

# **DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS**

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**Ted Goldenberg**

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Thailand often is referred to as a "*developing*" country. What is "*development*"? Does the University of "*Fine Arts*" or a liberal arts program contribute to development? Whether the answer to the latter question is affirmative or negative, some explanation and exploration of the question should be useful. But first let us consider some definitions of "*development*".

"*Development*" variously has been defined in terms of gross national product (GNP), GNP per capita, kilowatt-generation of electricity per capita, ratio of secondary school graduates to primary school graduates, and a dozen or so other very narrow indicators of economic or technological '*progress*'. More recently, a younger generation of social scientists, comparatively less biased in favor of heavily industrialized economic systems, have formulated broader, and perhaps more realistic, concepts of development.

To save space, instead of reviewing the literature on development as such, I propose to use definitions from just one writer. Professor George Axinn is a rural sociologist with extensive experience in Africa and Asia. For many years he was executive director of the Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities and currently is a professor at Tribhuvan University in Rampur, Nepal. In "The Role of Education in Rural Development: Stimulator or Oppressor," presented at an international conference at the Asian Institute of Technology (Pathum Thani) in June 1977, Dr. Axinn offered both an individualistic definition of development and an eco-system measure: "*Development refers to only those changes which are seen as desirable among the... people who are changing;*" and

... human groups which are under-utilizing the resources of their eco-system in enhancing their own levels and styles of living may be considered to be *under-developed*. Human groups which are over-utilizing the resources of their eco-system... may be... *over-developed*. And, somewhere between these two, human groups... in equilibrium with the resources of their eco-system... may be... *appropriately developed*.

Before considering the significance of these definitions for our university programs, some discussion is required. For example the individualistic definition implies that, where changes are imposed on people without their considering the changes

desirable, "*development*" has not taken place but rather a form of coercion. To be more specific, suppose a highway is built through a village. According to some, this is "*infrastructure*" development. But the road may destroy the village society: some lose their land to the right-of-way, others to speculators and businessmen, and many people leave the area. Is this "*development*" for the villagers? In fact, it is destruction for them, and "*development*" only for urban people whose inter-city transportation system has been improved.

On the other hand, suppose that before the road was built, villagers were prepared for the change and had plans to take advantage of it and to maintain their community as a self-controlled and secure social system. Then the road might stimulate "*development*" among the villagers.

An eco-system needs a temporal measure in order to judge whether or not a group is under-, over- or appropriately-using resources. We must assume a time span of, say, one year, five years, twenty-five years or any other period. Then we examine the use of resources during that time and among those people to see how and to what extent the group is "*enhancing their own levels and styles of living*" or improving in health, personal relationships, enjoyment of cultural pleasures, and understanding of their economic and social environment. The resources to examine may include fuel energy, human talent, local minerals and fertile soil, among other things. So, during those years, if the soil is depleted, if talents are migrating away, if the minerals are being exhausted and if the wood supply is being used up, that group of people surely are over developing with respect to their resources.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the villagers may not be taking advantage of strong solar radiation, a growing wood supply, plentiful rain, and natural talents among the population. We would consider this village to be *under-developing*. Consuming or using the supplies at the same rate the resources are renewed, a group is in balance, or appropriately-developing, during that time.

Because Silpakorn University is a government institution, is supposed to function as a human resource developer for the larger society, and depends upon external capital and human resources, and therefore has very complex relationships with the larger social system, it cannot be considered as easily as a village, with respect to development. But there are useful parallels. If we can compare the capital and human resources which the university consumes, to the new human resources that it "produces" in the form of graduates, we may determine whether or not the university is a net producer or a net consumer of resources, over a given time period. Unfortunately productivity economics in education depends upon extensive long-term data on graduates which are not available. As far as I know, there never has been done an evaluative follow-up study of Silpakorn graduates to see how either they or Thai society have

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<sup>1</sup>Whether or not their lives are improving is another question. There may be many social systems which are over-exploiting resources without any general enhancement, or with even a deterioration, in levels of living.

benefitted from their learning experiences at Silpakorn.<sup>2</sup> Nor has there been attempted any evaluation of possible benefits to Thai society of the research or creative activities of our faculty and staff. Most important, there has been very little definition of *how* society should benefit as a result of the education that Silpakorn students receive.

As an alternative, if we consider the Silpakorn community as a part of the larger Thai society, we may question whether or not desirable development for individuals at Silpakorn conforms to desirable development of the society as a whole. In other words, how does our perceptions of desirable activity at Silpakorn relate to perceptions of "ordinary" Thai people? Can we imagine what the Thai people, if they could express themselves, would accept as good planning and behavior on our part?

In one respect, these are easy questions to answer. We have some of "their" (Thai society's) "children" and we are supposed to be educating these "children". Are we educating them in the way that good parents would educate or have children educated? Or are our students bored with our activities, uncomfortable in their relationships with us, unsatisfied with us as model learners, and can hardly wait to leave their "home" away from home? Honest answers to these questions could affect current planning and finally improve learning at Silpakorn University.

