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Whither Mass Communication Education In Asia?

Tensions of communication education are inherent in its pedagogical goals, professional objectives, contexts of operation and availability of resources. The tensions are exacerbated by the advent of new media, globalisation and imperatives of organisational integration. How will communication education in Asia continue to develop amid these tensions? This article examines several critical approaches to "remount" communication education to better fit the changing needs of rapidly developing Asian communities.

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The education of mass communication in the United States, after several decades of growth and prosperity, has been facing an unprecedented "crisis" precipitated mainly by the drying up of educational funds. The result was a number of eliminations, threatened eliminations, forced mergers, and reorganization (Nelson, 1995). Downsizing has become a common phenomenon. Vacated positions are not autonomically filled. On some occasions, some programs had to defend their academic merits and the right to survive.

In contrast, mass communication education in Asia appears to be enjoying a growth period, as marked by the ready availability of resources and mushrooming of communication programs, departments, and schools. New curricula are being introduced. Enrolment increases as the faculty expands. Some programs boast of having state-of-the-art equipment and facilities. The confidence of communication educators in some schools has reached an unprecedented high.

Mass communication programs in both Asia and the United States, however, appear to share some common traits. Popular among new admissions, they have been able to attract some of the best students. Also, both are searching for answers to their academic identities, social relevance, and responses to the rapidly changing communication and social environment. This article is a result of one such soul-searching activities; it explores the tensions and directions of communication education in the Asian contexts.
We are often asked what distinguishes communication from other disciplines and whether communication students are necessarily better communication practitioners than students from other disciplines. It is not easy to argue that communication majors are as a rule more competitive because many first-rate professionals are graduates from other disciplines. They stand out because of their high analytical acumen, profound subject knowledge, and high proficiency in expressing themselves.

In other words, the basic goals of communication should aim at raising:

- the students’ general analytical and critical capability;
- knowledge of the subject which they will work with;
- understanding of the communication process and effects;
- proficiency in expressing themselves with one or more media.

While the first two goals are common to other liberal arts and social science disciplines, the goals of achieving expressiveness and the understanding of the communication process are unique to communication. Expressiveness is often served by the professional curriculum that provides training in the uses of media. Analytical training and subject knowledge are acquired through the theoretical curriculum in communication, social sciences, and other disciplines. Knowledge about the communication process is derived from theoretical courses on communication.

The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) in the United States recommends that journalism majors be required to take 75% of their courses from the social science and liberal arts. In contrast, Asian communication programs more often require students to take a much higher proportion of courses in professional training. Training in social science, liberal arts, and other disciplines is either neglected or less stressed.

Most liberal arts subjects are intended to cultivate analytical and critical minds that are essential for leading effective lives and making successful careers. Of particular relevance to communication majors is social science which provides not only analytical and critical training but also knowledge about the rules by which the society operates. The importance of analytical and critical training is often not appreciated by students, who are more fascinated by the hands-on experience of skill courses. However, as responsible educators, we have to persist in requiring the students to broaden their knowledge and to educate them on the rationale for such a requirement. Students will understand more as their careers advance and as they mature. Those with better
training in analysis will excel in the long run.

Communication majors without training in other disciplines are often criticised for their lack of knowledge in the subject area they are working in. A good remedy is to require students to acquire a strong analytical and critical training through double-majoring, minoring, and taking electives. The theoretical curriculum in communication forms an integral part of this analytical package. It helps students understand the communication process and its effects, which fosters analytical thinking on the one hand and facilitates the creation, distribution, and evaluation of messages on the other.

The stress on analytical or social science education should not be interpreted as undermining the importance of the professional curriculum, which, after all, helps distinguish communication students from those majoring in other disciplines. The professional curriculum is intended to foster media literacy or proficiency in expressing oneself. It gives an edge to communication graduates in the job market and projects a professional or semi-professional image to communication departments. This serves to attract students, justify their existence, and secure resources. This is particularly true in Asia, where professional education is highly valued. The importance of the professional curriculum is enhanced by the advent of more powerful and sophisticated information technology, the mastery of which requires some learning.

A solution to the dilemma is, therefore, to strike a proper balance between analytical and professional education. The ideal is to have a dual emphasis in curriculum which turns out students with high analytical power and expressiveness. While one can safely assume that students can perfect their skills on the job, it is less certain that they will have their minds sharpened in a relatively systematic manner after graduation. The curriculum should therefore reflect the primacy of analytical and critical training. It should also have enough room for students to double major or minor to increase their knowledge in a subject. In fact, students should be encouraged or required to have at least a minor. If this is put into practice, we shall be able to dispel the myth that communication students study nothing but communication.

