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Putting Communication and Information Skills in the Mainstream of 21st Century Culture in Developing Countries

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Asia's Information Marketplace, Race for Technology, Content and Competence
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SOME PHENOMENA IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES' MODERNIZING SOCIETIES

- Urbanization, industrialization
- Traffic, commuting public
- Fastfoods
- Long-distance relationships – family, friendships
- Teleconferencing – in the work area
- Home-based employment/work
- Overpopulation – in schools (open university)
- Information-based employment, mid-career shifts (high demand for HRD/adult education)
- Multiple occupations, including volunteerism
- Public R&D and efforts to make it relevant to society
- Crisis management
- Environmental degradation
- Moral “plurality”/degradation
- Popular culture vs. national identity/ethnicity
- Overpopulation and its plurality vis a vis participative/democratic decision-making; in delivery, marketing of services e.g., health aside from education
- Food and goods production, processing, marketing
- Unifying a diverse population

DEVELOPMENT MODELS/SCENARIOS

- Multiplicity in one world (Servaes, 1992)
- Justice, sustainability, inclusiveness (Korten, 1989)

CADIZ / AMIC 7th Annual Conference / 21-23 May 1998 / Bangkok, Thailand
1. The PEACE Network (People Engaged in Active Community Experience) (Habito et al., 1996)
BARRIERS that communication and information technologies TRANSCEND

- Space
- Time
- Literacy
- Numbers

ALLOWING (Functions of media in society)

- Free choice
- Participation/involvement
- Socialization/acculturation
- Education
- Entertainment
- Agenda-setting
- Conflict management/negotiation
- Integration/unification
- Etc.

DRAWBACKS/ISSUES

- Access to com/info techs (lack of capital)
- Hardware phobia
- Limited telecommunications services
- Limited government support in the development of communication/education facilities

OPPORTUNITIES

- Active NGO sector
- Empowerment of local governments and their receptive leaderships
- The education sector as a pervasive force
- Investment in communication infrastructure
- Society's informatization
- Information wealth
- Emerging technopolises
THE TECHNOPOLIS

The geographic center of the process of commercialization of new technologies (Smilor, Kozmetsky and Gibson, 1988 as cited by Santos, 1996).

Characteristics (Santos, 1996)

- presence of major research institutions
- private-public linkages
- strong entrepreneurial environment
- large pool of technical and scientific labor

THE CIVIC INDEX (Rood, no date; National Civic League, 1994)

Indicates strength of civic infrastructure/citizenship in a community or society

- Citizen participation
- Community leadership
- Government performance
- Civic education
- Power sharing
- Community information sharing
- Capacity for cooperation and consensus
- Community vision and pride
- Ownership of important initiatives
- Volunteerism and philanthropy
- Intergroup relations
- Inter-community cooperation

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SKILLS NEEDED TO ENHANCE CITIZENSHIP

- Numeracy, literacy
- Negotiation
- Interpersonal skills — courtesies, ethics, facilitation, assertiveness, listening, expression, nonverbal communication
- Foundation values: integrity, golden rule
- Information utilization skills: reading maps, directories, knowing where and how to access information
- Computeracy
- Mass media literacy
- Media skills: composing, visualizing, audio communication, visual and audio literacy and design
- Cyber literacy
Fig. 2. Schematic diagram of the Information Network for Technology, Education and Research Communication (INTERCOMM) Foundation of Laguna, Philippines (INTERCOMM, 1998).
Fig. 3. A scheme for enhancing communication and information skills toward enhanced citizenship in a developing country.
Conclusion

In this information age, communication and information are imbedded in all forms of activity where our capability to participate effectively in society necessitates communication skills and literacy in its technologies. The emerging information culture, which has become inevitable with the information and communication technologies coming into the mainstream of our day-to-day existence, similarly calls for equipping everyone with communication and information skills and literacy.

We who call ourselves "experts" in communication and information no longer have a monopoly on these fields as the rest of the population attains the same expertise, if not better, even without formal training. One of our current agendas is to multiply ourselves, making everyone else effective communicators and information processors and users.

To enhance citizenship through people’s enhanced communication and information skills, a basic requirement is access to the new communication and information technologies. As these technologies pervade our societies they become part and parcel of our culture. In the process we learn and can even become adept in taking the best advantage of them, while perhaps taking them for granted as "givens", just like in Western society.

However, this is not so in the greater parts of developing countries like the Philippines. It is up to the people to innovate ways of enhancing citizenship skills tapping the communication and information technologies. An example is the INTERCOMM, a network of development-oriented nongovernment organizations in Laguna Province, Philippines (Fig. 2). The idea of establishing telephone centers in the rural areas is another example, as well as the setting up of regional R & D information services in countryside settings nationwide.

This is not saying that the communication and information technologies are all that are needed in enhancing citizenship in this era of voluntarism where people power is considered an advantage. Greater cognizance of the role of communication and information is imperative, and its "software" aspects like interpersonal communication skills, as well as encoding and decoding skills for enhanced understanding and motivation.

The proposed scheme in Fig. 3 displays varied alternative ways of teaching communication and information skills and literacy for enhanced citizenship. It emphasizes the integration of formal, nonformal and informal learning of these skills. The scheme shows that we ought to apply communication strategizing to promoting communication and information skills also, aside from other areas of development such as agriculture, family health, nutrition, and citizenship.
Fig. 3 does not explicitly show the messages that need to be imparted, which are actually embodied in the civic index and the communication and information skills earlier listed (p. 4). Further, the interaction among various sectors namely the schools, developmental nongovernment and peoples’ organizations, local governments, government agencies, media organizations, private business, and so on, are not apparent. Their networking and partnerships are implied, with the likes of the PEACE Network (Fig. 1) and INTERCOMM (Fig. 2), where such would be most active in technopolises.

