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Communication Training At USM

By

Vincent Lowe
Fourteen years ago, the Universiti Sains Malaysia embarked boldly into offering a degree programme in communications. It was bold because the university had only begun its life a year before that. No full-time staff member in the field was in place as yet at the university. Malaysian society, said critics of the move, had a long way to go before they would accept as a university-taught discipline the few-fangled subject. Yet, thanks to the vision of the university leaders, we were able to develop into a full-fledged program, and we are now on the verge of an ambitious expansion programme.

The Curricula

The first curricula underwent several changes. From hastily drafted sets of courses, the curricula was revised on two or three subsequent occasions. What I am going to describe for the moment will be the present curriculum and does not involve the most recent—but still to be implemented—changes decided recently. Except for this recent proposal, each previous change, however, preserved the main emphasis and balance among the different components. Its basic philosophies did not change. The curriculum remained an integrated one (i.e. different branches of communications were taught as courses), with students being given some limited choice of more skills training blended with a broad exposure to the liberal arts. Students were exposed to laboratory situations—producing their own newspaper, radio programmes and films (some freelanced for media)—combined with the special training needs of communication. They were worked in together with other university requirements such as proficiency in language, options in social sciences and the need to offer a minor in other subjects. The structure of courses and weightage of courses in units was retained. In short,
communication was structured like any other liberal arts subject taught at the campus.

What would a student wanting to major in mass communication be required to undergo? In the first year of his four-year course, which requires a minimum of eight semesters, he would be required to pass a total of 120 units of courses to qualify for a degree. (Courses vary from two to six units each depending on a weightage calculated according to content, work required hours of classes etc.) He has his share of non-communication required courses such as Islamic civilisation and Malay language proficiency courses. In the first year, a series of foundation courses are offered which are designed to give him a basis from which to choose what discipline he should specialise in during his later years.

To qualify as a major in mass communication, the student has to pass and even do well in his first year foundation course in the subject, demonstrate above average proficiency in the national language as well as in English, and satisfy an interview panel of this commitment to the profession. Once he is admitted, he chooses from courses that are offered from each level. Compulsory courses include communication theory and research methods. All students have to follow a communication practicum sequence in the second and third years. This sequence includes journalism as a compulsory course. In addition, all majors have to be "interned" to a media organisation for a six-week period during their vacation, and in the final year, they will have to complete a supervised research project, also known as the academic exercise.

Training Approaches

From the description, it is easy to pick out some features of the training approaches used. The curricula is largely course-based. Hands-on experience is emphasised, as in the production of television programmes or a laboratory newspaper. Students go out to collect actual cases or undertake research on local communication problems. Some modifications have been made to the concept of course requirements. Instead of having only four unit courses, practicum courses are weighted for six or, in the case of the academic exercise, eight units. Practicum courses in journalism or broadcasting are year-long courses extending to both semesters. Upgrading this unit weightage of courses allows for workshop/laboratory classroom situations which take up more than the usual allotment of two hours for any one class.

The spread of courses allows for many different approaches towards learning about communications. Some
courses are theoretical, while others, especially higher level advanced courses, require actual research—or critical discussions about research. Courses taken from other disciplines broaden the academic base of the students, and allows them to adopt perspectives which will make them better media practitioners.

Professional socialisation and a "feel" for actual work conditions are provided for in the internship of students with media organisations for a six-week period between their second and third years. They themselves are free to arrange internships during their other vacation periods, or to free-lance with any media organisation throughout their period of study. In as much as this is encouraged, students should on their own develop initiative and independence.

Planning For An Information Age

Those who attended a seminar hosted by Universiti Sains --in conjunction with UNESCO and AMIC last year in Penang-- would be aware of the fact that we have been undertaking some long-range planning. Such planning was predicated on several assumptions about the future directions of communication education, given not only the coming new technologies but an assessment of their possible impact on work and occupational patterns, especially as they impinge on media organisations and the future role of universities.

It might be pertinent for me to repeat some of these assumptions. I crave the indulgence of those who have heard me say these things before. At that earlier seminar I talked of the convergence of communication modes, the marriage of the computer to telecommunications, to media channels and to networks of homes where the mundane home television set now becomes an intelligent terminal. I talked of an information economy passing through three stages, first, where a few large users of information bases are present, e.g. banks, government departments etc. Secondly, where the number of users both expands and increases. Thirdly, computer networking becomes available on a mass consumer basis.

