INTERDISCIPLINARITY FROM BELOW

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Abstract

Interdisciplinarity is one of the key catchphrases that define the ongoing educational reform in the Philippines. Through the K-12 basic education curriculum and the revamped tertiary-level general education curriculum, bureaucrats and their partners in the academe seek to equip students with knowledge and skills that will allow them to think and act beyond their chosen field. Such an edge supposedly affords graduates a competitive advantage in a highly globalized labor market. Nonetheless, one must not be carried away by the hype; interdisciplinarity, especially this version imposed from above, still has to be interrogated. For one, lost in the state-directed discourse of interdisciplinarity is the emancipatory tradition arising from epistemological movements that question methodological and conceptual conventions. In the discipline of history, one such epistemological movement—with “movement” deployed here in its broadest sense—is the push toward crafting a “history from below.” Foregrounding diversity rather than orthodoxy, this historiographical turn has sought to give voice to the voiceless. In the Philippines, the nineteenth-century *ilustrados*’ conception of the nascent field of Philippine studies and the social histories that broke new ground starting in the 1970s best represent this progressive knowledge–power nexus. These examples demonstrate that interdisciplinarity, for it to be beneficial, should not be the goal itself but a means to an end. Without substantial changes emanating “from below,” especially among teachers and students from the huge number of educational institutions neglected by the state, the promise of interdisciplinarity that the Philippine government is peddling is nothing but the production of fantasy.

Keywords

tertiary education; Commission on Higher Education; K-12; pedagogy; historiography; *ilustrado*

About the Author

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Interdisciplinarity lies at the heart of the new general education curriculum (GEC) set forth by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). As the Philippine state unleashes a comprehensive education reform program for the country, it exalts interdisciplinarity as a new pedagogical mantra. However, without substantial changes “from below” the promise of interdisciplinarity is nothing but the production of fantasy.

As part of a comprehensive education reform, the state, as represented by CHED, sets the minimum course requirements for all undergraduate students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country through the GEC. In its memorandum order 20, series of 2013, CHED has replaced the old GEC with one that drastically cuts the number of units from 63/51 to 36. This reduction, however, is not simply quantitative. Much more significant is the change in the guiding philosophy behind the GEC, a paradigm shift that seeks widespread reforms not just at the tertiary level but also for the entire educational system. Hence, analyzing the new GEC’s philosophy requires placing it against the context of a changing educational landscape that is global in scope.

The new GEC is inextricably linked to the new basic education curriculum in the Philippines, more popularly known as the K-12 curriculum. One salient provision of the enabling law for the K-12 curriculum, Republic Act (RA) 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, is the addition of two years to the preexisting ten-year basic education curriculum. The government reasons that this measure will give Filipino students “quality education that is globally competitive based on a pedagogically sound curriculum that is at par with international standards” (Congress of the Philippines). Bro. Armin A. Luistro, the former Education Secretary (2010–2016) who launched the K-12 curriculum, explains that the end goal of these reforms is a new Filipino subjectivity:

The impetus for meaningful education reform is clear: the realities of our modern world require a different kind of Filipino. The Filipino must be a lifelong learner. The Filipino must be holistically developed. The Filipino must be globally-oriented and locally-grounded. (Southeast Asian Ministers v)

Such a global orientation stems from the exigencies of the highly internationalized economy in which the country finds itself, especially in relation to the Philippine state’s de-facto labor-export policy (San Juan, “Pambansang Salbabida”). Advocates of the K-12 curriculum assert that a twelve-year basic education curriculum is an imperative because practically all nation-states have it. To resist this reform, according to advocates, imperils the chances of millions of Filipinos who depend on overseas employment (San Juan, “Kaisipang Nasyonalista” 102–103). Furthermore, a globalized Filipino subjectivity entails and leads to holistic development.

