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Low cost or learning tool?

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Low cost or learning tool?

Netbooks are all the rage, but they don't really meet the needs of today's students

By Jon Bower

Primary Topic Channel: [Handheld technologies](#)

The "next big thing" has arrived in education, and it's a little computer--the netbook. School districts from Maine to California are considering acquiring netbooks for student use, figuring they are a low-cost route toward one-to-one computing. Never mind whether one-to-one computing is truly a panacea--are netbooks a good education platform for our children?

The advocates for netbooks make three basic arguments:

1. The price is right: We can afford enough machines for every student.
2. The size is right: Students will do best with a small, light machine.
3. Students don't need any more power: With cloud computing, everything they need is available on the web.

Let's take a look at the arguments. First, cost. An Acer laptop with a 14-inch screen, 2 GHz Dual Core processor with 3 gigabytes of RAM, NVIDIA graphics, wireless networking, a 160-gigabyte hard drive, and Windows Vista costs \$399 after rebate. An Asus netbook with a 10-inch screen, 1.6 GHz Atom processor, 1 GB of RAM, built-in Intel graphics, wireless networking, a 160 GB hard drive, and Windows XP costs \$349. Looks like you get less with the netbook for almost the same price.

Next, size. Quick: What is the most important skill after reading and numeracy that children learn in elementary school? I would argue that it is basic typing. Once they can read, do math, and use a keyboard, students can access the entire world of content and can communicate with their teachers and peers online. Yet, what is the fundamental limitation of netbooks? It is hard to type on them! Why would we ever want to train our children to type on an inadequate keyboard?

Finally, power. What medium is most important to the next generation of learners? It's video--the most power-hungry medium of all. Does it make sense to give our children a hardware platform that doesn't create or play video well? Of course not, yet that is what we do with netbooks.

Let's get this right. We need to evaluate our children's educational needs, not jump on the latest bandwagon. If they need to learn to type on a full-size keyboard, we should supply one. If they need a decent screen to see their work, they deserve to have one. If they need graphics power to create video, we should supply that to encourage their learning in the new medium.

Most of all, we need to stop listening to the hardware marketing barrage and focus on the real crux of educational technology--the applications our children use to learn. As President Clinton might have said: It's the applications, stupid.

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