STUDENT INTERVIEWS AT ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY: A PARTICIPATIVE LEARNING PROCESS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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An ancient adage holds that "if you become a teacher, by your pupils you'll be taught." The proverb deals appropriately with the mission of the teacher vis-a-vis the student. It contains wisdom that transcends the barriers of time. The words come to provide, for the present, refreshing insights into the scopes of teaching and learning.

This paper seeks to explore the implications of the above proverb in a present "real world" situation -- that of Assumption University. For well over 20 years, this university has grown into a center for modern and upgraded studies. What has contributed to this growth is an "openness" and "flexibility" in the system through participative learning. This phenomenon has occurred and appears in constant growth in the system of interviews at Assumption University since the interview system was initiated by its current president, Dr. P. Martin Komolmas, f.s.g.

Stated very plainly, the interview affords an opportunity for University officers, lecturers and advisors to meet, get acquainted with, and participate in the growth and development of individual students as mature and thinking individuals. A parallel system, though not as elaborate, does exist in the U.S. universities with advisory activities. Assumption University perhaps has had the U.S. model in mind, but -- with modification -- has structured regular interviews that afford teachers and students opportunities to meet and dialogue with each other on a semestral basis.

The interviews themselves occur within a formal setting -- in the teacher's office, across the table. The interviews are measured and graded exercises and both students and teachers are held accountable for the one hour per semester interview (split into two half-hour sessions each). Students are assigned grades and teachers turn in records of scores for the interviewees. For certain students the interviews affect quite tangibly their core English course grades. For other students through the interviews, among various benefits, future jobs may be recom-

mended and guidance and counselling effected.

The interviews become participative in that the students and teachers communicate at even keel in a non-classroom environment and teaching comes through more as friendly advice. Apart from obsessive discussions about the difficulty of the English grammar and its applications to the non-native speakers of English, there are other valuable benefits that accrue from the interview. Consider the following as examples :

Case #1

Student : Teacher, you speak English very well.
Interviewer : So do you!
Student : No! I don't think so.
Interviewer : I do! You just spoke two simple sentences in English very accurately.
Student : Did I?
Interviewer : Yes. Keep speaking such sentences in the future.

Case #2

Interviewer (a non-native speaker of the English language) : Well, it's alright to cry.
Student : I really feel badly. I cannot speak English very well!
Interviewer : Cheer up! I had that feeling when I was a student. Teachers have all gone through this same experience.
Student : Really? Thank you, teacher!

In both of the above case studies we observe how the teaching/ learning process takes place at a very common platitude -- that of the participative level. The two interacting people have naturally relinquished their formal positions. Participation in a discussion on a common issue enhances friendship and fulfills one objective of teaching -- namely, to communicate a message which enhances the aptitude of the student. In addition, the participative mode of teaching through interviews structures one more advantage. When students are given encouragement on a personal basis their psychology and attitudes change, and students begin to think and "dare to do" for themselves.

At the interview, the student -- normally under stress and pressure of semestral studies, prospects of graduation and job positioning -- transforms himself or herself into a potential "doer" and an "actualizer." One readily warms up to an animated discussion following the simple question: "What would you want to be in the future?" Reactions to such a question may involve the following:

Case #3

Student : I don't know....I'd like to run my own business in the import-export market.
Interviewer : Why shouldn't you?
Student : I do not have enough experience!
Interviewer : Isn't it that experience comes from effort, from attempt -- FROM DARING TO DO?
Student : Yes! Well, I have a good friend in Canada. I'll write him to find out what Thai goods would sell there successfully.
Interviewer : Try it out. Good luck!

Another situation is when the student is seeking advice:

Case #4

Student : Teacher, could you please give me some advice with regard to something that has been on my mind?

Interviewer : I'd gladly do that.

Student : My father says I must get a job and some working experience while studying. Besides, I could earn money for myself.

Interviewer : That really isn't a bad idea! It would be fun.

Student : My friends told me that I'd do well in running my own fashion wear boutique shop.

Interviewer : You would be good at that.

Student : I spoke to my father and he's offered me a loan to start my boutique shop. My friends will help me and I think I could succeed.

