May 27, 2008, 7:14 pm

Why Walter Bender Left One Laptop Per Child

By STEVE LOHR

When Microsoft joined the One Laptop Per Child project earlier this month, I wrote an article noting the change in heart by both sides. The O.L.P.C. project, intended to bring cheap computers to children in poorer nations, had been committed to using the freely distributed Linux operating system, an open-source alternative to Microsoft’s Windows. And Microsoft had resisted joining anything that promoted open-source software.

Walter Bender, a longtime collaborator of Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of the nonprofit laptop group, left O.L.P.C. in April. Mr. Bender oversaw software development for the project. His departure had been the subject of blog posts that suggested his exit was because a pact with Microsoft was in the works.

When I wrote the news article, I sent Mr. Bender an e-mail message, asking him why he left. He replied that his efforts to advance the cause of open-source learning software “would have more impact from outside of O.L.P.C. than from within.”

I also asked Mr. Negroponte about Mr. Bender’s departure, and he called it “a huge loss.” Mr. Negroponte said that, in his view, some people had come to see open-source software as an end of the project instead of a means. “I think some people, including Walter, became much too fundamental about open source,” he said.

After the article was published May 16, Mr. Bender sent a letter to The Times, taking issue with Mr. Negroponte’s comment and elaborating on his own views: “Mr. Negroponte is wrong when he asserts that I am a free and open-source (FOSS) fundamentalist. I am a learning fundamentalist.”
I talked to Mr. Bender last Friday to discuss his views at more length and give them a broader airing.

“Microsoft stepping in is the symptom, not the disease,” he said in the interview. The issue, in his view, is whether the tools that bring computing to children are “agnostic on learning” or “take a position on learning.”

“O.L.P.C. has become implicitly agnostic about learning,” he said. The project’s focus, he said, is on bringing low-cost laptop computers to children around the world. “It’s a great goal, but it’s not my goal,” he said.

Mr. Bender is a founder of Sugar Labs, a new organization whose goal is to continue developing and promoting the use of Sugar open-source education software.

The Sugar software, which provides the user interface for O.L.P.C. laptops, is the means toward the end of a “constructionist learning model,” said Mr. Bender. It’s an approach that builds on the conceptual work of Jean Piaget, the Swiss philosopher and developmental theorist, and the practical research of his intellectual descendants like Seymour Papert, the M.I.T. computer scientist, educator and inventor of the Logo programming language, designed for education.

The constructionist model, put simply, says people learn best by building things — solving problems by “constructing” answers as active agents — instead of by being passive recipients of facts and received knowledge.

Computing is potentially an ideal tool for constructionist education because a computer is a universal machine and software is a building material without material constraints. (In fairness, Mr. Negroponte, founder of the M.I.T. Media Lab, has also been a champion of the constructionist education agenda over the years.)

Mr. Bender says he thinks the collaborative, interactive learning environment embodied by Sugar could be “a game changer in how technology and education collide.” He says he wants to see the Sugar software run on many different kinds of hardware and software platforms, even on Windows, if the Sugar experience is not sacrificed.

“It’s not about Microsoft being evil,” Mr. Bender said. “It’s about optimizing the chance of having a positive impact on education, and that is what Sugar is about. And that mission would be endangered by being too tightly coupled to one hardware vendor, O.L.P.C.”

O.L.P.C. says that Sugar will continue to be offered on its machines, and the project has announced it plans to work with outside developers to port the software to Windows. “I’m not sure what that means,” Mr. Bender said. “I can’t do it, and I’m not going to work on it.”

However, Mr. Bender said that in the last two weeks, he has talked to four laptop manufacturers he won’t name, including major PC makers, about making Sugar-based machines — with no Windows in the recipe.
economics, Mr. Lohr. The journalist’s interest should inform the reader not only the ‘why’ of someone’s involvement, but also the ‘what’s in it for them,’ payoff. You left out half of the story.
— Posted by Bob Borden

3. May 28th, 2008
8:58 am

Au contraire, Walter Bender has not given ENOUGH thought to 'learning.' A search around the OLPC project website reveals no investment in instructing kids (or teachers) who receive these laptops in how to "maintain" the software or the hardware in them, should they malfunction. Linux as an operating system is just as opaque as Windows. Without the investment in teaching kids not just the "three Rs", but also how to tweak the Sugar OS, it becomes just another magical totem dropped from on high. It's a business model that differs little from the ill-conceived drive in the 1950s and 1960s to ship tractors to remote African farmers.
I'm all in favor of OLPC, but it's putting the cart before the horse.
— Posted by a.k.a.

