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## Notes on the ASAIHL Seminar Workshop

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## Notes and Comments

### Notes on the ASAIHL Seminar-Workshop\*

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

The Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) has held 30 international seminars in the 22 years of its existence. The 15-17 December 1977 Seminar-Workshop was the first to be held in Cebu, and the first to be held in the Philippines outside of Manila. The seminar theme was "Interdisciplinarity in Higher Education." There were 35 foreign delegates, 75 delegates from Philippine schools, and some 75 observers, mostly from Philippine schools. No doubt because of the Cebu location and the large number of local observers (previous conventions had limited the number of observers) the Seminar was 80 percent Filipino. This had an impact on the seminar, since the papers were largely international and Asian, but the discussion from the floor and in the group meetings reflected largely Filipino concerns. The Cebu location and the unexpected number of delegates also had an effect on the logistics of the convention. The opening session suffered through a two hour brownout (apparently a daily Cebu occurrence), and the convention sessions were plagued by microphone problems. The seminar organizers continued to play with cordless microphones throughout the sessions which either did not work or drowned out the speakers with static and feedback. The group sessions involved 180 delegates holding five group meetings in one crowded meeting hall!

### OPENING SESSION

The opening session was chaotic. Fr. Margarito Alingasa, of San Carlos, the seminar director, made a noble apology for the delay

\*Held 15-17 December 1977 in Cebu City.

in the opening ceremonies, for the lack of seminar papers, and the inability of the hotel to provide food for all participants. The foreign delegates were polite about the inconveniences and most of the Philippine delegates laughed it off. The opening session finally got underway with the invocation by His Eminence Julio Cardinal Rosales of Cebu and greetings from Dr. Aurelio Tino, regional director, Department of Education and Culture, Region 7. ASAIHL President, Dr. Swasdi Skulthai of Mahidol University, Thailand, formally opened the seminar and Father Alingasa then proceeded to introduce the seminar participants, individually by name and school — all 175 of them! All this was necessary since Dr. Onofre Corpuz, president of the University of the Philippines, who was to deliver the keynote address, had not yet arrived from Manila. He finally began his speech at 11:30 A.M. (One foreign delegate took me aside later in the seminar and asked me what the political implications were of Dr. Corpuz's late arrival!)

#### KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Dr. Corpuz made two main points in his 30-minute talk. Interdisciplinarity must be founded on strong disciplines and interdisciplinarity is not viable unless the disciplines remain. Professor R. Johnson of Australia's National University emphasized the same point later in the conference when he commented that interdisciplinarity needs a strong base in one discipline, and successful interdisciplinarity must emphasize the intrinsic worth of a discipline, its unity and its complex coherence. In the open forum on the first day of the seminar, Arthur Yao of the University of Hong Kong commented that "we shall probably come to the conclusion at the end of this seminar that we have to have both interdisciplinarity and strong disciplines." And in fact, the seminar did come to that conclusion, a compromise of interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity, and a gradual strengthening of interdisciplinarity while disciplines remain. This conclusion was reached in almost all the group meetings on the second day of the seminar, and echoed in the group reports on the final day.

#### COUNTRY REPORTS

The country reports were generally triumphalist, listing the various efforts at interdisciplinarity in different countries through-

out Southeast Asia. Not surprisingly, the prepared papers were generally a waste of time, since it was not clear what was expected and they were most often superficial. Since they were named only at the last minute the reactors had little time to digest the prepared paper. Most of them opted to give a speech in their own right which had little connection, if any, with the prepared paper, or to list in rather boring fashion the main points made by the original paper. Of some interest in the country reports was Professor Hsueh's description of the International Studies Program at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Professor Yao's explanation of the program in Urban Studies at the University of Hong Kong. Paitoon Sinlarat of Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, made a telling point when he commented that all the readings provided as background for the delegates to the convention were written by western scholars and based on western models. (As a neutral observer I was tempted to ask a Malaysian delegate about the political implications of *two* country reports being given from Malaysia!)

