

Laptops for all

A pioneering project's chequered start.



Shiny new toys, certainly. An educational revolution? Perhaps - AFP

For the past year the pupils of Escuela 95, in a poor neighbourhood of Montevideo, have had a new learning tool. Each has been issued with a laptop computer. This has been of particular help to the 30 or so children with severe learning difficulties, says Elias Portugal, a special-needs teacher at the school. Before, he struggled to give them individual attention. Now, the laptops are helping them with basic language skills. "The machines capture the kids' attention. They can type a word and the computer pronounces it," he says.

Nearly all of Uruguay's 380,000 primary-school pupils have now received a simple and cheap XO laptop, a model developed by One Laptop Per Child, an NGO based in Massachusetts. The government hopes this will help poorer and disadvantaged children do better in school while also improving the overall standard of education. These ambitions will be tested for the first time later this month when every Uruguayan seven-year-old will take online exams in a range of academic subjects. The rest of the world should be intrigued: the first country in Latin America to provide free, compulsory schooling will become the first, globally, to find out whether furnishing a whole generation with laptops is a worthwhile investment. (Peru, a bigger, poorer and less homogenous country, is trying something similar.)

The scheme has already proved popular. Miguel Brechner, the organiser, says it has brought home-computing to tens of thousands of poorer households, while also reducing truancy. It is fairly cheap. Each machine costs \$260 (including teacher-training and connection charges) and the estimated annual maintenance cost is \$21. In total, the scheme has cost less than 5% of the education budget.

But is this the best use of the money? There have been several glitches. The first 50,000 laptops arrived loaded with software in English, not Spanish. In Escuela 95, up to half of the students in some classes have broken their machines, usually by cracking the screen or snapping the antennae that pick up a Wi-Fi signal. When poor, rural children wreck theirs, they often prefer to keep their new status symbol clutched to their chests than risk the postal service not returning it promptly from the central maintenance centre.

The biggest technical problem is connectivity. The government reported last month that in 70% of primary schools only half the laptops can go online at the same time. Two out of five rural schools have no connection, and will have to bus their students elsewhere for the exam. Many of Uruguay's teachers, a rather elderly bunch, find it hard to cope with new technology.

Sceptics would rather the government concentrate on making teachers more accountable. But most admit the laptops are worth a try. They should prompt a shift away from rote learning and towards critical analysis, says Edith Moraes, the official in charge of primary schools. They

extend Uruguay's egalitarianism to computing. They should be seen merely as a means to the end of better schooling.

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