



keynote papers

An insight, an idea, an inspiration

Keynote by Ms Ang Bee Lian

Summary: this overview will offer a perspective of the efforts in social interventions and provide a framework for garnering the collective insights for the next engagement plan. It suggests how the knowledge sharing from case studies can evolve into themes, patterns and research into what works. What can we begin to measure to focus the deployment of resources and community support and what role can community leaders continue to play.

“An insight”

Asking good questions

Most efforts in preparing for the future involve asking a few good questions. What have we achieved through our current efforts? How do we remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of the people we serve? What does progress look like? What do the data show? How can we develop and improve the service, or demonstrate accountability to funders, or both? Who have experienced the impact of what has been done? And what has the experience been like? I know that given time, we can collectively put together such a report from which we can draw lessons for the next engagement plan. For those who are open to understanding issues more deeply beyond what statistics and data show, the surfacing of themes, patterns and insights can be valuable in creating fresh perspectives.

The gathering of community leaders, partners and activists in this forum assumes that our efforts are one characterized by collaboration and co-solutioning. We know that the complex eco-system will make the search for better solutions more difficult. We can however, collectively focus our energies on ensuring that our strategies target specific issues and deploy resources on what works and what ultimately matters.

“An idea”

What have we achieved through the programs?

The programs, schemes and interventions to address preparation for school, helping families with multiple social problems and keeping youths in school have resulted in families being helped earlier rather than later when they are faced with marital discord, break ups and separation. Over the past decade, the MMOs

have begun transforming the way they develop new programs and services as community leaders and recognizing the benefits of drawing on research on what works better.

For example, while the education system continues to ensure that students with a variety of learning capacity and aptitude have multiple pathways, the MMOs have also begun to work on ensuring that families provide the environment to support students' learning. Some of your agencies have grown your own in house capability in terms of social work practice and opened up to external help to improve the range of intervention. Helped by changing technology, many of you as leaders have looked beyond your MMO circles to adapt and develop solutions to a variety of strategic, operational, and organizational problems. This openness to new ideas and approaches augurs well for the future.

How do we remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of the people we serve?

This could be a harder question to answer given the more complex eco system that exists today. The constant rise in consumerism and a fast paced society fuelled by the onslaught of the social communications technologies means that the constituents will have a wider range of needs, expectations and behaviours. There will be far less predictability to what is already difficult to hypothesize of human nature and behaviour. How will we operate the services and programs in the midst of such diversity, changes and polarisation of perspectives and views. Or can we assume that for the social problems caused by low income, low education and low earning capacity, the answer lies mainly in re training and supplementary income?

Some of the clues to help us prepare better for the next plan could lie in your knowledge brokering; by this we mean a systematic approach to seeking external ideas from people in a variety of disciplines, industries and contexts and then combining the resulting lessons in new ways. It does resemble best-practice benchmarking. It aims to learn from others and not invent afresh. The case studies that you will hear today of responses to problems constitute knowledge sharing and could form emerging research if well analysed for themes, patterns and solutions. There is great value in sharing, across the whole community. We can take some of these valuable knowledge and see how other disciplines may address the problems as we prepare for the future.

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Measuring what works

Despite the enormous difficulties that we always imagine in the social sector, we can measure what works if we set our minds to it. We can determine what are the assumptions behind the program, the service or the intervention. We then decide what is it that we want to measure; for example, to put a child to primary one and attend school regularly? Or a program can put individuals through training and then get regular work with the option of upgrading. A program can then measure its success simply by counting the number of people participating in its training programs and being placed in jobs and monitoring staying on the job for a fair period of time. The current constraint is that we have not placed premium on ensuring that there is “stayability” or “stickability” in some of the end results.

However, we need also be mindful that we avoid the trap of oversimplifying and treating the symptoms rather than the cause of a particular social problem. Defining a problem as “lack of employment” and “lack of skills for employment” can lead to quite different approaches and programs.

Another way to measure what works is to invest in research to determine whether the activities actually do help and how they help to mitigate the problems and promote the benefits that the program involves. If for example, a program aims to improve the educational outcomes of low income children, it will aim to ensure that children are prepared for primary one. Such a program will then aim to improve children’s basic literacy at age four. Statistical studies, updated periodically, can show that children in such literacy programs enter primary one better prepared than similar children who didn’t participate in the program; and more importantly, that such children have better educational outcomes throughout primary school. The solution then is to systematically put children from low income through such a program. So the approach is to first determine through evidence that the program works and then measure achievement by counting the number of children on it.

As this is a community’s approach to addressing needs, the question we want to pose is the effect of the collective effort of all the outcomes professed by the various case studies. There could be value in attempting to put together the in depth appreciation of the various efforts and their outcomes and see

what insights they offer. Would the efforts bear greater good if they were better coordinated? What collaborations do they offer with the overview offered by this forum? What does this knowledge sharing and brokering offer in terms of lessons for the next community engagement plan?

We owe it to those we serve, the funders and donors and the collaborators to work jointly to find better solutions, to adapt what can work in the changing eco system and to inspire our community and those beyond it to remain relevant and responsive.

“An inspiration”

So what will inspire us? One source of inspiration may be the ability to articulate progress, a renewed purpose of the way forward and opportunities for fresh partnerships and participation. With greater awareness of how we are all interlinked especially in a fast paced web of relationships, there may be greater interest from the private sector to be involved in solving community problems. Will there be room for partnerships with the private sector? Take an example of a company that makes or sells diapers. Maybe it wants to be involved in making life better. Maybe there can be win-win collaborations where the private sector can be exhorted to play a role to build communities where they do their business. Building long term sustainable partnerships however requires negotiation and engagement. They require courage to be at the table of negotiation to discuss the difficult issues of collaboration.

The long tradition of community leaders helping to improve the circumstances of those in need, with needs and those who need uplifting has taught us definitive lessons on how to engage the constituents with respect and in doing so preserve their dignity. These must continue to be the underlying values that drive our efforts and engagement. The fact that we have seen those who have gone through the programs do better in life, shown better educational outcomes and be better parents and adults, augurs well of the past efforts. We must however remain curious, bothered and challenged that some have despite our offerings and help, fallen by the way and did not make their lives better. This is what keeps most of us awake and nimble.

Renewing Common Purpose, Inspiring Engagement, Enabling Participation

The Local Corner Store - A Metaphor for Evolving Communities

by Dr John Buckmaster

Background:

In 2004 I established the Sydney Film School with peers in a vibrant inner city suburb, Redfern-Waterloo, Sydney. Located in the centre of the metropolis it has: two large universities, residential housing (including Government Housing Commissions), shops, a sports centre, and football ovals (one the home of a football club owned by Russell Crowe) and is the traditional ground for Australia's Indigenous community. An area that drew a large number of migrants to settle in the 1890's, it has continued to be culturally diverse with approximately 63% of the suburban population being born overseas.

Redfern-Waterloo has been associated with that of a comparatively poor and crime infested suburb. Public housing estates built in the 1960's resulted in a relatively high concentration of economically disadvantaged persons. Currently, Redfern-Waterloo has 4140 public housing properties (12,638 private dwellings were listed in the 2011 National Census). Though the median weekly wage here is only slightly lower than the national average - \$535 (AUD) compared with the national average of \$575 (AUD) – this is buffered by those residents who are employed full time. In fact, the average weekly wage for tenants (91% of whom are on unemployment benefits) in public housing is significantly lower \$337 (AUD). The total number of Redfern-Waterloo residents in public housing is 6017, proportionally substantial when considered with the suburb's overall population of approximately 22,000 people.