#### GROUP MEETINGS

A summary of the discussion in Group A, "Interdisciplinarity and the Humanities," which I attended may be of some interest. It was striking how the problems which surfaced in Group A were reflected in the other groups as well, and in the discussion throughout the convention as a whole.

The group was the largest of all — 48 participants. The size of the group and the physical arrangements complicated the exchange of ideas, but the experience was eminently successful. The group spent an hour and fifteen minutes trying to decide what to talk about. The suggestions were as numerous as the participants and as varied as their cultural and intellectual background. The resulting chaos of ideas — itself a reflection of one of the most serious criticisms leveled against interdisciplinarity — was in many ways the most profitable part of the session. The group accepted two assumptions: (1) The Kaufman definition of the humanities as including philosophy and theology, literature and history, and the arts; and (2) the multifaceted definitions of interdisciplinary, multidiscipline, pluridiscipline, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity (ah! such jargon!) of Swora and Morrison, from the

background readings given to all delegates. It was surprising that in a group of humanists, notorious for their quibbling over definitions, the suppositions were accepted without discussion.

As the discussion progressed, three ideas gradually emerged from the chaos: (1) an affirmation that there was little need to discuss the interdisciplinary nature of the humanities themselves since they are by definition, and in fact, the most obviously interdisciplinary of all disciplines; (2) the need to discuss the interdisciplinary nature of the humanities in relation to the other disciplines; and (3) most importantly, after some very interesting discussion, the general acceptance of the humanities as *Geisteswissenschaften* – or “Spiritual Sciences,” as opposed to the social sciences and the natural sciences. As one participant put it, “the humanities must ask the ‘fundamental question’ – whence man and hence man?” This was underlined by Dr. Skulthai’s plea, commenting on the group report, for “religion to give us a goal.”

The participants spent the second hour and fifteen minutes of the group session discussing the C. P. Snow dichotomy between the two cultures. Why is there a split between the humanities and the sciences? There was much discussion of whether the split was real or apparent, semantic or actual, Eastern or Western, Platonic or Aristotelian. The discussion was highlighted by several intriguing diagrams on the board of Man, Knowledge, and Life. Some conclusions slowly emerged: The need to integrate man, to bring the two cultures – humanities and sciences – into harmony in man, and the goal of education – especially of higher education in the convention theme – as aimed at producing the harmonious, integrated man.

The group moved on to a discussion of the obstacles to this integration which were enumerated as follows: the emphasis of present-day education on conceptualization without experience, the failure of all disciplines to focus on man, the inability of teachers to present this integration, and practical problems like employers and society who do not want “Integrated Man” but “Utilitarian Man.” Solutions to the problems were briefly discussed toward the end of the final session of the group meeting. They included: a reaffirmation of “experiential” education, the need of the university to redefine its goals and to reemphasize its role as an agent of change, and educational autonomy, free from employer, societal, and governmental pressures or decrees. The

most important need was for established educational institutions to change, while maintaining and sharpening the essential focus on the harmonious man.

Perhaps the greatest result of the discussion in Group A was the exchange of ideas which cannot be tabulated in a list of problems and solutions. The discussion itself was interdisciplinary of the highest order. There was a physicist advocating a return to basic moral questions, a westerner asking for a return to eastern values, and an easterner advocating a turn to western technology, a linguist proposing problems of semantics, an economist wondering why his discipline was not humanistic, and many classroom teachers asking for a reemphasis of human values. The group discussion was so successful in Group A that perhaps we should have spent less time in the convention listening to speeches and more time simply talking to each other.