4. May 28th, 2008
9:35 am

To the 8:22 am cynic, before I comment further I have a question: In your eyes are glory and economics the sole reasons people pursue projects such as this? Do you consider the possibility that the 'what's in it for them' might center around an answer that says 'the knowledge that I've done something to help others, or 'the knowledge that I've done something to make the world a better place'?
Maybe I'm naive but I read Walter Bender as primarily falling in these latter categories.
— Posted by Ken Jr.

5. May 28th, 2008
9:37 am

One of the best examples of effective primary school constructionist learning is with Lego. Lego is not open source. It's not necessary to cast the plastic in order to make lego buildings and even lego robots.
— Posted by A Lego Learner

6. May 28th, 2008
10:20 am

Negroponte made it this far because of the support and enthusiasm of the open source community.
It is a shame that no manuals or training programs have been in place. Good for Bender to leave when Negroponte is clearly prepared to bed anybody at this stage.
— Posted by Frankie Fourfingers

7. May 28th, 2008
10:26 am

Walter Bender is whole on this one.
Power to SugarLabs! It's about the kids, not the PC/Software Industry.
— Posted by Sam Hiser

8. May 28th, 2008
10:40 am

OLPC is over. The original goal was a laptop that would cost $100 and be robust and stable. This made Linux a requirement, because Windows is not a robust system, and it costs about $100! Guys in Taiwan, China and India are making Linux computers. Heck, you can get a gPC at Walmart for $200! It runs gOS 2.0 Linux. Inviting Microsoft the OLPC is like having Ronald McDonald provide food services to the schools. Something's fishy.
— Posted by Winthrop Spofford

10:50 am

Computers have as much to do with aiding children to learn as the slide projector did fifty years ago (this was another school marvel, though of the 1950s). But the OLPC laptop did perhaps lead to the manufacture of the ASUS EEE mini-laptop and others of this genre, which is a welcome development.
— Posted by xx

10. May 28th, 2008
11:03 am

These people are smart but nuts.
They complain about everyone but don't fix their own mistakes.
On Ebay OLPC sells for $400 .. they want to sell it for $180 or so .. go figure.
— Posted by Satish Sharma

11. May 28th, 2008
11:15 am

"Linux as an operating system is just as opaque as Windows"???
"aka", I'll assume that's ignorance and not a Microsoft employee at work.
Show me where, on line, you can download the sourcecode for Vista for free.
Then we'll talk.
Opacity doesn't refer to the education it takes to understand something, it refers to that something being readily available for free. Open source software is opaque only to those who aren’t willing, or, like me, don’t feel the need to tinker

with the code. The Linux code is out there for anyone who wants it. Educating the Third World to understand and use the code, that’s another thing entirely, and yes, of course, it does need to be done. BUT to compare Windows and Linux and make a statement like the above about opacity is ignorant at best misleading and deceitful at worse.

Allowing Gates and crew to crawl into bed with the One Laptop project dooms it to irrelevance. As more and more people around the world are forced to learn alternatives because of the greed of Microsoft, open source alternatives will be increasingly attractive.

— Posted by Marcus

As a hard-core Linux fanboy and M$ hater, I can’t help but harbor the suspicion that the above comments are Microsoft FUD. Two questions were brought up that I’d like to respond to: economics and documentation.

First documentation. While Sugar probably doesn’t have the kind of training manuals that you’d expect from a piece of commercial software, open source has always been much more autodidactic. This is the constructionis learning model. You learn how the software works by having the source, compiling it yourself, taking it apart, putting it back together, and tweaking to your hearts content.

Once a few gifted kids do this, they will write the missing manuals.

Now economics, while no one is in it just for the glory there is a clear economic reason to open source software: you gain access to the world’s best programmers for free. This is why I contribute to open source projects. You get access to a build system and version control plus you’ll often have very talented people go over your work and make improvements. The trick to starting an open source project is to make it interesting so that people like me will want to contribute.