Like many professional disciplines, communication programs often find it difficult to accommodate all the essential courses within the course of university education. How to maximize the effectiveness of the professional curriculum becomes particularly important if we are not to enlarge it beyond acceptable limits. To this end, the "exemplary" and "problem-based"
approaches to learning provide some clues for experimentation. We have been testing out what may be called the "exemplary approach" in practicum courses. The central idea is to simulate or create a real working environment for the students who are asked to perform exemplary tasks and to seek solutions to exemplary problems. Such tasks and problems owe their exemplary status to the scope of skills and intensity they require. If the students can work through a range of exemplary problems, they should be able to master the skills involved. The assumption is that the students can learn more from working intensively on an ideal case than repeating their skills over a number of smaller jobs.

Associated with the exemplary approach to professional training is problem-based learning (Walton and Matthew, 1989; Norman and Schmidt, 1992; Bridges with Hallinger, 1992). Whenever possible, professional courses are to be organized around problems. The students' mission is to learn through solving actual problems. The students are to play an active role in the identification, analysis and solution of problems. Research has indicated that the problem-based teaching method is effective in producing more skilful professionals such as doctors and school administrators. The students are more motivated during the learning process. They will actively seek information and advice, often as a group, in solving the problems in hand. Such collective approach to problem solving fits in nicely with the growing importance of team-work in communication and other fields.

Two weaknesses of the exemplary or problem-based approaches to professional training are that the problems selected may not cover all the essential ground and that the students may fail to realize what they are actually learning. Teachers should therefore be responsible for covering the blind spots and for highlighting the important principles the students should have learnt in performing their tasks. The teachers should go beyond vocational training to dwell on the principles involved. It is the combination of teaching and problem-solving that works the best.

We should also learn from the evolution of business administration in the United States to upgrade communication education (Dennis, 1988). Before the late 1950s, business administration was regarded as vocational training in the American university setting because of its fragmented and skill-oriented curriculum. It won academic respect when it moved from industry-specific and skills training to a principle-based curriculum that produced students with broad vision and leadership capability. The commercial world came to be impressed by the outstanding performance of graduates from business administration and the productivity that could be derived from
the faculty's research. Even though there may be constant pressure from students and some narrow-minded practitioners that we should focus on preparing entry-level labor for the communication industry, we should adhere to what we do best and go beyond vocational training.

Professional courses should therefore be conceptual, critical, and analytical in approach. As McCall (1992:36) explains: "Media law courses need a clear philosophical and theoretical bent, and not the 'Here's how to avoid a libel suit' approach frequently found. Communication ethics can be taught in a values framework, and not from the standpoint of getting around practical problems. Production courses, too, while carrying a certain technical element, should first focus on message and aesthetic components." Such course design effort amounts to taking a liberal arts approach to learning. While this effort is time consuming, it will pay off in upgrading the academic status of communication in and enhancing the effectiveness of the professional curriculum.

Asian communication programs tend to be overspecialized at both the program level and at the level of the professional curriculum. The professional curriculum often trains students to become entry-level workers in a communication industry such as print journalism, broadcast journalism, advertising, and public relations. The benefit of trade-specific training is that graduates have higher proficiency in a particular medium when they first enter the job market. However, too narrow an approach does not square with the advent of new information technology, the rapid change of the information industry, and the volatility of modern careers. Information technology is restructuring the communication industry.

The print media, once the dominant form of expression, is giving way to audio-visual media as television comes of age. Audio-visual communication gains even greater importance as media converge and multi-media emerge. The new possibilities call for broader professional training and greater emphasis on audio-visual media and multi-media. We have to prepare students for a greater variety of jobs, as it is unlikely that communication workers will stay with a given industry or medium throughout their lives. To increase the students' adaptability and to better the needs of the modern age, it is advisable to require them to broaden their professional base and to have a better mastery of interactive multi-media.

The world shrinks as the global network expands. Trade, tourism, and other forms of exchanges at the global and regional
levels have been increasing very rapidly in the last decade. The trend towards globalization is symbolized by the rise of the Internet. Communication within Asia is also reaching a new height, as marked by the launch of regional satellite services based in Hong Kong, Singapore, China, and Australia. More Asians are now crossing national borders in pursuing their careers. Media have begun to expand their markets into neighboring countries. Subregional television services and media are sprouting up as well.

All these changes have created a demand for graduates who are global-minded and familiar with international affairs and communications. However, Asian communication programs are, in general, lagging behind. To keep abreast of the trends, communication programs should be globalized by introducing courses in international communication or regional communication and by incorporating international dimensions in individual courses.

Setting up exchange programs with universities in other countries is also an important part of this globalization effort. As it stands now, most exchanges take place between Asian universities and their American or European counterparts. We should begin to create exchange opportunities among Asian communication programs. According to Skolnikoff (1993:231), it is the undergraduate years that will play the largest role in influencing the students' attitudes toward, and preparation for, the global society within which they will have to function.

