Volunteers bring computer education to migrant schools first

Greenboard believes computers have more to offer China's education than training in Microsoft Office.

By Derrick Sobodash

Four weeks ago, the students at Wende School in Cuigezhuang Village turned on a computer for the first time.

The school's new lab of 20 Loongson-based laptop computers is the first test bed for Greenboard, a Beijing-based volunteer group and a similarly named free curriculum to bring open source software to the Chinese classroom.

The school, located north of Fifth Ring Road, is one of the city's 300 unlicensed schools that accept the children of migrant workers: kids rejected by mainstream education because of their social status and constant mobility.

It was a cold afternoon last Thursday as reporters, volunteers and spokesmen strolled past the muddy entrance to Wende School.

In the classroom, students sat bundled in thick winter coats as they followed the teacher's instructions.

There is no goofing off on Tudou or Renren when the only "Internet" you can connect to is the class intranet on your teacher's computer. For a migrant school, where electricity and heat are a limited blessing, access to the World Wide Web is impossible.

The students, then on their third week in the new computer lab, were still learning to use the laptop's trackpad. But they will soon be learning valuable lessons that many children in public schools are missing out on by using free, open source software.

The new curriculum, which is being tested in the lab for the first time, was created by a group of local volunteers who have been unsatisfied with public education's failure to embrace the learning potential of the computer.

The road to Wende

When French company Dexxon told Greenboard it wanted to donate 20 Loongson computers to a school, deciding where to send them was tough.

After a few bad experiences meeting government-run schools, Greenboard contacted LEAD, a Beijing organization that connects volunteers with the city's 300 migrant schools.

But most of the headmasters the group met with only saw computers as a way to

"A lot of people get something for free and they don't value it. But if they give a little bit on their own, then they have 'invested.' They will be more committed."

Migrant schools are the only option for many kids' education.

acquire students. They packed their labs with broken machines just to impress prospective parents.

"Out of 25 computers, they might have had three that turned on. And they used these three to sell their school," says Fred Muller, 39, the founder of Greenboard. "The computer lab ends up like a display room. It's rarely, if ever, turned on to save on electricity costs."

Since migrant schools run on a shoestring budget, few are willing to bear the power drain of a computer lab.

"We thought about getting the school a solar panel to power the lab. But I know them," Muller says. "You would install a solar panel and they would use it to power everything except the computer room. 'You want to use a computer? Sorry, I'm charging my bike.'"

And that is where Cui Gezhong, Wende's headmaster, was different. Cui was willing to invest his own time and money to build a lab and to buy the necessary networking gear.

He cared about the quality of his students' education – "not just the bottom line, says Pockey Lam, 33, the group's project manager.

Cui and his wife worked out of pocket to renovate and repaint an old storage

closet in the corner of Wende School. They installed bars on the windows to protect the new lab from thieves – the bane of many school labs.

"I think that (his initiative) is very important," Muller says.

Teaching with technology

Greenboard's curriculum is offered online in a Wiki, where teachers are encouraged to develop and share their own lessons. When the Wiki was last frozen to create a second edition of the Greenboard textbook, it weighed in at 220 pages and covered 2nd through 6th grades.

The current lessons provide exercises in art, math, science, English, reading, geography and general problem solving.

The curriculum includes open source programs like KolourPaint, a drawing program, OpenOffice.org Writer, a word processor, and Stardict, a free, multi-language dictionary that can also teach pronunciation.

Wende's teachers have been especially enthusiastic about the vocabulary tools.

"Two weeks ago we talked to a primary school teacher who told us the problem in migrant schools – because of the high turnover rate – is that the ability of the students is very uneven," Lam says.

By using computers to learn English, each student can move through the vocabulary lists at his own pace. The computer lessons also offer a chance to scrap many of the school's outdated and inaccurate English books.

But more interesting is RUR-PLE, a programming game inspired by the earlier educational language Logo. In RUR-PLE, the student directs Karel the robot through a maze of turns using 10 simple commands. The catch is that Karel's makers were cheap and never taught him to turn right.