Specifically, framers of the K-12 program claim that it discards the “discipline-based approach” in favor of a “spiral approach wherein learning is a process of building upon previously learned knowledge” (Southeast Asian Ministers 26). For example, in the old curriculum, high school students learned a specific discipline of the natural sciences every year (i.e., Biology in the Second Year, Chemistry in the Third Year, and Physics in the Fourth Year). In contrast, the K-12 spiral approach presents the natural sciences through a “learner-centered and inquiry based” curriculum: “Concepts and skills in Life Sciences, Physics, Chemistry, and Earth Sciences are presented with increasing levels of complexity from one grade level to another (spiral progression), thus paving the way for deeper understanding of key concepts” (Southeast Asian Ministers 39).

The same philosophy and strategy are present in the new tertiary-level GEC, illustrating how it is so intertwined with K-12. Similar changes include the “paradigm shift to learning competency based standards” (CHED 1), which CHED has advocated since 2011. Another is interdisciplinarity. Of the 36 units in the GEC, 24 correspond to eight core courses, 9 to three elective courses, and 3 to a course on the life and works of José Rizal as mandated by a separate law, Republic Act 1425. The eight core courses are: Understanding the Self; Readings in Philippine History; The Contemporary World; Mathematics in the Modern World; Purposive Communication; Art Appreciation; Science, Technology, and Society; and Ethics (CHED 6–7). Except for Readings in Philippine History and Mathematics in the Modern World, the new core courses are not readily identifiable with a specific discipline, thus illustrating CHED’s objective of promoting interdisciplinarity: “The core courses are inter-disciplinary and are stated broadly enough to accommodate a range of perspectives and approaches” (CHED 7). The new GEC, according to CHED, promotes “holistic understandings,” aside from “intellectual and civic competencies” (7).

The idea behind interdisciplinarity is certainly laudable. Many scholars have praised its potential and actual benefits. As outlined by Hansson, proponents of interdisciplinarity argue that most breakthroughs are interdisciplinary in nature (339–40). In the case of a developing country such as the Philippines, perhaps the most relevant in Hansson’s list of arguments for interdisciplinarity is the nature of real-life problems, which cannot be solved if thinking followed strict disciplinary categories (Hansson 339). Agrarian reform, climate change, and widespread poverty require solutions that will integrate concepts and frameworks from practically all domains of knowledge. More than just eliminating compartmentalized pedagogy and research, “with their hideous jargons and false divisions of knowledge” (Leitch 129), the more valuable promise of interdisciplinarity is the possibility of dismantling the ivory tower of academia to make classroom instruction more

relevant to students' needs and research more responsive to the demands of a larger community (Swora and Morrison 45–48).

Unfortunately, these positive attributes of interdisciplinarity have turned academic decision-makers into unthinking bandwagoners. Indeed, interdisciplinarity has been offered as a “fashionable panacea” in the American academe since the 1970s, “guaranteed to please students and rejuvenate faculty thinking” (Swora and Morrison 45). Uncritical acceptance, especially with the imprimatur of administrative power, has reduced the idea into a buzzword, from panacea to placebo.

As an academic “movement,” interdisciplinarity covers a broad spectrum, and one can analyze it differently depending on the discipline from which to view it. This essay is my attempt to understand it using the vista of my “home discipline”—History. Just like any other historical phenomenon, the particularities of interdisciplinarity through the centuries have shaped and deployed it in its present form. However, if I were to pick just one significant lesson from its long history, it would be the link between interdisciplinarity and initiatives toward more democratic epistemologies. I conclude this essay by contrasting this point with the current official state prescription of interdisciplinarity as an institutionalized practice in HEIs, an intervention which might even reverse its emancipatory character.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND “HISTORY FROM BELOW”

The articulation of interdisciplinarity in the discipline of history saw its peak during the early twentieth century, in response to the solidification of disciplinary boundaries in the social sciences in the previous century. From the mid- to the late nineteenth century, the institutional borders separating sociology, anthropology, history, geography, political science, economics, and others from one another began to solidify. The standardization of methodologies and conceptual frameworks and professionalization through the establishment of academic departments and journals facilitated this development (Iggers 27–28). Canons were compiled, and founding fathers were canonized.

