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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Mohd Safar Hasim; Samsudin A. Rahim</td>
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Communication And Development:
Developing A Curriculum Of The Future

by

Mohd Safar Hasim,
Samsudin A Rahim
Plenary Session 3

**Communication and Development:**

**Developing A Curriculum of the Future***

By

Mohd. Safar Hasim and Samsudin A. Rahim

Department of Communication

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

1. Introduction

In the last two decades or so we see tremendous development in communication technology. New technologies are now being used in the process of editing, printing, publishing and transmission of news, information, graphics and photographs, etc. These new technologies are revolutionising most forms of mass communication. With the advent of desk-top publishing, a mushrooming of publishing outfits are taking place to cater to the need of communication. Writing and editing and publishing are going beyond the newspaper offices. In terms of information, more and more emphasis are being given to business and financial information. We also see the merging of print and electronic media through teletext. Most recently with the advent of satellite communication people can witness events or news as it happens.

While the technologies are moving forward in leaps and bounds, the communication education has not been matching this development. This paper is of the view that communication education should keep up with the development of communication technology and the development per se. An increasing number of

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employment opportunities are opening up in the communication field, such as publishing, film and video. People need to be educated to fill up these vacancies. As knowledge become more specialised, more and more communicators are being sought. We feel communication and communication education will become more and more important.

2. Communication and information development vis-a-vis economic development

Communication and information development is expected to be correlated with economic development. Rahim and Pennings (1987) found that informational indicators such as number of computers and number of telephones and information labour force have an almost perfect rank-order correlation to per capita GNP and life expectancy. ASEAN countries which are experiencing a dynamic economic growth is expected to have about 14 million work force classified as information workers. Rahim and Pennings noted that 4 million information workers will be dealing with creating, compiling, processing, packaging, storing and disseminating information and knowledge needed in management, marketing, educational and other economic and social services. The remaining 10 million will be clerical and sales related workers.

Along with the increasing number of labour force involved in information sector comes new demand within the communication industry to disseminate information. According to Wurman (1990) there are three kinds of business that have to do with the dissemination of information: businesses of storage, transmission, and understanding. While the first two businesses are easily recognized and organized with advancement of telecommunication facilities and computers, the understanding business is still widely untapped. Wurman suggests that we need understanding
business devoted to making information accessible and comprehensible, new ways to interpret the data and new models to make it usable and understandable.

The importance of understanding business is twofold. First, information not understood by its consumers is useless and irrelevant in a country's development. With proper understanding, an individual could be inspired and motivated to participate in various development activities ranging from social, agricultural to financial activities. Since the key word in development is participation, collectively individual understanding and participation could lead to better progress. Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad when launching the silver jubilee celebration of the national news agency BERNAMA said, "if information was used wisely and imparted to the people in a wide, objective and accurate manner it would help towards producing a well-informed society. A community which is rich in information and knows how to use it will become progressive" (New Straits Times, June 3 1993).

Malaysia has set its development agenda to be an industrialised country by the year 2020. The decision to venture into industrialisation has had a sound effect on the economy which is experiencing a good growth (more than 8%) in the gross domestic product (GDP). With this growth rate it is expected that the information sector will also grow.

3. Communication education in Malaysia

Adhikarya (1983) provides a comprehensive picture on the communication education in ASEAN covering its origin, curriculum and teaching priority, and knowledge utilization. This is based on a study involving 100 ASEAN communication scholars on whose needs and interests should be given priority in determining their communication schools' educational objectives, directions, and curriculum. His study
shows that 54 percent of the scholars mentioned mass media industry's need, while 42 percent mentioned students' needs. With regard to the scholars' perception of their students' occupational goals, majority of them perceived that their students wanted to be public relation practitioner, journalist, public information officer, advertising practitioner, development communication workers and broadcast producers.

The priority and perceptions of educational goals of 20 years ago, are still the same confronting us today. In Malaysia, the first communication programme was introduced in 1970. Although 23 years has since passed and the communication programme has come into "adulthood", nothing much has changed in terms of curriculum development and courses offered. It is safe to say that the curriculum offered at the first communication programme in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 1970 has become the focal reference for other communication schools in Malaysia. Even the communication programme at the International Islamic University set up in 1991 still shows traces of USM's curriculum. With slight variations, most communication schools offer majors in broadcasting, journalism, advertising, public relations and development communication.