Nearly one decade ago in 2004, six months before we moved into our film school, racial tensions sparked here when a 17-year-old Aboriginal boy was impaled on a fence while giving chase to police on his bicycle. Rioting followed with the streets ablaze with flames, shops were looted, cars destroyed and residents' windows smashed. In response government was driven to rebuild the area, as if in doing so they hoped to erase the memory of this violence. Re-development and new building works mushroomed throughout sparse spaces that had once laid doormat. Those members of the community that instigated or fuelled the change wanted to see it grow faster. Others who built up the pre-existing community links or who had simply witnessed the sameness of their community were largely suspicious of any such transformation.

With this change an exciting development in the community has occurred: one that could not be devised by the most talented of social urban planners.

The building development has generated a new migration of young families, working professionals, 'hipsters', students and 'self pronounced creatives' into the area. This movement has seeped into the existing community tapestry to form a rich eclectic pattern. The change that permeates the suburb can bring tensions between these groups within it. While new boutique stores and apartment blocks continue to rise up in this suburb, a few stores, particularly a local corner shop still remains the same. These shop fronts show the trajectory between the old and new, and as we shall see tell us something about the nature of communities themselves.

Abstract Introduction:

This abstract concerns what I term '**the exponential evolving nature of communities**' - the way in which modern suburbs change through swift building re-development and 'gentrification' and how this may pose a threat to pre-existing communal structures. Modernisation can mean that grass roots communities become fractured and overtaken by a progressive need for change with new residents moving into the suburb. The latter wishes to cultivate, fix up, rebuild, improve, develop and expand what has seemed to remain stagnate. As always is the case with gentrification change involves more socially mobile persons **buying** into the suburb, which ultimately leads to those long-standing and poorer residents being displaced due to increased rent and general living costs.

The 'exponential evolving nature of communities' is about the tension between those who dearly hold onto the interpersonal values in their society and those who wish to move beyond this. While the distinction between the two camps may not be sharply defined, it is nevertheless a desire for some to hold onto what they have helped build up in the past versus those who wish to transcend this society. Both groups wish to seek values they feel are important for their society.

This paper endeavours to demonstrate how these two groups and their values may co-exist through a curious metaphor of the 'local corner store'. Contrary to what some people may believe is the more productive, I favour the former of the two values whereby the need for an interpersonal community may often be best served by small business, which survives by providing for the needs of the individual. In comparison, big business, which represents the latter value, may lose sight of this aim in the way that it seeks to serve primarily through commerce

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and efficiency. This is of course not to say that we do not need change and big business, but that we should not abandon one for the other.

The 'corner store' forms part of a social space where people meet and derive an ownership of their community. Many people, who have nowhere else to go, congregate outside the corner store and banter about life's social dramas. This is their corner! The shop sells most of their needs and even offers credit to some customers. In the midst of a changing and developing suburb, the corner store remains largely the same. It is feared by some - those that want 'unconditional change' - as the last bastion for the old existing society, one they wish would disappear. For me the local corner store is a 'metaphor' for how 'the exponential evolving nature of communities' need not disregard one community with respect to another. Rather, that a community, like the local corner store, will be defined by and thrive through diversity. The current dynamic mix in the community is something that has really come about unplanned. Given the electoral process and that council planning is subject to four year terms, often at best things can only be instigated by a political party. The make up of the community is then subject to many factors. Irrespective of this, the community is genuinely fortunate.

Let me briefly outline for clarity's sake what this thesis entails in regard to metaphor, the corner store and community. A metaphor is the 'filter' with which we use to compare two fields (subjects of study) - the first, is one known to us, while the other field remains pervasive and mysterious- in order that we may better understand the lesser known of the two. In doing so, similarities are identified between the fields with our knowledge (including its mechanics) of the one familiar to us being transposed onto the other. The metaphor is a means to describe and illuminate something that we cannot as yet grasp through other means (See Max Black and Donald Davidson and their work on Metaphors). The known field I describe here is the corner store that embraces its changing community by still largely offering the same low cost goods, and the field we wish to explore is a community under transformation.

What is fundamental with the metaphor of the corner store is that it reflects a **space**, where (two groups) the economically disadvantaged and upwardly mobile members of society co-exist. Indeed, it does so in a covert and yet radical way. The corner store is not only a **place** - it is a nexus where these two groups 'meet' when using its' services. In doing so

they become accustomed to each other in their daily shopping rituals: the two groups see that neither is entirely foreign from the other as individual persons. Ultimately this metaphor shows how the storeowner can fulfil a need in the community that while simple, enriches it and plays a part in maintaining its identity. The bringing together of these two groups in this routine setting demonstrates that the very identity of the community itself is constituted by their **co-existence**.

This paper will use a rich and diverse location to show how a community confronts change and the effect that it has on the identity of a place. This requires constant attention to ensure that the 'sustainable social development, transformation and action' desired does not destroy established communities. Indeed that it should seek diversity within the community. In doing so, all parties need to recognise that the identity of a community is constantly evolving. The importance of the local corner store, and three other similar shops I discuss, is in the way that they can to varying degrees meet change while still addressing the needs of those that fear it the most. By outlining **the exponential evolving nature of communities'** I will note that many other communities in the past have undergone radical change in a consistent way, which results in those seeking unconditional change doing so, and the poorer community members being displaced. In recognising this process I suggest a better alternative with the metaphor of the Corner Store. This stands in opposition to the threat of gentrification and the homogenising effect that it brings in contrast to the current diversity.

This paper will discuss the changing landscape of this suburb through the personal narratives of those people who own and work in the shops that form part of this suburb. It is through these very personal stories that we will see what makes a community important - human, flesh and blood, biological beings who are made all the more significant through their notable difference to other biological beings; each in unison constituting the dynamic society in which they live.

Moving into the Suburb:

The first time I entered this suburb, I drove endlessly up and down the street trying to find an old fabric's factory. I had a road map open on the passenger seat. The directions did not make any sense to me. Two roads seemed to curve and hug each other so that you were not aware where one road began or

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the other continued. I called a friend from my mobile asking for landmarks. 'Look out for a Salvation Army Centre. It's a red brick building', he said. Our 'new school' was directly opposite it. Although at this point it was not a school but rather a vacant warehouse- formerly known as "Academy Fabrics". One hundred years before it was a primary school.

I passed the Salvation Army Centre four or five times before recognizing it. Along the way, I was overwhelmed by two tower buildings, which were housing commission apartment blocks. The Towers were built in 1974-75 as part of the new government housing experiment. Next to them were smaller residential buildings and further up a neat row of Victorian Terrace houses. Small factories, a smash repair car workshop and a unit for human prosthetic limbs comfortably sat between these home dwellings. In the middle of the street was a vacant stretch of grass. It looked as though it was a park at one stage, but now was dry and desolate. A block away from the vacant plot was a bakery, butcher, Medical Centre and the local 'corner store'.

I eventually saw the Salvation Army and the beige coloured, two-story warehouse standing opposite it. Parking the car I noticed that the warehouse was adjoined to a pork meat factory. Outside some workers were sitting on chairs smoking cigarettes. They wore white hair caps and blue striped long aprons covered with stains of blood. They looked at me as I left my car walking towards them.

I called the same friend to check that this was indeed the right building as there was no street number. The warehouse had two roller shutters and a heavy metal front door. I pressed a buzzer and eventually my friend opened the door to let me. Inside, wooden beams supported the ceilings of two large separate storage spaces with concrete floors and on one side a raised wooden platform. A series of arched windows on the right hand side let in some light. In front of the metal door was a wooden staircase. In the middle of the space next to a dividing wall was a conveyer belt made of wooden planks bound together by a rusty metal frame. Next to it, two clunky machines with red and green push buttons powered this majestic dinosaur. Later I would hear its hum as the wooden planks rotated to move objects upwards.