In tandem with the rise of Asian economies is the growing eminence of the concept of Asian values. Notwithstanding the questions of whether Asian values exist and the diversity of Asian societies, Asian values are often alluded to in defence of the relative lack of democracy and freedom in Asia and in celebration of Asian economic achievements (e.g., Peterson, 1992; Ibrahim, 1995; Jesus, 1996). On some occasions, Asian values are used to cover for the lack of professionalism. Therefore, the stress on Asian values, to say the least, should not blind us to the general values that are shared by mankind. Given that democracy and freedom are important values associated with communication, educators should not brush them aside as alienating Western values. To the extent that the world is interdependent, we should learn more readily from other nations, be they Asian or Western.

Journalism education was first introduced to the American university curriculum in the early decades of this century and began to grow rapidly after the Second World War. Not only did journalism departments proliferate, they branched out to specialties such as advertising, public relations, film, television,
and telecommunications, as the communication sector developed and diversified. At the same time, graduate programs up to the doctoral level proliferated. To match the curricular and institutional expansion, schools of communication came into existence. After decades of development, we should briefly review the organizational structure of various communication schools in the United States to shed light on the configuration of Asian communication schools.

Organizationally, some schools are composed of departments, ranging from Journalism to Telecommunications. Communication schools have two general curricular orientations: practical and analytical. While some schools may stress one area more than the other, many choose to place dual emphasis on both. Communication schools are also distinguished by the level of training they offer, either restricting themselves to graduate level, or to both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Four major patterns of communication schools are observed:

- **The Columbia Model**: Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism provides professional training in journalism at the master’s level only.

- **The Annenberg Model**: There are two Annenberg Schools of Communication, one at the University of Pennsylvania and the other at the University of Southern California. They offer research communication programs only at the Masters and Doctoral level.

- **The Wisconsin-Minnesota Model**: Represented by the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Minnesota, this model has a single department structure with a number of curricular concentrations on communication. It offers programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. While the graduate programs are academic in orientation, the undergraduate programs place dual emphasis on analytical and professional training.

- **The Texas-Michigan State Model**: The communication schools at the University of Texas and Michigan State University have four and five departments respectively, offering majors in advertising, speech, journalism, telecommunications, and film. The curricular approach resembles that of the Wisconsin-Minnesota model, with the graduate program being academic and the undergraduate program placing dual emphasis on liberal arts and professional training.

Economic cutbacks and the challenges arising from the advent of information technology have led communication educators to review the state of communication education in the United States. It is increasingly recognised that the communication
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Curriculum should be geared towards training the students to be more adaptable to the rapidly changing media environment, and to streamline the school structure to save costs and to promote academic cross-fertilization within and outside the communication discipline.

Organizational integration appears to be a good response to these challenges. In other words, it is advisable to offer a range of curricular concentrations without separate department units, as illustrated by the Wisconsin-Minnesota Model. A single-department arrangement has these advantages: (a) it ensures a more effective use of facilities, equipment, and staff; (b) it encourages academic exchanges among teaching staff in communication which, by nature, is an interdisciplinary subject; and (c) it matches the trend towards convergence of information technologies and the emergence of multi-media.

These concentrations may become full-blown departments if the school reaches a size beyond effective administration. Even in such cases, it is advisable for students of the lower division to be grouped under the school as a whole. They can choose their majors when they enter upper division. This will allow the school to offer core courses for all students, thereby making better use of teaching staff and resources.

Research is a relatively new tradition in communication schools in the United States. Journalism schools, the predecessors of communication schools, often stressed the teaching of skills to the neglect of research on the communication process. It was not until the 1970s that as more doctoral programs in communication and journalism were set up, the research tradition started to develop. Very few communication scholars have succeeded in becoming academic leaders for the university as a whole. Even now, whether communication teachers should be promoted mainly on the merit of research is still being debated. Consequently, communication has failed to command high respect from other departments in universities (Dennis, 1988). Even practitioners do not hold communication programs in great respect, as they do not find their research, if any, informing and applicable.

This academic hierarchy also applies to Asian universities, perhaps to a lesser extent because research in Asian universities is at an early stage of development. Thanks to the glamour of the media and the general acceptance of professional skills, communication schools in Asia are in general more readily accepted by university colleagues and society at large. However, whether communication schools provide the best pathway to a communication career is still debated among practitioners, university administrators, and...
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communication educators themselves. Given the growing importance of research in Asian universities, communication schools should prepare for the days when disciplines are mainly evaluated by their contribution to knowledge. Valuable time will be lost if we resist being part of the research tradition. It is equally important for communication schools to interconnect with other disciplines and make their presence more strongly felt on the campus.

