

## **A sub-hundred dollar folly**

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It is one of the ideas that normally catch the attention of a lot of people looking for the next big thing, or sincerely concerned with alleviating world poverty, or indeed both. Why not provide the world children with a really inexpensive laptop? The One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project, by the Media Lab's resident guru Nicholas Negroponte, will surely become the darling of nerds, geeks and policy wonks around the world, and will turn into the next wonder to illuminate the sincere hopes for development and poverty-busting that the First World cradles. It will also be a folly, and a very expensive one, that will create more problems than it will solve.

I really don't care about the nitty-gritty: it can be stolen, it can malfunction, it can be forgotten at home. It may or should be replaced by second-hand computers, or perhaps telecenters should be given preference instead of this approach. It certainly may turn into the biggest source of kickbacks many of our poor, corruption-ridden governments of the Third World would see. But those aren't the real issues. We have too many real ones to consider before getting into the details; unfortunately, the details look to be the focus right now.

So let's get into the heart of the matter. Why should the world poorest governments, or even the so-and-so poor governments, spend megabucks into providing their children with computers? It is just because "Laptops are both a window and a tool: a window into the world and a tool with which to think. They are a wonderful way for all children to "learn learning" through independent interaction and exploration", as stated in the FAQ of the project ([laptop.media.mit.edu/faq.html](http://laptop.media.mit.edu/faq.html))?

I heartily agree with this idea. I have provided my son with a laptop too, a kiddie model for him to practice basic math and Spanish. He enjoys carrying it with him and getting to work next to me, both with our laptops topping our laps. It is great.

But I have also provided my son with cuddly toys, books, an abacus, Bionicle kits, swimming lessons and plenty of opportunities for developing all of his potential. Fortunately, we can afford it. Many kids around town cannot. They deserve better, in terms of basics like housing, food, sanitation and the like, and also in terms of the same things my kid takes for granted. But first and foremost, they deserve the chance to explore and develop their potential through decent but complete, integral schooling.

This goal demands significant investment, but also good planning, good use of scarce resources and a very proper and honest consideration on how to provide all the things they need with the smallest investment possible. To develop learning and discovery in the cheapest possible way is very valid objective for poor nations, and it not only brings the benefit of new generations with better tools to deal with the future, it also develops local capabilities to deal with local problems from a local point of view.

And one of the most important things the developing world needs to develop is the ability to create solutions to their own problems, and to build the right tools for those solutions. To

transform education in the developing world will demand a solution to many problems, but the last ones to be considered would probably be the tools to be used.

The OLPC project starts the other way round: we have the tool, now change everything else *to fit the tool*. The few resources left will be used to adapt everything in the educational system to work with the tool, being software, adequate security measures or teacher training. And the original goals will be changed to fit the tool.

Considering that many developing countries haven't reached the point where the goals of education are clear and understood by all those involved, the main danger of a project like this one is to create a huge mirage of understanding, one where the main thrust of education is to turn kids into techno-savvy individuals with the potential to find and understand all the information they need for themselves, without consideration of little things like social cohesion, a common historical frame of reference for all, development of local knowledge, promotion of aboriginal languages, and a really long list following. School is about all of them, not just the nice but narrow focus that OLPC has.

Also, the purpose of promoting this very specific tool as a way to achieve objectives of self-learning and discovery does disregard the notion that there are plenty of ways to do that with less expensive, locally produced tools, and also forgets that a computer can be a wonderful way to waste time. Just one example: replacing books with the sub-hundred dollar computer could mean the end for local publishing houses, and that is certainly a very unfortunate unintended consequence. Another example: exploring and discovering could mean just to pass the day IMing your friends instead of properly discovering mathematical reasoning, and googling your way out of school work, specially with poorly trained teachers without the needed skills for differentiating a real school paper from a downloaded one.

Undoubtedly, many kids will take advantage of the new opportunities brought to them by the computers, some for good, some for bad. Again undoubtedly, many computers will end up in the black market, used for different purposes, turn into mobile porn theaters or boom boxes, and so on. That's not the issue. The thing we really need to deal with is this new- brightest-idea-under-the-sun, that the problems of world education can be solved through a specific technological innovation and its transformational, revolutionary potential. This new tool, in the best possible scenario, will force a poor country's whole educational system into becoming a very different animal, without consideration of the goals looked after and the possibility of reaching them through lesser, although cheaper and locally produced and locally enabling, means. And in the worst possible scenario, this gadget will end up changing nothing, and the poor will get the chance to receive the worst education possible in full color.

Without doubting for a minute the good intentions of those involved in the project, it is impossible not to think about the whole idea as a world-changing attempt just like many that the computer has brought, and a sort of good intentioned but massive ego trip. The computer has change the world in so many different ways but for those imagined by the apostles of computing. This could be the final proof required to make the entire computers-will-change-the-world meme finally moot? I certainly hope so. There's nothing more urgent for developing nations than to stop paying attention to hype and start thinking about the real issues. The OLPC project does exactly the opposite, and that's why it is such a bad idea.

Lima, Perú, November 16, 2005