To the far left of the conveyor belt, in the corner, was a second rickety staircase, precariously winding its way to the second level. Instead of using this one, I took the sturdy looking stairs to walk up to the second level, where there was an egress area with a

dividing wall that had sliding glass window panels. Surrounding it was an old-fashioned administration office and two small-enclosed rooms. Beyond the egress was a large open space. Presumably the conveyer belt had once carried large boxes of fabric to be stored in this space. Now it was virtually empty except for several stacks of chairs and fold out tables. Two bathrooms lay to the far left as well as a grimy kitchen. The brick walls of the factory were painted white. Daylight flooded the space through large rectangular shaped windows.

We began to clean up the space and set up rows of chairs. I mopped the floors as best I could and wiped the basin surfaces in the bathrooms. Then I scrubbed the porcelain toilets and an old metal urinal. We did not have much time! The keys to the building had only been given to us that very day. Tomorrow would be an open day to show our new school to a crowd of prospective students. By the time the public arrived we would have been in the building for less than 24 hours. The ink on the lease for the building barely dry!

Some of our investors were nervous about where the school was situated. A few blocks in front of the school an aboriginal teenage boy was impaled on an iron fence while escaping police on his bicycle. Later the grieving community handed out fliers around the train station close by blaming police for his death. In response police closed the entrance of the train station down. A riot ensued with youths throwing bricks and glass bottles at the officers. The streets were littered with debris. Cars were firebombed and petrol bombs thrown at police wearing riot gear. It was though these streets could have been in some war torn country.

The riots stirred a great deal of debate about closing down the government housing blocks. Discussion ensued amongst politicians about how to fix a problem that is in reality systemic since Australia was first colonized. A section of the community, its indigenous people, have been 'on the receiving end' of government policies indicative of a country whose history is based on usurping its original people. For some the riots gave an opportunity to argue for the gentrification of the suburb. It is situated close to the city in area, which is potentially prime real estate.

Over the years before we started cleaning the fabric's factory to turn it into a school, an interesting mix of people evolved into the suburb. Middle to upper middle class professionals, slowly migrating into the suburb, started to buy up old terrace houses

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and renovate them. Socially economic disadvantage people lived beside these affluent members of society. This was still relatively restrained when we first arrived. But in the past five years, the landscape has noticeably continued to change. Apartment blocks started to embrace the suburbs low skyline blurring out the views.

The one thing that still keeps the suburb what it is once was is the corner store and a few other local businesses. Some of these are changing but let me first explain why the local corner shop and the handful of other stores are so important.

The Corner Store:

From the first day we moved into the school I became acquainted the local corner store. It is a small shop that sells goods according to the demands of local residents. This is the very definition of a corner store that has been threatened in recent decades by the growth of large supermarkets. I know this as I worked in a local corner shop while studying at school. I earned \$3.75 per hour. During this time supermarkets opened during standard business hours with the exception of Thursday evenings when they closed at 9pm (known as Thursday night shopping). Outside these hours you purchased goods for convenience at the local store, which was open 7 days a week from 7:30am till 10pm. Items were overpriced because the store owner bought goods at a higher price than Supermarkets and needed to make a profit. The store I worked in also gave credit to its customers usually living on the pension.

This all changed when Supermarkets opened for longer hours. Credit cards and store cards increasing replaced the old form of credit shop owners gave to its local residents. One thing lamented by residents with the change in business practices of Supermarkets is of course the loss of personal contact with the Operator & Owner, who worked in the store, and engaged with you not only in your regular financial transactions but also on a personal level. On a Christmas Day he would likely give you a bottle of champagne for free if you were in need. He or she also asked about your work and family life.

Philosophical discussions can be exchanged with the local store proprietor. You and the owner are part of the same community. Your well-being and the owner is intertwined. The owner provides a service that exists only because you are there. But without the owner your life would be much more difficult.

He provides a convenience. Supermarkets do this but they lose this personal contact. Recently, the nature of these corner stores has been attacked by one of the major Sydney Newspapers and a Retail Advocacy Group. They state that there is a flood of small corner stores that threaten the viability of larger retail businesses.

My Local Corner Store:

Back to the corner store near my school. (Here I discuss change in community, how it can be mediated to some extent, its benefits in bringing diversity and biological beings.) The initial owners were two Iraqi brothers, neither residents of the area, living in the far western suburbs. Working in shifts, covering an 18 hour day, the brothers alone kept the store running 7 days a week. Their business was tailored for the majority of its clients – housing commission residents on government welfare benefits. Cans of soft drink sold for \$1 each, a single cigarette only \$.050 (later \$0.80 with the increase in government taxes), and next to the cash registrar unpriced second hand watches on display behind the glass counter, presumably exchanged for the purchase of goods. Everything stocked in the store has been carefully considered to fulfill the needs of the residents, and while most convenience stores in the city are notoriously overpriced, this one - my one - offers products often even cheaper than any of the surrounding supermarket chains.

The older brother, who usually works morning shifts, is particularly friendly and appreciates the new customers arriving from all over the world to study at our school. I learned that his wife used to work with him in the store but had become tired with the traveling it required. Now he works alone until his brother arrives in the late afternoon. Despite this fact he always smiles while serving me. He is a short man, well rounded with his hair brushed across to disguise a bald patch. He calls the store, 'a \$1 shop' as most of his best selling items are only \$1.

Sometimes customers complain about the price of milk and bread, for even his low prices doesn't help the ones without money, nor the ones stuck in a lifestyle. These ones are often sick from the drugs they inject or swallow. He tells them in a hushed tone to complain to the Prime Minister. Outside the store in the morning some of the residents gather and chat about life. Sporting tracksuits and runners they buy cigarettes and drink beer. The stories they tell are about everyone they know living in the Towers. I walk by them or often almost right through

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them as if I am a ghost. They are ambivalent to me. Gradually when I have walked into the corner store countless of times, the residents begin to notice me. Occasionally they say hello and ask for a dollar, or we just simply nod to each other.

At times an old man and his dog dwell outside the store. The old man sitting on a disabled scooter. The other residents pat his dog and ask whether he can dance. The dog jumps up on his hind legs performing tricks. One of the residents was upset when the old man no longer could be seen outside the corner store. I heard this man later explaining to the shop owner that the old man had passed away. The dog was taken away by authorities and placed in a kennel. It was a genuinely sad moment for this resident. Although he was old, and one would think that his death would not be too surprising, the passing of the man was a reminder that things change, even in the housing projects.

I will return to these residents and their state of consciousness. But for now focus on the other owner of the local store; the younger brother is not as friendly as his sibling, and indeed is cynical and suspicious. Working the nightshift he sees people living in the towers at their worst. Friends of his sit with him in the store at night-time as though they are guarding him from robbers. He does not smile or greet you as you walk into the store in the same way as his brother. One morning I see broken glass and blood on the pavement outside the medical centre opposite their store. Walking into the store I see this unsmiling brother. I ask what has happened. He responds that a patient has cut a doctor with the broken glass. 'This area is getting worse', he says. I wonder how much worse it could be than the war torn streets of Iraq.

Shortly afterwards, two other men of a similar age to the brothers are helping out in the store. The men, also brothers, are originally from Iraq having since moved to Sweden. I later learn that they will be taking over the corner store.

These two men have migrated from a small town in Sweden. They quickly become acquainted with the residents, their future clientele. One has thin hair, high cheek bones, a wide smile, bulging eyes and medium height. The other brother looks the same except he has a full set of hair and is slightly taller. They become regular fixtures to our neighborhood and the other brothers disappear. The interior store is painted and some minor changes are made with the layout. The glass cabinet filled with second

hand watches is replaced with chocolates. Though, the prices of goods and its selection are largely unchanged. The needs and wants of local residents remain the same and so too does the corner store. The only difference is that the owners look slightly different. But they are still brothers from a foreign land catering to the needs of the residents that live in the tower block.

