HOW TO ACHIEVE DIALOGUE WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY.

Prof Ray C Downs

PART I

THEORY

It is not true, of course, that universities began in the west. "Higher education" began at almost the same time in China, India and Greece. A wise man once observed that nothing is more irresistable than an idea whose time has come. The time had come, some 2,500 years ago, in the develo-pment of civilization, for the human mind to explore more deeply into the meaning and mystery of life, using the powers of rational intelligence and learning. A way had to be found to transmit learning. The emergence of the "university" wasinevitable.

In China, students gathered aro-und Confucius and the "schools" which sprang from his teaching. In India, as early as 550 B.C. hundreds, even tho-usands of students were gathering at Nalanda University which remained in existence until the close of the 12th century—almost 17 centuries of conti-nuous existence! And in Greece, at the same time, the curious and inqui-ring minds garhered around another of the greatest teachers of all time, Socrates. They assembled in groups, or "schools" which were to stlmulate Greece to a level of civilization which is still the envy of the world.

The earliest direct comparison with Thailand might be drawn with the "Palace School" of Constantinople, established in 425 A.D. for much the same reasons that the Royal Pages School, later Chulalongkorn University, was established in Siam.

Another 500, years after Constantinople's university, the famous University of Qarawiyine at Fes in Morocco, and the El Ashar University in Egypt were established. Not until the 11th century was the oldest university in the west, Bologna, established in Italy, This was shortly followed by Oxford in the 12th century in England and by the University of Paris in the 13th century in France. Younger siblings of the Asian universities these western universities may have been, but they have wielded a disproportionate influence upon the development of higher education in Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries.

There are many reasons for this which require only a brief listing: the industrial revolution and its handmaiden, mercantilism; which fed the rise of colonialism and with it the explosive expansion of western technology ideology, philosophy, religion. Early missionaries, still naively unquestioning the supporting role they played in the unfolding drama of the westernization of Asia, were better equipped than diplomats, business men or soldiers to help in establishing new institutions of higher education. Their latter-day successors, the Foundations, "AID" programs and international development programs have more recently joined them in being pejoratively labelled "imperialistic". Which, indeed, they were. But, founded for whatever reasons or motives, good or bad, right or wrong, we must examine these institutions of higher education. What are they for? what use have they for Asia? And, most basically, what is a university?

A brief glance backwards suggests three things that all of the early "universities" held in common: students, teachers, and the free and easy movement and interplay between and among them. These students and teachers were engaged in something different from the various apprentice, vocational or skill schools contemporaneous with the "universities". They were engaged in a freer flow of inquiry, debate, discussion, seeking. Students and scholars came from far and wide, often roving from one school to another, in their quest for new knowledge. They were not "local" or even "national" (no such concept yet existed). Ons wonders whether a "national" university is not a conflict in terms! Be that as it may, the university tended to develop along three broad lines: the utilitarian, the humanistic, the instrumentalist.

The Utilitarian Definition of the University

First, the utilitarian understanding of the university. Says Arnold Toynbee, "The university is to prepare for a liberal profession, to prepare an elite, to educate a select minority."[1] In other words, it is not a place for idle debate, it has a **purpose, a use,** it is utilitarian. So, too, with the enshrined definition of Cardinal Newman[2] speaking in 1888: the university is "to conserve knowledge and ideas and transmit them to the elite."[2] Here again the university has a **use** but neither of these great men dares to suggeft **what** we train the elite for, or whose vested interests they are expected to serve.

Some would put this slightly differently and say that the university should "develop professional competence." But for what? It should "pass on the culture" we are told. But with how much change? Abraham Flexner, the educational theorist responsible for the complete revolutionizing of Ameri-

1 Eurich, Alvin C., ED., **Campus 1980** Deltr 1968
2 Newman, John Henry Cardinal, **The Scope and Nature of University Education**, Dutton NY 1958

can medical education at the turn of the century and author of an influential book on the university has this to say, "**The university contains the roots of the past, it is the soil out of which we grow....it contains the accumulaled tre asures of truth, beauty, knowlege, experience, social, and political (experience)....**"[3] This definition is appealing because it suggests **growth** and movement from the past and not simply the enshrining of the past. A place of true academic freedom leads to change and innovation. Otherwise it is simply a museum entombing the past. Implicit or explicit in all of the utilitarian definitions of the university is the assumption that the university must play a role in problem solving. A university **must train people to do somethihg.**

