

# The Philippine Tertiary Education Situation in Broad Strokes<sup>1</sup>

Gail T. Ilagan

I have been tasked to discuss with you today the situation of tertiary education in the Philippines. The invitation came on a short notice. Prudence advises I should pass on this opportunity due to lack of time to thoroughly prepare. However, if there's anything that I would willingly give my wisdom tooth for, it's the chance to talk to the young rather than be subjected to the torture of dental surgery, which I had on schedule today until your invitation came along. So having said that, I hope you would allow me to charm my way through this. In return, I promise to really try and not to lend you my toothache.

What is the tertiary education situation in the Philippines these days? I'll give you the broad strokes because you are old enough and bright enough to fill in the details, and I don't think you would appreciate to be spoonfed. This is going to be depressing, but look at it this way - dealing with this first thing in the morning gives you the rest of the day to try and improve the mood. After all, when you're down, the only way to go is up.

Let me begin by absolving you of any blame. Your generation is not at fault here. You entered college at a time when the Philippine educational system still has to unshackle itself from the parameters put in place by the colonial powers that subjugated this land in centuries past. The masterful ties that ensure that their requirements continue to be served by this nation remain in place, propagated by state policies crafted to meet the interests of the first world-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Guillermo 1997).

Education is for liberation. Education is intended to give the student the knowledge and skills to prepare him for the future. It follows then that what the school tries to give you is preparation for what it

understands to be the future for you. And we say the best schools are those that equip you with life skills to allow you to care for you and yours someday.

What is this hopeful future for the Filipino as the Philippine tertiary education system understands it? Well, in a nutshell, the future for you is to be a member of the cheap exportable manpower to other countries where you will earn and send back the precious dollars to prop the Philippine economy. This future had been decided for you even before you were born.

Part of the foreign debt incurred during the Martial Law years - which each of us continues to be accountable for - had been to undertake educational reforms for this end (Lumbera 2000). Of course, part of the US\$202.7M was also used to align technical training for Philippine agriculture and industry to be reliant on surplus western technology and input that could only be provided by multinational companies.

Since the Martial Law years, the products of our tertiary school system have not been going to other countries to run their companies or to make a mark in pushing back the boundaries of knowledge or to influence the international discourse on global disarmament or environmental protection. Our people go there to work as technicians, service personnel, caregivers, cooks, and drivers (Asis 2004), and for this the nation accords them the dubious distinction of being the *bagong bayani, pag-asa ng bayan* (new heroes, the nation's hope).

Last Monday, I was at the National Statistics Office to have my daughter's birth certificate authenticated for enrolment in high school. A lot of people were there to have their birth certificates authenticated so they could apply for passports. So it does look like many want to belong to the ranks of heroes.

Labor migration is a trend that will continue. Our neocolonial worldview conspires to make this phenomenon something that will feature in our communal life for a lot longer than would be beneficial to us as a national community. As a social scientist, I cringe to envision a future when our young and vigorous are wasting away their youth and vigor exiled from their needful homeland where their strength and ability are needed to make a difference. It is like leaving the home in disarray while we go out to clean someone else's mansion.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Filipino can. The Filipino has what it takes to be more than mere technicians, service personnel,

caregivers, cooks, and drivers. This constant need to emphasize, underscore, and bludgeon to death the slogan popularized by former President Fidel V. Ramos<sup>2</sup> is an articulation of a massive inferiority complex, masking a deep-seated, hard to shake off doubt that more than likely the Filipino can't. This exhortation to exhibitionism and social ascendance<sup>3</sup> is a manifestation of resentment for the Filipino's lowly rank in current world order.

Let me be clear on this: Yes, we can. Leo Oracion, Pastor Emata and Romi Garduce - in that order - can climb the Everest. Manny Pacquiao can knock El Terrible Morales out before the tenth round. Teodoro Aragoncillo can steal US state secrets and share them with the Philippine opposition. (He got caught, but that's not the point. The point is, he could and he did, and there must be some personal pride there in his pleading guilty to the charge.)

In a nation hungry for heroes, we eagerly bask in the reflected worldclass glory of the Filipino achievers. We conveniently forget that individuals succeed in what they do largely on their own merit. For Oracion, Emata, Garduce, Pacquiao, and yes, even Aragoncillo, the only ones they needed to convince that they could do what they had to do were themselves.