In History, the drive toward the institutionalization of the discipline and the emergence of the “professional historian” came in the early nineteenth century (Torstendahl 42). Responding to the “scientific” spirit of the Enlightenment, Leopold von Ranke, then with the University of Berlin, became a towering figure in European academia as he promoted his view of History as “rigorous scholarship

[that] presupposed strict abstinences from value judgments” (Iggers 25). Ranke’s positivism fit perfectly with the empiricist tradition rooted in Lockean philosophy. This empiricism, which presupposes a clear separation between the historian-subject and the historical object, formed the foundation of Rankean methodology, characterized by the primacy of evidence, defined in terms of documentary and/or archival data, the use of a scientific method to process data, and the setting of the ideal historian as an objective arbiter. Eventually, “Rankeanism outright or in a modified version became a condition for a professional historian” (Torstendahl 48).

Ranke’s scientific approach, which ran parallel to the contemporaneous positivist movement that helped define sociology as a distinct discipline, influenced the next generation of historians. Such an enduring influence not only cemented his status as the “model for professionalized historical scholarship in the nineteenth century” (Iggers 26), but also helped maintain the viability of the discipline itself. French historian and paleographer Charles-Victor Langlois, for example, became an exponent of an independent historical science (vis-à-vis Emile Durkheim’s view that history only provided raw material for sociologists). Together with Charles Seignobos, Langlois published *An Introduction to the Study of History* (1912). Although Langlois and Seignobos were not exactly adherents of Ranke (Torstendahl 49), their general attitude toward history as a discipline and historical methodology was clearly a product of the academic tradition set by the latter. Indeed, in *An Introduction to the Study of History*, Langlois and Seignobos “codified what many of their contemporaries considered Ranke’s method” (Tucker 4).¹ And because Ranke did not provide an explicit outline for his methodology, *An Introduction to the Study of History* was a milestone for the discipline as it served as the manual for the scientific principles of historical methodology. The book dealt with the process of searching for documents, conducting external and internal criticism of evidence, the grouping of facts, and constructive reasoning, among others.

At the time Langlois and Seignobos published their book, Rankean philosophy had become rather outdated. His inductive and empiricist approach, although reignited by Langlois and Seignobos, soon became a constant target of unconventional historians. And since “followers of Ranke could not accept as history an account that did not follow certain principles of method” (Torstendahl 48), such rigidity eventually came under attack from those who felt the scope of history could be broadened. One of the more prominent movements to challenge the established historiography was the *Annales* school.

The *Annales*, as a historiographical movement, began as a journal. In 1929, French historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre founded *Annales d’Histoire Economique et Sociale*, a journal that sought to provide an arena for discussing new ways of writing history, most especially to revive interest in social history, which Rankean

methodology, given its fixation on verifiable documents, had marginalized (Burke 7). They attained their objective through the use of methods and sources of other disciplines, including those in the natural sciences. Febvre's clarion beckoned: "Historians, be geographers. Be jurists too, and sociologists, and psychologists" (Burke 2). The *Annales* interdisciplinary bent pitted Bloch and Febvre against Seignobos in an intellectual tussle in the 1930s (Burke 10; Iggers 54) and, more importantly, marked a drastic shift away from the Rankean tradition:

History for the *Annales* historians occupied a central role among the sciences dealing with man, but in a different way than it had for classical historicism. While the latter had elevated the state as the key institution to which all other aspects of society and culture were subordinated, *Annales* historians abolished the boundaries between the traditional disciplines in order to integrate them into the "sciences of man" (*sciences de l'homme*). The plural was used intentionally, in order to emphasize the plurality of sciences. (Iggers 53–54)

The *Annales* historians were not the first ones to call for the use of the methods and data from other disciplines to improve historical research. In fact, in *An Introduction to the Study of History*, Langlois and Seignobos called for the use of other disciplines in historical methodology. However, the two referred to the said disciplines as "auxiliary sciences," denoting their external position in traditional historiography, in contrast to their integral status in the *Annales* school. More importantly, while Langlois and Seignobos's endorsement of the so-called auxiliary sciences maintained the traditional positivist relationship between the historian-subject and the historical object, *Annales* interdisciplinarity foregrounded a "history from below," a term that Febvre supposedly coined in 1932 when he stated "histoire vue d'en bas en non d'en haut" (history seen from below and not from above). Noted social historian E. P. Thompson then popularized the term in his 1966 essay "History from Below" in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Kramer and Mitchell 323), thereby leaving his imprint in the now widespread use of interdisciplinary approaches in the study of social movements, as seen in his seminal work on the history of the English working class (Drake 142).