The challenge usually takes a 4th Grade student 20 minutes to solve. More complex puzzles can take a class hours or weekends.

"Seeing kids spend time on RUR-PLE was quite a revelation," Muller says. "They would sit with Liwen and Julien and spend the whole day hacking with the little robot."

What is open source?

Unlike closed source commercial software, open source is available under a special license that allows and encourages users to change or improve the software, and to share those changes with others.

An open source developer retains his copyright while granting most rights to anyone willing to follow the terms of his license.

Businesses which contribute to open source development earn money by selling support and installation services rather than selling the software itself.

The Firefox web browser, WordPress blog publisher and VLC Media Player are some of the most popular open source programs.

Get involved!

Both Greenboard and LEAD are independent, nonprofit volunteer organizations that need help.

If you are interested in volunteering your services as a teacher or teacher's assistant, or in donating secondhand computers to migrant schools, visit LEAD's website at ygclub.org or write to Sun Liwen at liwen@ygclub.org.

Anyone who wants to develop lesson plans, edit existing lessons, translate lessons into more languages or help to make more open source educational software available in Chinese can visit the Greenboard website at greenboard.org.cn or contact Fred Muller at info@greenboard.org.cn.

Xuanwu's Traditional Art Season happens next week

By Venus Lee

The annual Beijing Traditional Art Season, which features Peking Opera, cross talk and acrobatics, returns to Xuanwu district next Monday.

Jia Jingwen, deputy chairman of the cultural department of Xuanwu District, said the seven-day event will highlight century-old culture streets and product brands.

Zhang Yiyuan, a tea shop founded in 1908, has invited 1,000 foreign students to come for tea and learn about tea art.

Laoshe Tea House, popular among tourists for its traditional stage performances, will hold a photo exhibition on 100 world leaders who have visited the place.

Rong Bao Zhai, the city's largest painting and calligraphy shop that opened in 1672, will teach visitors how to create wood-block prints, how to mold and paint porcelain and how to cut seals.

China Bookstore will sponsor a talk about appraising folk collections in its store on Liulichang Cultural Street. Folk art experts will be present to give free appraisal and advice.

In addition, all theaters along Tianqiao – the National Ballet of China, Beijing Acrobatic Troupe, Fenglei Peking Opera Troupe, Tianqiao Theater, Deyun Theater and Wansheng Theater – will present their masterpieces to the public.

The district government has invited 100 people – half of them foreigners – to join a one-day cultural tour of Xuanwu on Saturday to learn about the district's

Folk culture artists at Tianqiao area, Xuanwu District **CFP Photo**

history and current situation.

Jia Jingwen said participants will take a look at the lives of imperial officials by visiting clan association offices, learn about traditional commercial culture by surveying famous old shops on Dashilan and experience folk customs by attending theater performances in Tianqiao. They will also be introduced to local religious culture by visiting Fayuan Monas-tery and Xiannongtan, a temple where the emperor once worshiped the god of grain and produce, she said.

Xuanwu District, which has a history of 3,000 years, has developed a local culture called Xuannan – referred to as the embodiment of old Beijing culture. The Beijing Traditional Art Season is part of the Xuannan Cultural Festival, Xuanwu's yearly cultural event held since 2002.

Where can I get Vaseline petro-leum jelly? A doctor said it can help soothe my daughter's lip, which has been bleeding because of the dry weather. I've been to Watson's and Jenny Lou's but couldn't find it. Hope you can provide me with a good lead.

Try other supermarkets like Carre-four and Walmart. Vaseline petroleum jelly is called *fanshilin* in Chinese. If you still cannot find it there, try the pharmacy of a hospital.

I'm going back home a few days before Christmas and my flight leaves at 4:30 am. I live in Dongcheng district and would nor-mally take the Airport Express, but the subway won't be open yet at that hour. Will there be a good number of cabs on the street at the time? Will they be fussy about bringing me to the airport? These days, I've noticed many drivers are refusing fares to destinations they don't like.

