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Computers impacting literacy

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Illiterate today does not mean you cannot make use of 21st century technology. Let us take an example from the US that addresses its own population's level of literacy through its driving test. The country-we-would-do-anything-to-be-in has a very high school drop out rate. Also, many newcomers are not English speaking. Hence, computer programmes have been evolved that present the driving test in picture form. One only has to click on the relevant icon to obtain the US driver license. In this fashion, computers, and in particular, windows software, are designed to cater to a population that need not be literate to be able to utilise this technology.

Utility: In order to illustrate further the point that one needs not be literate to be "modern", let us move from the above scenario in the United States to a rural scene in Pakistan. The setting is a bare field in an arid area where we have engaged a contractor to build a boundary fence around a newly demarcated piece of land. He needed to work out its square footage and asked us for a calculator but I noticed he had a mobile phone with him. I told him to use the calculator built into the machine. He honestly replied that he only knew how to receive and answer calls but did not know any more of its functions. This building contractor also happens to be living in a temporary

hut, the kind that nomads build.

If I was to purchase a mobile I would have first sat down to read the instructions that come with a mobile phone on how to use it, then have tried out all its functions in order to obtain maximum utility before I actually bought the set. But here this contractor has already gone ahead and started using it. He has no permanent home yet he is connected with his professional and personal contacts.

Obviously, the ability to read and write is not a prerequisite to use modern technology. The question that arises here is should we be able to read and write before we use state-of-the-art technology?

Etiquette: Technology has its advantages and disadvantages depending on how and who is using it. Today a large segment of our population owns a mobile phone. In the middle of a meeting or conference, or in a library, etc., the obnoxious beeping of a mobile reflects on the owner's lack of etiquette in using this modern gadget.

If the owners are educated, and not just literate (or illiterate as in the case of the building contractor), they would know that without losing contact with their world they could switch off the ringer. The phone would continue to record the callers ID and the caller would also know that the call has been received. Also, when a fixed telephone is continuously busy, one can send a message that the mobile phone owner would receive the moment the set is switched on.

Ethics: Besides the obnoxious-

ness, the ringing can be dangerous when a professional, such as a surgeon, is performing sensitive work. Also, mobile phones ring by emitting radioactive waves that cause damage to the internal organ closest to the pocket where stored. Furthermore, what we must keep in mind is that to get away from the ever-increasing disease of stress, one must occasionally get away from technology, switch off those computers and mobiles, and give one's mind and body a break. Thus, we must remember to turn off the ringer when etiquette or ethics require it.

It is not that technology — or for that matter, education — is good or bad, it is merely a tool of empowerment; its ethics depends upon its use or misuse. For instance, a thief can use a mobile phone to coordinate with his helpers to conduct a robbery yet the victim can also use it to summon help.

Why should we make being educated a condition to accessing a computer? Computers can play that vital and much desired role of promoting education by making learning interesting. Parents can also be motivated to place their offspring at the same level of skills and respect as privileged children. A child need not wait to go through the various stages of literacy, education, technical advancement that can take generations to achieve through conventional methods. Every child should have access to a computer, to use it to better oneself and

earn respect.

An active member of the civil society recently pointed out to us: "can you imagine the tremendous impact that a single computer would have in a village school? These children yearn to just touch a computer and we in the cities can easily donate, as zakat, a machine to such schools." Innumerable children could be empowered by that one machine.

No doubt that is true but would the politics of that school give the children permission to touch the computer or would the machine be placed in the school master's room for his use only? The solution is very simple: donate not one but two computers!

Returning to the issue of ethics, in response to my article "Do We Value Education?" someone quoted his own dilemma when he came across an educated youth waiting to be hired as a labourer on daily wages basis at Peshawar Mor, Islamabad. He took some work from him but paid him off within the hour simply because he felt uncomfortable knowing the worker was overqualified for a menial job. This is clearly lack of confidence within us and of the labourer. Let the labourer earn an honest living. Give him an extra buck and say those most needed words, "shabash!" Try to find him a better job, or next time, give him a task to prove his ability. Or maybe you have another solution?

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