

Globe Talk: Keeping it simple

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Early-childhood education is big business these days, and no age group seems to be spared of being a target of even some of the most high-tech of products, from videos geared at babies who are yet unable to talk, to books that will read themselves aloud to spare fatigued parents from taking on the task themselves.

The proliferation of chip-laden goods for such young minds has found its friends and foes. Some parents swear by the latest Baby Einstein DVD to teach kids their ABCs, while others bemoan the demise of civilization as we know it as children are seemingly raised to need constant electronic stimulation.

Whatever camp parents might find themselves in, though, one thing is clear: Technology is here to stay, and the use of electronic goods will permeate increasingly across the home and in schools, whether they like it or not. What's more, more and more businesses are going to get a firmer grip on the ever-expanding market.

Providing easy-to-use laptops with children as young as those in first grade in mind is one sector Renaissance Learning has been focusing on. In addition to providing software to help with basic academic skills, the Wisconsin Rapids-based company has developed a laptop that was designed specifically for classroom use, even at the elementary-school level.

Certainly, being able to use a personal computer adeptly is as essential as being able to read and write as well as add and subtract, but schools with

fewer financial resources have found it more difficult than their wealthier counterparts to get their students computer literate due to the high cost of installing and maintaining computers.

The Alpha Smart laptop, however, is less about teaching kids how to use computers and more a tool to teach them basic reading and writing skills, said Greg Wright, senior vice president of electronics at Renaissance Learning.

"It's technical problems that usually creates the digital divide," Wright said, pointing out that the school-friendly laptops are not only priced at an affordable \$249 per machine and reduced to \$200 per unit if bought as a bundle by an organization, but also that they are easy to use.

Given that teachers are not information-technology experts, they would get distracted if even one of their students had any computer problems, and precious teaching time would be diverted from actually teaching the class and instead would be spent on trying to fix the computer problem.

But perhaps the most useful aspect of the Alpha Smart is what it doesn't do: It has no MP3 player or any other ability to download or play music. Nor does it have any Internet access or any other interconnectivity capability. It also has no DVD player. In short, it has nothing that could distract the user from doing anything other than using it to learn lessons.

Meanwhile, Wright argued that the laptop will allow teachers to monitor better how each and every student is doing on a daily basis, and those who are faster learners could accelerate their learning program, while those falling behind could likewise adjust the program to be tailored to their needs.

"Typically, the laptops are purchased by classrooms in bundles, with teachers at the hub" in getting a lesson going while all students are using

their laptops, he said, adding that the machines can be used by kindergarteners and high-school seniors alike. Wright said that those in older age groups in particular benefit from the distraction-free computer system.

Indeed, the challenge for technology providers moving forward may well be not what they could put on a single device, but what they can leave out to streamline their products and make them suited to particular consumer groups. PDA-enhanced mobile-phone manufacturers may well take note of that lesson.

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