Think of how many people work for Linus Torvalds. He has more “employees” than Bill Gates.

— Posted by Dixon

I find it sad that one of the co-founders of this project left, it was a great idea, and I think that either Linux or Xp would have been fine, seeing as Xp only needs 256 ram and 300 MHz to run, and a hard drive would not be an issue, i have no idea what linux requires, but a $100 laptop with an OS would be a great thing.

— Posted by Sam Clark

Computers for little kids? Dare I say this is an ill-conceived idea that will never go anywhere, for obvious reasons.

— Posted by David

MS has had decades to provide a low cost, super easy and intuitive computer OS or interface to the world’s pe-estranged children, mated with ultra low cost harware, and has come up with nothing. Slapping Windows on a super cheap laptop could have been done years ago and can be done by anyone. The concept’s not terribly innovative or compelling. Windows in an of itself is a complicated system far more tuned to business and entertainment and wholly not tuned to the educational concepts of that are the very raison d’etre of the original OLPC project.

The whole thing just reeks of MS’s swooping in and co-opting someone else’s project, not being able to resist the tempting opportunity to lasso in millions of future paying customers. You can’t really be surprised by MS, though, that’s what they do. OLPC on the other hand, we thought better of.

If you think a cheaper EeePC with XP is the solution, well . . . okay. OLPC was supposed to be about something bigger, something better, something different, and now who knows what it’s about. Kudos to Bender for striking out and defending this worthwhile original vision.

— Posted by ArtInvent

to the 9:35am romanticist - so walter bender is doing this all at cost, is he? are sugar labs a non-profit organization? does he draw a salary or other financial compensation based on the labs’ performance? of course he’s in it for the money and fame (or he could have remained anonymous). i rest my case, thank you very much!

— Posted by microbrain

Thanks to Mr. Lohr on shedding more light on the divergence here.

While “bringing low-cost laptop computers to children around the world” is a distinct goal from “a game changer in constructivist learning”, they are very complementary. Afterall, even if Sugar becomes widely available on all OSs and computers, it would mostly benefit cultures that already have access to the computing hardware. OTOH, if OLPC is deployed without Sugar, but with a large library of texts and teaching materials that can support local teachers, wouldn’t that still make a
significant difference in the life of the poorest 20%?
Perhaps this can be seen as a difference in priority between benefiting the poorest population first or changing the learning experience of 3/4 of all children.
— Posted by Tungho

18. May 28th, 2008 12:34 pm
What a bloody shame. This difference in opinion and change in senior management command is another major block in the delivery of one laptop to children. In countries like Papua New Guinea where children are desperate in need aid agencies have followed the development of this computer anxiously waiting on the list to receive. Another disappointment.
— Posted by Jenna

19. May 28th, 2008 12:37 pm
Based on what I have read, the issue is the so called Governments who would be purchasing OLPC assert they wish the product to be a MS compatible system because as they say it is the world standard and they want their "new workforce" to know that standard.
That logic on the surface has merit, but it one does not have to look far back in history to note that very approach is what killed Apple in the business sector. Apple poured huge resources into school programs and made sure every district had Apples at school with the idea that if we get them young, they will stay with 'us' for life.
That opened the door for MS to pour itself into the business markets which at the end became a better investment because as it turned out it is a lot harder to teach some old guy a new system than a young person who is flexible with all systems. Score: MS- 1, Apple- zero.
That snipit of history should have been enough for the OLPC team to sell its product to these Governments. Somebody forgot to do their history homework.
Sounds like a good product with a flawed sales plan to me.
— Posted by Frank

20. May 28th, 2008 12:43 pm
OLPC is a great idea, but not a great invention.
Negroponte's humanitarian approach towards less well-off countries won't likely end up what he aims to do. The reason is commercialism will prevail in the end, and chances are that children might feel more interested in mobile devices.
— Posted by Quemann

21. May 28th, 2008 1:34 pm
I once imagined the OLPC as a boon to African community health workers (replacing their non-digital Blue Trunk Library); my dream is still intact with an XP version, and many open source projects, like Cmap Tools, are written for the Windows ed. audience. The evolution of educational technology needs the Negropontes and the Benders, not in lockstep but in bringing their competing visions down to some kind of practical level.
— Posted by Charlie