The conversation in Case #4, an in-office interview, took place in September, 1991. By November, 1992, the student came in to see the interviewer to discuss the establishment, development and growth of the boutique shop. The "push" and "prod" strategies used during the interview help the students locate in themselves the actualizing of their goals or even more plainly, to answer for themselves certain questions that they would have found difficult had they not sought the advice of the teacher. Advice during the interview takes several forms, one of which is to affirm or corroborate certain hunches or possibilities that exist in the minds of the students. On the other hand, the teacher becomes gratified that the student not only chose to confide in him or her, but also that the student was able to actualize something as a result of the consultation.

Such benefits for students -- the free consultation with the teacher may be seen as extensions of classroom instruction into the consideration of individual talents and potentials in the business world of Thailand. Based on the feedback that students give to the teachers, they (the teachers) have to become involved in strategies of problem-solving and of motivating and psychologically conditioning students. In effect, such discussions as in Cases #3 and #4 above reinforce the relevancy of institutional mission which is to prepare and train future business professionals for the business world of Thailand. When conversations at interviews end in action possibilities and benefits for students, these young adults feel re-assured and ready to go to any extent to actualize their talents. The benefits for teachers emerge in the teaching strategies of motivation and empowering students with stimuli from new ideas. Furthermore, clearer understanding of student psychology enables the teacher to selectively apply motivational strategies to have the students improve or even radically change their mental make-up towards academic work and studies.

In addition, in these times of quick-paced changes in the external and market environments, any normal teenager or young adult is invariably confused and needs referenced counselling which, nurturing the student's dispositions to experiment in the theater of the world, accentuates "value-added" learning.(1) The teacher through the interview helps the student see himself or herself in terms of greater action possibilities. Teaching through interviews upgrades the

teacher's ability to suggest pragmatic courses of action towards specialization and problem solving.

Another sustaining factor of value from the interview is when a student believes in all humility that he or she is ill-equipped as a student and is "unprepared" to live without the guidance of the teacher because:

a) The student lacks knowledge of himself or herself fully.

b) The student lacks experience in objectively evaluating his or her own ideas.

c) The student is confused and needs opinions from others.

In these cases, the teacher helps by confirming or rejecting an idea, a self-assessment and/or a perceived impression.

Effective value from the interview: The interviewer invariably becomes a "friend" to the student. The student becomes more adjusted to this newer facet of the relationship with the teacher. This effect clears all blocks to free and effective communication and participative discussions flow comfortably. Indeed, there can be no greater value than that in the smile that appears on the quivering and doubtful lips of the student after a problem has been discussed and dismissed as trivial. The transforming touch to the student's attitude after the interview can be summed up in one word: **confidence.**

A catalogue of case study examples of interview-led participative learning could be endless and exhaustive. However, what stands out as actual value for the teacher is that in student questions, responses and doubts in the situation of the interview, lies the critical mass of feedback that sends signals clearly and abundantly to the teacher. The teacher is exposed to the issues, trends and action points of student development and student concerns. Such feedback creates awareness in the teacher and poses newer challenges within the agenda of the teaching mission to either preempt evolving irritants to student development as better thinkers and doers or, structure pro-active strategies to enhance student learning processes.

Very clearly then, the teacher's mission is to structure theoretical discussions. Practical applications to the working of the theory do come in large measure, from student responses themselves. The teacher as interviewer can play a more effective role as strategist to help students think for themselves.

In the interview system at Assumption University direct information and feedback guide and regulate the attitude of the teacher. Assumption University students are idea-motivated and success-oriented. What complements student talents, in their beliefs is the approval, affirmation and sometimes corroboration of the teacher. Nurtured by teacher consultations, students grow into effective agents of action, setting up centers of positive activity on and off campus.

