Learning with the $100 Laptop

by Tom Brown

An international community of researchers from more than 20 countries around the world, called G1:1 (globally, one computer for one person), have been exploring a future in which everyone will have access to a computer for learning <http://www.g1to1. org>. It is a global network of collaborative researchers (including representation from the University of Pretoria), aiming at the rapid advancement of a research-based understanding of 1:1 technology enhanced learning and progressively extending its impacts to the world.

For the G1:1 community the starting point is the learning, not the technology. The quest is to understand and advance conditions for learning, and to build on proven methods of introducing and using technology to support effective learning.

In support of MIT's $100 laptop initiative, the G1:1 community drafted an "open letter" that was released worldwide in the press during December 2005. In this open letter they argue that simply owning a computer is not enough to realise the promise of individualised learning. The new digital literacy does not come in a package with the computer, but will be provided through many kinds of human support, from friends, teachers, parents, the community and the wider society.

With this open letter the authors wish to spark the establishment of conditions that will ensure the success of the $100 laptop initiative. These include adapting the initiative to local needs, training local people to provide technical support, designing new software for knowledge sharing, and ensuring that the computers are available to all children regardless of sex or ability.

The G1:1 authors say: "Successful transformations emerge when cultural practices of thinking, learning and interacting co-evolve with developments in technologies, establishing a 'virtuous cycle'. We believe that a personal computer for all children may have a good chance of success if we can activate the virtuous cycle. These conditions include designing new open and creative software for learning and knowledge sharing, addressing issues of equity, providing support to educators and the wider community, and adapting the technology and systems to local needs and differences. For the laptop to succeed in the long-term, the project should be owned by the children, and by the society as a whole."

Some practical ways in which children, teachers, parents, communities and governments can build and sustain successful learning with laptops, are also provided in the letter.

The authors add: "We applaud MIT for their initiative to enable huge opportunities for learning, education and training. For the first time, the possibility exists for children everywhere to own a computer, to learn online, to create, and share knowledge around the world. Our aim is to learn from past successes and failures in educational computing, so that together we evolve best practices and make the $100 laptop a real tool for learning."

Doctor Tom Brown, Deputy Director: Telematic Learning & Education Innovation, University of Pretoria.

tom.brown@up.ac.za