

Why Some Analysts Don't Get The iPad (Yet)

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A couple of days ago I've forwarded this article on The Apple Blog¹ to a friend of mine: "Why Apple's iPad Can't Succeed in Schools (Yet)", by Liam Cassidy².

This article, even if written in a supposedly "pro-Apple" blog, is rather critic and makes some debatable assertions at best, some of them without any proper backing in terms of analysis or statistics.

But most importantly, this article shows that the iPad can really become the disruptive device we've been waiting for years. The expectations are huge. The inflection point of IT in education could be April 3rd, when the iPad will start its career in the hands of users.



My friend (who works in the education field, by the way) answered back to me, and boy, did he make a point. Judge by yourselves:

Apple has started making the iPad available on its online education store in packs of 10 with an appallingly–stingy discount of only \$20 per iPad. If Apple wants to start a computing revolution with the iPad, it absolutely must get the device into schools.

¹<http://theappleblog.com/>

²<http://theappleblog.com/2010/03/24/why-apples-ipad-cant-succeed-in-schools-yet/>

Why must?

But in order to do that, it's going to have to try a lot harder, and generous discounts are the easiest problem to solve.

Low price (lowest price Apple "computer" I've ever seen!) is not enough? Generous discounts will change the penetration?

There are much bigger hurdles standing in the way.

Let's start with costs alone. Assume a school wants to buy an iPad for each of its students. Assume the school is small with only 300 children enrolled. Assume also that the school wants to buy the cheapest iPad without AppleCare. At a little more than \$450 per iPad, that's a cost of almost \$144,000. I imagine the average state-funded school enjoys less than half that in its annual I.T. budget.

Yes, and? What is the school's annual *book* budget? Can you imagine that amount too?

"Aha!" you might argue, "Many schools in underprivileged areas get subsidies from the state and provide laptops for their pupils."

And, of course, you'd be right. Many schools do provide their students with free or 'nearly-free' laptops. But not decent laptops. We're talking cheap, disposable netbooks that cost far less to insure against loss or damage. (Let's be realistic – the younger the student, the greater the chance of laptop-death!)

Weird. So schools buy cheap. Schools buys cheap furniture? Cheap books? Really?

I graduated from High School back in the early 90s, and even then my school was considered **ahead of the curve** when it came to the adoption of computer technology in class. Even so, there were no Macs in my school. They were just too expensive. Here in the UK, the fierce battle in the 1980's between Acorn, Sinclair, Atari, Amstrad and Commodore meant that there were many perfectly capable, cheap microcomputers available to schools. The Mac was superior to those machines in almost every way, but it couldn't compete on price.

(emphasis added)

I wonder how much money schools spent on computers then. Did an Acorn, Sinclair, etc. cost the equivalent of today's \$499? Different times, obviously.

It has been 16 years since I graduated from high school. And while I'm happy to report that my old school now has iMacs in most classrooms, sadly they only run Windows XP.

Why did they buy iMacs then? They were the cheapest?

The reason for this comes down to two simple factors; Cost, and What's Best for the Kids. It seems more educational titles are available at lower prices on Windows than on Mac OS X.

Define “Educational Title”. Seriously: define it, today, as I suspect the market has slightly changed since Grandma and Me CD-ROMs³. How about counting how many Living Stories⁴ run on the PC platform?

And, outside school, the kids encounter more Windows PCs than Macs.

And? Since when does school teach to use a platform? They educate pupils on what to do properly with Computer in this Digital age, they don’t (as far as I know) deliver Windows certificates. At least they should not.

So I look at the upcoming iPad and, even though I can see the potential it offers to schoolchildren (and the wider education market),

... not sure you do, actually...

I can’t help but wonder if it has any real chance of making a dent at this time. HP’s upcoming slate PC has more chance of being adopted by my old school simply because it works with all their existing software and runs Windows — the platform the school believes the pupils are better served knowing,

You believe this, not sure the school actually does.

rather than Mac OS X, which they have concluded is just too obscure and “specialist.”

Weird argument for an “ahead of the curve” school (?).

And as though these fiduciary and policy-driven decisions aren’t bad enough, there’s another glaring challenge to getting the iPad widely accepted in schools; at the end of the day, it’s just not a book.

You’re right, it’s much less...

You see, tablets-as-books is a great idea until the battery dies, and then the student has no textbook and no computer. She will have to plug-in to a power outlet if she wants either of those things back.

A school with iPad will make sure the pupils understand they must have a fully charged iPad when they arrive at school. Anyway kids hate having to plug something in during work, they’ll do this at home.

But consider the delicate health and safety issues associated with cable-safety in a classroom environment.

Delicate health and safety issues? Tripping on a cord is a delicate issue?

Not to mention the maintenance costs (that’s a lot of power outlets being used more than ever before)

Maintenance is not the usual budget line where you put electricity bills.

You’re right, that a lot. I’ve done the calculation for a Mac mini, dissipating 13W when used. If a school uses it 25 hours a week, 40 weeks a year, for 5 years,

³<http://www.taglearning.com/productdetails/Just+Grandma+and++Me+:+Living+Books+Series.html>

⁴<http://itunes.apple.com/ch/app/my-living-stories-little-red/id363506793?mt=8>

it's 5000 hours of use. With a kWh priced at 20 centimes, that's an electrical cost of 13 swiss francs. Thirteen. In five years. And the iPad is going to draw much less power (and be used maybe more hours a week, probably).

and don't forget the school will suddenly incur higher energy bills. Say what you will about a paper-textbook, at least it doesn't need plugging-in.

You sometimes need light to read. Oh, sorry, a candle will do.

And then there's the issue of damage. What happens if an iPad screen is cracked? A damaged book cover doesn't render the book's contents inaccessible, nor is it likely to slice into fingers. Plus, the cost of a replacement book is trivial. Remind me how much the cheapest iPad is?

I see: compare *one* book to *one* iPad. Hm.

A school having a 1-1 project with MacBooks did an insurance system, every kid paid a little sum in a fund. In case of loss or damage, the kid had only 30% of the device to pay back. They saw very little damages, kids took good care of the laptops. The more precious the device, the more care they took, actually.

Oh, and let's not forgot that Apple isn't perfect. Remember when the iPhone OS was updated to 3.1 in September last year? I wrote about it here⁵, and the comments quickly ran to over 100. iPhones everywhere were freezing, crashing, and generally just refusing to work, and all as a result of an official update from Apple itself!

Since when do 300 kids perform the update on the first day Apple releases it? I bet that kids and teachers would update at best their iPad once a year, and probably not before someone from IT gives it a go.

What happens when Apple does the same thing with the iPad? Even the most diligent students who take the greatest of care with their always-charged-in-time-for-class iPads will suffer if an update from Apple proves flaky.

Hell! That's a serious risk!

And, finally, there's the matter of crime. No one ever wanted to rob a kid from my school. The only thing we ever carried in our bags was biology books and the occasional Thundercats pencil case. But what if my school handed-out iPads to its pupils? Overnight, the school uniform would become an advertisement to any would-be criminal; "mug this kid – expensive computer on-board."

iPad = Expensive computer... oh dear... Kids don't have to take the iPad home, depending on the age of the kid, the school will keep them safe.

I'd dearly love to see all school kids and college students everywhere take-up iPads as their favorite learning tools. Sadly, I just don't see how that can happen as long as they remain significantly more

⁵<http://theappleblog.com/2009/09/14/iphone-os-3-1-update-causing-crashes-on-iphone-3gs/>

expensive than textbooks, more sophisticated than simple e-book readers and less resilient than the existing, proven toolset — traditional, dead-tree textbooks.

You don't see? Watch.