
Posted on Sat, May. 19, 2007

Cheap laptops bring equality to Villa Cardal

THE RURAL TOWN OF VILLA CARDAL, URUGUAY, GETS A BIT OF THE 21ST CENTURY WITH INEXPENSIVE LAPTOPS

By VINOD SREEHARSHA
Special to The Miami Herald

VILLA CARDAL, URUGUAY -- This rural community of just over 1,200 people began an experiment last week that could impact not only its children but potentially some U.S. technology giants.

Eight-year-old Nahuel Lema and his 135 classmates at Number 24: Italia, the only primary school here, took home new laptops, thanks to a partnership between the Uruguayan government and One Laptop per Child (OLPC), a U.S. non-profit.

His mother, Grisela, sat right besides him in his classroom, her face beaming with pride. Born and raised here, she has never used e-mail.

Villa Cardal has one main street and no traffic lights. Many here work as farmhands at dairy ranches. The community is in the "paper and pencil era" says 4th grade teacher Hania Villanueva.

Since its inception, OLPC has been hailed and derided for its goal of providing "100 dollar" laptops to disadvantaged children around the world. The machines lack costly bells and whistles such as CD or DVD players and use free open-source software instead of Windows.

Microsoft and Intel are now developing competing programs. And numerous other companies are expected to jump on the bandwagon to provide cheap access to technology to developing countries.

The ambitious nonprofit OLPC project was launched in 2005 by Nicholas Negroponte, then-director of the media lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and has received considerable private and official backing.

Miami's Brightstar Corp., a global distributor of wireless telephones, has pitched in with its expertise on distribution and logistics. The Inter-American Development Bank has also agreed to support the development of the computers that can communicate with each other.

The price has jumped from the original \$100 per laptop to an estimated cost of \$175 today, although developers hope the price will drop in the future.

Getting the OLPC programs off the ground is a complex task, as shown by the experience in Uruguay, launched just last week.

The first snag: the log-in system did not accept kids' names that have accents. "I can't believe we did not catch this," said David Cavallo, OLPC Americas' director. The children got around the problem by using different names, and OLPC went to work on a software tweak.

Choosing the community was the first key decision for the Uruguayan National Technology Laboratory, or LATU in Spanish, the government-owned, privately run institution managing the program in this South American nation of 3.5 million people.

AGRICULTURAL TOWN

Lower-middle class Villa Cardal is typically Uruguayan. Homes have electricity and running water, but most residents live off agriculture, and economic opportunity is their greatest need.

"I want my son to study everything," said Grisela Lema, "and learn as much as he can. I hope he can enter the professional sector."

And, with only one school, it was easier to give all the kids here laptops, avoiding jealousies while sticking to Uruguay's traditional sense of egalitarianism.

Uruguay is the first OLPC pilot country to provide laptops to one entire school and directly involve the whole community, says Cavallo. Thailand, Nigeria, Libya, and Brazil have already distributed OLPC machines, but in piecemeal fashion.

In the two participating Brazilian schools, only some students have received laptops. And in the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo, they still cannot take home their laptops due to concerns about crime.

LEARNING NEW WAYS

In Villa Cardal, students took theirs home on Day 1. School principal Marcelo Galain says he prefers it that way because "they have to learn to take care of their laptops. They will value them more."

Taking the computers home also will involve parents more. That is one reason why Lema says she does not fear losing her son to his laptop. They are learning to use it together.

Maria Fojo echoed that sentiment at her home the day after the program's launch. "Sure they will play computer games. But also, last night they already read the instructions on how to take photos [with the laptops]. At least they will now be forced to read. They never read books," said the mother of sixth-grade twins, Franco and Lucas

Meanwhile, her boys were already buried in their laptops despite having a sunny day off from school.

Meanwhile the teachers were in the middle of a day-long training by LATU, the reason for the kids' day off.

Anxiety filled the classroom.

"I see there are a lot of doubts here," said Pablo Flores, a trainer. Another trainer later added, "Don't worry if your students end up knowing more than you. That should be your goal."