#### THE PHILIPPINE REPORT

Because of its relevance to the local situation, a brief summary of the Philippine report, delivered by Dr. Proceso U. Udarbe of Silliman University, might be of some value. In one of the more honest statements of the convention, Dr. Udarbe said: "If interdisciplinarity in higher education has reached the stage of adolescence in other Asian countries, my assessment, as far as the Philippines is concerned, is that it is in its infancy, or probably to be more accurate with respect to most schools of higher learning, it is still in its embryonic stage." Dr. Udarbe then went on to list the difficulties with the acceptance of interdisciplinarity in the Philippines (which, in my opinion, are also the problems of a good deal of Philippine education in general). The main problem, of course, is financial. Interdisciplinary and humanities programs often turn out to be the most expensive. It is almost always far cheaper *not* to change the established and traditional methods of teaching. As Dr. Udarbe summarized it: "Innovate *and* perish." The second difficulty is that the traditional Philippine system has always placed a priority on the discipline. Thirdly, the employer expectations demand that students be trained in practical, utilitarian skills. The employer most often will want a skilled employee, not necessarily an educated man. Dr. Udarbe then went on to discuss the fourth problem which is the lack of freedom in

curriculum construction, basically because of the relatively short time given to formal education in the Philippines when compared with other countries.

Despite these obstacles there are possibilities for interdisciplinarity in the Philippines. The "underlying and basic factor is the emphasis on national development," Dr. Udarbe pointed out. "For education to make its contribution to national development, the overall strategy has been interdisciplinary." National development demands a focus on the future, on *human* problems, and ruralization of curricula, which should lead inevitably to the interdisciplinary approach. Among examples of this type of approach in the Philippines, Dr. Udarbe listed the efforts of PAGE (Philippine Association of Graduate Education), the Institute of Asian Studies at the University of the Philippines, and the IDEA (Institute for the Development of Educational Administrators) program at Xavier University, and interdisciplinary programs at the universities of Ateneo de Manila, San Carlos, Silliman, and De La Salle.

It seems that the Philippine situation is rather critical, at least in the minds of many of the Philippine delegates on the floor and in the group meetings. Revitalization of the educational system is imperative, before Philippine educators can begin to think of interdisciplinarity in the strict sense of the term. First, as Dr. Corpuz pointed out in his keynote address, the disciplines must be strengthened. It is my own opinion, that perhaps national development poses as much of a threat to genuine education as it encourages interdisciplinarity in the view of Dr. Udarbe.

#### POLITICAL OVERTONES

The seminar-workshop nearly foundered on political reefs at two or three points. After a long and wearying first day of late starts, brownouts, static from wireless mikes and lengthy country reports, the first question from a Filipino delegate on the floor was why an organization like ASAIHL should not attack problems like political dependence and economic exploitation instead of talking about "bourgeois nonsense" like interdisciplinarity. In the face of Asian hospitality, and after a brief response that questioned the "hostility" of the question, the matter was quickly swept under the carpet. But the problem re-emerged in the remarks

of Dr. Skulthai on the following day when he commented about the need of "relevance." We must stress "how" to solve our problems, and question what is the national interest. "We have done it wrongly in the past," he said and must "work for the benefit of the masses. Knowledge is not enough. We must also *do*. We must concentrate on day-to-day problem solving." The problem came to a head on the final day of the seminar when another Filipino delegate expressed "uneasiness" about the seminar and questioned the "stupidity" of national educational policy and the "rigidity of bureaucratic structures," the "anarchic forces of the market" which foster educational courses like tourism and hotel management, and the control of research by those who control economic resources. Although the remarks appeared to have justification in the first paragraph of the seminar-workshop rationale ("... world wide concern over the seeming inadequacy of higher education in meeting the urgent problems of mankind"), Dr. Skulthai felt it necessary in his closing remarks to the convention to plead for the independence of ASAIHL from all political concerns.

### CONCLUSION

Not much was accomplished if the Cebu ASAIHL Seminar-Workshop is to be measured by a list of resolutions or even of practical suggestions. Its chief value lay in gathering together a number of stimulating minds from different cultures and countries of Southeast Asia. The resulting exchange of ideas was itself the chief benefit of the convention.