Sometime later the new owners extend credit to our school for supplying milk. The smiling older brother who works in the morning delivers these supplies to our school. He seems to enjoy the visits. I see him each day walking to and thro to the corner store wheeling a supermarket trolley filled with goods. He adds a coffee machine to the store selling cups for half the price elsewhere and installs a slurpie machine. While adding these services the essential ones largely remain the same.

The shocking sound of a human thud was heard near the corner store and our school one night as a falling man connected with the bitumen of the car park at the nearby local housing commission, nicknamed 'suicide towers'. The man, a tenant living in this block of small apartments, had only moments before his fall, cursed a team of football players practicing on the oval nearby. Police came and cleaned up the scene and any traces of the death that marked evidence of the clash in cultures. Some of my students working late in the school heard the sounds that the drama played out. It was something that they would not expect to see in another suburb cushioned from the transgressions of society. But there it was, out there, in the world for them to witness- the effect of dense housing together with the rise in mental health issues, and its literal impact on the community. Whether or not the football players and the newly built oval could have been symptomatic of how change was encroaching on the man's space is unknown.

The students wondered as to whether they may have passed by this man at the corner store or met him at the counter buying cigarettes and bread. Although they did not discover who he was by either by name or face, he was nevertheless real to them. He was a person who lived in their community, no longer a statistic; he was flesh and blood, a biological being just like them! This is an example of what a diverse community brings with it, empathy.

This brings me back to the conscious states of **them** and **us**, 'those who stand on the street corner' while I walk by. At first when I saw **them** I imagined them

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to be like zombies without real conscious thoughts in the same way I do. But eventually they talk to you and you to them. You greet them outside the corner store or you observe them angry or laughing. You may exchange a few words with them at the counter. Sometimes they make a joke with the brothers in the store. Soon you realise that, the sometimes-surface appearance of vacuity on their faces disguises thoughts and feelings subdued by their narcosis. Maybe they start speaking with me because they, too, realise that I have thoughts and feelings under what might appear to be a cold and judgemental surface.

I think this says something of the reciprocal nature of a community- one where public spaces may connect diverse people together. The perceived difference between how I see myself in relation to the other heightens the connection when it is made. Something about a diverse community is that the weaker 'set' provides a wonderful example of what a community can be at times. Those people who are in need rely on each other as opposed to those more affluent people who just want their own backyard and private space. You see it in a Market held each Friday in the Salvation Army car park. Residents pool together old clothing and other possessions to sell. A band plays and a sausage sizzle is served. People banter and chat in the reassurance that it is an open community. This activity occurs through necessity not commerce. The sense of a community becomes stronger when it is built on inter-dependence on your neighbor. This becomes more and more visible to the newer more affluent members of the suburb when they see these activities. Sometimes they even lament the loss of this community elsewhere.

The corner where the shop stands is also a space where this 'community' can rally together. It is a place where stories are exchanged and social dramas can be given a voice and mediated. Solutions are devised for the day-to-day problems that confront those that dwell on the corner. After their deliberations the speakers disappear as quickly as they assembled. After you have visited the corner store enough times you come to realize that the chaotic appearance of the gathering has its own order. People are there to orate and be seen; those with the most pressing issues are given preference in the speaking order. In the midst of the banter and mimetic movements they can buy supplies from the shop, cigarettes and cans of soft drink.

It is interesting to note that street corners and their use as a public space seems universal. Examples

include a bible quote critical of those who prayer for all to see on the street corner, and more recently (in a positive light) organized community gatherings across Harlem called 'Occupy the Corners', where community members discuss solutions to street violence. The 'corner' shows others like myself that this community has a discursive means to speak openly in an informal forum- one not constrained by the towers in which they live- to resolve their grievances. Something now elsewhere defined by the walls of councilors or legal mediators.

The corner store is non discriminatory - all old and new residents are customers. It offers services that are simple and essential. The diverse range of people that make up the community all buy from this store. A random snapshot at any time of the day would show just this fact. The store and its corner can teach us something through my cursory observations. Not only can we empathize with the 'others' that live here, but also learn through example.

<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/united-states/occupy-the-corner-peaceful-gatherings-for-change-287721.html>

Barber Shop

If you walk up the main street near our school you will see a Barbershop. Opposite, is a Car Mechanic. These two small businesses have been operated by the same owners for decades. The Barber has worked here for 42 years while the car mechanic a shorter spell of 25 years. The Barber shop is owned by Harry, an 82 year old Greek migrant who has been a witness to this changing suburb. Though, when seated in his shop you feel cushioned from this changing world. His barber's bench is as old as the business; it is covered with crimson coloured Perspex veneers and adorned with alcohol filled jars soaking combs, scissors, clipper blades and the odd cut-throat razors.

Above the bench are photographs of Harry in Greece, his wife and children. A folded and creased newspaper remains open on the horse racing pages. An old radio plays the monotonous docile tones of the racing announcer. The occasional flutter on the races is one of Harry's few pleasures. When you get into his barber's chair he asks you how you are in his thick Greek accent, wraps a paper towel around the bottom of your neck and pretends to take in your instructions on how to cut your hair. The truth is that Harry only does one kind of cutting style! Each time when he finishes by rubbing talcum powder

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to soothe your neck, you are always struck by how remarkably similar your haircut looks like his own.

While sitting in Harry's chair, I always feel nostalgically connected to past experiences I had of being in the barber's chair in my childhood. The announcer's voice on the radio and the hum of Harry's electric razor tingles me into a dreamlike state. I feel as if I am floating in the air. The sharp cold edge of the razorblade on my naked neck each time only barely awakens me from this dreamlike trance.

Sometimes in this state I look at one photograph Harry has of his sick wife. Her two sons are holding her upright in a chair. She looks dead; just like the images taken of the deceased in early photography, the corpse positioned in a lifeless pose by their loved ones. Harry's wife had been sick for sometime now. His children took care of her at home while he worked beyond retirement to pay for the hospital costs. Years later one of my students made a documentary about Harry. It was through this film that I learnt that Harry's wife eventually passed away struggling with every breath in her body.

I thought that maybe Harry would have retired by now, but he kept working. In fact, even opening up the shop sometimes on a Sunday. But what else could he do? The only other option would be to stay at home; a place now made lonely with the absence of his wife, save for the residue of her memory that gathers like dust on every corner surface. Rather than drift into pathos, Harry seeks solace in what he has done for the past 42 years.

Recently, on one occasion I spoke with Harry about our suburb, and at this point he says something curious. "The suburb is no longer the same. It is getting bad. Drugs!", he warns me. But in fact this is not the case. Crime rates are down and police presence high. Statistics are not of concern for Harry. He is basing his opinion on what he can see through his shop's front window. It is the means by which he can peer into the outside world.

Next door to Harry's shop is a tattoo parlour. It first opened with its shutter doors kept closed, 'tattooing only by appointment'. One shop owner informed me that the tattoo artist feared reprisal from biker gangs who control tattoo parlours in Sydney. Slowly the shutter doors opened further and further so that you could see inside. It was about this time that Harry decided to permanently etch an image of his wife into his flesh. The artwork is impeccable. Her image

is a constant reminder to him when he showers and looks into the mirror. In her ink form she now ages in exact correlation to him, as the flesh on his upper arm wrinkles with age, so too will she. So, Harry continues to cut hair at a very affordable price that I forgot to mention- only ten dollars a cut!

Eventually the roller doors of this Barber Shop will cease to re-open. It is unlikely that anyone will fulfil the place of Harry. Another boutique shop will replace it. Maybe even another barber, but this one will be pristine- a new leather chair, wooden benches, and stainless steel scissors - with expensive haircuts. Those in the community who cannot afford it will have to go elsewhere!