While the research questions originating in the West should apply in Asian contexts, there should also be Asia-specific or country-specific research questions which may call for new approaches. It is therefore the mission of Asian communication schools to indigenize Western theories and to advance our understanding of communication in Asian contexts. To make our knowledge relevant to the communication industry, communication schools should tackle questions related to the regulation of the communication industry and add to the understanding of the process and effects of communication. A research reputation is not built in a day. Communication schools should define their academic status by starting early on their research enterprises.

There is a general lack of qualified teachers of communication in Asia. By qualified teachers, I am referring to those who are academically rigorous and professionally competent. Most teachers with Ph.D. degrees have been trained in the West, primarily the United States. It will be some time before most teaching positions are filled by qualified locals. It is only when more doctoral programs are established that more qualified teachers can be produced domestically. Increasing graduate training is undoubtedly a direction for communication education in Asia. In conjunction with the shortage of qualified teachers who are familiar with the domestic situation is the lack of good indigenous textbooks. Communication students often have to rely on foreign textbooks and journals for teaching materials. To make communication more socially relevant, communication educators in Asia have to produce more textbooks based on the social context in which they are used.

Knowledge nowadays grows so fast that what is new today will become obsolete in a couple of years. Given the short life cycle of knowledge, it is all the more important for communication students to cultivate their abilities in identifying, analysing, and solving problems. As long as they have such abilities, they will more easily adapt to the constantly changing demands in their careers. At the same time, it is equally important for them to learn
how to learn. Life is a continuous learning process. Mastering the skills of learning will therefore make better life-time learners.

An ideal student is one that has high analytical power, profound knowledge in communication and other subjects, and high expressiveness using one or more media. Liberal education in communication and social science plays a critical role in turning out such students. Thus, it becomes important for us to encourage students to double major, or at least take a minor. However, emphasis should also be placed on professional training whose primary purpose today is to enable students to express themselves proficiently with the conventional media and interactive multimedia. The effectiveness of professional education can be enhanced by using the exemplary and problem-based approaches to learning. Professional courses should also be redesigned to give them an analytical and critical touch.

As communication plays a crucial role in society, it is very important for students to be ethical and to have a keen sense of social responsibility. Ethical concerns have taken on new urgency for this generation because they have to face up to the pressures of commercialization, competition, and corruption. The ethical reasoning learned in school should be useful when they have to make discriminating moral choices in the real world.

Digitization and computerization have led to the convergence of media. While proficiency in a single medium such as print might have been practical in the past, it will prove to be too inflexible in the days to come. There is a growing demand for students to be audio-visual in orientation. The communication curriculum should therefore allow or require students to have professional training in more than one medium or multi-media.

Globalizing and regionalizing the curriculum are on the agenda of Asian communication education as the world interconnects and as regional exchanges surge. The forthcoming generations of communication practitioners have to have a wide scope of vision that extends beyond their national boundaries. International, regional, and subregional elements should be incorporated into communication programs. International internships and exchange programs should be set up to cater to the growing needs of the students. The West has been the primary, if not the only, destination for student exchange programs. This should be balanced with exchanges within Asia, where regional trade and other forms of transactions are rapidly increasing.

Communication programs in the booming Asian economies are enjoying the abundance of resources. Many have expanded or have plans to expand into schools of communication. If business cycles are to hit education as they do in the West, we should be prepared for the not-so-good days. We can achieve this by putting
the resources to more effective use. One important way is to avoid overbuilding educational institutions, such as building communication schools with rigid departmental lines. This will save resources, allow cross-fertilization, and facilitate multi-media education. Trying to do more with less now will maximize the return of our investment and reduce the pain of possible downsizing later.

Given the short history of communication education in Asia, educators can play a more active role in shaping the traditions of communication education for the years to come. We should aim at reinventing communication education to better fit the needs of the rapidly developing Asian communities. We should also seize time to make greater theoretical understanding of the communication process. In the last analysis, it is the advancement of knowledge in communication that will enable communication education to command greater respect from the academia and to stand a better chance of playing a central role, as it should, in the formation of the information society.

Notes

1. For communication subfields such as advertising and films, creativity is sometimes more highly valued.
2. For an analysis of liberal arts education, see Rosovsky (1990)
3. The idea of "exemplary" is originated from Thomas Kuhn's (1962) conception of paradigm which may refer to one's worldview, the exemplar or critical event that signifies the assumption and operation of such a worldview, as well as the practices derived from this worldview.
4. It can be argued that there is a fifth model: The Cal State Model. The California State University as represented by the Fullerton campus has a College of Communication consisting of two departments, one in journalism and the other in speech. Much greater emphasis is placed on undergraduate training. While students are required to take many courses outside the major, journalism majors take very few theoretical courses in communication. The communication curriculum is professional in orientation.
5. Similar debates are observed in journalism education in the United States (Dennus, 1988)

References


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