

Thank you OLPC, indeed — a comment to Teemu Leinonen

By Ismael Peña-López ([@ictlogist](#)), 16 January 2008

[Teemu Leinonen](#) posted on Monday at [FLOSSE Posse](#) both an acknowledgment and a critique to the [One Laptop per Child](#) project: [Thank you OLPC – Maybe now we may start to talk about education again](#).

While I'm no unconditional defender of the OLPC initiative — i.e. there are things I like, things I don't, so I still don't have a strong position for or against — I believe there are some statements Leinonen makes in his post that, IMHO, are not absolutely fair with the project.

I share most of his arguments but I don't agree with some of them:

On one hand, I don't think the project pretends that children "own" (in the sense of exclusive ownership he talks about) a computer. I honestly think is a matter of identifying the main user. Actually, the reason — I guess — behind giving the child a laptop and not giving it to the school is so he can take it home. By doing this, **it is the whole family that receives the computer**, and not only the child, so there is — at least potentially — a **multiplier effect**. Considering that the project is intended to serve mainly rural, isolated areas, providing a household with such a tool makes sense to me. I personally find the point that in general children do not own things quite excessive.

A second derivative (critique) of assigning not an institution but an individual — the child — the computer is that it goes against all values that foster sharing, community building and so. I would fully agree with such a critique if the XO computer had not a strong bet on [mesh networking](#). I absolutely believe this *does make* a difference. By mesh networking sharing is boosted to the maximum — at least potentially, of course — and what could be seen as an individual tool becomes a networking node with many implications, including educational implications in both the field of knowledge and values.

Thus, the **knowledge exchange** that can take place in such an **open and collaborative network** is only enhanced by the huge amount of content embedded in the computer by default. Besides the fact that, as the software, this content can be localized — and this is a (soft) countercritique to the project's (supposed lack of) sensibility towards different cultures and traditions — by bringing such content home, at least two things happen: the first one, as stated before, the whole family benefits from having that laptop home and not at the school; the second one is that that content stays *with* the student. If this student lives away from the school and spends there little time — specially compared to developed countries — it is not trivial that **the more time he has access to content, the better**. And just a remainder: *if* he is connected with other students wirelessly, the sense of "classroom" still exists, even if virtual.

There's a last statement on Leinonen's article that caught me by surprise and might be due to my ignorance on the project: the OLPC seems to believe that learning programming is the key to all other learning. I must confess it's the first time I read this argument. If it were true, I'd be sharing most of the criticism around it. Nevertheless, I'd rather add some clarifications about this issue. Regardless if coding is a key issue in one's education, **digital literacy** absolutely is. And besides my own thoughts on how literacy will evolve in the future closely tied to digital literacy until they both become "just" literacy, evidence shows that **skilled individuals** — and this includes by large digital literacy — will have it much better to work and socialize in a Network Society. Just in economic terms, employability and productivity will rely very much in digital skills in a world where **ICT-based services will be the locomotive of development**, above all in emerging economies.

I want to insist that I share and find most of Leinonen's critiques really relevant, but I also believe that most of the buzz around the [One Laptop per Child](#) project has taken place in geek environments, thus shifting the debate towards technological aspects, and hence infringing a technological bias to the project that, in its origin — and this is my own, personal opinion — the project had not.