To sum up, one of our current challenges as communicators is to promote our discipline and craft to the wider populace, hoping to make everyone else skilled in communication and information utilization, if not expert in these. As we do so, we would have to continue innovating schemes and techniques addressing the challenges and realities of the times. In the area of enhancing citizenship in developing countries, there remains much room for action and innovation.

Bibliography


Information Network for Technology, Education and Research Communication (INTERCOMM) Foundation of Laguna Brief, 9 p.


APPENDIX

NOTES ON THE CIVIC INDEX
(*Rood, no date; National Civic League, 1994)

* Citizen Participation

The degree of the people's participation in all aspects of community life, where citizens are players rather than spectators in democracy, and are creators and maintainers of a sense of community, of cooperation, or "working together-ness".

Some guide questions: Do citizens volunteer to serve on local boards? How visible and active are local civic groups? Do citizens know how local government works? Is participation proactive or reactive? Are citizens actively involved in major projects?

* Community Leadership

Where strong communities have wide and deep leadership, i.e., all important sectors respect and follow leaders and there are a number of persons in each sector that take responsibility and constructively seek to work out the common good.

Some guide questions: Is there active leadership from all three sectors? Is government willing to share leadership turf? Are there training programs to nurture new leaders? Is leadership results-oriented? Is leadership risk-taking? Do leaders take the long-term view? Do leaders from the three sectors work well together?

* Government Performance

Based on responsiveness to the needs of the people; efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of basic services; and fair treatment of all persons, without prejudice to social, economic, political or cultural background.

Some guide questions: Is government free of corruption? Does government address qualitative concerns about services? Is government professional and entrepreneurial? Is government responsive and accountable? Are services provided equitably? Does government consider and utilize alternative methods of service delivery? Is government a positive force in addressing community needs?

Volunteerism and Philanthropy

Caring about, and sharing resources to help one another and the community as a whole is essential to community life.

Some guide questions: Is there an active community foundation? Do local corporations have active giving programs? Does the community have longterm philanthropic goals? Do local programs encourage and honor volunteers and philanthropists? Do government and business work closely with the nonprofit sector?
Intergroup Relations

Increasing communication and appreciation among groups of varied ethnic and racial origins, socio-economic status, and religions and within the community as a whole. Some guide questions: Is the community addressing ethnic and racial diversity? Does the community promote communication among diverse populations? Do all groups have the skills to become involved in the community? Do groups cooperate in resolving broad disputes? Do small, specific conflicts escalate into larger issues? Is the community dominated by narrow special-interest groups?

*Civic Education

Encompasses information on how democratic political systems work; how the government works; information on what citizens can do to facilitate local development; how to be involved in government, in NGO-PO institutional development. Also includes a study of the current government, how it works, and how it can be improved. Participatory teaching/sharing processes facilitate shared reflection. At the highest level, it includes ongoing dialogues about the improvement of governance systems and processes that includes the government, the community and the business sectors. The local school boards are in a position to facilitate this kind of community-government exchange.

Some guide questions: Do schools promote or require community involvement? Do schools, churches, and youth agencies offer civic education? Do civic education efforts involve the entire community? Do youth have ample opportunity to engage in community service? Are schools teaching citizenship and civic responsibility?

*Community Information Sharing

Mechanisms for gathering, sharing and analyzing important information, including research, surveys, investigations, reports, publications and media as formal mechanisms and community meetings, neighborhood gossip, social events like town fiesta gatherings, weddings, birthdays at church and local association meetings as informal mechanisms.

Some guide questions: Do citizens have information they need to make good decisions? What role does government play in making information available? Do schools and libraries play a role in informing the public? Are there civic organizations designed for this purpose? Do the media cover community issues fairly? Do the media play an active and supportive role in the community?

*Capacity for Cooperation and Consensus Building

Focuses on finding common grounds and acceptable processes to agree on how to solve problems and resolve issues, based on the reality of the wide and diverse opinions and viewpoints in a community as the number of persons and the different political, social and economic persuasions.
Some guide questions: Are there neutral forums and processes where all opinions are heard? Are there informal dispute resolution processes? Do community leaders have regular opportunities to share ideas? Do all three sectors work together to set common goals? Do leaders reach collective decisions and implement them?

*Community Vision and Pride*

Collective self-esteem or community pride based on a common development vision generated through broad participatory planning processes where people are partners of government in envisioning how they want their locality to be in the future.

Some guide questions: Is there a shared sense of desired future for the community? Has the community completed a broad strategic plan? Does the community have a positive self-image? Does the community preserve and enhance what is special and unique? Does the community proactively monitor critical issues? Does the community deal with problems before they become crises?

*Intercommunity Cooperation*

Individual communities need to cooperate with each other in planning for their shared future and addressing regional needs. Some issues that are more regional than local in nature: land use, hunger, affordable housing, economic development, and environmental protection.

Some guide questions: How do local governments relate to each other? How do region-wide policy challenges get resolved? Is economic development addressed on a region-wide basis? Do leaders in the region have a common forum to discuss issues? Are any services provided on a regional basis? Are any planning activities carried out on a regional basis?

*Power Sharing*

Power-sharing happens when elected political leaders enable their constituents to do something and help steer the direction of the community.

*Ownership of Important Initiatives*

The community's acceptance, support and involvement in policy formulation and planning and development programs/initiatives.
Media Convergence:
More Cooperation
Or Clash?

Tony Wilson