The intellectual links between interdisciplinarity and history from below are not coincidental. Social historians have known the limitations of traditional historiography: strict positivist empiricism can only present history from the perspective of monarchs, feudal lords, and bishops, those who write and are written about in the historical sources. Peasants, women, subjugated tribes, and others will remain mute unless historians broaden their definition of "historical sources" and be open to other methodologies.

Philippine historiography also exhibits the merging of interdisciplinarity and history from below. One can identify two important historical junctures that demonstrate this convergence: the intellectual tradition established by the *ilustrados* in the late nineteenth century and the surge of social history in the 1970s.

Reforms in colonial education, changes in the bureaucracy, the rise of the press, and the proliferation of non-state and non-Church associations in the nineteenth century were just some of the most important factors that led to the creation of a “national intelligentsia.” Epitomizing this historical process was the *ilustrado*, a middle- or upper-class educated male, often a participant in secular sojourns to Europe (Mojares, *Brains of the Nation* 419–466). The intellectual heritage left by the *ilustrados* is incomparable to any in Philippine history. Although much of Philippine historiography’s focus is on their contributions to the Propaganda Movement, Mojares alerts us to the interdisciplinary nature of their scholarship, which marked the birth of what we now regard as Philippine studies:

There was excitement in the challenge of creating a “national” body of knowledge encompassing such fields as literature, history, language, and politics. Disciplines were cultivated not as specialized, abstract systems but as instruments and ways toward understanding and “organizing” society. Varied in their creative and critical practices, Filipino intellectuals engaged Western knowledge from their own specific site of work, worried about their relation to the country *from, of, and for* which they spoke, and traced the possibilities of an autonomous, critical voice in dialogue with the West. (Mojares, *Brains of the Nation* 471, italics in original)

Clearly, the *ilustrados*’ interdisciplinary approach stemmed from the anticolonial politics with which they understood their scholarship. Their struggle to produce modern knowledge emanated from the more fundamental objective of remaking Philippine society.

Almost a century after the rise of the *ilustrados*, a similar trend of interdisciplinarity reappeared in Philippine scholarship. The surge of social history starting in the 1970s paved the way for historians who decenter politics, diplomacy, and wars in historical writing (McCoy), a trend that they sustained in the 1980s and 1990s.

One of the first examples of interdisciplinary social history is John A. Larkin’s *The Pampangans: Colonial Society in a Philippine Province* (1993), first published in 1972. Larkin’s ethnohistorical approach borrows “anthropological and sociological techniques in dealing with problems of ecology, kinship, and class relations” (x). Mojares’s work on the linambay theater, published in 1985, uses the said cultural form and thus bears the influence as an analytical tool to understand the social history of a rural Cebuano village, bears the influence of the *Annales* school. As

Mojares himself points out: “This study then aspires to be a *histoire des mentalites* (awkwardly, ‘history of mentalities’) which, by virtue of the necessary interlinking of material, ecological and economic infrastructures with political structures and finally, ideological superstructures, is also unavoidably a social history” (*Theater in Society* 1). Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr, in his 1998 book, *Clash of Spirits: The History of Power and Sugar Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island*, turns to the anthropological view of culture, especially in terms of spirit beliefs, to uncover how it is linked to politics and economics in Negros (6–7). Both Aguilar and Mojares emphasize the need to understand the worldview of ordinary rural folk using nontraditional historical sources.