The Mechanic:

Gary's mechanic shop is one of the cheapest in Sydney for tuning your car. The owner proprietor is a jack-of-all-trades; he has hotwired my car when the battery died suddenly, replaced its engine oil and brake pads. The shop is made up of a garage fitting up to four cars, a small adjoining office and car park. Gary is an Aboriginal Australian who was raised abroad in Canada. A place he visits again from time to time. He wears broad spectacles, which highlight his round face and wide eyes, shielded constantly by a baseball cap. A long slender cigarette holder with its burning tobacco is constantly clenched in his teeth, whilst he fiercely sucks in and out smoke from his lungs like an exhaust pipe. Whether in his office or fixing the engine of a car, Gary breathes fumes and mutters out loud through his clamped mouth each action he is doing. He stops and smiles when he greets you, always with the cigarette holder in his teeth. He calls me 'brother' or 'Johnnie Boy'.

The garage shop has undergone change over the years. When I first took my car for service the shop was painted a grey colour. The shop was like Gary's business cards, which were printed in simple black and white text. On my next visit he had coloured business cards with images of flash cars, ones that not be serviced through his shop. The cars that are there instead are simple and sensible. I compliment Gary on his new business cards taking a small pile for the school. He looks at me and says a simple, 'thanks'.

The next visit I make sees the car shop front as a hot bed of activity. Cars nearly spill out onto the street, and the building is now painted a mustard yellow, with large print of the name of the mechanic shop on the outside of the building. I praise him again,

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this time about the paint colours of his garage. "Thank you Johnnie for your patronage. If it wasn't for you and the other customers I couldn't have done it. I owe it all to you" he says with a smile showing his gold teeth fillings.

What Can we Learn from these Stor(i)es Using the Theoretical Framework? :

Let's now tie together these stories into my thesis outlined in the abstract. To do so I will start with 'change' and refer briefly to 'process philosophy' from which I draw my ideas.

Change – Endurance and the Process of Becoming:

Alfred North Whitehead (1933) in 'Adventures of Ideas' writes insightfully of the transformation of modern society and change; hinting at the side effects that will be later termed 'gentrification'. A paper he wrote entitled 'Foresight' (published in his book *Adventures in Ideas*) examines society in a way that is as fresh today as it was when presented to the Harvard Business School in the 1930's. He notes that the movement away from the city to suburban dwellings had begun to reverse. Communities were moving back to the centre of the metropolis and with this migration the nature of inner cities had changed. Whitehead writes that the nature of change in our society was becoming more evident now in our lifetimes, whereas in the past it was generational.

According to his thesis, a community acts through the stabilizing forces of 'Routine'. Our daily activities provide a desired outcome with each person performing their role in the knowledge that others will also fulfill their complementary tasks. For Whitehead, a society is like an ants nest: all perform their routine tasks in unison to enact what seems like a coherent whole, with each unit fulfilling its duties in relation to the other. On the surface it seems that the colony is an intelligent being. But in fact, the routine nature of a society is that our actions may be performed seemingly without thought, instinctually without a need to know all the other parts that make it up. This is where Foresight comes into play. We need to move beyond our safe routine and make decisions that will impact our society – that enact future change. These will then form part of our routine practices in the future. Whitehead's philosophy concerned the nature and importance of change (termed Process Philosophy) that brings us back to the thesis raised in the opening of this paper regarding **exponential change**.

Whitehead in discussing change coined the term 'actual occasions' to describe how something (an object, events etc.) might endure over time. An 'actual occasion'- incorporating the world that we experience- is not something that is an enduring substance. Rather, it is something that exists in flux through the state of 'the process of becoming'. An enduring object/event is made up of a succession of occasions each endlessly divisible. We can thus understand our world through a 'process of becoming' and change.

This is a very simple way of describing Whitehead's incredibly dense and complex theory. But it does allow me to address my earlier point about change and how the identity of a community is constantly evolving. Things are changing all the time in the way that different people and their cultures interact. The problem is that one group does not recognize or at least appreciate the change that is occurring, while the other group does not want the change they can see to occur. How change itself comes about is interesting and not necessarily planned at all.

The community of Redfern -Waterloo and its diversity has come into its current form in part through chance. What happens here is exciting in the way that people from diverse backgrounds co-exist and connect. I say that this diversity is 'in part by chance' because the nature of changing governments can lead to inconsistent planning with each new election. So while a government decision will result in the make up of community, it does not and cannot, control all the events that lead to the identity of a community and its fundamental core, even if it would like to think otherwise. Thus, this diverse community of people- different ethnic cultures, ages and economic backgrounds- living so close to the city in prime real estate, comes about in part through government's decision to have low cost housing but other aspects also have their influence.

Waterloo itself has increased its population by 206% in the past decade. New development led to the poor centralized housing being diluted with new residents moving in. This brings with it the qualities of gentrification. The exact mix of people and what change they bring into the community is not something that is easily masterminded by government, as it is an ongoing dialogue. The further development that is taking place there is in part governed by welfare, while other aspects are commercially driven.

Redfern has not increased to same extent as Waterloo but rather has undergone a different significant

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shift. In 1965 a large indigenous community lived and worked in Redfern at the Railways depot and local factories. The equalizing of wages in rural areas meant that many farm workers were unemployed, and in response relocated with family members to Redfern for better work opportunities. By 1967 over 12,000 Indigenous lived in Redfern, these included people who had been forcibly removed from families (The Stolen Generation) seeking to find them. Today only 867 Indigenous people live in Waterloo - Redfern combined, with 289 actually in Redfern. Where did all these displaced people go?

Despite this shift in demographics a number of important Indigenous Centres exist in Redfern. These include non-for-profit organisations such as mentoring schemes, the Sports Centre, Koori Radio, a Legal Centre, Health service, housing cooperative and an Education Institute. In the mix there are art galleries, a children's literacy programme, bars and cafes. The Koori Radio Station once operating from a run down terrace house now exists in a refurbished building. Change, after a long period of neglect, is starting to move rapidly!

Recently, the Sydney Morning Herald classified Redfern as one of the 'Hippest' suburbs in Australia to reflect this change.

<http://smh.domain.com.au/a-few-surprises-in-the-list-of-the-hip-and-happening-20120817-24dxc.html>

While 'diversity' in the mix of residents is noted positively in the article, it is interesting to see how they have defined what is 'hip'. The journalist notes the study written by Urbis: "suburbs that are statistically "hip" have a high proportion of people between the age of 20 and 39, are not married, don't identify with a religion and have a tertiary qualification. Also the areas tend to be more ethnically diverse and have medium- to high-density living, with more group households and fewer cars". A higher portion of residents rent- Redfern Waterloo has 56% of its residents renting - and without the responsibilities of a mortgage and children are more likely to take risks. The article states that the gentrification of the suburb, including a drop in crimes rates, has resulted in more upwardly mobile younger people (20 years old to 39) moving into the area.

On a cautionary note it states:

"From a property perspective, the APM senior economist, Andrew Wilson, said hip suburbs are originally 'cool for renting and then they become cool

for buying. As people become alert to the benefits of the area and they start to bid it up the prices with owner occupiers competing to be part of the 'overall lifestyle choice of the community'. However, upward price pressure eventually leads to a suburb losing its cool. "They evolve into something else," Dr Wilson said. "They turn into prestige suburbs."

This key point brings us back to the change and how with gentrification we can lose the diverse mix of people within a suburb once prices surge upwards and the poorer people living there are displaced. This is what the new residents may want as an economic imperative- these are those who want unconditional change. Other new people who have moved into rented properties, however, while liking change don't want this same change to cause their own displacement. **'The exponential evolving nature of communities'** often entails this with the more upwardly mobile people displacing the more disadvantaged community members, including those residents (renters) without the same wealth as the property owners. The above article takes this process to be a given with little free-will or agency being able to obstruct this change. However, I do not feel that this necessarily has to be the case- at least not with regards to Redfern -Waterloo.