Don't worry, it's easy getting a cab at 4:30 am – much more than at rush hour. Drivers usually like going to the airport since it provides them with a good chunk of income on smooth highway-driving and they're guaranteed another fare back to town. But if you want to be doubly sure you get a ride, book a cab in advance through telephone numbers 96103 or 6683 7339. The service is provided in eight languages.

(By Wei Ying)

"You see the concept and think, how are kids going to be interested in coding? But they are!"

It forces students to use logical, simple steps to solve complex problems.

Muller says he believes the ability to offer exposure and training in so many areas is the real power of computers in education.

Past headaches

Wende is not Greenboard's first adventure into Beijing classrooms. In 2007, the group donated 40 refurbished machines to a school on the condition it use open source software for education.

"Some of the PCs that were donated ... we opened them up and it was hard to believe they were running," says Julien Forgeat, 28, the volunteer who tackles Greenboard's technical issues.

At the time, Chinese support – especially for educational software, remained a weak point, and it was not long before the program collapsed.

When the school realized it was possible to get things for free, it scrapped the donations and begged another organization until it got a lab of brand new Windows computers.

"It let you see the real character of the headmasters," Muller says. "They threw out all our (educational) work and went back to teaching how to type Chinese in Notepad."

Things were not much better at government-run schools.

"They would have nice, new computers, a server room and a curriculum. But they never used it," Muller says. "They said they had a real problem asking their teachers to teach more than Office."

The bias that computer are an end-purpose vocational tool rather than an educational tool makes educational projects a tough sell, Lam says.
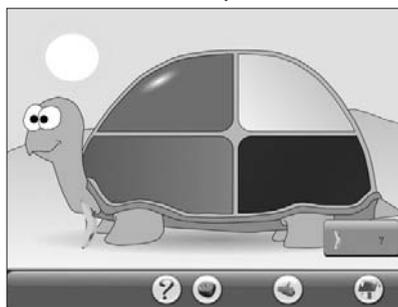
"The mainstream education system is

Greenboard's curriculum is getting its first test run in Wende's new lab.
Photo by Derrick Sobodash

Many educational programs are freely available. Greenboard's goal is to give them a curriculum.
Photos provided by Greenboard

Microsoft 100-percent-endorsed. There is nothing else. It's either that, or you have teachers who don't know how to use a computer at all," Muller says.

Part of the problem stems from the textbooks, which Microsoft has long provided to schools for free to encourage them to buy its software. But those textbooks hardly make for a thrilling read.

"The textbooks from Microsoft will teach you how to click the Start button and change the desktop wallpaper or use Microsoft Word. The kids say it's boring. I agree," Sun says.

The project's future

When Greenboard first went to Wende School, it began training four teachers to use its free curriculum. Today, two of those teachers remain: one is the headmaster.

Teacher loss is always a problem at migrant schools, where many earn less than 1,000 yuan per month.

For now, the lab is more than any of them had ever hoped for, Cui, the headmaster, says.

"I believe in these children. If they are given the same educational tools and opportunities that most children get, they can exceed their peers and score higher," he says. "I hope one day, students at other migrant schools will have the same opportunity that mine have now."

That might be possible, but not for a while, Muller says.

While the group is visiting schools with LEAD volunteers every weekend, its current total curriculum is tied to Dexxon's machine, which is decidedly not free.

"We've had requests from other migrant schools that already have some second-hand computers. We'd like to support every architecture so we can just give them some disks," Lam says.

The group's first goal is to make the curriculum work with every Loong-son-based computer before expanding to the more common Intel-based computers found in most schools and homes, he says. Most of the information is already there, it will just take a dedicated volunteer to repackage it.

In the mean time, schools interested in following Greenboard's lessons can download and install most of the programs on their own.

The current goal is to perfect its lessons and translate Greenboard to English, so schools in other countries will be more able to access it.

"That we can get this into primary schools, and that there has been so much community support, tells me we are going in the right direction," Lu Shouqun, chairman of the Chinese OSS (open source software) Promotion Union, says.

"But community projects like these need more attention and volunteers so more students can have a chance to access these resources."