The Humanistic Definition of the University

The humanistic answers to the question, What is the university? are equally old, perhaps older, than the utilitarian answers and deserve equally careful scrutiny. These definitions cluster around the concept of the university as the focus of the quest for pure knowledge. But most humanistic answers contain some utilitarian overtones. When Woodrow Wilson, as Presirdent of Princeton University, said that "**The purpose of the university is to awaken the whole man,**"[4] he spoke of pure knowledge, yes, but **in order to** awaken. Confucius and Socrates would have nodded approvingly. So did CUNY (State University of New York, the newest university **system,** consisting of hundreds of thousands of students and dozens of campuses): "**The university si to help each person to decome all he is capable of decoming.**" It would be hard for those unfamiliar with higher education in U.S.A. to comprehend the radical shift this new SUNY definition marks from the long—prevailing utili-

3 Flexoer, Abraham, Universities-American, English, German, Oxford 1930

4 Vesey, Laurence R., The Emergence of the American University, Univ of Chicago 1965

tarian assumptions of the "land grant" colleges, those state universities which were established by federal land grants more than a century ago to develop much—needed agricultural and mechanical knowledge. This new direction in thought carries us straight back to old Noah Porter, President of Yale in 1878, who, precisely at the time that the utilitarians were staking out the land grant colleges, could say, "[5] **The purpose of the university is to give power to think rather than to impart knowledge in a particular discipline.**

How contemporary that sounds! Porter's definition seems to fit perfectly a school of educationists who now say that it is not sufficient simply to teaeh our students the skills and answers appropriate for the problems of today, that our real task is to prepare them to be able to handle the unknown problems of the next century. We recall the generals who spent their lives preparing for the previous war. Porter would remind us that it is useless to prepare our students for the past or even the present. His is a radically modern humanistic definition of the university as old as the university itself

Porter was rebelling, of course, at the concept of the university that would make a man religious, or ethical or patriotic, or moral, or even agriculturally or mechanically competent. He calls us back from the ancient past to the future by demanding that we investigate the meaning of life itself, by demanding that the university open the riches of human experience, especially in literature, art, religion, philosophy, sociology, economics, political science. Aaid Woodrow Wilson, "The university must arouse interest....."

The utilitarian and the humanistic approaches, however, have always run contiguously within the university, both always present, the ascendancy

5 Vesey, opcit, p 24

passing from one to another in some sort of historical dialectic. They close ranks when they are challenged by instrumentalism.

The Instrumentalist Definition of the University

For there is still another answer to the question, "What is the university?", the instrumentalist answer. This view suggests that the university is the **instrument** of some one or some thing, the tool of the Church, or the state, or the party, or the ruling clique, class, or even dogma. The instrumentalist answer involves, necessarily, surrendering the "freedom" of the university which classically is its very essence. Some purists or idealists might go so far as to say that once an institution has become an instrument of policy it is no longer a university. That may be quibbling with words. The University of Cuba **does** exist. It **is** a university. And it **is** instrumentalist.

It is interesting to see what happens when a utilitarian university switches over to instrumentalism. In 1959, 37% of the students of the University of Cuba were studying the humanities; in 1969, 6%. The percentage of those studying medicine remained constant, 28% and 30%, but those studying education dropped from 19% in 1959 to 8% ten years later, while those studying science increased from 7% to 16% during the same period. In one decade, those studying technology increased from 5% to 26%. So we are not dealing with abstract ideas. We are not simply theorizing. "What is a university?" is a very real and immediate question. Should a university be elitist in the utilitarian and humanistic tradition, or should it go populist, following the Cuban or contemporary Chinese pattern? Should it emphasize humanistic studies or vocational studies? Are humanistic studies a luxury that

the so–called developing "third world" nations cannot afford? or is the contrary true, that these are the very countries that, in eslablishing long term forms and structures, need humanistic studies the most?