Firstly members within the community must acknowledge that change is always there with a 'process of becoming' (actual occasions) defining things and events, rather than them being an 'enduring substance'. The next step is to consider how this process can be best used to serve a community. Furthermore, it is a case of the community realizing that its diversity should be maintained for all the reasons I outlined above- the key word being empathy. Of course those concerned with how it may impact their property price may find this a difficult pill to swallow. But if they are in the minority than hopefully those who fear change may not be so concerned. Ultimately, the disadvantaged members of the community believe that change will displace them. They are not against change as such but rather embrace it, it is only when it could be a threat that they are concerned.

On a cursory examination of the likelihood of the disintegration of the current diversity, it is useful to look at current housing plans for the area. A recent submission on housing in Waterloo - Redfern suggested the following residential density:

Private Dwellings	3500
Government Housing	2800
Affordable Housing	700

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This is interesting as it suggests that government housing will continue but at a reduced form. Affordable housing is low cost rent accommodation funded by "joint ventures, which may, in conjunction with planning system incentives, use a combination of rental income, private funding, state or local government subsidies or resources, and community sector resources, are increasingly necessary to meet the demand for affordable accommodation in NSW and Australia. The Commonwealth's National Rental Affordability Scheme, which was launched in 2008, aims to increase private investment in affordable housing by providing an annual tax incentive or grant for new properties rented at 80% of the market rent" (Family and Community Housing New South Wales). These 700 Affordable Housing dwellings will displace current housing commission residents who will need to be relocated.

Thus, future plans for housing still incorporate policies that would encourage diversity. An important point to note again is that the cultural diversity within Waterloo Redfern has not necessarily been planned. For many reasons diverse ethnic groups have formed in the suburb. What happens between these groups is dynamic and part of the exciting aspects of communities- not necessarily planned - and that's what makes it interesting.

Norman Klein in his book "The History of Forgetting Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory", writes of a similar circumstance in Echo Park. Here Anglos have developed strong relationships with poorer immigrant families. In this community, all appreciated the eclectic mix of fellow residents.

The corner store also acknowledges the need for this mixture of residents. The proprietors accommodate this change while still retaining their main services. Harry witnesses this change but still holds steadfast to what he knows - \$10 haircuts- in opposition to the very changing surfaces of the benches that prop up his scissors, aging with time. Harry's shop can only do so for a short time longer. Garry seems to grow with this change, but the extent to how he might continue to do so, is still a work in progress.

As an appendix note, the block of housing commission towers close by our school and opposite the corner shop, is actively involved in connecting with all residents . Each Monday and Tuesday evening there is a Bicycle Co-operative that meet here to fix and build bikes. The poorer residents, wealthier property owners and renting 'hipsters'

come together to service their bikes and make new ones at no cost. It provides cheap transport for a number of residents. Close by the garage in which they service these bikes, is the fence where the young Aboriginal boy was killed while riding his bicycle in pursuit from police.

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“Engagement and objective distance, understanding reality as object, understanding the significance of men’s action upon objective reality, creative communication about the object by means of language, plurality of responses to a single challenge – these varied dimensions testify to the existence of critical reflection in men’s relationships with the world. Consciousness is constituted in the dialectic of man’s objectification of and action upon the world. Yet consciousness is never a mere reflection of but a reflection upon material reality.”

Paulo Freire

A discursive engagement that brings about greater consciousness, and the nurturing of a critical spirit is significant in any meaningful community building initiative. To discuss and problematise the need to craft social engagement, which is instrumental in the process of community building, is both an intellectual exercise as well as a moral-ethical commitment. To have a sense of community means the existence of a sense of connectedness, that is, feeling belonged to a group which shares common identity, history and destiny. Another sense of being in a community is also the *experience of struggling* in the face of non-recognition, or humiliation, and this is where social engagement should deliberate, address, and challenge whenever necessary. A conscientised generation is one that able to confront and engage with those ideas and practices that stunted the path of progress and development of the community. Its reflexivity is integral in pursuing an educative engagement, with combative engagement made occasionally in cases where the problems become prolonged and disruptive.

The vision towards harnessing a conscientised generation is part of this community-building idealism. A conscientised generation means one that has evolved from and overcome the limitations from that of *magical consciousness* to *naïve consciousness* and to one that can be referred to as *critical consciousness*. The latter, in Paulo Freire’s definition is crucial to be understood.

“The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one’s “findings” and by openness to revisions; by the attempt to avoid distortions when perceiving

problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to new reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old – by accepting what is valid in both old and new.”¹

Social engagement seen as part of a process of conscientization means to nurture the thinking that is opposed to domestication, and imitation, and domination of thought. We nurture civic courage and democratic spirit, through engagement where the people take part in engaging on the issues of society alongside their leaders.

“Critical consciousness is brought about, not through an intellectual effort alone, but through praxis – through the authentic union of action and reflection. Such reflective action cannot be denied to the people. If it were, the people would be no more than activist pawns in the hands of a leadership that reserved itself the right of decision making.”²

Most importantly, reference to a conscientised generation, (or to be precise, a generation/society affirming conscientization,) does not mean that the process of conscientization has been completed and attained. Instead it is an indispensable process, and on-going with the aim of nurturing of a conscientised generation. “Conscientization is first of all the efforts to enlighten men about the obstacles preventing them from a clear perception of reality. In this role, conscientization effects the ejection of cultural myths that confuse the people’s awareness and make them ambiguous beings.”³ In our case, the manifestation of such myths can range from the culture deficit, dysfunctional family structure, the indolent behaviours and mindset problems of the Malays, and many other blame-the-victim type of conclusions, which have been invariably harped upon to explain the cause of the community’s underdevelopment.⁴ The challenges of nurturing and affirming conscientisation are many. Although this is not the place to discuss the subject of conscientisation in greater details, it is suffice to note of the danger of bureaucratization of conscientisation, where, “in losing its dynamism and thus fossilizing, ends up transforming conscientization into a sort of rainbow of recipes - another mystification.”⁵

¹ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 18

² Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: culture, power, and liberation*. (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), p. 87

³ *Ibid.*, p. 89

⁴ For a critical survey on this issue read, Suriani Suratman, “Problematic Singapore Malays”: the making of a portrayal. *Occasional Paper Singapore: Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore*, 2005.

⁵ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, p. 172

⁶ Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*. (New York: Basic Civitas, 1999), p. 326

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Focus of Discussion

In all developing societies, community building is a facet that cannot be ignored. A meaningful community building should be seen as integral to nation-building, while the latter should mean beyond the state-building. Community building must be integrative, both at inter and intra levels, with a primary aim towards an organized society, since in the words of Cornel West, “a disorganized society cannot generate conceptions of its alternative future or act on them.”⁶ Here we shall focus on an aspect essential for community building, namely the importance of social engagement. To deliberate that, we shall divide this discussion into three parts. First, we shall discuss the constituents and purpose of social engagement. Second is adult-youth nexus. Whenever we speak of the need to get a productive involvement and participation of youths in the process of community building, we must consider the adults’ equation in the dynamics. Third is the craft of community building, linking the earlier two points as the basis towards crafting/weaving a fabric of community which is called a conscientised generation. The last part of the paper highlights the need of cultural circle as an approach and platform to garner social engagement that is instrumental in community building. We shall elaborate and evaluate the significance of the above three points while at the same time highlighting the obstacles and challenges that impede our efforts towards creating a conscientised generation.

