Chapter 4
An Online Conversation among Southeast Asian Higher Education Institutions and its Observed Oppressions

Alexander G. Flor
University of the Philippine-Open University, The Philippines

Narong Sompong
Kasetsart University, Thailand

ABSTRACT
This study looked into the feasibility of a meta-communication approach, specifically the community of practice (CoP), in the design of a graduate degree program for natural resources and climate change management. The CoP is characterized as a modern day counterpart of the “invisible college” that developed curricula or learning programs during the birth of universities in the Middle Ages. Can a community of practice as a meta-communication approach, transcend institutional, geographical, disciplinary, and language oppressions for collaborative development of new curricula?

The study was implemented from Kasetsart University in Bangkok and the UP Open University in Los Baños, with the latter hosting the KM system and administering the online platform. However, it involved a community of practice that came from four countries: Thailand; Philippines; Lao PDR; and Indonesia. It found that the CoP model may indeed be used as capacity development approach for the design of a graduate degree program. Furthermore, Web-based learning management systems such as IVLE and Moodle can adequately serve as meta-communication platforms for such a CoP. However, it was observed that the language barrier, cultural sensitivities of Southeast Asian participants, intellectual intimidation, as well as access and connectivity clearly posed communicative oppressions.

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INTRODUCTION

“The problem of communication is a problem of consciousness.” - Jurgen Habermas

One of the most discernable trends in this era of globalization and informatization is transnational education. Institutions of higher learning are no longer bound by national borders. Almost every major university in the world has programs that are addressed to learners based in countries other than its own. This trend has seen the rise not only of the global university but regional networks of higher educational institutions catering to a multinational student body. In the latter, several national universities established a regional consortium to jointly offer a program that may be availed upon by students of any nationality within the region. The institution that awards the graduate degree is based on the individual student’s citizenship. In Southeast Asia, several university consortia or network initiatives are underway sponsored by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education organization (SEAMEO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and others.

This chapter is based on the online conversation that transpired among faculty members of higher educational institutions from four Southeast Asian countries who were in the process of designing a proposed regional graduate program on natural resources knowledge management. Knowledge management is synonymous to the sharing and reuse of intellectual capital. In other words knowledge management is likewise engaged in what Habermas (1984) calls the communicative act. This communicative act being the subject of the online conversation has transformed the online discussion for the proposed program into meta-communication, i.e., communication on communication or discourse (online discussion threads) on knowledge management (communication). The researchers documented the online conversation to test the efficacy of the platform used. In the process, however, they have uncovered certain oppressive factors peculiar to this setting that hindered the communicative act (i.e., knowledge management) and meta-communication (i.e., the online conversation) itself.

The Online Conversation

The online conversation was prompted by a pressing need: Southeast Asia is beset with natural resources management problems. Decades of unhampered resource exploitation in the watersheds of the Philippines and Indonesia by logging concerns are exacting their toll through landslides and flashfloods in the Visayas and Central Java. Land-locked areas in the Greater Mekong Sub-region are now suffering the same fate. Coastal resources in the Sulu-Celebes Sea, home of the most biologically diverse marine ecosystems in the world, are being endangered by destructive fishing practices, mangrove destruction, and oil spills.

The initiative argued that the collective expertise of the region should be brought to bear on these problems through the establishment of a regional knowledge management (KM) system on natural resources, an online platform for the sharing and reuse of knowledge. Along this line, the capacities of both individuals and institutions for natural resources knowledge management should be built and strengthened. Thus, a program for developing these capacities was proposed and it was to be designed collaboratively through an online discussion forum among Southeast Asian universities.

Two alternative platforms for the online discussion forum were employed, the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment and the Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment made available by the University of the Philippines (Open University).

Participants in the online conversation may be considered as part of the regional community of practice (CoP) on natural resources knowledge
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