Still, we have been socialized to value first and foremost someone else's opinion of our own worth. So we turn around and do our part to raise the Filipino in the estimation of the world - that is to land in the Guinness Book of World Records for the highest national average of text messages that go out in a day. Or we mount the biggest gathering for the purpose of simultaneous public kissing for and in behalf of a toothpaste company on Valentine's Day. Yes, the Lovapalooza blitz was, for all intents and purposes, a college phenomenon. This, I take it, is our understanding of how to shake the world and make it pay attention.

As I said, it is not your fault. Our socialization to life in these islands teaches us the range of acceptable values and the limits of alternatives available in the pursuit of these. As your generation works to realize your present, you cannot escape the blueprint of the values and aspirations you imbibed in socialization. Nurtured by the elite-dominated, consumption-oriented media that prepare you for secondclass citizenship in a culture alien to where we are, it is not a surprise that national surveys constantly reflect the youth's intention to be out of here<sup>4</sup> just as soon as they could.

It is also not a surprise that a significant percentage of the youth has given up on this nation even before your fight for it has begun, as evidenced by countless surveys that track the Filipino youth's pessimism over future prospects for this nation.<sup>5</sup>

In the words of national artist and UP professor Bienvenido Lumbera, "A people indoctrinated in the American way of life cannot ever assert their sovereignty over affairs of politics, economy, and culture." And, may I add, education. Not in their own country, and most especially not in the 192 countries where we find overseas Filipino workers today.

*Desperate Housewives*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Defense of the Ancients*, and all other representations of alien culture hypnotize us with instant solutions to gratify hedonistic impulses, turning us into individual cauldrons of self-absorption who neither have the time nor the inclination to look beyond ourselves and see our connection to the community and to the world. We resentfully interrupt the self-absorption to spend time in the classroom because we have to, but many of us would rather not. Of the almost two million who are in college every year to mentally wrestle with simulations of real-life problems, only around 40,000 would have the strength and wherewithal to see it to the end.

Much has been said about the decline in the quality of tertiary education in the Philippines. We can't say we did not see that coming. We used to have the National College Entrance Exam or the NCEE, but when it started to return mean performance by high school graduates that fell beneath the educational system's expected benchmark, they scrapped it in 1995 (Ilagan 2006; also Martinez 2004, 304). The bottom had fallen out, so we threw out the early warning device because it kept sounding out the warning and that was very irritating to some policy makers because it meant they were inutile at their job.

Today, we still witness the continuing downtrend in the performance of the young in math and the sciences.<sup>6</sup> Hardly a surprise. The formal classroom requires a mind that is capable of concentration, reflection, and judicious discernment. These cognitive abilities fail to unfold to their maximum potential for many schoolchildren because we increasingly exhort them to value technological shortcuts instead. When our school administrators and teachers rationalize that they could not teach well for want of first world instructional resources, it tells students that first

world technology is the be all and end all of third world education. And since the majority of our classrooms do not have these resources, the handwringing conveys to our students that their stay in the classroom is at best an exercise in futility. We forget that the mind is infinitely creative, and so we do not look to the application of the mind – both the teachers' and the learners' – for the solution to our educational crisis. True enough, when students come from culturally-deprived classrooms, they expect to come out with not much benefit from the experience, and so they don't even try.

But especially for those who were weaned on first world surplus televisions, computers, DVDs, and other newfangled gadgetry that are part and parcel of our neocolonial legacy, their ubiquitous exposure to these have conditioned their minds to want instant pushbutton solutions. We could hardly expect their young minds to devote concentration and reflection for abstract concepts, much less to apply mental effort when calculators, computers, cellphones, and external memory holders are the way to live.<sup>7</sup> We, too, do not want to know anything beyond what our technological appendages were designed to do.

Recently, alarm was raised that we are losing our edge in English proficiency. But then again, that is hardly a surprise as we don't seek to master the language in order to communicate, apply grammar rules, work out logical meaning, or measure our growing ability to think with increasing complexity and depth. Media teach us that we use the language to entertain. It is a tool to evoke visceral excitement and instant laughter. The more mangled, the more incongruous, the more it serves our hedonistic purpose. Besides, if it's merely for complying with academic requirements, it's a lot easier to cut and paste someone else's communicative facility from the internet.

