

Book Review: Learning to Change the World: The Social Impact of One Laptop Per Child

blog admin

*One Laptop Per Child started out with a very ambitious mission: to provide more information and better education to the world's poor via an inexpensive laptop. This book tells not only the story of this pioneering project, but also puts the lessons into perspective for future social entrepreneurs. **Cole Armstrong** finds that the book provides an interesting account of a successful social enterprise, but fails to describe how the XO laptop has achieved its purpose in delivering a new style of learning in the developing nations in which it works.*

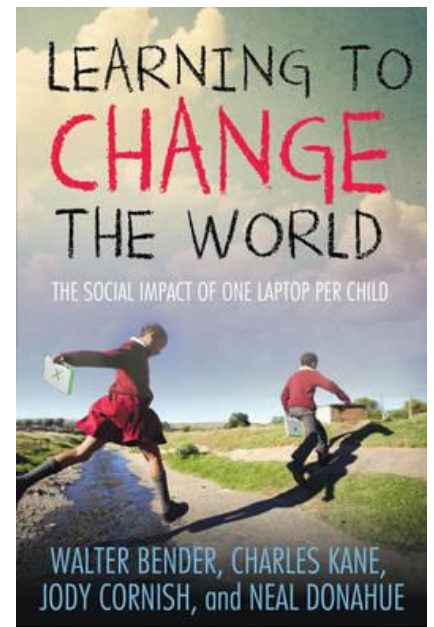


Learning to Change the World. Bender, Cornish, Donahue and Kane. Palgrave Macmillan. January 2013.

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Learning to Change the World: The Social Impact of One Laptop Per Child provides an interesting behind the scenes look of a much publicised education development programme, in operation in a number of countries around the world. Written by two leading members of the [One Laptop Per Child \(OLPC\)](#) group and two consultants brought on board by the organisation during a period of change and restructuring, this book recounts the history of the organisation that provided low cost computers for a number of developing nations.

The book is an interesting and readable account of the history of a programme with the stated mission to “empower the children of developing countries to learn”. The philosophy behind this programme, originating in [MIT's Media Lab](#), is that education must move from the traditional passive style of learning knowledge to a more constructivist style of learning skills. In order to facilitate this change in the developing world, the OLPC attempted to develop an affordable US\$100 laptop (the [XO](#)) that could withstand the harsh environments and infrastructure problems present in many of these countries. By accessing the XO laptop, students would be able to take control of their own education in ways not often seen using more traditional forms of education.









One Laptop Per Child in Bhutan: Photo by [laihui](#)

The OLPC organisation attempted an ambitious mission, one which has been much commented upon, and in some quarters criticised. *Learning to Change the World* is not an unabridged PR exercise, as it details both successes and disappointments while critically responding to a number of criticisms that have been levelled at the programme over the years. For anyone interested in the development of a not for profit social enterprise, including the difficulties that a social entrepreneur might face along the way, this is an excellent book.

In the first section of the book, the authors provide an interesting journey of the organisation, documenting the difficulties of designing the XO laptop, developing the software to run it, identifying suppliers, and signing customers. They critically discuss the difficulties that this posed for the organisation and how and why they responded to these challenges in the way they did, and acknowledge where they went wrong. They discuss with some admirable honesty how this impacted the organisation and how this resulted in divergences in strategy within the group. At one point these divergences resulted in OLPC splitting into three sustainable and complementary organisations: the OLPC Foundation which provided strategic direction for the project, the OLPC Association tasked with the practical delivery of the XO laptop, and Sugar Labs which lead the software delivery.

One of the more interesting chapters looks at the development of the Sugar software platform, which provided students with a number of basic pieces of software (such as a word processor and internet browser), while allowing the student to look at the programming code behind the software. While the development of the computer receives the most space in the book, the chapter on Sugar traces the development of this platform and why it was seen as necessary for the success of the programme given that there were several existing platforms already available. The success of the Sugar platform is attributed to the army of open source programmers, including several students, who worked on developing a number of programmes independently of any centralised control.

Disappointingly, the book provides little evidence of the impact on students that is so repeatedly referred to throughout the book, or even more specific details of the type of impact expected. Partly this might be due to the difficulties of evaluating a programme that is being used in such disparate contexts, a comment that had been suggested in one of the cited programme evaluations. The authors acknowledge this as a weakness, and state that further evaluation is currently being undertaken. But this does not limit their enthusiasm for their programme, and they make liberal use of anecdotal stories of impact, which while making the book interesting to read, does not result in a convincing argument.

For example, in the case study chapter about the programme in Rwanda impact is evidenced by the experiences of one student, whereas the section on Nicaragua gives passing mention to student re-enrolment rates and grade repetition. However, where evaluations have been briefly mentioned, one of the common impacts referred to is the beneficial effects on student motivation. More detail on this and other areas of impact would have made for a stronger argument in favour of OLPC.

A second disappointment of the book is that it largely reads as an account of the development of a successful technology organisation that has overcome a number of operational and strategic challenges, rather than as the successful and revolutionary organisation that they aspire to. While the purpose of the organisation is to provide new educational opportunities to under-served students, the book misses the opportunity to explain how the technology supports these opportunities. For example, while the Sugar software platform is the aspect of the programme that will be most apparent to students, description of this is largely confined to one chapter of the book.

Overall, the book is an interesting account of a successful social enterprise, which has attempted to meet some commendably lofty ideals. It reads as an honest account of how this organisation struggled, and at times failed, to meet these goals – particularly with the stated aim of delivering a \$100 XO laptop. For an aspiring social entrepreneur it should provide an illustrative account of the belief and persistence required to overcome the many obstacles that will come up in delivering such aspirations. However, it fails to describe how the XO laptop has achieved its purpose in delivering a new style of learning in the developing nations in which it works.

Cole Armstrong recently completed an MSc in Social Research Methods at the [Department of Methodology](#) at LSE, with a dissertation that looked at ethnic segregation in New Zealand schools. Cole is currently a Research Manager at an international NGO that utilises the mass media for development purposes. His research interests focus around evaluation methodologies and the use of communication techniques for development aims. [Read more reviews by Cole.](#)