So that we can go on to determine their impacts on both media organisations and universities, let us sketch briefly some more characteristics of an information society. The increase in computational ability will result in a burgeoning of information bases with a corresponding vast increase in all kinds of information, news and entertainment. If this assumption holds true, what impacts can we forecast for media organisations? Will the present systems of mass communications be replaced by an era of more personalised, user-determined, segmented and specialised information networks? What will be the balance in
profitability between general news as opposed to specialised business and economics information? Will there be a premium placed on a variety of entertainment programs, to extend consumer choice in an era where it is normal to have twenty or thirty switched channels?

The second not very heroic assumption that can be made is the convergence of print, video and voice communication, fused into a common stream. What impact will this have on the present institutional arrangements for radio, television, film, newspapers and telephone services?.

Internationally, what new patterns of division of labour will arise? If the key determinants to productivity and economic wealth will now depend on the ability to process, absorb and use information, what should be the development strategies for developing societies? With the increasing use of robotics, what will the comparative advantage of poor countries which have hitherto depended on cheap labour to attract transnational industries to provide employment?

I have a vision of a particularly depressing scenario where people in developed societies enjoy voluntary leisure —where the value of work and work as value loses importance—while in developing societies the retrenched and unemployed are faced with forced or enforced leisure. An alternative picture is that of mass armies of unemployed even in developed countries, who find themselves de-skilled by technologies and demoted to lower class strata than they had been used to.

Implications For Communication Education

At this point one might ask, what impact will the new information age have on communications education? Since this presentation will be at the beginning of the seminar rather than to foreclose discussion, I would like to raise a number of questions for further discussion.

1. In view of the convergence of modes in communication media, should there not be a convergence of disciplines into a broadened new field of communications, which includes both hardware and software knowledge?

2. Will changing demand patterns for information require different patterns of emphasis on different kinds of information? Will there be a premium on certain kinds of educational and professional skills, not hitherto stressed, e.g. data analysis, knowledge economics, ability to produce instrumental knowledge programmes such as Computer Assisted Instruction packages?
3. If in the new era, multi-purpose media loom large in people's lives, should there not be training in general media education, i.e. to instill discrimination in the proper use and consumption of media fare for not only entertainment but also informal education and job needs?

4. If information and communication are to be strategic resources, especially relevant for developing countries, should not universities undertake policy and planning studies? Should not universities offer courses and supervise research in this new frontier, to guide policy makers to decide how their countries can plan and benefit positively from the newly emerging international frameworks and structures?

Based on thinking in part spurred by these considerations, USM proposed a broadened curricula which, in addition to the present major, will offer the following new programmes:

Management communications
This corps of graduates will be knowledgable in the administration of media organisations. They will fill a gap long recognised but which up till now had not found a place in most communication curricula.

Development communications
This will be a special area of focus, concentrating on the purposive use of communications. We in USM feel that renewed emphasis in this area is warranted by the demand and response we have had for relevant departments and agencies providing a broad range of developing services.

Film and video communication
This will fulfil the need for more such fare in media but will also train those who can produce more instrumental communications such as anthropological, medical, and in general, educational films. Production and technical skills will be complemented by the critical study of film traditions world-wide. Technically, they will be able to handle low-cost media and will be poised to take advantage of breakthroughs in video-film transfer technology.

Film-making
This is a fully professional sequence. The curriculum will be de-structured into modules of short craft courses--e.g. sound, camera techniques, animation--to take advantage of the expertise of visiting fellows from national film institutes abroad, and without having the university commit itself to awarding degrees to anyone admitted to the programme unless the candidate meets professional standards. By de-structuring the curriculum, the university can offer film training to a variety of people for different specific
purposes, while also developing its own pool of film-makers and films.

In addition to these undergraduate majors, the university also intends to offer two master's degree programmes. One will be started first as a regional post-graduate diploma in communication policy and planning for development. This course will run in cooperation with the Institute of Social Studies at the Hague and UNESCO, and for the first two years will be funded by the Dutch Government's Overseas Development Aid Agency. The second masters degree will be offered to those who already hold undergraduate degrees in other fields and who need a professional "leavening" in order to be able to join communication professions.

It is our intention that these programmes will contribute towards a fuller national implementation of the New World Information Order in several ways. First, the national capacity to communicate will be enhanced. Second, the proposed programmes will help the country to gear itself to meet coming changes and demands for personnel in the new information era. Third, by pioneering the research and study of communication policy and planning, the university will make its courses, as well as its research, available to a wide range of policy and decision makers not only nationally but also regionally.

The post-graduate course will be culturally oriented towards the region in its choice of case materials and exercises. Efforts towards this goal have already been started in the compilation of a data base with regional characteristics to simulate actual policy and planning situations applicable to the various countries in Asia.