22. May 28th, 2008 1:45 pm
What have children learned here? Unless adults get their way they throw tantrums and make sure nobody can have their way, too.
Stop being childish people. Idealism only prevents realism from happening. In other words, just get the kids the computers and stop bickering and whining.
— Posted by UHUH

23. May 28th, 2008 2:06 pm
Strangely enough, I find myself agreeing with more than one angle of this story. Mr. Negroponte has said that some people looked upon OLPC as a weapon in the battle for Open-Source operating systems. And, he says that is not what OLPC is about. I can see his point. Mr. Bender says he does not see Microsoft as 'evil' but he also does not know how and/or want to try to overlay Sugar onto Windows. I can see his point. I remember reading an article that reported the difficulties getting the XO to children. Children do not buy the XO – bureaucrats in their countries do. And these bureaucrats are familiar with Windows and its GUI and not so much with Linux and the Sugar GUI. I can understand that. It could be argued that kids are clean slates and that they don't care about the OS or the GUI on the XO. I can agree with that. It could also be argued that if the teachers in these impoverished communities have any kind of computer knowledge which they are to impart to their students, it is most likely Windows based know-how. I can agree with that. But Windows is such a huge OS that if it were placed on the XO with its limited flash drive and memory, it would slow it down even more than it already is. I wouldn't want that to happen (I have two OXs via the G1G1 program and yes, they have their limitations). Although, if your goal is to put a computer in the hands of every child on the planet, doesn't it make sense to partner with the biggest, wealthiest name in computing – Microsoft. Makes sense to me. It's not about the OS or the GUI or the XO, it's about the kids – EUREKA!!
— Posted by Douglas
“Sugar Labs, a (soon to be established) non-profit foundation, serves as a support base and gathering place for the community of educators and software developers who want to extend the Sugar platform and who have been creating Sugar-compatible applications.”

That quote is from the Sugar Labs wiki, for those of you wondering if Sugar Labs is a for profit endeavor. And if you are so confused by non-profit software organizations, see the Mozilla Foundation (who bring you Firefox), or the Apache Software Foundation (who bring you Apache Webserver, the most popular web server in use today), or numerous other similar Foundations.

Might want to check your facts before you start typing.
— Posted by Jason

This entire project is putting the cart before the horse. What good is a computer to children who are starving? Now that India and China are coming up in the ranks, this just seems like a scheme to guarantee cheap outsourcing for the future.
— Posted by GG

first of... it’s really sad when a partner leaves, but that’s how it is and there’s nothing that we can do about it.
second, its hard to admit, but don’t you think XP (no, not Vista) would be easier for kids to understand and use than Linux?
third, well... these kids...they are growing more and more interested in cellphones and mobile devices than laptops.
i say they just make a robust cellphone-like device with educational capabilities and runs windows mobile or linux! that’d be great!
— Posted by liquidskinn

When I was a young programmer in the early 1970s, there was a saying: No one ever got fired for buying IBM.
That was when IBM dominated computing. Today, the same backwards mentality still exists, but for Microsoft.
Everyone can see the trouble that Microsoft has in getting to the present (Vista), much less the future.
Sugar is a truly remarkable platform, truly new and exciting in scope and design. But it’s ahead of the realities of Microsoft’s political pressure and bribery in the 3rd world, and the old “Don’t do anything different, so you won’t get fired” mentality.
The OLPC acceptance of Microsoft into their fold is an admission of defeat, an admission that OLPC cannot actually get past the nothing-different mentality. The best that OLPC can hope for now is that Windows will give it the political boost it needs, a sort of trojan horse, to get the laptop and Sugar into the hands of young 3rd world students who can move with it into the future.
Good Luck, Walter. Good Luck, Nick.
William
— Posted by William Donelson

Microsoft including Windows on the OLPC laptop for $3 reminds me of Nestle’s practice of giving free baby formula to mothers of newborn babies: get them addicted, and then later you can charge whatever you want.
Linux is economic freedom instead of Microsoft slavery.
— Posted by David in Boston

Just like so many brilliant venture-backed start-ups, OPLC is rich with passion and technological accomplishment, yet hasn’t learned why innovators so often fail - as Frank points out, wrong channel = no ‘market’.
Sadly, superior products often fail.
— Posted by susan j ward