Should the university be an instrument of national policy? Can it be avoided? George Santayana may not have been the first one to suggest that those who disdain the study of history are doomed to repeat it. The history of the university when it was a tool of the Church, for example, reading as far back as you choose, is not altogether inspiring. The "thought control that seems inevitably to accompany instrumentalism violates utilitarian and humanistic definitions and traditions of the university. Questions abound. At what point does the appeal of nationalism and its instrumentalist demands betray the concept of the "free" univer sity? How to reconcile the isolationism of nationalism with the more traditional internationalism of the university in its earliest days and even in most of its latter development? What does the current revival of monolinguism in national or provincial universities do to the ancient concepts of the free flow of scholars, teachers, scholarship, from place to place? The assigned purpose of this paper was to investigate how dialogue **within** a university might be achieved. But an inquiry into the meaning and purpose of the university itself, as a concept and as a functioning institution in society, must precede such a question.

PART II

PRACTICE

Paulo Freirie has said that the purpose of a university is dialogue. A good utilitarian definition. In asking how to achieve this purpose in a university we must talk about method. The first and most obvious way to open the clogged channels of dialogue within a university like ours would be to eliminate departments, which have so effectively blocked the flow of ideas. This method is not as absurd as it might at first appear and has actually been tried in a number of very small, experimental universities in the west, with varying degrees of success.

A slightly less drastic approach would be the physical integration of some, if not all, departments. This would force some dialogue. But can dialogue be **forced**? Yes, of course. A stiuation can be so arranged as to make dialogue virtually unavoidable. But the elimination or consolidation of departments are radical answers to the question and are impractical in most places and quite impossible within the Thai university administrative structure.

Another way to achieve dialogue, and one which is possible and gaining in popularity is through the increased use of open electives. That is the way that Confucius, Socrates and Abelard did it! One might almost make a formula: the amount of dialogue achieved is in inverse ratio to compulsion. The more compulsion, the less dialogue; the less compulsion (free elective) the more dialogue.

STill another way to achieve dialogue is through team teaching. It is difficult to put two teachers together in the same group without there developing some stimulation among teachers and students. This method is especi-

ally suitable for issue—oriented studies: ecology; political, social, artistic, ethical problems; even literature, for example Shakespearian studies. Almost anything can be enriched by the addition of an added discipline or two, subject-oriented courses almost equally with issue—oriented courses, especially at the higher levels.

A careful re—examination of the background, training, and especially experience of the teaching staff should reveal new possibilities for increased dialogue. Some of us are actually teaching in areas outside of our major concentration while others are disciplined in areas in which they are not even team—teaching or guest lecturing. We could achieve greater dialogue simplp by more careful use of the resources right within our own staff.

Perhaps the most obvious way to achieve dialogue is through guest lecturers, scholars, artists—in—residence, etc. How we could manage to get ourselves so busy within our own little cubicles as to slight the opportunities for dialogue offered by such universally acceptable and readily available methods is hard to imagine.

Perhaps the best way to achieve increased dialogue, in fact it almost becomes a definition of dialogue, is to develop the **community** aspect to the university. We become so involved in the academics that we forget that the university is an academic **community.** Without community we are not a university and there can be no dialogue. Sometimes community develops spontaneously. Usually it requires careful nurture and stimulation. It is not enough to build "centers" our simple solution to every problem: build! Dialogue involves the sharing of experiences, reports from those returning from abroad, the French soiree, the setting up of an atmosphere where free and easy conversation becomes natural. The institution of the university becomes a stage, a

setting, where the business of the university can take place. And the business of the university? **Dialogue.**

Finally. splits, factions, inter—departmental and inter—faculty rivalries and jealousies are detrimental to dialogue. This is as true as it is obvious. Within an atmosphere of rivalry, the spirit of dialogue is stifled and stilled. And any definition of the university becomes meaningless. The university is dialgoue. Dialogue becomes the uniuersity.

Sources and Bibliography:

Fehl, Noah Edward, *The Universits East and West*, Chung Chi College, Hongkong 1962

Swearer, Donalk K., *Buddhism in Transition* Westminster Phila 1970

Veblen, Thorstein, *The Higher Learning in America*, Hill & Wang, NY 1957

Wieruszowski, Helene, *The Medieval University*, *Van Nostrand*, Princeton 1966

Wolff, Robert Paul, *The Ideal of the University*, Beacon Boston 1969

ETC

Education leads to an immortal treasure. (Latin)