Assumption University is a multi-cultural center of learning. Its president, Dr. P. Martin Komolmas, has this to observe about the University's international culture :

> Assumption University is truly an international community. Within it, each student and faculty member is encouraged to explore the similarities and differences that exist between each other's cultural heritage in order to enrich his or her intercultural understanding. The university, as its etymology implies, should have international characteristics that unite people from various individual cultures. Assumption University seeks to realize the ideal indicated through this etymology by establishing an educational environment in which members of a culturally diverse faculty and student body can interact with each other in a productive and mutually illuminating manner.(2)

Cultural diversity has been one contributing factor to the university in its mission to maintain a high level of academia. The diversity of students and lecturers lends itself to a cohesiveness which both fosters and is fostered by this interview process. In an interview list one may see students' names from countries like Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Burma, Philippines, India, France, Britain, the Americas, Russia, Nepal and Somalia. The interview time becomes productive in that the teachers and students exchange views on cultural features, intellectual and philosophical positions and above all they -- interviewer and student -- become co-participants in a "new learning" through cultural diversity.

Valuable insights and rich information emanate from questions like: What is a social myth in your country? What is a major festival in your country? and Is it social or religious? Other questions may be: What is considered as "taboo" in your country? or Describe a marriage ceremony in your religion/culture? Such questions make for very substantial discussions in English in the process of which, the student enjoys sharing ideas and information about his or her cultural heritage and unconsciously gains a better handle on the English language, one of the main objectives of the interviews being conducted.

An occasional and creative variation to the one-on-one interview format occurs when an interviewer may choose to interview two students at the same time. Such an arrangement serves a useful purpose for a short application of brainstorming or participative discussions on mainly social issues. After a few minutes into topics like job opportunities, or social norms and individual freedom, students bring into the discussion, realities from society and culture and the interviewer as teacher may be challenged to moderate a weighty discussion and to advise/counsel in response to difficult heightened emotional outbursts. The group discussion provides a valuable time for students to compare and guage their conversational skills in English and also to present a common front, providing insights on the difficult challenges English sometimes poses as a non-native language. What also does emerge is the shared learning experience for all three participants in the group interview. The spirit of shared experiences enters discussions and while the interviewer may be educated on social orientations for the differing social backgrounds of the students, the students themselves are emboldened to "speak out" and in so doing they rehearse their spoken English language and form personal perspectives and philosophies with regard to life.

In general, Assumption University students are forthright in their evaluations and feed back with regard to matters like academics, society and their personal preferences. In an interview students are provided opportunities to unburden themselves to teachers who in fact learn new realities with regard to youth psychology and development. When students are encouraged to engage in conversations on various topics, they appear to be more deeply thinking and perceptive, than may be the case in their classroom involvements.

Additionally, the student and teacher discourse in the interview setting tends to blur cultural differences. Transparency in friendship and learning processes become feasible. For the teacher, innovative questions stimulate substantial discussions. For the students, different teacher accents and speech patterns become more recognizable and the student in the long run is equipped to enter any corporate business organization that deals with international trade. Assumption University graduates are well equipped to do business, and successfully network with international business houses and world commerce.

In the face of swelling enrollments in universities in Thailand and elsewhere, the personal development of individual students may be overlooked and sometimes even grossly neglected. At Assumption University this worrisome trend has been identified and stymied through the interview system. The interview may provide opportunities for the student to clear doubts with the interviewer who may be able to allay the student's doubts. Herein, the teacher and the student together become "participants" in a problem solving process and both are gratified that they can "participatively" solve the problem.

This paper has examined the system of student interviews at Assumption University as one possible strategy towards a participative or shared learning experience. It is true that in today's education of applied academics, teachers have to expose students to everyday and immediate models which the teachers may better understand and which students recognise. The student interview becomes a strategic teaching tool to facilitate a participative and simultaneous mode of education. The interview system at Assumption University, by accentuating participative teaching and learning processes, reinforces "compassionate education" which is so important in the world today.

END NOTES

1. The term is attributed by Thomas J. Peters to Harvard Business School Professor Paul E. Lawrence, in the Peters" article **"A World Overturned"** (World Executive's Digest July - August 1989).

2. Komolmas, P. Martin, f.s.g. Ph.D. "The Internationalization of Higher Education at ABAC" **ABAC JOURNAL** Vol.11 No.1 January - April 1991 p3.