Mr Bender makes an enormously important point that has been lost in the comments trail. Open source LEARNING is a very different beast from open source software.
A mere glance at the OLPC “desktop” is sufficient to convey how RADICAL of a departure in learning model is enabled by the sugar platform. Constructionist, progressive education has consistently outperformed didactic teaching methods for over 50 years.
Kudos to Mr Blender for not losing his vision of a platform for open source education.
— Posted by susan j ward
education. And kudos to Mr. NegroPonte for at least trying to salvage OLPC's revolutionary product with serious marketing muscle.

Sincerely, a Trustee for the Cambridge School, a leading provider of progressive education for high school students.
— Posted by susan j ward

31. May 29th, 2008 2:23 am
Negroponte's business model of initially demanding poor countries to purchase 1 million units at $100 a piece was a real stinker. No matter how relevant and exciting the OLPC might have been, that is not the way to gouge poorer countries with unproven concepts and products. Poor countries have scarce resources and have the right to prioritize them. The right way to proliferate the OLPC would have been to align with philanthropic foundations that would put up the money to deliver OLPC devices to poorer countries. I am glad Walter Bender has seen the light and moved on to Sugar Labs. The OLPC tie-up with MS is an absolute shocker.

Since Sugar is open-sourced, we would love to put it on our own hardware, the Encore Mobilis which I designed and built with a small dedicated team of engineers at Bangalore, India. We are justifiably proud of our own product but also appreciate the good features, like Sugar, in competing products. I am glad we will now be in a position to offer Sugar on the Mobilis, should we decide to, and provide our users more choice.

Good luck, Walter, and keep the open-source flag flying!! Freedom of choice is important for all of us.
Shashank
— Posted by Shashank Garg

32. May 29th, 2008 2:46 am
Negroponte has lost the plot completely. He rode on Bender's back all this time only to stab him in the back. By the way, discussions with Microsoft started at WSIS (Tunis) in 2005. It was at this forum that they launched the OLPC at the UNDP stand. That afternoon, Microsoft executives were lobbying the UNDP officials to allow them to showcase 'various' ICT success stories in the Middle-East.

The following day, they got their chance and all we were told was the way they had 'partnered' with the Jordanian government. Now, if you know the modus operandi of Microsoft, it is 'partnership'. Then dependency and later addiction before MS start nailing you for all you have. David in Boston is very right.

Microsoft officials lobbied the UN and Negroponte to allow a scaled version of Windows (read 'mobile'). In return, MS would pour the much needed financial resources for R&D. It would not be long before MS then went and signed 'partnerships' with many governments (in Africa) for projects such as the non-starter called 'Unlimited Potential'. This effectively blocked any open source initiatives. The sabotage had begun. On record, only the South African government refused these advances.

The OLPC project, now owned by Microsoft, will end up nowhere as has been all their corporate social responsibility projects.
Sugar labs should mobilise financial resources and have a clever, agile and proactive PR strategy.
— Posted by Eddy Runhar

33. May 29th, 2008 5:14 am
Sorry but the problem with OLPC is that it is not a touch screen phone with the Phraze-It on-screen keyboard for typing with fingers on the screen. In many developing parts of the world, access to the Internet and portability mean a mobile phone. A touch screen phone with the Phraze-It application makes more sense than schlepping a mini laptop that is not a phone. Touch screen phones will supplant laptops for most uses anyway.
— Posted by Mark

34. May 29th, 2008 5:21 am
I know Piaget but am confused why Bender's computer needs to use Developmental Psychology as an integral part. Perhaps some elaboration is in order?
— Posted by Bob Wong

35. May 29th, 2008 7:49 am
“I like running Windows in dual boot on the laptop as exactly what Apple did on their machine,” said Professor Negroponte. “A lot of people moved to the Apple laptop once it had that dual boot.”
Mr Steve Lohr, today is May 29 and not May 16. Can you be more honest and less biased today and tell your readers why you left out this quote by Professor Negroponte in your article dated May 16? No other publication, that I know of, but The New York Times left this quote out. Are you becoming another Apple Guru like Mr. David Pogue?
— Posted by retired toilet repairman
“Here is the test to find whether your mission on Earth is finished: if you’re alive, it isn’t,” Richard Bach. I’m a very optimistic person and I always like doing things to make other people happy. But how did I get that way? During my senior year I’ve noticed that some events and a few select people have shaped me into becoming a good person.