Perhaps the most well-known among these “interdisciplinary social histories from below” of the latter half of twentieth century is Reynaldo Ileto’s *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910*. In fact, the first chapter of this book is titled “Toward a History from Below” (1). Although clearly a work of historical inquiry, *Pasyon and Revolution* goes against traditional historiography as seen in its incorporation of nontraditional sources (especially the *pasyon* texts) and its use of literary analysis to supposedly uncover the worldview of the peasant masses. The unconventional character of Ileto’s methodology has led critics to question his arguments: how can one write a proper historical account when literature is incorporated into the analysis? Notwithstanding the validity of these critiques, the influence of the *Annales* school on *Pasyon and Revolution* cannot be questioned. In explaining the historical value of factual errors in narrative poems and songs, Ileto quotes “the pioneering social historian Marc Bloch” (11). He then paraphrases Bloch when he describes the *Pasyon Pilapil*, one of the main pieces of religious literary texts he uses as a historical source, as “a mirror of the collective unconscious” (13).

INTERDISCIPLINARITY FOR WHOM?

Despite the long history of interdisciplinarity as a methodology and framework to give voice to the voiceless, at least in the discipline of history, embracing it uncritically can actually lead to opposite results. The writing of the past does not become an empowering force simply because it utilizes a wide array of disciplines. Interdisciplinary history for whom? Interdisciplinary for what purpose? In light of CHED’s promotion of interdisciplinarity, such questions should be answered first before implementing it especially because CHED appears to have taken interdisciplinarity as a goal rather than a means to an end.

First and foremost, CHED does not seem to have done much research on interdisciplinarity prior to the promulgation of the new GEC. The practice in other countries of embedding interdisciplinarity in their respective education curricula cannot be taken as adequate evidence to warrant its application in the Philippines. If anything, interdisciplinarity teaches us that context matters in any kind of policy intervention or scientific innovation; yet CHED does not provide us with any study that analyzes the history of interdisciplinarity and its potential impact on the political economy and social dynamics of Philippine academia, let alone Philippine society at large. In CHED's explanation of its "rationale for change," which is contained in the appendix B of its GEC memorandum, it directs readers to a solitary footnote regarding the need to revamp the pedagogical framework of our tertiary institutions (17). It cites a 2009 *Forbes* article by Carol Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, titled "In Defense of Liberal Education." The CHED memo cites Schneider's argument that today's world "is no longer a 'multiple-choice' world; instead 'big-picture thinking' is in demand amid the complexity of life and the massive explosion of knowledge across all fields" (17). If CHED's intention is to foster holistic thinking in Philippine colleges and universities, it must lead by example and give us a more rigorously researched and analyzed policy paper. As Jacobs and Frickel caution us:

The widespread attention that administrators, funders, and faculty alike are giving to interdisciplinarity—and the intensity of the debates that attention has generated—is striking given the fact that relatively little research on many of the underlying issues has been conducted. As a result, we are skeptical of a number of the assumptions advanced by advocates of interdisciplinarity, and we caution against a major reorganization of academic fields without a substantially stronger case being made on both theoretical and empirical grounds. (44)

Closer to home, Alfred McCoy, in his introductory chapter for an edited volume that features interdisciplinary Philippine social history, warns us that not all instances of interdisciplinarity are liberating and insightful; that some are even cases of less-than-solid scholarship. Such was the case in the interdisciplinary social science dialogue in the 1960s, a time when "historians accepted the models of cultural anthropology and sociology without criticism and social scientists expropriated chronology as evidence for their monogenic paradigms or presentist concerns" (McCoy 4). Moreover, we must recognize that interdisciplinarity can also become self-defeating. Vincent Leitch articulates this concern when he points out that "most interdisciplinary work supports or modifies but does not transform—that is, change—existing disciplines" (125). The irony of Leitch's analysis, albeit hasty and exaggerated, is disconcerting: "The origin and end of interdisciplines is the discipline" (Leitch 126).

I take Leitch's statement not as a way to discourage all efforts toward interdisciplinarity but as a word of caution. On the one hand, scholars cannot afford to be Luddites in an ever-changing academic landscape. Insights generated by genre-bending research, exemplified by the works enumerated earlier, have contributed so much to the wider scholarly community and beyond. On the other hand, interdisciplinarity does not exist as a constantly positive force just waiting to be harnessed. As with the act of research itself, the promised gains from interdisciplinarity must still be measured in terms of who benefits from it and its overall purpose. Developing nuclear weapons or concocting mind-altering drugs entails interdisciplinarity and is arguably theoretical and technological advancements, but do these advancements benefit the majority? Is their purpose to improve or destroy lives? These examples are of the extreme type but clearly show the fallacy of ascribing a positive essence unto interdisciplinarity.

