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Free laptops is not the answer. What is?

A digital utopia cannot be constructed on a shaky educational base such as ours.

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To loud applause at a special distribution ceremony on Pakistan Day, PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif declared: “We do not give weapons in the hands of youngsters, we give them laptops; we give them education.” The laptop scheme is the brainchild of kid brother Shahbaz Sharif, chief minister of Punjab. He says that the Punjab government plans to distribute a further 300,000 laptops — in addition to the 100,000 already distributed — as a “weapon against poverty and ignorance”.

The Sharifs are surely to be commended for preferring computers over Kalashnikovs (some of their political rivals would want it the other way around). But laptops are not silver bullets that can transform Pakistan’s education. Cost is not the main issue. Of course, we do know that Dell laptops, purchased at Rs 37,700 apiece, are more expensive than the Rs2,200 indigenous product developed by Tata for use in India’s schools. Possible cuts and commissions by middlemen, and allegations of unfair distribution, also cannot be ruled out. But this too is a peripheral matter.

Instead, the central question is: how exactly are these laptops to combat poverty and ignorance, or improve education? The answer is not clear in any developing country but is even muddier in Pakistan. The purchased computers did not come loaded with school books, supplementary educational materials, or programmes like “Comic Life” which make math learning fun. There are no locally-developed programmes, and none in Urdu or any local language. Nor have schoolteachers been trained to deal with computers as a teaching tool. Of course, there will be some Google searching and perhaps some educational material will be downloaded. But overwhelmingly they will be used for chatting, surfing, or video games.

The false notion of technology as a magic wand has made our rulers euphoric from time to time. Few Pakistanis will remember the bulk purchase of Apple-II C computers for schools at the end of the 1980s. General Ziaul Haq’s minister of education, Dr Muhammad Afzal, (now deceased), was a progressive man in a religiously-charged government. Somehow he was seized with the notion that computers would revolutionise everything. In one of my occasional meetings with him, I unsuccessfully sought to persuade him that his idea was fundamentally flawed. Sadly, the warning turned out to be correct: it is likely that many machines were not even turned on before they were junked en masse 10-15 years later.

Earlier on, a still bigger revolution had been promised. *Pakistan Television* was founded on the premise that its core purpose would be education. At the invitation of the Pakistan government, a Unesco team visited Pakistan and met with the ministers of law, broadcasting, and education. In a subsequent report the team leaders, HR Cassirer and TS Duckmanton, wrote:

“We arrived in Lahore on October 10, 1960, where we were the guests of the Regional Director of Radio Pakistan, as well as the Provincial Department of Education. We pursued our consultations with officials concerned with the following: university and college education, primary and secondary education, vocational education, village aid, broadcasting, the Arts Council”. The report document does not even mention entertainment or news broadcasts, but has paragraphs on how telecourses should be conducted.

But *PTV* never made a sizeable contribution to education. For 50 years its broadcast content has been almost exclusively entertainment and news. In this period *PTV* has produced only two documentary serials that sought to popularise science for the general public, one in 1994 and the other in 2002. I can testify that these had the lowest priority accorded to any programme series; for months I was given the midnight shift and would work through on the editing until morning arrived, at which point I would go bleary-eyed to teach my classes at Quaid-e-Azam University.

These negative examples do not mean that technology is valueless for education. Far from it! Distance education, conveyed via laptops and notebooks, is clearly the future. Open Course Software (OCS) from the world’s best universities brings a wealth of

knowledge to those who can absorb it; the clever instructional techniques of the Khan Academy helps millions of students across the world; and increasing interactive learning programmes are becoming more effective learning tools.

But students who benefit from internet resources already know what they are looking for; they have already achieved a certain level. A digital utopia cannot be constructed on a shaky educational base such as ours. Most Pakistani schools do not have the bare minimum infrastructure like blackboards, toilets, library, or wall posters. More importantly, they do not have competent teachers. Expectedly, the recently released Annual Status of Education Report paints a dismal picture of basic reading and writing skills. Laptops can do nothing to improve things here.

What about well-off city schools that do have reasonable infrastructure? Unfortunately here too, the laptop can presently play only a marginal role because, with some honourable exceptions, students mostly study for grades. If grades were awarded on the basis of real learning, it would be a different matter. But where money buys marks and cheating is rampant, the incentive for self-improvement diminishes. Moreover, exams test little beyond that contained in guidebooks or prescribed textbooks. They stress memorisation rather than internalisation of concepts. I think revamping the examination system will do more good than buying a million laptops.

Of course some good does come from merely connecting children to the internet. Nicholas Negroponte of MIT, who fathered the idea of one-child one-laptop, argues that children are naturally inquisitive and access to an internet-enabled computing device is sufficient to release their creative faculties. He says somehow they will “figure it out” and “learn to learn”. But this view is excessively optimistic.

Connectivity and access, already provided by cellphones, alone does not create a thinking mind. For example, consider Darul Ulum Haqqania at Akora Khattak. This ‘Harvard of madrassas’ has produced Mullah Omar as well as other such luminaries. It is awash in computers but, even in a hundred years from now, shall not have added an iota to the stock of human knowledge.

The bottom line: good education requires planning, organisation, integrity, resources and, above all, a mindset that is oriented towards the future and not the past. Techy hi-fi stuff has glitz, but it’s really the sub-stratum of thought that matters.

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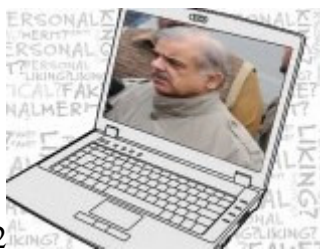
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