Yesterday's paper had former Senate President Edgardo Angara saying that official achievement tests show that only 6.59 percent of our graduating high school students could read, speak, and comprehend English well enough to enter college.<sup>8</sup> The same source shows that 44.25 percent had no English skills at all.

So? That is not alarming per se. What is alarming about it for some is what it implies for meeting the objectives of the tertiary education system.<sup>9</sup> But just because you don't speak English doesn't mean that you can't handle college work.

Like all normal children the world over, the normal Filipino child is born with the potential for intelligence and the ability to learn and benefit from formal instruction. Ideally, basic education should be designed to equip our young with an appropriate repertoire of general information and learning skills to get them ready to deal with specialized training for the professions. But the sad truth is that our basic education system fails in this objective. Many who come to the college classroom are hardly prepared for college work. The increasingly mandatory bridging program is proof of that.<sup>10</sup>

This is ironic because many who get to college are not at all culturally deprived. These are mostly kids who had a leg up at preschool and basic education, indulged by hopeful parents with a wealth of imported "educational toys," books, computers, and other accoutrements that pay homage to the value of education. In my experience, these are the students who more readily abdicate their intellectual capabilities and negate the power of their minds with their inordinate, reflexive dependence on the limited mechanical functions of their gadgets. Many among them cannot do long division without resorting to the calculator function of their cellular phones. Ask them to turn off their cell phones during class and they suddenly feel insecure and vulnerable.

But even for their counterparts who are not as fortunate, a fine mind has the potential to overcome the disadvantages of relative deprivation. Introduction and continued exposure to an enriched learning environment would lead it to soon catch up. However, to my observation again, that is not the case for many who come from public schools whose basic education experience understandably featured a greater technology lag. Their basic education experience failed to imbue in them a sense of self-efficacy, such that when they get to the ADDU, they fail to evaluate that conditions have changed and that the coveted learning resources believed to be crucial to their academic development are now accessible. Having been conditioned earlier on not to benefit from the classroom, they don't even try when they can.

What we teachers have going against us is the monumental challenge of educating a generation that has been programmed to devalue the mind at work. This generation's ubiquitous exposure to pop media seemingly from birth predisposes them to seek not experiences for quiet concentration, reflection, and judicious discernment. Instead,

they come to expect and demand experiences that provide attention-grabbing visceral excitation and instant gratification such as what pop media fare brings, and these they seek even in the classrooms. Hear them howl and cheer when the teacher says, "Correct!" the way Kris Aquino says it on *Game ka na ba?*<sup>11</sup>

Our policy makers generally miss the importance of mending the gaps in basic education by bringing up the students' quality of thinking that had been retarded by overexposure to ubiquitous pop media. Instead, education policies focus on bringing down the quality of college instruction to a level that could be understood by a ten-year-old.

The insistence for instructional methods to present information in ways that the audiovisual mind can process humors the immature mind into relying on lower order cognitive skills, and there it stays in that comfort zone - sensually excitatory and media savvy, yes, but sorely lacking in the capacity for depth and complexity of thought. It is a mind prepared to follow and execute orders, not to evaluate reality and generate creative solutions. Imagine what kind of thinking output we could expect from minds that have yet to individuate. Imagine which rung in the organizational ladder would that kind of mind be good for. It is a mind that would constantly look to others for direction and would be totally comfortable to execute sequences and procedures that do not make sense, so long as it is not given the responsibility to decide.

In the mad scramble for solutions, tertiary education came to be increasingly deregulated since 1972 to loosen up the investment of private capital for facilities needed to train for global competitiveness. Today, around 89 percent of higher education institutions are privately run.<sup>12</sup> This translates to the Filipino family increasingly shouldering the cost of educating the youth. Class, political, and cultural boundaries increasingly mark off access to college. Only the more affluent families can send their children to higher education. The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (1.69 percent) and the Cordillera Autonomous Region (3.57 percent) contribute a measly 5.26 percent of the college population in school.<sup>13</sup> The increasingly uneven access to professional training ensures that our marginalized communities continue to be excluded from the opportunities for social uplift.