From social history to state mandate, the sad twist in the history of interdisciplinarity in Philippine academia has turned it from a tool to write "history from below" to an imposition from above. Hansson notes that one major counterargument against interdisciplinarity is that it "cannot be produced on demand—in even the most favorable interdisciplinary setting"; hence, an institutional directive is futile: "The production of creative ideas is not an organizational matter. Such ideas arise in the individual mind in idiosyncratic ways" (340). Without subscribing to such an individualistic view toward the relationship between innovation and the state, I also see the perils of this top-down approach toward the promotion of progress. It is a phenomenon that bears a striking resemblance to the state-centric, expert-led, high-modernist "development discourse" present in, for example, urban planning, disaster risk management, public health, and the like (cf. Mitchell; Loh). It is underpinned by a discourse that turns disempowered sectors in society into passive beneficiaries of science, a discourse that further disempowers.

Similar to the supposed developmental framework of top-down state interventions, the danger in CHED's directive of interdisciplinarity is the possibility of state instrumentalization, turning an ostensibly beneficial innovation into a legitimizing force for policies that worsen the plight of certain segments of Philippine society. The instrumentalization of innovation is a risk that has already manifested in CHED's official pronouncements, as seen in its insistence that the new GEC will not lead to the marginalization of Filipino as a subject and the retrenchment of Filipino teachers at the tertiary level. Former CHED Chairperson Patricia Licuanan has always asserted that criticism of the new GEC is misguided as it does not target Filipino and must be understood in light of the strengthening of Filipino language courses in the K-12 curriculum ("Statement"). Despite the fact that the new GEC does not allocate a specific number of units to Filipino, whether as medium of

instruction for a GEC course or a language and/or literary course, she maintains that Filipino still has a place in higher education. However, Licuanan admits that an “array of socio-cultural, economic and financial constraints” hinder the widespread use of Filipino as medium of instruction, which include “the availability of experts with strong mastery in both the Filipino language and specific domains, the wide use of English in academe and industry, and the possible impact of such move on our students’ access to global knowledge and conversations” (“Statement” 3). Of course, CHED will not explicitly admit it, but these constraints will effectively push Filipino, which is still underutilized and unappreciated in scholarly discourse, further into the margins of our Anglophone academia. Lacking a world-class appeal, Filipino and other Philippine languages are seen as inconsequential in the global framing of education reforms, while English, as the international lingua franca, maintains its hegemonic position in knowledge production and dissemination. Furthermore, the increasing influence of English-oriented indexing services, such as Thomson Reuters and Scopus, over the decision-making processes of Philippine HEIs that are also aspiring for this world-class appeal reinforces this neocolonial arrangement.

A 21 April 2015 Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order (TRO) halting the implementation of the specific provision in the new GEC regarding the non-inclusion of Filipino subjects as core courses (Licuanan, “CHED Memorandum”). This respite for advocates of Filipino proved to be illusory, however, when in November 2018 the court lifted the TRO (Navallo). It is apparent that the marginalization of Filipino in the new GEC, whether unwittingly or not, is just one part of the massive restructuring of basic education and tertiary institutions. As interdisciplinarity cannot happen without altering the university structure (Swora and Morrison 49), CHED itself recognizes the impending reorganization of all schools (Licuanan, “Statement” 3). However, in explaining the rationale behind the drastic reduction of units proposed in the new GEC, a move that will displace a huge number of college teachers who teach courses of the old GEC, Licuanan turns to blaming the old “disciplinary” nature of the previous curriculum: “the old GE curriculum had courses that were disciplinary (such as introductory courses to specific disciplines) rather than liberal education in character. These disciplinary courses (such as General Psychology, Basic Economics) were also removed; the CHED then crafted courses reflective of liberal education” (“Statement”).² CHED then recommends to those who are bound to be rendered outmoded by the new GEC that they retool or find other employment opportunities, especially in jobs that K-12 will create at the senior high school level. However, in doing so, CHED places teachers who “cannot adapt” in a diametrically opposed position vis-à-vis the supposed rational goal of interdisciplinarity. Such a tack makes teachers who oppose interdisciplinarity appear stubborn and selfish, “protective of [their] vested interests. Those who dismiss interdisciplinarity have not been so educated

themselves and, therefore, are unable to cope with the intellectual restructuring it requires” (Swora and Morrison 49). How can one stand in the way of a process that will reduce redundancies and inefficiencies?

