

KNOWLEDGE FOR PEOPLE: RESEARCH FOR COMMUNITY LIFE

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PART II: PANELS

i. SpareTime University as an Approach to Enhance Youth and Community Engagement and Service across ASEAN and Asia

(Based on a presentation by Professor Michael H. Glantz
and prepared by M.H. Glantz and Gregory Pierce)

Time Magazine recently posed two questions about the future of education: What are the educational needs of students in the 21st century? How do we “build” a student for this century?

The urgent educational needs in the new century include but are not limited to the following: empowering youth; linking all living generations; using social networking and all types of conventional media; enhancing access to and usability of knowledge; sharing knowledge across geographic regions, generations and genders; and empowering the general public by distilling university-level knowledge for greater general understanding. As this list suggests, traditional education approaches of previous centuries that had children going to a building called a school and learning from a person called a teacher who stood at the front of the room while the children sat passively ‘learning’ all day will not adequately meet the socio-economic needs and information demands of the new century. Educators must therefore find new ways to inspire both children and adults to seek and acquire new knowledge throughout their lifetimes.

People today seem to have shorter attention spans than those of previous generations; the sad thing is that our social structure has conditioned them to have such shortened attention. For example, people now text each other with short symbols and abbreviations on their mobile

phones instead of developing ideas and thoughtfully expressing them. Indeed, Twitter allows for messages to contain no more than 141 characters including punctuation marks and spaces between words! Furthermore, a large majority of people today merely skim over headlines or favor reading short articles in newspapers and other media. Possibly the most egregious example, however, is that even TV news shows bombard people with cursory information in the constantly scrolling ribbon of abstracted information that moves across the bottom of the screen even as the newscaster is speaking (often too cursorily) about other topics. A final example of how people's attention spans are being shortened can be viewed by the very production techniques of television programming: Switch off the lights in a room with a TV on, turn your back to the television during a news report, and notice how the light flashes every few seconds as the show's images rapidly change. To be sure, we are unwittingly conditioning people to have no attention spans at all as everything about communications seems to be getting continuously shorter.

In this lecture, a new and complementary approach to education is proposed that can bring a virtual classroom to participants through a format that I refer to as SpareTime University (STU). Though few will readily admit it, everyone has periods of time throughout a week in which they are free to access new and useful information wherever and whenever they choose to do so. SpareTime University is a way to educate students, to identify and interact with community mentors for students, to inform academics of "teachable contemporary moments" drawn from around the globe, to foster interaction and to transfer knowledge. The STU format enables such an education platform to be built inexpensively between universities and local communities throughout Asia. SpareTime University is for all—from "K to Gray", that is, from kindergarten to older people—and for universities, educators, students in high school and beyond and government agencies. It provides an accessible inexpensive pathway to educate and empower civil society through the use of a wide range of inexpensive portable technological (audio and video) devices.

The general objectives of STU are to share new as well as to enhance existing knowledge for civil society. Civil society is important because the people who compose it, though almost always most in need for information to surmount the hazards and uncertainties that affect their lives every day, are often the last people to become aware of such information as it trickles

slowly down to them. Such information is often very usable *today* to such people, if only such people in need were made aware of it. Furthermore, civil society is also the source of all future socio-economic and political decision makers in all walks of life. Experience with such information on the ground in civil society will continuously ground such decision makers even after they establish themselves within the often rarified world of political life.

Specific STU objectives therefore include:

- Encouraging all members of civil society to share in the nation's education and training systems;
- Providing an inexpensive pathway to accessibly educate and empower civil society, allowing them to do so in their "spare time" using a range of existing as well as new but truly inexpensive technologies (e.g. MP3 and MP4 players);
- Fostering the sharing of knowledge about water, climate and weather problems and solutions;
- Enabling people who cannot afford the costs or the time to attend traditional school settings to continue to learn; and
- Inspiring and enriching civil society by bringing the virtual classroom to the participants through the STU platform.

Civil society encompasses the entire spectrum of people—the poor and the rich, the marginalized, government and industry bureaucrats, educators and trainers and those they educate from "K to gray," mid-career people already in the workforce, and political leaders. The wide range of cheap technologies encompasses new as well as older electronic devices. This broad range of people and electronics is essential to the STU concept. For example, as consumers in the most economically developed classes of civil society upgrade their mobile phones and electronic devices such as their MP3 or MP4 players, they often fail to recycle their older, still functioning devices even though there are many others who could still use them. Such a tendency to upgrade and discard functioning devices, however, provides a possible inroad for the billions in the world who lack information and access to information.

“Satisfice” is a concept from Economics that is formed by merging two concepts, satisfy and sacrifice. Many people willingly choose *not* to earn as much money as they could, giving up that singular goal in order to pursue other satisfying, often more holistic lifestyle objectives. What they earn they consider “good enough” to meet their needs as well as their wants. Satisficing provides an individual, company or government an alternative to maximizing their assets: “I don’t have to strive to become the richest in the world, as there are other rewarding activities to which to devote my time and energy.” In other words, people can be satisfied to have funds that are “good enough” to engage in those activities they wish to pursue. The underlying message for satisficing by individuals and societies is to be satisfied with less, knowing that a lesser but no less suitable amount in one area can bring much greater satisfaction and security overall. This understanding of satisfaction is a necessary, nay, key aspect of the notion of sustainability. It is also, metaphorically speaking, an inroad for admissions to STU.