The first thing that probably helped shape me is an event that happened when I was five years old. My parents got a divorce. Now I know these days 50 percent of kids have had to experience that, and no one should be ok with it. It does affect you as a child, because children don’t know statistics, they only know how it feels for them. And for me the divorce was horrible. Being the oldest boy in the family, I had to step up and help my mom take care of my brother and my sister. In doing that it made me a strong individual, and it taught me that I can do many things to contribute to a group.

Towards the end of last year I started dating a girl named Arrica. Now I know it can be cliche to think that she is something very important ‘cause I started dating her in high school. Heck for all I know we could be broken up tomorrow, but she has done things for me that changed how I looked at certain situations. Like this relationship, I thought most kids do it just ‘cause, but now it actually means something to be sharing your experiences with someone. She has taught me two things that I will always be better for, commitment and compassion for the things I do. Every day when she comes home from school she does her homework. Me, before I met her had never done a days worth of homework at home. But now, I will do it and not procrastinate. Creativity is also another one of the many things I’ve learned from her.

I’m only 18, is what I’ve been told. I still have my whole life ahead of me, and this feels like an auto-biography, which as an 18 year old I probably can’t tell a whole lot of stories. But the ones that have happened to me have changed me drastically as a person. They’ve made me better. B Gallemore

— Posted by Brandon Gallemore

OLPC has no choice but to put Windows on the XO because the market monopoly strength of Wintel is too strong to fight. OLPC already spent a great deal of time and resources competing with Intel in the third world, MS will crush the XO without a thought. Their underhanded monopolist tactics employed cannot be resisted; third world leaders are easily bribed and coerced.

I’m not sure if there’s really an out, but as long as there’s a method for end users to reformat the system and replace Windows with an OS of their choice, ultimately Windows on the machine doesn’t matter.

— Posted by Mike Caprio

They should rename it to O.M.L.P.C. (One Microsoft Licence Per Child) since that’s really what it’s about now with M$ involved.

— Posted by Average Microshaftee

If you want to learn to use computers, buy Microsoft; if you want to learn computing (programming and networking, etc.), get LINUX.

I’ve learned far more about NETWORKING and COMPUTING through using LINUX-based distributions than i ever have from using Microsoft products.

— Posted by quincy

As an early OLPC evangelist explained the project to me during a car ride through a mountain range in rural Mexico a few years ago, the first, most basic sales pitch for OLPC was that using it as an ebook reader instead of buying paper textbooks would save far more than the OLPC’s cost over a four-year span. Few articles about OLPC mention this angle.

Second, the wireless mesh networking built into the OLPC means that only one computer in a town or school needs a direct Internet connection. All others share it through the ”mesh,” including OLPCs too far away from the Internet node to connect directly to it. And a child connected to the Internet through that mesh suddenly has access to a huge percentage of the world’s knowledge, no matter how poorly he or she lives.

Third, open source is a marvelous teaching tool in and of itself. There is no guarantee that the next world-changing computer genius isn’t female and growing up in the slums of Rio. Give that child a Windows PC and she will learn how to push buttons. Give that child a PC with Linux and open source software, and she will be able to look at the software’s structure and experiment with it.

I assure you that if Linux–powered cheap computers end up in “uneducated” villagers’ hands, some of those villagers will surprise you with how fast they learn how to repair and modify those computers. You’ll have a whole new cottage industry — and no doubt, innovative software that the likes of Microsoft would never dream up.

With or without the OLPC project, low-cost Linux computers “will” spread throughout the developing world. Some of them may look like cell phones or handheld PCs, but they will be computers nevertheless, and will make life better for those who own them in ways we may not be able to predict.
And for the people who talk about how the need for electricity and clean water in the developing world is more important than the need for computers: An Internet-enabled computer gives you access to plans for “build it yourself” bicycle-powered and hand-cranked generators, not to mention information about simple water pumps and purification methods. Knowledge can bring power. (And clean water, too.)