Understanding Social Engagement

What is then social engagement? Engagement entails the examining and exploring, delineating and demystifying, countering and contesting some of the persistent problematic ideas, inasmuch as providing possible alternatives in addressing to the current challenges and predicament of the community. The moment we defined social engagement it must involve, amongst others, the realms of discoursing ideas; of debating issues and policies affecting the society; of ensuring ideas communicated across the society, especially pertaining to the alternative ideas pertinent for the wellbeing of society; of harnessing the consciousness and concern for society and its constituents, and of challenging ideas and practices that dehumanized and humiliates the community.

Without the need to be fixed by a definite definition, we shall only highlight what some of the obstacles in social engagement are. It is best that we see the social engagement in the following traits. Amongst others,

(a) it is a space accessible to members of public, with no groups allowed to garb themselves as the sole custodian of the discourse/ideas; (b) it has the clear purpose to discuss about the problems and challenges of society, and the motivation of the engagement propelled by the common concerns; (c) it is led, though not monopolize, by the intellectuals and intelligentsias of the community, who are inspired by the local dynamics and able to think in an autonomous fashion, without pressure of dictation or imitation from exogenous forces and trends; (d) it is elastic and spontaneous in nature, meaning that it is not stuck with a particular regime of truth, inasmuch averting hair-splitting polemics that only diverted real concerns; (e) it has a sustained platform or receptacle in which the engagement can be expressed and made known to the larger public; (f) it brings together concerned members of the community, from various sectors, to come together in a dialogue to speak up, to recommend, to share their experiences and to motivate each others.

Theoretically social engagement could cover every domain of the community life. But here a caution is necessary. We must be careful that it should not be part of the euphoria of trivialization; (an euphoria that beset many consumer and information societies) nor by the superfluosness of the romantics. In other words, the engagement site and the participants must be focused with issues of vital importance of the community, rather than to be enticed by seasonal polemics, moralistic controversies and the like. While we can agree that social engagement itself must take up against these superfluous issues, we must always be careful that the agenda for community building should not be distracted.

The craft of social engagement requires the imagination, the will power, knowledge, stamina, skill, dedication, commitment and consistency. This in turn requires a long term cultivation and enhancement. What can be observed generally is the fact that we do have social engagement but one that is characterized as euphorically or seasonally motivated, due to certain efforts to concur certain events and called by prominent leadership, rather than one that is emerged out of commitment, conviction and sense of urgencies. Social engagement is not simply discoursing of ideas. It is more than that, even though discoursing of ideas is an important component in the process of social engagement. But to engage in an ideational realm is not simply to convey or consume the ideas, but to react to, create, recreate of new ideas. It is also not a deposition or assertion.

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Constituents of Discerning Social Engagement

In social engagement, we must have the moral and intellectual courage, and stamina to persistently confront the types of thinking that become destructive to community building, that is, those that immobilize confidence, hurt the self-respect and dignity, and infuse erroneous ideas into the thought on the community's modernization and developmental process. Put simply, it questions the dehumanized and prejudicial notions that are associated with the community, or those directed at them. As such it requires a sound intellectual and cultural basis, without falling into an immobile position of formalistic academicism especially in the context of the anxiety for global ranking. Social engagement cannot afford to imitate frenzy academicism, as its audience is not abstract international journals and forums.

Social engagement is best seen as a sustained process rather than deliverable products. It involves the participation of key circles of the community, its stake holders, interest groups, while enticing and inviting new ones into this process of engagement. To be a truly an engagement, it should never be maintained by an exclusive group, for narcissistic complex will impair its vitality. Nor it should be elitist in its tenor, concern and demeanor, yet without the need to go populist. The valuational drive of the engagement is never for academic sake, but one that takes the nuances of the universal and the particular seriously, averting any form of group insularity and parochiality. Social engagement must be site where participation is inclusive, emancipative, enlightening the members of the community towards the goal of building a progressive community.

For social engagement to be truly effective, it must be communicative inasmuch as it is dialectically deliberated among its proponents and participants. By communicative we refer to the accessibility and dissemination of the things deliberated in the engagement to the larger public or community so as to benefit from it. An engagement that is inclusive, not in terms of this topical coverage, but also in terms of its sector participants and the sites which it operates.⁷ The meaningful communication between various sectors of society; between civil society and State; between adult and youth requires a democratic form of communication (as opposed to an authoritarian ones).⁸ Overall the mission of

engagement is to bring about a democratic form of communication, which facilitates engagement in an open and non-hierarchical manner.

Harnessing the Resources for Engagement

While we say that social engagement is inclusive, this does not mean it is frivolously opened to all sort of things with the consequence of leveling down of the discourse. Here the role of the intellectuals and the experts are imperative in engagement.⁹ These two groups, as agent of change, must (re) direct the engagement into a productive one. They are not only instrumental in setting and harnessing the agenda and issues in the engagement, but provide the intellectual-ethical direction, such that, in the explication of the engagement, for instance, points to the imperative of moral reasoning, rather than racial reasoning, which only brings us to the abyss of prejudice and moral confusion; yet at the same time not denying that ethnic dimension in unraveling certain analysis is as important as gender and class dimensions. Here combining the best of the available critical scholarship in the academia, and the realities and urgencies of the present in the community becomes imperative.¹⁰

A community of engagement with conscience is fundamental in community building with the aim to ensure communitarian empathy, intellectual receptivity, ethical rigour and emotional stability. When we say "intellectual" we do not mean to say the highbrow academic intellectualism, but one where the concept entails, in the words of Cornel West, the will "to speak a truth that allows suffering to speak." West continues:

"That is, it creates a vision of the world that puts into the limelight the social misery that is usually hidden or concealed by the dominant viewpoints of a society. "Intellectual" in that sense simply means those who are willing to reflect critically upon themselves as well as upon the larger society and to ascertain whether there is some possibility of amelioration and betterment."¹¹

Such commitment requires a moral-ethical basis and this is where the religious tradition of the society can provide. Religious tradition provide us the sound universal values we need, but an analytical tool must

⁷ This reminds us of what Raymond Williams speaks of the democratic mode of communication in a community. Read, "Communications and Community," in *Resources of Hope*. (London: Verso, 1989).

⁸ The democratic communication constitutes "maximum participation by the individuals in the society. Since communication is the record of human growth, it has to be varied. It has to be dispersed itself into many different and independent systems, all of which, however, have to be secure enough to maintain themselves. It has to get rid of the idea that communication is the business of a minority talking to, instructing, leading on, the majority." *Ibid.*, p. 29

⁹ Here its apt to draw the distinction between the intellectuals and the experts as made by Cornel West. He opines: "The experts – the analyst and the academic – performs the kind of careful, cautious scholarship that needs to be done. The intellectual is somebody else. An intellectual is someone who builds on specialized work to give people a sense of the whole, an overview." Cornel West, "Affirmation," *Transition*, Issue 68, 1995, p. 68

¹⁰ Thus Cornel West writes: "to be an engaged progressive intellectual is to be a critical organic catalyst whose vocation is to fuse the best of the life of the mind from within the academy with the best of the organized forces for greater democracy and freedom from outside the academy." *Keeping Faith: philosophy and race in America*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 103

¹¹ West, *The Cornel West Reader*, p. 551

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be acquired and developed in order for us to fully appreciate those values; those that can be directed for our community well being. The courage to deliberate and participate in social engagement is part of the socio-cultural and political courage. Again West's reflection on this point is relevant, especially for us who committed for this community building where a dehumanized and distressed condition is one of our aim to address:

"If you're fundamentally committed to dealing with the suffering and pain, you will be willing to put yourself through some processes. One sign of commitment, for me, is always the degree to which one is willing to be self-critical and self-questioning, because that's a sign that you're serious about generating the conditions for the possibility of overcoming the suffering that you're after. Commitment is fundamentally about focusing on the suffering and trying to overcome it, trying to understand where it comes from, its causes, its effects. At the same time, it is about trying to prepare oneself to sacrifice and to serve in such a way that one attempts to overcome the suffering."¹²

In engaging, we are actually looking together for the best recipe to heal and address the undernourishment in various realms of our social, cultural and economic life. In the process of engagement, we assume the educative role, with intellectual resources to shape and give meaning to the engagement. The educative approach has its purpose; to propose and to bring forth ideas deemed as important for the society and individual. However, it must be cautioned that in such engagement, there can be authoritarian ways of engagement as opposed to a more humanistic approach.

