



Distance Education for Marginalized Communities: Using Communication Technology as an Alternative Approach to Adult Literacy Education

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"The Gospel interpreted in the social teachings of the Church, is an urgent call to promote the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic disease and ignorance... Every Catholic University feels responsible to contribute concretely to the progress of the society within which it works."

*Pope John Paul II
Apostolic Constitution on
Catholic Universities*

Introduction:

The development of human resources of a nation, rather than its physical capital or its natural resources, ultimately determines the character and pace of its economic and social development. According to Prof. F. Harbinon of Princeton University "Human resources constitute the ultimate basis for the wealth of nations. Capital and natural resources are passive factors in production while human beings are active agents who accumulate capital, exploits natural resources, build social, economic and political organizations and carry forward national development. Clearly, a country, which is unable to develop the skills of its people is unable to develop anything else."

Therefore, the development of citizens is of prime importance among countries, particularly those that are labeled to be in the *Third World* and aspiring for development. The formal educational system has always been considered as the principal institutional mechanism for developing human skills and knowledge. But as the World Bank's Development Report of 1999 acknowledges that "education is the key to creating, adopting and spreading knowledge", it also emphasizes that the "gains in access to education have been unevenly distributed, with the poor seldom getting their fair share." Hence most Third World countries believe that the rapid expansion of educational opportunity is the key to national development. Believing in the mantra that the more educated the citizens are, the more rapid the development is.

As a result, governments are putting a premium on education. The proportion of national income and national budget spent on education has increased rapidly. In Asia as a whole, the total public expenditure tripled during 1960's and the 70's where on the average education accounted for 15% - 27% of the total government expenditure. In the Philippines in particular, the education sector is set to receive P 134.8 billion, biggest budgetary allocation as proposed in the National Budget

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for 2006, this would include the budget for Department of Education, (DepEd), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), State Universities and Colleges (SUC), and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST). But in spite of this, there is doubt if it will be enough to overcome the tremendous backlog in classrooms, textbooks, chairs, and teachers. As of school year 2003-2004 there is an estimated 13,000 barangays in the country that do not have an elementary school, the classroom backlog is pegged at 40,000, for arm chairs it is estimated at 5 million and there is a need for 20 million books. As a result three (3) out of ten (10) Filipinos aged 5 – 19 do not go to school. Children from poor families often do not finish their schooling. And 75% of those who do not finish elementary, high school or college are from poor families.

To tip the balance and turn the tide towards the development of individuals, families and communities, private institutions, particularly Institutions for Higher Education must do its share in fulfilling the universal goal of “education for all”. As proclaimed in the DAKAR FRAMEWORK for Education For All, we must share in the commitment of “(a) expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children; (b) ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality; (c) ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programs; (d) *achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults*; (e) eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality”.

Distance Education as an Alternative.

Given that those that are in the most need of basic education are those that are in the poor, hard to reach, underserved or unserved marginalized barrios, the foremost challenge is to identify an alternative means of delivering education. A mode of education that would conquer the limitations of resources such as the lack of classrooms, teachers, books and chairs, and one should overcome the limitation distance and location of the community. The alternative is the delivery of educational services and programs through *distance education*.

Distance Education is an alternative means of delivering instructions to distant learners or group of learners. It presupposes that the teacher and learners are separated from each other by some geographical, social or time constraints. Thus, distance education is meant to overcome the factors that separate the learners from education services. Inherent in the nature of distance education are three elements that distinguish it

from the conventional classrooms. That there is a permanent record of instruction that is usually captured on print, audiocassette or videotapes, the use of instructional materials that are largely learner-centered and the pooling of expertise for the production of quality instructional materials.

Distance education utilizes normally three modes of delivery, namely: print-based, broadcast-based and computer-based. The print is the earliest mode and perhaps the most widely used. The broadcast-based on the other hand, may use a one-way radio or television broadcast (as in the Knowledge Channel); or a two-way radio system technology. It is like print-based mode except that this time the learner listens. Of the two the broadcast-based medium, the two-way radio system is more desirable primarily because it provides immediate feedback to the remote center. The use of computer-based distance education is increasingly becoming widespread. However, it requires computers on both ends, making its use limited only to those who have computers at home or in the center.

