

LAPTOPS WILL NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM

BOB ZASLAVSKY

The phrase “failure to connect the dots” became a flashpoint in the earlier recriminations surrounding our preparedness (or lack thereof) for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The phrase needs to gain greater currency because many of the failures of policy makers—on both sides of the aisle—and citizens can be attributed also to a failure to connect the dots, whether they be the dots of climate change or of misallocation of government funds or of lapses in professional ethics (among office holders, journalists, teachers, students, and others) or—and this is my current concern—of education reform.

In the initial weeks of May, three such dots have been reported without being thematized, let alone connected. First, the Liverpool, N.Y., Central School District has joined a small but growing movement to phase school-provided laptops out of its system. Second, the poor performance of students on the newly introduced grammar section of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) was publicized. And third, the intention was announced in Georgia to raise the standards for earning a high school diploma (and objections thereto were raised).

What story do these dots tell?

They tell us that a focus on technology as a magic wand to cure our educational ills is misguided, that we are still failing to provide students with the essential foundations of learning that would make even the use of technology productive, and that there are simultaneously a blind groping toward change and a resistance to the systemic reform without which intelligent changes cannot be made.

As far as technology is concerned, there is already a growing body of research that indicates that there is no difference in student academic achievement between schools whose students use laptops and schools whose students do not. The anecdotal evidence from Liverpool Central School District confirms my own experience supervising students (high school seniors) using a program called—forgive them their ignorance—PLATO. The purpose of this program was to allow students who had failed classes to retake them on the computer so that they could graduate on time. Although there was virtually no audio component, each student was provided with a set of headphones. Consequently, the students spent most of their time downloading and listening to music, and looking for as much soft-core pornography as they could find. The Liverpool Central students did the same. Predictably, graduation rates did not increase appreciably.

I am no Luddite, and I am as dependent on my iMac as one can be—for writing, research, and e-mail. Nonetheless, in my PLATO classes, I confiscated the headphones and disabled both the music and internet capabilities on each computer. The other teachers in the program were either unaware or indifferent, and inevitably, the next day, I would have to repeat the process since the students—most of whom could not write a coherent English sentence—could re-enable those programs.

The lesson here is that one should not use a tool in a classroom unless one has the know-how and will to short-circuit its possible misuses and an educational framework within which its use will be meaningful.

As far as grammar is concerned, the resistance in the educational establishment to teaching this fundamental knowledge is criminal. Even after the FCAT results were made public, a chorus of voices—ranging from individual teachers and administrators to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, of which I confess myself to have been—out of professional obligation—a member)—arose to fly in the face of the results and declare that grammar neither should nor need be taught as a separate subject because it is too mechanical, too onerous, too ineffective, and too rule-bound.

One would think that the abysmal results of not teaching grammar would be now so manifest that educators would demand its reinstatement in the curriculum. After all, teaching it cannot produce worse results than not teaching it, so we have nothing to lose.

However, they do not, perhaps because—despite their rationalizations—they do not know it themselves and feel uncomfortable with it. They are like the blind men in the room with the elephant, except that they claim that the actual elephant is irrelevant and each blind man is right enough.

In addition, their response does not gibe with my own experience of elementary school. One of the things that my contemporaries and I remember most fondly is parsing words and diagramming sentences. We genuinely enjoyed it!

Please, let us bring grammar back. It is foolish to think that language is the only game that one can play without having to know the rules.

As far as Georgia’s desire to toughen its requirements for a high school diploma is concerned, the impulse is correct, but the plans for implementing it are timid and incoherent. Without systemic reform from kindergarten up, it will result only in increasing the dropout rate. Focusing on high school is simply not enough. We need higher uniform standards from bottom to top. Without them, the goal of equal educational opportunity for all is a will o’ the wisp.

Bob Zaslavsky is a retired teacher of our much-neglected humanities.