Taking a less utilitarian or society-oriented, and more humanitarian approach to this discussion results in another question.<sup>3</sup> Is each learner at our university developing as the learner himself or herself perceives as desirable? This appears to be an easy question to ask, but obtaining useful answers might prove very difficult: our students and we teachers may have a very limited understanding of the meaning of "desirable individual development," which we usually assume to be processes of "learning to learn," "learning to love," and "learning for personal liberty."<sup>4</sup> A teacher accepting this question then may take on a heavier burden than he or she may be used to: finding out what desirable individual development is, *practicing* it, inspiring students to define and seek it for themselves, and finally hopefully (and humbly) helping them learn how to direct and achieve their own individual development.

<sup>2</sup>See Phansri Wichakornkun *et al.*, *Research about Employment Conditions of Silpakorn University Graduates, Class of 1974* (in Thai, Nakorn Pathom: Faculty of Education, 1977), for rough data from a portion of one class of graduates who subsequently worked, mostly in Bangkok. Unfortunately, responses were not analyzed by faculty or type of employment.

<sup>3</sup> Ray C. Downs, in "How to Achieve Dialogue Within the University," *Aksorasat 1* (Aug.-Nov. 1977), defined the utilitarian role of the university as that which prepares people "to do something" in the larger society. The humanistic ideal of the university is to emphasize each learner's current and continuing capacities (intellectual and moral) to learn and to improve vis-a-vis humanistic or liberal ideals.

<sup>4</sup>These are the goals and the means of humanistic-liberal education.

Another area remains to be explored: how does individual development in university learning relate to the eco-system measure of development? An individual may be considered an eco-system in himself or herself. Therefore, are the new resources or capacities that an individual acquires in learning less than, equal to or more than the resources consumed in acquisition of the individual's new capacities? This question may be the most difficult of all to approach. We lack an easy-to-manipulate measure of individual and social resources by which to determine whether or not the individual achieves a net gain through university learning. And if a suitable measure existed, we would want to compare gains in university learning with those acquired in professional and family life experience. It may be the case that individuals develop as much or more capacity in "*learning-to-learn*," "*learning to love*," and/or "*learning for personal liberty*" with experience in the large social system than they do in our university.

Economic measures exist and have been employed for rough estimator about individual capacities and the resources consumed in developing those capacities.<sup>5</sup> However data of this sort is lacking in Thailand, and, in any case, would relate more to utilitarian goals rather than achievement of humanitarian ideals.

A more promising possibility is an energy analysis. Consider the amounts of human effort involved in learning: the student's labor, that of the faculty and staff, and that which went into constructing the physical plant and acquiring learning materials such as library books. Parents' labor to support the student while in college must be added. Then we make up assumptions about how the students learning enables him to save energy for the rest of his life. For example, advanced learning skills give him advantages over those without. He can do many things and learn new skills with less effort. Skills in personal relationships ("*learning to love*") reduce stress in professional and personal life, and stress consumes extra energy. A "*liberated*" person also, presumably, has more capacity for happiness and acts more purposefully, than those less liberated, and therefore he or she suffers less stress and works more efficiently.

Given an energy measure for learning activities and for projecting a lifetime of saving effort, computations still would not be easy. Even a day-to-day investigation would be complex, although the results might prove interesting. Two-way communication, for instance, requires much more human energy than one-way forms such as films and lectures. Perhaps there is a significant relationship between the learning skills a student is acquiring and the amount of two-way dialogue which that student has with teachers. If so, then we should use our unusually low teacher student ratio at Silpakorn University to promote more individual dialogue with students.

Energy analysis may be an impractical method to use in reaching a conclusion that everyone agrees about anyway. On the other hand, whatever goals and

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent example, see W. Lee Hansen and Burton A. Weisbrod. *Benefits, Costs and Finance of Public Higher Education* (Chicago: Markham publishing Company, 1969).

ideals are established, evaluative tools also must be established in order to determine whether and to what extent the goals and ideals are being approached. Energy, along with economic and other measures, may become useful in evaluation of university learning processes and individual and social development.

At the moment, however, we lack objective measures of learning-to-learn, learning-to-love and other humanistic development goals. Our semi-annual exams tend to measure memory storage or diligence in memorizing information, capacities which have little to do either with humanitarian ideals or skills particularly useful in professional work.

But there is nothing sacred about objective measures, especially for humanitarian ideals. We have adequate subjective means to evaluate if we are willing to use them, namely, personal observation of individual students. The workload is so light and the teacher-student ratio at our university is so low that faculty members can work closely with many individual students during their careers here. We have the facilities and the opportunities both to attract individual students to faculty interests and methods, and to help students identify and pursue meaningful goals of their own. Faculty members can judge whether or not our students (and we, ourselves, as models) are becoming more skilled in learning to learn, more loving, and more liberated. We can determine to what extent students are bored, uncomfortable, unsatisfied with and avoiding of our activities. We can help students learn to evaluate their development for themselves, through competence in self awareness and in discovery of humanitarian and liberal ideals, in our programs of language, literature, and other cultural arts and social sciences. At last, we teachers and students may know what is a good *and* happy person and how to enhance our goodness and happiness. And what more valuable development than this could society, or a government, desire for its youth and citizenry?

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