The University of Santo Tomas Distance Education for the Marginalized

The University of Santo Tomas Distance Education for the Marginalized program is an adult distance literacy education program using the two-way radio (broadcast) as the medium of delivery. The teacher broadcasts the lessons via a two-way radio from the Radio Room in the College of Education in the University to the learners in their communities in Bamban, Tarlac. The teacher in the University initiates the "classes" in España while a trained local para-teacher facilitates the discussion in the learning center in the community by presenting visual and other teaching aids, introducing the learners to the use of the radio, demonstrating skills and supervising the learners in their pen and paper exercises. She / He also serves as the animator of the group, clarifying topics and encouraging the learners to ask questions.

Lessons Learned from the Five-Year Implementation of the Distance Education Program

- 1. Overcoming the indifference to technology.** *"Paano mangyayari 'yon? And titser ay nasa UST at ang kaharap n'yo rito ay speaker (referring to the radio) lang, paano kayo matututo?"* The tribal leader captured the apprehension of the community towards the whole concept of the program. Since Sitio Malasa was the pilot area, we could only use as reference the experience of other distance education programs, mostly from other countries. More so, these references are mostly written and computer-based, and none of which was radio based, add to the fact none of these are on adult literacy.

In addition the apprehension on the radio as a methodology, there is also the fear of actually using it. In the early stages of the program, it was really an effort to get the learners to use the radio to report work, and then when they got use to it, we

encountered a pleasant concern. There was a tendency for the learners to press the handset while they talked in length, causing the radio to overheat and blow fuses. As the program manager, I say that it is a pleasant concern because I would rather buy fuses on a weekly basis than not have the learners enjoy what the technology can offer. But as they gained more confidence and proficiency with using the radio, the problem on blown fuses became a thing of the past. They still talk in length but now pause and even end their reports with “over ma’am” and reply in the affirmative with “roger”.

From an initial pilot class of 15 Aeta and “unat” women in Sitio Malasa four years ago, the program is now being implemented in four (5) indigenous peoples’ communities in Bambang, Tarlac: Sitio Malasa, Sitio Mabilog, Sitio San Maritn, Sitio Santa Rosa and Sitio Haduan. In all, the program now has more 150 registered learners.

2. Learners first approach.

The basic literacy classes are delivered on modular packages rather than the traditional straightforward reading and writing sessions. Taking into consideration that adult learners are more receptive to learning when the topics are directly related to and have meaningful use in their everyday lives, the literacy aspect of the program is integrated into modules that discuss topics such as, Environmental Conservation (*Ako at ang Aking Kapaligiran*), Livelihood (*Pangkabuhayan*), Health and Responsible Parenthood (*Ang Kalusugan ng Aking Pamilya*), and Community Life (*Ako at ang Aking Pamayanan*).

A typical class starts with the radio check of all learning centers one hour prior to the session. This is to give time for adjustments, battery checking and preparation of the para-teachers for the day’s discussion. As soon as the learners arrive, the para-teachers check the attendance and signify their readiness to the main station (University). The main teacher then introduces the topic for discussion, asks some reflective questions and then seeks the opinion of the learners. The discussion then ensues. The exchange of the discussion is often lively because it is not only limited between the teachers and learners or between the learners in the same learning centers, but the discussions and sharing even develop between learners in different learning centers. Discussions on the same topic may last for two to three sessions. Until eventually, the literacy and numeracy components are introduced. An example is when the learners were asked to conduct an inventory of the natural resources by enumerating all the plants and trees in their community. After exhausting all they have to share, the teacher may ask them, which of these plants and trees start with the letter K, or with the syllable KA. From here, the para-teacher

would normally take over and initiate the literacy and numeracy classes. Their conceptual and literacy learning are regularly measured through pre-tests and post tests.

As educators, no matter what technology we use in the delivery of our subjects, we are always guided by our genuine concern for our students / learners. This has been the primary principle in the implementation our Distance Education Program. The radio is the means of delivery, but equally important, if not even more important is our message and content. Given that we primarily cater to adult illiterate learners in indigenous communities, the program follows a more dialogical, exploratory and flexible approach. This means that rather than teach them *our* story of creation, we encourage them express *their* story, their belief. As such, in as much as the technology is something new for the community, it becomes a means for them to understand who they are. In as much as it provides them new meaning, they are always rooted to their identity, their culture, their tradition.

“Si Manang Ilyang at si Chieftain Hausgirl”

Beyond the results of the tests, it has always been the testimonies of the learners and community leaders that best validate the program. During one of our visits in Malasa, we were surprised that the learners were at the learning center even if the sessions had been suspended. Ate Lucy, their para-teacher, told us that the mothers came to practice writing their names. When I asked Manang Ilyang, a fiftysomething grandmother, what she was writing, she told me she was writing her name.

