

## Straight Talking – To Lead, not to Teach

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

According to some, the use of open source software in global education is the key to many problems because it removes the issue of cost.

Yet for those living in areas where the average income is less than \$1 a day or where there are specific needs for certain skills or resources, open source licensing fails to address the issue of hardware costs - nor can it ensure that good educators or content are available.

Now an unexpected advocate has come to the fore, in the shape of Microsoft.

Under its Unlimited Potential programme, aimed at providing access to technology to as many people as possible, the Partners in Learning initiative has components that aim to provide a thought-through approach to providing more than just technology to those in underserved environments.

By underserved environment, Microsoft is not just looking at the usual targets of the emerging and third-world markets.

The company is also targeting those environments within the more mature markets where technology has still not made a great impact, such as many of the less well-off rural and inner-city primary and secondary schools. For example, schools in Kilkenny in Ireland, Aragon in Spain and Los Angeles in the US have benefited from the scheme.

But for these schools the innovation relates to how standard syllabus education has been provided, whereas the needs in areas such as sub-Saharan Africa, many South American countries and the burgeoning markets of China, India and through other Asiatic nations are less easily defined.

Here, many children do not attend school at all. Of those who do, many will need to be earning money for their family by the age of 12 or so - indeed, many will be the sole breadwinner and head of the household by that age.

Here, standard kindergarten to age 12 education against a maths, language and reading syllabus may not be the right approach - a new way of dealing with the various problems is required.

If we look at the different issues that such an environment faces, we can see how Microsoft's Partners in Learning attempts to address them:

1. **Availability and cost of hardware** It's all well and good having cheap or free software but not if the hardware still costs a significant amount. Even \$100 in an area where the average income per day is \$1 is a show-stopper. Partners in Learning can make use of another Microsoft initiative, Microsoft Authorised Refurbisher, where PCs are recycled from other areas, ensuring that data is erased and that the underlying Windows licence is validated before donating them to areas in need. When we look at the difficulties in disposing of computer equipment that the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) regulations have introduced, using one of Microsoft's partners who are part of the recycling scheme suddenly makes both economic and humanitarian sense.
2. **Software costs** The main issue that is thrown at Microsoft is the cost of its software - from Windows through Office to other tools. But this tends to affect those on more formal licence agreements or in more affluent areas, whereas for qualifying governments purchasing Windows-based PCs, Partners in Learning provides a full stack of Windows XP Starter Edition, Office Home and Student, Math, Learning Essentials and Live Mail for \$3 per PC for primary and secondary students' personal use at home.
3. **Content availability** Having cheap hardware and software is useless unless you also have content that is applicable and usable. Microsoft realises that the needs for a child of a goat herder in the Andes is going to be a little different to those of an inner-city slum child in Mumbai. So it aims not only to provide

contextually sensitive and applicable content but also to enable locals to have access to as much content as possible, and to encourage them to translate this into local dialects. For example, the local autonomous region of Alsace in France has created a set of software and content in the local language which is being used by more than 70,000 people, created through the use of Microsoft Local Language Program tools. In another example, a student in Peru has been provided with the tools required for him to learn English and is now earning money being a guide to foreign travellers visiting his local area.

4. **Content access** One of the abiding issues with dispersed and decentralised communities when it comes to education is access to the content. The always-on connection just cannot be taken for granted, and the capability for the local educator to keep abreast of latest developments is similarly problematic. Microsoft is looking at how to effectively utilise existing mechanisms, such as the local postal services, to deliver CDs or memory keys with content on them.
5. **Collaboration** Associated with the above is the capability for educators and students to collaborate over content and latest best practices. Where connectivity is available, this is being done through the use of email and web-sharing capabilities. Where connectivity isn't possible, existing systems such as postal mail and local meetings are being utilised.

Obviously, Microsoft is not just being altruistic here - the market it is playing for is the five billion or so people who do not have access to technology and who may at some stage become a worker in a more commercial environment.

Microsoft wants these people to be well versed in its own products, rather than open source, and Partners in Learning is one step towards this. But Microsoft is also learning that arrogance may not win the day, and is being more inclusive than we have previously seen.

The software giant accepts that the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC), Intel's Classmate PC and Asus' eeePC will all have a place to play in the market, and sees these as access points to centralised content provided on Microsoft-based systems, or even as means of providing content generated by the use of Microsoft tools direct to the student.

Overall, Microsoft's Partners in Learning initiative provides a well thought out and fully provisioned approach to many of the problems in providing tools and content to the underserved communities around the planet.

That we can all become involved through donating our old PCs to the cause means we can be WEEE-compliant and gain the feel-good factor of helping others.

Meanwhile, those who wish to help lead students to a better life, rather than force-feed them with a curriculum that matches our perceived needs, can see how Partners in Learning provides a guided platform for students and educators to define their own needs.

It uses this approach rather than a pre- or proscriptive educational programme that does not prepare them for maximising their potential in their own life, and in their own environment.

## About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

Details of Quocirca's work and the services it offers can be found at  
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