR for children's craft I needed something self-contained: Big W booklets of eight animal masks that could be pulled out and coloured. The crocodile story led to animal masks which made the theme easy. All storytimes need stickers and stamps, so I purchased these, and all was set. In Dili, Gaspar organised a group of students to come, and Kirsty invited teacher-trainer Ana Mafalda from UNESCO to read alongside me.

After the stunning cultural welcome to XGRR we visited their museum, art space, open pavilions for learning programs, main library and children's area (known as the bebeteca). It was hot, I was suffering a prolonged bout of Dili Belly, but it was storytime. The kids who came were a much wider age range than I anticipated, from around 5–12. They were all East Timorese but schooled in English and they loved to sing! Storytime in Australian libraries is interspersed with songs but I wasn't sure if this would work here, however Ana came with the words to *If you're happy and you know it* written in Tetum on a huge piece of paper. We hastily discussed songs, plus agreed on how to read in both languages.

Ana was an extraordinary reading companion and I was blessed to have her. Although the kids had a good command of English it was a dual language event, so Ana translated everything back to Tetum. Listening to the group sing *If you're happy and you know it* and *Twinkle twinkle* in English, then belting it out in Tetum gave me goose-bumps. However, they did refuse to sing *Wheels on the bus* in Tetum – kids



these days! The books were perfect. Reading *Whoever you are* to this feisty new generation of East Timorese, it felt like this book was written for them. It doesn't matter who you are, we are all the same. Although the legend of the crocodile is firmly part of their culture, the kids listened expectantly until the last page – 'and the crocodile became...TIMOR' they all yelled. The teachers then announced the kids wanted to sing for me. I didn't think my heart could take much more, I was so overwhelmed by the resilience and strength of this country, and its people.

By now we were running wildly late but there is always time for some arts and craft. I'm thinking of how we set up craft stations at home, but here everyone is sprawled comfortably on the floor flicking through the mask books choosing an animal to colour in. I stand here the luckiest librarian in the world: in dusty Dili, the bebeteca is absolute proof that libraries bring the world together. Thank you, Timor-Leste. 🇹🇲

ALEX SEFTON

Librarian

Town of Cambridge and City of Joondalup



EMAIL

aasefton@hotmail.com



MASTER OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Apply now to study in 2019.

Your postgraduate journey to a career in information management starts with UniSA. Tailor your studies to suit your busy life with flexible options such as part-time and online study.

Taught by industry-engaged academics and practitioners, our programs are professionally recognised by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA).

Join Australia's University of Enterprise.
unisa.edu.au/infomanagement



University of
South Australia

On Campus. Online.

Taish Shaw, Graduate
Collection Development Librarian at
Adelaide Hills Council Library Service

8100370_CRICOS PROVIDER NO 00121B