I would like to see the concept of “satisfice” introduced to civil society as a “good enough” guide to consumerism in the 21st century. Clearly, technological inventions can change individual as well as societal behavior; however, concepts can also change behavior and can be viewed as “social inventions.” SpareTime University synergizes the use of such discarded and inexpensive electronic devices and the concept of social inventions. Today, for example, people can buy MP3 listening devices that will store 4000 minutes of information for only a few dollars (US). Small video players cost only a few dollars more. Recycled and functioning devices would cost that much less. Such devices can be pre-loaded with short, brief lectures to be given away to share “knowledge” with targeted groups. Such knowledge need not be narrowly defined as “school knowledge,” however, as a scene from the popular film “Slumdog Millionaire,” based on Indian author Swarup’s novel *Q & A*, illustrates in providing an instructive lesson on the interesting notion of “Ordinary Knowledge.” When the young, unschooled protagonist of the film was asked by his lawyer how he could have answered 12 difficult questions on an Indian TV quiz show to win a million dollars, the unschooled boy replied, “they happened to ask me the 12 things I know.”

The point is that we must become more aware of the value of the things people “just know” and not only value those concepts people learn in school. Though many people may not finish school, they do possess considerable useful knowledge, the point being that whatever the source

the more a person knows the more questions throughout life that person will be able to answer and the better able that person will be at surmounting the challenges of living in the modern world—and of helping others similarly surmount those challenges of that world. Information is power; sharing information is empowering.

Relevant content for SpareTime University would be developed in national education and training centers for dissemination to targeted audiences in any desired language. It would be based not only on what those centers believe is relevant to the targeted audience but also on what the audience has suggested is information they could use, making STU a participatory and collaborative platform. To be sure, content could also be provided by those target audiences who are the Zero-Order Responders (ZOR) to disasters and the empirical authorities on change at the resolution of the local. Participants in STU would have access to information that is taught in a high school, university or training centre as well as useful knowledge that has become ordinary to other people in similar social and environmental circumstances. STU can be developed as a certificate program or could be just for information sharing to those who do not need a certificate. There are many ways for educators to teach as well as for people to learn. The wider use of existing, even older cheap technologies can enable STU participants to listen when they want, use it when they want, where they want in their “Spare time,” however short that might be.

The following is a list of potential practical STU topical courses:

- Agriculture (irrigation, drainage, livestock, shifting boundaries)
- Water (quality, quantity, health aspects, upstream-downstream links)
- Energy (solar, hydro, wind, fossil fuels, comparative advantages)
- Environment (glacial melt, soil salinization, deforestation, dust storms, seasonality changes)
- Climate (change, extremes, hydrology, CO2 emissions)
- Food (seasonal changes, storage techniques)
- Public Health (nutrition, sanitation, infectious disease outbreaks)
- Public safety (floods, drought, epidemics)
- Tenure rights (national laws, organizations to help, mapping techniques)

To foster an understanding of climate, for instance, the notion of Climate Affairs, including climate-society-environment interactions and previous work on Climate Affairs in Southeast Asia, could be explored. Climate Affairs highlights how climate, water and weather science impacts politics, policies, law, economics, and ethics and equity. To understand and cope with climate change people often rely on scientific research, but they urgently need social science research as well because policymakers want to know what the impacts of climate change, variability and extremes might be on their citizens. There is much speculation about how climate change might adversely affect society at the local level in Malaysia and at the regional level in Southeast Asia, for instance. Through the STU platform, knowledge on climate change, seasonality, and hazards could be shared in a multidisciplinary context. In terms of Climate Affairs, therefore, STU courses could:

- Enhance interest in how climate and water variability, change and extremes influence daily life in Southeast Asia—locally, nationally, and regionally;
- Explore how to cope with climate change, shifts in seasonality and environmental hazards;
- Encourage consideration of developing university-level multidisciplinary Climate Affairs activities and developing a regional Climate Affairs network.
- Develop ongoing knowledge sharing ‘collaboratories’ between local peoples with empirical experience of changes and those who are studying such change at the university level, creating inter-disciplinary, inter-cultural links that value all relevant forms of knowledge and experience.

Science of the 21st century is different than that of preceding times; in fact, the dominant role for the scientific community has changed. Before the 1970s, science was “for the sake of Science,” while in the 1970s, science was “for the People.” But after the year 2000, the role of science has become “with the People.” Actually, societies need all three roles of science to be interconnected and smoothly functioning.

Indeed, a key aspect of climate-society-environment interactions today is ethics & equity—every scientific decision about the environment has the potential to create disparity among people in the world. One must protect those who might be adversely affected by decisions made through

the scientific method. For example, many of Asia's regional hydro-meteorological hazards are known and include tropical storms, droughts, floods, haze, disease outbreaks, tsunamis and global warming, but such knowledge is often inequitably disseminated across societies. Those who are poor or marginalized are often unaware and are therefore more harshly affected by such hazards. This is an egregious inequity in today's world of communications. SpareTime University is here proposed to bridge this gap in communications, providing usable, on-demand, timely, user-friendly knowledge related to environmental change and other topics that addresses such breakdowns. It is, in other words, a hands-on, inexpensive way to learn about and cope with the socioeconomic problems and the needs of both policymakers and people in a world of constant change.