Studies by Sharifah (1988) and Yusuf (1983) indicate that 35 percent of the communication graduates from local universities perceived that the communication education they received did not sufficiently prepare them for employment in the industry. Among communication practitioners representing journalism, broadcasting, advertising and public relations agencies, 69 percent perceived that the curriculum of communication education was not sufficient to prepare students for employment. It has been several years since those studies were conducted and the same comment is being echoed now.
While there is a need to ensure that communication curriculum should meet demand of the industry and a country's development, we disagree that the curriculum should be tailored for a specific profession in the industry. We opt for an integrative and commonalities base curriculum as against a media-based curriculum. According to Quebral (1987), "a curriculum is not just the constituent courses,...in truth, (it is) the entire experience that the students undergo in the learning environment."

Two reasons why the integrative and Commonalities approach is being advocated. In the past, careers in the newspaper industry among other things were limited to being reporters, sub-editors, editors, etc. and in the electronic media, broadcast journalists and producers. However, with the emergence of mediated media such as computers, a host of other careers are opening up while other careers are becoming obsolete. For instance, some job functions in the newspapers like lay-out artists are now being taken over by computers where lay-out can be done more efficiently. In the electronic media, one man can manage a continuity suite instead of several personnels in the past.

Many communication graduates find employment not in the media industries. Nevertheless, they are related to communication. Many of them landed themselves in administration and management positions which require usage of communication skills, such as in charge of publication, production of audio visual, etc. The curriculum being advocated should prepare them not only for media related profession but also those outside the media which require communication skills and knowledge.

4. Integrative and Commonalities-based Curriculum

Journalism and mass communication as a practice has ancient origins, but as an academic subject, not only is it fairly new but also it is unique to the United States in
its development (Newsom, 1985). Now it has been exported to other countries like Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and lastly Singapore where it is showing up in higher education as an academic subject. However, according to Newsom, it is still a long way from acceptance in the academy. Newsom gave three reasons for this questionable status:

1. Mass Communication borrows theories from a variety of other disciplines, most of them in the social sciences.
2. Further complicating the matter is the split in teaching of communication theories between programmes of journalism, mass communication and speech (human) or interpersonal communication; i.e. failure to establish a solid theoretical base.
3. Failure to replicate (what has been appropriated), to codify and to originate.
4. Not helping the matter is the failure of the mass communication components with ties in specific industries to establish themselves as professions.

Newsom mentioned three possible solutions:

1. Back to the basics, i.e. re-absorption of studies in journalism/mass communication into classical disciplines. The whole area could become a sub-set of sociology, for example like social work, or could go piecemeal into political sciences, history, sociology, English, etc.
2. Establishments of a few large umbrella mass communication schools that are primarily research oriented but tied to the industry because that is what industry needs most from the academy - not entry level job applicants.
3. Fragmentation of some schools with specialization on the various areas like newspapers, magazines, photojournalism and broadcast, with the management of all these in one school.
Contrary to what Newsom feels about communication education, we feel communication education is here to stay. But we have to be responsive to the changes taking place. Instead of going back to the basics, or establishing a large umbrella mass communication school or fragmentation, we should embark on changes of a different form: one that will meet present and future changes and at the same time be acceptable in the academy.

A study carried out by Blanchard and Christ (1985) revealed that Journalism and Mass Communication curricula in the United States suggests a great variety of approaches - ranging from considerable specialization and atomization to integration and coherence.

First, some curricula have no core offerings or requirements. Here the students go directly into a speciality or sequence without a course required for all students. Secondly, once in a sequence or speciality, some students in some units are required to take courses considered basic to their chosen speciality. Thirdly, some schools have universal core curricula. This is usually one or more courses, or set of courses in a functional area, that are required in a multiple-sequence school. There are at least three rationales for universal cores - utilitarian, introduction/orientation and integrative.

