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Seminar-Workshop on “A General Education Program for Filipino Students”

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Notes and Comments

Seminar-Workshop on "A General Education Program for Filipino Students."

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

The Division of Humanities, College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines, under the energetic direction of Pacita Guevara-Fernandez, its Associate Dean, sponsored its fourth annual seminar on general education on 5-6 September 1980. While previous seminars had centered on "The Role of the Humanities in a Developing Society (1977, 1978 and 1979), this year's seminar marked a distinct shift in direction as it attacked the problem of general education in the Philippines. Moreover, whereas the earlier seminars had largely been restricted to participants from the University of the Philippines, a good number of this year's 150 participants were from outside the UP campus. The result was a far more lively meeting of ideas that took the participants beyond the confines of the University of the Philippines, and face to face with the pressing problems of Philippine education as a whole.

OPENING SESSIONS

The first morning of the seminar was devoted to a plenary session that defined general education rather traditionally in terms of humanistic values. Ms. Fernandez, in her introductory speech made the point that teaching is still worth doing — there are values still worth preserving. But then, paraphrasing Socrates she said that an unexamined program is not worth keeping in the curriculum. Hence, the purpose of the annual seminar of the Humanities Division.

Dr. Emanuel V. Soriano, President of the University of the Philippines, in his Keynote Address, insisted upon the value of general education in an increasingly specialized world. Relying on a neat etymological argument, he made the point that education is to "lead a man out of himself" — to teach him how to care for others, how to serve others. Perhaps speaking from the background of contemporary ferment, he then said: "Communion is necessary for dialogue; else it becomes noisy and unfruitful."

The plenary session then discussed the three major disciplines in general education: literature, social science and natural science. Dr. Gemino Abad quoted Professor Dadafulza, that the true University is a "center of hilarity" — "not a vaudeville act, but a state of mind which springs from the highest vision of life called the comic vision." The motives of general education, he said, are edification and emulation in their root Latin meanings, and from this perspective, "the center and focus of general education is to be found in literature and philosophy."

THIRD WORLD CONSCIOUSNESS

The most exciting part of the morning's discussion was precipitated by Professor Dolores S. Feria who made a strong case for "third world consciousness" in general education. In her usual provocative fashion, Professor Feria said: Philippine society, "in spite of avowals to the contrary, has only a fringe relationship with the Third World, dictated by expediency and rarely by Third World consciousness." "The Third World in literature," she said, "has ceased to be a place or a race. It is a point in a writer's consciousness." And she quoted poet Syl Cherry-Coker with approval: Third World consciousness is a "new humanism. . . the total expression of those human and cultural values of the people of Asia, Africa and Latin America. It is a new humanism that urges a blanket repudiation of the solutions of the First and Second World; a new humanism that shall not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity." In the open forum, predictably enough, Professor Feria had both her opponents and supporters before the exchange of ideas degenerated into a discussion of whether science can be truly humanistic. Fortunately, the invitation to lunch at

the U.P. Executive House preserved the group from a tedious rehash of C.P. Snow's *Two Cultures*.

The rest of the day, as well as most of the next, was devoted to workshop sessions, where a considerable amount of profitable discussion took place. Although the seven groups — working on consciousness of self, and six types of consciousness: historical, socio-economic, political, cultural, aesthetic, and methodological — were often too large and hampered by space limitations, a good deal of the really meaningful exchange in the seminar took place within them.

AESTHETICS AND THE POOR

I attended the Workshop on Aesthetics, since I was anxious to see what would happen to beauty in the face of Dr. Soriano's muted plea for service and Professor Feria's more strident demand for Third World Consciousness. The discussion on aesthetics in the workshop skittered around for quite sometime until Professor Ricaredo Demetillo asked what to me was the crucial question: what does all this discussion of aesthetics have to do with the squatter living in a barong-barong? Although there was much discussion of the question, and a good deal of defensive self-justification, the question was never really answered. The workshop participants seemed satisfied to affirm that even squatters need art and then to discuss the native instinct for beauty even among the poor. But I for one was not satisfied that Professor Demetillo's question had been answered. What Philippine folk song do you play for a man who is starving? Perhaps the problem was best stated by Narciso Albarracin, former Under-Secretary of Education:

For a long time in this country we have been spending more for education relevant to the elite and the middle class of which there are only 30 percent — people who could take care of themselves — but irrelevant to the poor which constitute a greater portion of the population. *Philippine Sunday Express*, 3 February 1980.

Viewed from the outside, and from the stance of a non-UP participant, one might justifiably list three impressions from this Fourth Annual Seminar of the Division of Humanities at U.P.

1. General Education in the Philippines is under siege. In the past it has been besieged by the natural sciences and then

later by the social sciences, in an ever-increasing demand for technological skill. Its most recent enemies seem to be those who demand an increasing emphasis on social relevance. What good is philosophy and literature when people are hungry and deprived of freedom and human rights?

2. Assuming that the general education curriculum is relevant, there is an increasing awareness of the deterioration of teaching skills. This point was made by Dean Francisco Nemenzo of the College of Arts and Sciences in the 1979 Seminar, and the situation seems to be even worse in 1980. There was much discussion of content, but most of the problems raised could be traced to poor classroom teaching. Irrelevance, of course, is only a hop, skip and jump beyond poor teaching.
3. A good deal of Philippine education, at least that which one hears about on the Diliman campus and perhaps also at the Ateneo and La Salle campus, is detached from reality. It seems — and this is only the observation of one participant — that we are teaching, but our students are not listening very much. Is the problem theirs or ours?

The Fourth Annual Seminar of the Humanities Division of UP, served a vital function. It brought educators together to talk about problems. It is to be hoped that Ms. Fernandez will continue the work she has begun so well. The University of the Philippines, and Philippine education in general, would be poorer without these seminars. Like Socrates, they force us to re-examine both the humanities and general education.