And who stands to benefit from these supposed improvements in education? Certainly not the thousands of college instructors in mid- and low-ranked HEIs. They are swamped with work (a full-time instructor teaching at least 30 units per semester in an upper-tier university in Manila is common) to the extent that they simply cannot heed the demands of simple research or interdisciplinarity. They are severely underpaid that losing teaching duties for just a semester is already a matter of life and death. Can we simply tell them to adjust and retool? CHED may argue that students’ interests deserve the highest priority, that blocking the new GEC will prevent the Filipino youth from acquiring a world-class type of education. But which students are we talking about here? Certainly not the likes of Kristel Tejada and Rosanna Sanfuego who are literally driven to commit suicide because of the rising cost of tertiary education, even in state HEIs (Geronimo). Certainly not the millions of Filipino school-age children who cannot even afford to finish basic education (made all the more difficult by the additional two years set by the K-12 curriculum) due to poverty and perennial state neglect of the education sector.

Certainly, a select few will enjoy the fruits of a revitalized Philippine educational system. At the frontlines are the privileged professors and instructors of well-funded universities (myself included) who already enjoy comfortable teaching workloads, research incentives, and faculty development structures for retooling. Unfortunately, it is from these ranks that “intellectual vanguardism, obsessed with the new and cutting edge whatever they may be,” arises (Leitch 130). It is an intellectual vanguardism that sadly fails to see the more fundamental political economy of Philippine education, while it helps manufacture consent for the agenda of the ruling elite. Interdisciplinarity-from-above creates its own ivory tower. The beneficiaries of CHED’s brand of interdisciplinarity will also include the sons and daughters of the well-to-do, as they are still capable of paying skyrocketing tuition and fees in top-tier HEIs. In effect, whatever profound insights, holistic understanding, and global competitiveness that interdisciplinary education has to offer, save for a very small number of scholars (whose education has been transformed from an inalienable right into a token of someone else’s altruism), only an elite set of students will have the opportunity to gain them. In the end, interdisciplinarity-from-above, alongside concurrent educational reforms, only serves as an apparatus to maintain and reproduce elite dominance in Philippine society. It stands to suffer the same fate as the move toward the popularization of academic research, which has turned into a process of depoliticization, or the sad trend in studies of popular culture becoming an excuse to pander to middle-class frivolities rather than presenting a nuanced critique of modern society.

IMAGINING INTERDISCIPLINARITY-FROM-BELOW

Nonetheless, one cannot disregard the importance of state mechanisms to achieve progressive education reforms. As an institution with the power to redistribute resources and compel citizens to act, the state has an incomparable capacity to support a type of interdisciplinarity that emancipates rather than oppresses.

But rather than a unidirectional imposition, the state has to take of a more supportive role and a more patient attitude. It can do so by creating incentives for those who push for interdisciplinary teaching methods and research. At the same time, it cannot be punitive in its pursuit of this objective, i.e., cutting “loose ends” and removing “redundancies,” which are merely euphemisms for anti-labor practices and budget cuts for educational institutions.

Rather than impose on a nationwide scale what is theorized by well-paid academics in elite Manila-based universities, the state has to begin with what is practiced at the grassroots level. There, policy-makers will see how, in fact, underfunded state HEIs and small private colleges “implement” interdisciplinarity out of desperation: instructors teaching courses outside their disciplinary backgrounds; untenured teachers working part-time for multiple employers and preparing for multiple subjects; professors who have to practically turn their classes into high-school-level English review sessions to address students’ inadequate writing skills. Therefore, the first step for the state to engender interdisciplinarity-from-below requires the removal of conditions that lead to these “informal practices” of interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity-from-below is a back-to-basics call for education decision makers. To avoid disenfranchising the overwhelming majority of stakeholders in higher education in the Philippines, i.e., income-poor teachers and students, the state must first secure at least a decent academic environment for them, something that we have yet to see.