Some universities in the United States have carried out comprehensive attempts to identify commonalities and integrate functions, in communication education. These universities, like the University of Minnesota and Indiana University are leading the way into the 21st Century (Blanchard and Christ, 1985).

University of Minnesota requires courses in introduction to mass communication, visual communication; generic, integrated writing; history and law
case studies; researching sources and other systematic information gathering methodology; and mass communication process and structure.

Indiana University offers a universal core with courses titled communication in American Civilization, writing for mass media, visual communication and communication law. In addition, students are required to take one course from a functional set of both reporting and editing courses. For example, the options for the reporting requirement are newspaper reporting, magazine reporting, broadcast reporting and photojournalism reporting. The courses mentioned appear to be aimed at communication students with different background and interests. The Integrative function of the universal core seems to be an attempt to identify the commonalities that lie at the foundation of the discipline.

At Trinity University a similar approach has been carried based on a universal core curriculum. In formulating its universal core curriculum, Trinityargued that it was more practical and efficient to reduce duplication than to support increasingly artificial differences among sequences (Blanchard and Christ, 1985). Many practices share common concepts and skills that can and should be taught to students before they are forced to make career choices, which according to Blanchard and Christ "may not exist ten years from now." They contended that undergraduate students will best be served in the 21st Century by curriculum which emphasizes the commonalities of the communication fields - regardless of the diversity of delivery systems and career labels. We subscribe to this view.

It is instructive to know that at Trinity, the faculty took three years to grapple with the problem of integration of knowledge and skills and, on the other hand, the nurturing of specialities. As a result, they developed a curriculum with a universal core that allows the development of specialities within the context of liberal arts and
sciences education. The courses are divided into universal core courses, second-tier core (or major courses), and electives.

The course are related to four conceptual and applied areas or functions that are fundamental to all communication fields:

1. **Media Studies and Theories** - history, public policy, structure, organization, technologies, ethics, law and regulation, social and aesthetic functions of communication systems and media.

2. **Media Management and Research** - research and policy making in contemporary communication media and media-related organizations.

3. **Media Writing** - writing skills essential for professional competence.

4. **Media Production** - procedures and skills in audio, print and video communication.

In the first instance, students are required to take five universal core courses, the first three being entry core and the last two being exit core:

1. **Mass Media: Process and Effects**
   
   This is a media studies and theory course, an integrative core, emphasising commonalities among the communication media and media-related institutions. It is an introductory course.

2. **Sight, Sound and Motion**
   
   This is an introduction to specialities in audio and video production, photography and graphics. It also has an integrative function by emphasising common concepts among those specialities.

3. **Media Writing**
It is an essentially skills course. It also is an introduction to the variety of writing forms in the media, including magazine, news, feature and radio and television.

4. Communication Law

It is a media studies and theory course that also serves both utilitarian and integrative functions with its essential legal concepts common to most communication fields.

5. Senior Research Seminar

It is identified with the management and research category. It also serves integrative and capstone functions by requiring students to synthesize their research projects with their previous academic work and career goals.

After the entry courses, the students are required to take second tier core (or major) where they will select one course in each of the functional areas - theory, management, writing, and production. They will supplement these courses with electives within and outside the faculty.

The integrative and commonalities approach as suggested by the Trinity University deserves a serious look. Efforts to overhaul communication curriculum, apart from making it more integrative, should also try to indigenize the communication education and communication theory. We should give more emphasis to the local content, like communication history, case studies, etc.

However, too much emphasis on indigenization of communication curriculum will not be good because we may lose touch with the international perspectives. This is because many of the theoretical propositions originated from the West. However, in adopting these propositions we may need to adapt to local conditions. In the final analysis it is the communicator conscientization of their cultural context to use
appropriate communication skills and knowledge in dealing with a situation determine the success of communication education.

5. Conclusion

New technologies in communication will continue to be found. Some of these technologies will open new horizons, as such creating new careers. At the same time some careers will become obsolete. Communication educators should always be on their toes. They should take cognizance of these developments and continuously take steps to ensure that communication education will always be right behind technological developments and not rendered irrelevant by events and change.

6. Reference