“What other words have you learned to read?” I asked further.

“Aba sir, nababasa ko na ang Bamnan at Angeles.”

“Bakit Bamnan at Angeles?”

“Para pag dadalawin ko ang mga kamag-anak ko sa Angeles hindi ko na kailangan isama ang apo ko, ‘di na ako magtatanong kung ano ang nakasulat sa jeep,” she said proudly, showing off her betelnut-stained teeth.

One incident during the local elections, a community leader, who is also a learner complained, *“Bakit madaming letra ang isusulat niya, maikli lang naman ang pangalan ng boboto ng kasama ko”*. This was when one candidate had a two-syllable surname while the other had four. *“Hindi ako pumayag sir. Alam ko ‘di ko pa nababasa, pero nakikilala ko na ang bilang ng letra”*.

And there was another instance when the learners were asked to sign their names in a document required for the enrollment of children—they were being offered an ink pad so they could place their thumb print but they hesitantly reached

for the pencil and started scribbling their names. This was much to the delight of their proud para-teacher who was there to prod and encourage them. There are a number of other stories, but it is Chieftain Hausgirl's (yes *that is his name*) story that I find truly inspiring. Chieftain Hausgirl is from another sitio situated at the foot of a hill. Because of its location, we were not able to establish a learning center in the Sitio due to poor reception of radio system. Although disappointed, this did not deter him from attending classes. He would walk for an hour (*at his pace*) to reach the learning center in Santa Rosa and attend the sessions there. He would never fail to attend a single class, perfect attendance. When we asked why, he would simply say, "*Hirap maging lider sir kung kami mismo di makabasa at sumulat. At nahihya na rin kami sa mga anak at apo namin.*"

3. Making the program relevant to the community.

From the onset, we recognized that as a component of the overall community development framework, that the distance education program is an entry point for the wider and more comprehensive effort. As stated in the program objectives, the Distance Education Program should "*contribute to the overall development of the community by increasing educational opportunities among the marginalized communities, particularly the indigenous peoples. Beyond improving their competence in reading, writing and arithmetic, the participants are expected (1) to apply and integrate the principles and concept learned in the modules, (2) to initiate community organizing and (3) to facilitate the community development process in their communities.*"

Now after three years of full implementation, the learners mostly make up the core of the local organizations in the communities. With support from the University, they have launched a community store, the TINDAHAN hen KASIGHAWAN and a goat dispersal project. In San Martin, the women are managing their own rice distribution center, selling rice at a much lower rate in the community.

And because of the growing scope of the community development program at the Sitio level, the distance education program has served as the platform for the University to strengthen the Municipal-wide organization of all the indigenous peoples' community, the BATA (Bamban Aeta Tribal Association).

Another project being implemented as an offshoot of the entry of the program in communities as facilitated by the Distance Education program is the scholarship Aeta Youth Scholarship Project. As of the present we have close to 80 elementary and high school scholars in these four communities. We are also set to finish

the forty housing units in Sitio Mabilog as part of the ACTS (Action Camp of the Thomasian Students) Project.

4. Adapting the technology where there is none.

One of the biggest hurdles we faced in the inception of the program was how to get it started in areas where they don't even have electricity. The solution was to adapt everything, adapt the radio system, including the repeater, to run on batteries. To sustain the charge of the batteries, project areas were provided chargers and generator sets. Recently, two of our learning centers were installed solar panels to sustain the operations.

In conclusion, amid the initial apprehension by both the community and the implementers on the use of technology for education, particularly in adult education, the UST Distance Education Program has proven that there are indeed great opportunities in this field. Not only for formal education, as in what the Educational Technology Center of the University is doing for our online courses, but also in the area community and extension service. With the continuous development in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), there would be no "mountain high enough, and no river wide enough" to keep the learner from his/her quest for education. As the people in the ICT community readily produce the stage, it is up to us the educators to provide the play, the content. It is for us educators to ensure that the content: (1) Is relevant to our learners (2) Provides our learners information, while at the same time giving meaning to who they are (3) Is culturally sensitive and (4) Situates the technology in the overall development of the person and the community.

In short, as the world is getting smaller through ICT, as we are all getting connected, as they say we are living one global village, The UST Distance Education Program has proven that: (1) Technology can be friendly even to the "marginalized" (2) that beyond formal education, ICT provides vast opportunity for community development (3) but, as we encourage connectivity we should also encourage individuality, living in one global village should not compromise culture and tradition, education must not only provide information but also meaning.

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