I cannot help but compare CHED’s discourse on interdisciplinarity with how advocates of free trade and globalization justify the liberalization of markets and privatization of public utilities: the process is inevitable and it will benefit everyone in the long run (i.e., the trickle-down effect); those who adjust will succeed, those who are too stubborn to do so deserve their fate; there is no alternative (Steger). This is not a mere parallelism; interdisciplinarity is indeed premised on the increasing globalization of education in which universities and colleges are treated as firms that need to open up and improve to withstand competition. The recent educational reforms, from K-12 to the new GEC and even the individual decisions of a number of top universities to follow the August-to-May academic calendar, are all responses to the pressure of globalization. Education has thus turned into a product that has to be sensitive to the demands of the market.

Following Neferti Tadiar's analysis of contemporary Philippine society, these new catchphrases of pedagogy produce our new global fantasies. Led by state technocrats and intellectual elites, many of us are now too caught up in this quest of finding our own place in a modern, globalized society. Indeed, the way K-12, the new GEC, and the academic calendar shift are being promoted is almost always couched in a linear, teleological imperative, that for the Philippines to get out of its Third World existence and consciousness, it must first reform itself through a globally competitive type of education. Bearing this in mind, we can look at Tadiar's words in a new light:

that while the West owns the codes of fantasy, the non-West is no less an active and willing participant in the hegemonic modes of imaginary production that are predicated on these codes. In their 'realpolitical' actions, postcolonial nation-states of the non-West demonstrate that they have acquired a certain fluency in these codes of fantasy of the West, making full use of them in the pursuit of their elites' desire but at the expense of the 'freedom of imagination' of the majority of their peoples. (12)

The order of the day is not to get rid of interdisciplinarity altogether. On the contrary, the challenge for us is to revitalize the democratic tradition of interdisciplinarity, as we have seen with the *ilustrados* and social historians. What we need is an interdisciplinarity-from-below that will foreground the interests of those who are rendered redundant (i.e., marginalized college teachers) and of those who are effectively excluded in the discussion (i.e., lower-class youths who cannot even afford tertiary education) by a technocratic and elitist type of interdisciplinarity.

If CHED believes that its proposed reforms are necessary to push teachers and students to be more interdisciplinary in perspective, then we might as well give the said agency a dose of its own medicine. One might ask: Isn't CHED becoming too fixated on curricular reforms when the basic ills of Philippine education have been left unaddressed: a growing number of out-of-school youth due to the rising cost of education; perennial lack of classrooms and teachers because of insufficient state appropriations for education; inadequate salaries for workers in the education sector? And if CHED sees the inexorable connection between interdisciplinarity and creating a global Filipino subjectivity, then perhaps it would also gain a better perspective of things it looked at problems plaguing higher education in an international scale: from the increasing number of oppressed and underpaid adjuncts or faculty without security of tenure (McCowin) to the plight of those holding interdisciplinary PhDs (Kelsky). If we want to be holistic and global in approach, then perhaps we ought to begin with the neoliberal conundrum of higher education, which is comprehensive and international in scale (Giroux).

CHED's excuse, of course, is that these concerns lay outside its mandate. But then again, if it wants students and scholars to think and act outside their disciplinary comfort zones, then it should lead by example and heed the supposed holistic and civic-minded spirit of interdisciplinarity by thinking and acting beyond its administrative limits.

Notes

1. Tucker and Torstendahl differ in their appreciation of the genealogical links that connect Langlois and Seignobos to Ranke. Needless to say, I take Tucker's position on this matter.
2. The supposed contrast between disciplinal and liberal education in CHED's memorandum is puzzling, if not erroneous. The Lockean influence on Rankean historiography is just one among many examples to disprove this dichotomy.

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