With no unified national objective, deregulation and autonomy have allowed many schools out there to be market-driven and profit-

oriented. Classroom training is barely linked to industry needs, thereby creating a large group of educated unemployed or underemployed who are inexorably pushed to seek overseas employment. Who can blame them? After all, they were not trained to serve this nation's needs.

And so we come full circle. This is the role they have written out for the young. This is the tertiary education situation in broad strokes.

This is real life, so I cannot give you the instant gratification of pat prescriptions to make you feel better or to make you see the light at the end of the tunnel.

First we have to define who we are as a people and what we want for our children. Yes, it is a difficult problem, one that would require our entire lifetime to comprehend. I totally understand why many of your generation would rather find it a lot more gratifying to return to your I-Pod and take no part in this. It takes a lot of effort to buck the ways of the world and chart a new course for the future generation.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered at the 23rd Buklod Ateneista Leaders' Summit held at the Ateneo de Davao University, 24 May 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Philippines 2000, the Ramos Administration's blueprint to turn the nation into a Newly Industrialized Country (NIC) was heralded by the slogan "The Filipino can."

<sup>3</sup> Jingles popularized by the local TV show Pinoy Big Brother carry the lyrics "Sikat ang Pinoy (The Filipino is renowned)" or "Pinoy ako, Pinoy tayo. Ipakita sa mundo kung ano ang kaya mo. Wag kang matatakot. Ipagmalaki mo. (I am Filipino. We are Filipino. Show the world what you can do. Don't be afraid. Flaunt it.)"

<sup>4</sup> Pulse Asia 2001 Report, for example.

<sup>5</sup> Social Weather Station reports for 1st quarter 2003 and last quarter 2004. See also David C. Martinez, 306.

<sup>6</sup> The Philippines ranked 36th in the math and science survey for 4th to 8th graders as reported by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study in December 2003. In the High School Readiness Test 2004, 0.64 percent of the elementary graduates scored 75 percent or better out of 1.2M examinees. The average competency is equal to Grade 4.

<sup>7</sup> As an example, a student once presented mean and median measures from a distribution of nominal data on respondents by profession. By assigning

numbers to categories (1 for medical professions, 2 for educators, 3 for farmers, etc), she drew 3.6 as mean and 3.8 as median using the SPSS, a statistical software that is used as an instructional material in most research classes for the social sciences.

<sup>8</sup> The *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 23 May 2006, p.2

<sup>9</sup> Bringing up English proficiency is a national imperative for the Arroyo Administration for the expressed purpose of maintaining the Philippine's edge in global competitiveness of its labor force. See Ramon Guillermo on the emphasis on English proficiency for global competitiveness. Also Macario Tiu on colonial legacy and the national imperative.

<sup>10</sup> The "bridging program" is a precollegiate mediational intervention resorted to by many universities as a requirement for freshman applicants who fail the entrance exam but wish to enroll even on probation. In the Ateneo, Admissions Office data show that about thirty-five percent of 2005-06 incoming freshmen had been advised to go through the bridging program.

<sup>11</sup> Quiz shows for the brainless have similarly conditioned students to expect to be allowed to "call a friend" or "poll the audience" when they are unsure of their answers to test questions.

<sup>12</sup> The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* issue of 4 June 2006, citing DepED Website of 2 June 2006, reports that 89.1 percent or 1,431 of 1,605 colleges and universities in the Philippines are private entities.

<sup>13</sup> *Higher Education Statistical Bulletin*. AY 2003-2004. 5th revision as of 30 September 2005. Office of Policy, Planning, Research and Information (OPPRI). Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

#### References

- Asis, Maruja MB, ed. 2004. *The 2003 children and family study*. Manila: Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), Scalabrini Migration Center, and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration.
- Guillermo, Ramon. 1997. "Rationalizing failures: The Philippine government in the education sector." *Education for development magazine*. Manila: Ibon Databank.
- Ilagan, Gail Tan. 2006. "Culprit to the decline in quality education." *Fly on the wall*. Davao City: American Big Brothers Fund.
- Lumbera, Bienvenido. 2000. "Between two mountains colliding." *Forum: Opisyal na publikasyon ng Unibersidad ng Pilipinas*. Quezon City: UP Press.