— Posted by Robin 'Roblimo' Miller

**CONSTRUCTIVIST not CONSTRUCTIONIST. The least you could do is consult Wikipedia (which, by the way, is a great example of constructivist philosophy); Piaget and Dewey would be so very disappointed. I’m not sure the computer software is necessarily the means to the ends they aim; as an educator myself, I know that using a constructivist paradigm is only as good as the educator that guides it, and the curriculum developed as a whole. The OS doesn’t necessarily need to be open source, it just needs to work and be affordable. Constructivist theory is only good for those students that have built up basic blocks of prior knowledge of what they are studying; if you consult the literature, you will see that novices tend to fail at constructing meaningful knowledge because they are uninformed.**

— Posted by Anthony

I was intrigued enough to get an OLPC computer and, frankly, found it thin. I’m happy to have contributed a computer to a third world child but it really seems a toy more than a tool. It’s a bit clumsy and opaque, has a bit of charm but no elegance. The interface is intrusive and limiting. Even an early Mac would be more useful. I know Negroponte’s intentions are good but don’t know what is taking them so long to get this right.

— Posted by Howard Deixler

**ok jason, you started referencing wiki. read this and tell me that w.b. isn’t going to get a ton of money from this:**

“Many non-profits are operated by either volunteers, paid staff or a combination of both, usually reserving the senior executive positions to paid personnel while the entry-level and field positions are frequently held by volunteers. Recently, some paid positions have come under question as the salaries of top level executives were in the millions of dollars per year.[citation needed] Additionally, an NPO may have members or participants or beneficiaries or students etc. as opposed to customers in for-profit organizations.

One should not generalize about the comparative cost of a “nonprofit” versus “for profit” organization; there may be internalized profit in a nonprofit organization. In fact, most successful NPO’s generate a surplus of funds (more income than expenses) that can be held to generate additional income and pay operating expenses when other income streams weaken. With a number of NPO’s, the only distinction between them and a for-profit company is that ownership lies in stake-holders, and not investors. Any net income is used to further the organization’s goal (whether that be paying for programs or investing for security), rather than being distributed to share-holders, partners or owners.

A primary difference between a nonprofit and a for-profit corporation is that a nonprofit does not issue stock or pay dividends, (for example, The Code of the Commonwealth of Virginia includes the Non-Stock Corporation Act that is used to incorporate nonprofit entities) and may not enrich its directors. However, like for-profit corporations, nonprofits may still have employees and can compensate their directors within reasonable bounds.”

and for those criticizing microsoft, one of the biggest non-profit foundations is the gates’ one which gives away more money every year than some countries’ budgets.

— Posted by nuts!

I said two years ago on another forum that I thought One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) was the idealistic fantasy of an academic that would never achieve a tenth of what its founder hoped it would accomplish.

We are talking about attempting to help children in countries where the schools lack paper, pencils, chalk, and black boards. And the students’ homes lack adequate lighting, study areas and clean water. Give them whatever electronics you want to, but as soon as it breaks, or has a resaleable market value, it becomes useless or missing.

The same old tired comment wars re Microsoft versus Linux are besides the point. Computers, any computers, are elaborate tools meant to help achieve other ends. They are only ends in themselves to geeks with some money who either play with them, or play games on them, or both.

If a man is in the desert and needs water, don’t give him a light bulb.

— Posted by Rob L; N Myrtle Beach SC

Coming from someone who has wasted years on microsoft. When there has been
a superior O.S like linux out there. I thought the OLPC was a great idea and needs to move forward. Without Microsoft I mean since when does Microsoft care about anything other than a dollar. I would love to have had a laptop with linux on it when I was child. A child who has yet to be molded by software confines of Microsoft. All this says to me is Microsoft is scared of Linux. And is trying to keep it out of future generations hands. No worries im sure everyone will come to see just as I have that true freedom leads to progression.

— Posted by Jake Harris

Wow the industry is winning out by producing short term thinkers and short term memory. Come on people the Macs are still given to the Elementary Schools for free and MS is competing still and selling their software to students for a great discount.

OK everyone all together now, don’t think too hard, why is Microsoft getting involved with the OLPC project. TO PRODUCE FUTURE MICROSOFT SOFTWARE BUYERS. Now that wasn’t to hard was it.

— Posted by Werner T

I would have left too. Microsoft should pay him for his time if all of a sudden Microsoft wants to get fatter—off the backs of the open source community… Nobody gives away their talents when they’re not getting anything worthwhile from them. Microsoft could pay him to stay.

— Posted by J. Payne

imagine a third-world child with a vista laptop and no way to combat viruses and other malware (nor, for that matter, to even know what’s wrong) is actually quite frightening, in fact, it borders on cruelty.

we’re talking giving internet access to people who need food, clean water and medicine. Nothing wrong with computers, but let’s pick the low-hanging fruit (or teach third-world communities to pick it) first.

must we make money on “everything”?

— Posted by chuck

Ha, now I hear about them talking about learning.

The fact of the matter is that the OLPC project had very little focus at the design stage, and even with the development build, there were little “education” software.

Their excuse for reinventing a new user interface, in Python (which is interpreted and very very slow for such a low-power machine), is that they didn’t want to have language as a barrier. Yet, their software lineup (huh?) all included English text anyways, which would require translation if the intention is to have the children learn in their native language.

Even from the development stage, loading the development build of the software on the experimental boards, I knew that this project would crash and burn. The problem of OLPC is both dogma, and a severe lack of focus. I have a friend with an XO, the first version of the OLPC, and the original software is so bloody slow, he promptly replaced it with a standard desktop Linux, which ended up running much faster.

— Posted by Benton Lam

Hmmm. Let’s see.

Sugar: right-click, and view source to everything including the operating system.

Windows: right-click, and get proprietary context menu.

Which one will enable curious children to explore the technology?

— Posted by Jay

There’s at least a decade between primary school use and professional use. It’s a mistake to think that one is related to the other in any significant way. When I was a kid, my computing experience was programming BASIC on a teletype to a mainframe. My early professional experience was all DOS and IRIX command-line, and nowadays it’s all OSX-based. Just as an example of how things change, and how one experience is barely relevant to the other. The only thing you learn is not to be afraid of them. I question whether computer-based learning is useful before middle school in any society.

— Posted by Flinger

The OLPC is a great piece of technology. Unfortunately, the problem of education in poor economies is not going to be solved by technology as the problem is not technological in nature. If you google “atamu OLPC” you will find cogent reasoning on why the OLPC was DoA.

— Posted by Lurker
Walter Bender left OLPC? Oh Really? Did one of the non-blinking gurus finally wake up and notice the Emperor is wearing no clothes?...

I work in international development. I've followed the "OLPC Soap Opera" since Negroponte unleashed his utopian notions. We all want children to grow-up in world peace, be well-fed, well-educated. Many highly experienced dedicated people give life-blood to that mission.

In their midst, a person without logistical experience, a person not unknown for hubris, hailing from the hinterlands of a predominantly Ivory Tower, stood up to proclaim, "You are doing it wrong! Give me, the Great Oz, your millions, and I will lead you out of the dessert!"

But seriously, what late-night-film-text was he inhaling?...

It'd be nice if he proved us wrong. Alas, the project was characterized more by grandiose visions, verbage, misinformation than corroborating fact. The number of cavalier proclamations and conflicting reports is legion, it's impossible to tally the times I read reports insisting, "We have orders from the following countries..." followed by new reports where country names shifted like sands in the desert.

Were we to believe this small team dishing up internally confused non-transparent blather knew it better?... Noble goals notwithstanding, to anyone with a shred experience, they came across as the Gang Who Couldn't Shoot Straight.

OLPC would be dour comedy indeed if not so tragically distracting and compromising millions (billions) of hours human energy and dollars worldwide, to the extent of misleading decision-makers like Kofi Annan, looking on sceptically while - like a Shakespearian ill omen - the handcrank of the OLPC non-functional demonstration box at WISI fell off. Who can forget or ignore that iconic portent.

For years we work with a business bringing Internet to rural areas in India, in community-based internet kiosks, including implementing computer-based education with schools. We are not alone in applying this down-to-earth model. We have over a decade pragmatic hands-on experience and a proven, consistently refined sustainable model. Unlike OLPC, we do not start by exhorting governments to consecrate huge investments of precious resources in utopian schemes.

— Posted by Reality Checker