The Challenges of Engagement

While it is easier to enumerate what constitute a social engagement, the challenge to fully define it is to see what are some of the practices that hampering it. For example, social engagement when initiated by an organization could face a hindrance, such as the interference of the executive or board members on the research wing spearheading the thinking circle in the organization. As a result, we see the tendency of anti-intellectualism at work in many of community organizations. This can be attested by the fact that it is so difficult for us to name one credible research or intellectual wing in our community organizations.

Thus when a particular research is required to be embarked by these organizations, it is not uncommon that the executive level just farm out researching works to others, with no motivation to develop its own capacity from within.

The challenge today is the fact that we have types of engagement characterized by (a) the ceremonial type where "engagement" made in lavish forums, yet its cerebral quality is very much to be desired; (b) the formalistic type where the agenda of research are predictable themes, with bureaucratic thinking predominate; (c) the seasonal type where engagement follows the periodical trend and fads in academic or media, and (d) the motive-driven type, where engagement is insurrected when there is high profile events organized, and where the "engagement" ends the very moment the events ended.

Another dimension where engagement becomes inhibitive is the culture of corporatism. Professionalism in running an efficient organization is definitely desirable and important, but to imitate the very corporate culture when we deal in the realms of community building is a misplaced one.¹³ If we simply treat our targeted groups as deliverables that are computed into our KPI and organizational profile, this is where the commitment for engagement becomes questionable. Simply put, the community leadership, equipped only with bureaucratic organizational skills, often imitating those in corporate culture. This will inevitably shut the door to other important ingredients for social engagement. This anti-intellectualism has serious effects on building a thinking capacity of its members, and to the larger society in general.¹⁴

Addressing Bureaucratic Formalism/Humiliation

There are many topics of importance that can be taken up in our social engagement. The latter should not be seen as a purely in the domain of discoursing of ideas. It should encapsulate practical day to day dealing with the community or group which we have taken the task to oversee or having the interest to ensure their well-being. Here we would like to bring attention to the bureaucratic approach in dealing our targeted groups, or in the current language is known as "clientele." Avisha Margalit in his perceptive discussion on the idea of decent society, raised an important question: Does bureaucracy contains humiliating elements? In our contexts, the bureaucracy may not necessarily referring to the government departments, but also

¹² Ibid., p. 409

¹³ "It makes it very difficult to hold on to nonmarket values, such as commitment in relationship, solidarity, community, care, sacrifice, risk and struggle. Market values encourage a preoccupation with the now, with the immediate." The Cornel West Reader, p. 295

¹⁴ Read, Azhar Ibrahim, "Anti-Intellectualism - The Predicament of Our Time," The Muslim Reader, Vol.22, No. 3, Sept-Dec, 2004.

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to our MMOs whose operation and work scheme is bureaucratic in form and spirit:

“One complaint constantly reiterated against all bureaucracies involves its mechanistic quality... based on impersonal relations, and so they are indifferent to individuals and their suffering and remote from their individuality and uniqueness. This impersonal attitude often becomes an inhuman attitude. “To bureaucrats people are just numbers” or “Clerks only see the application forms and not the people behind them” are familiar expressions of this sort of criticism. That is, bureaucracies are accused of seeing human beings as nonhuman – as numbers, or forms, or “cases.” This attitude of seeing persons in a machinelike manner is humiliating in its very essence.”¹⁵

He continues,

“A person may feel insulted by the very request to fill out forms in which he has to fit himself into neutral categories and do not convey anything of what is precious about him, and he may experience it as being treated as a number [or as application forms]”¹⁶

In the face of abject urban poverty, our bureaucratic style in dealing with our “client” (obviously borrowed from a market jargon), only humiliates them. Have we give serious thought on this group ; not just to alleviate their suffering, but to minimize their humiliation in their experience dealing with them? Through engagement , we can deliberate on this point clearly and firmly.

Of course it would be unfair to say that all MMOs operate as such, but in cases where there are such practices, this must be addressed. Engaging this issue becomes a focal point to minimize humiliating experiences of those who are in need of our support and help. Thus far, have we really deal with this question openly? I do not pretend to have the answer, but it is not uncommon to hear amongst some activists and social workers remarks such as “that those who are asking for help are not really deserving ones”, since they observed that “they have big TV set at home” or “their homes are well furnished,” or “the husband is not working” and the like. This issue needs to be engaged discerningly so that our social workers and activists are made aware

that such attitude could perhaps an outcome of an underlying tendencies to blame the victim, an easy way out to explain a complex phenomenon which we have not fully explore and diagnose it exhaustively.

Organizational Euphoria and Thinking Inertia

Thinking inertia in the midst of corporate organization and euphoria beset many of us in developing a thinking culture and spirit. Here we do not mean to say that organizational techniques as unimportant. However, it is meant to point out that in the process of running the organization, an overemphasis on organizational techniques may lead to the primary mission of the organization established to be relegated. This can be seen in a number of ways. For example, we may find that we are active to send staff for training in meticulous office skills (perhaps because there are ready service providers) – yet we are timid to send staff for updates on community issues and development. We get excited and readily want to initiate publications, and seminars, and often for our organizational profiling; publication with glossy editions, yet its distribution becomes rather limited as it turned into coffee table books, reports and occasional series (often in a language medium that could not address the community’s heartlanders). While, these initiatives are of course commendable, how do we place them as part in enhancing community building, rather than institutional showcasing.

Then, we are easily enamored by tendering out consultancies, soliciting a battery of foreign consultants, which is deemed to increase the profile of our projects, although honestly, we rarely check as to how much they know about our community’s dynamics, much less our history, and reading our problems with empathy. Perhaps the most obvious, in relation to building the thinking capacity amongst us, is the in-house training and readings which is rare, and even if existed, it is relegated primarily to the research department. Such activities are often seen as intellectualistic, and therefore not necessary. The organizational executive mantra is “less speculation/ deliberation, but direct action.” This state of thinking must be corrected, if not challenged as it puts a serious setback to the thinking capacity within the community. The executive or board running the organization are of the more professionalized type, but as observed by many social scientists, have a preponderance of a non-thinking type, or worst non-diagnostic type, amongst them.¹⁷

¹⁵ Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 215

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 219

¹⁷ Read, Hans-Dieter Evers, “The Role of Professionals in Social and Political Change,” in Peter S.J. Chen [and] Hans-Dieter Evers (eds.) *Studies in ASEAN sociology: urban society and social change*. (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1978)

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Adult-Youth Nexus

The present demographic profile in our community shows a large proportion of youth population, and this calls for our better preparedness to give substantive space for their growth. As Mannheim eloquently wrote: "Youth is an important part of latent reserves which are present in every epoch. It depends on the social structure whether these reserves, and which of them, if any, are mobilized and integrated into a function."¹⁸ To harness and develop this group must naturally be in our full stride and commitment. To simply recognize them by enchoing the lofty ideals of "pemuda harapan bangsa" is no longer suffice, but must be translated into concrete actions. It will only be a cliché if we only keep on saying the repeated slogans and clamour for our youth to be "conscious", "take the lead", "to be proactive", and the like.

The key words for engaging the youth is one that there is truly dialogic space and recognition of the roles to be entrusted on both adults and youths. It is not a dictation but engagement of two groups which enable both to communicate their aspirations, concerns, and frustrations. The domains for this adult-youth nexus are the school, family and community. The role of school in developing the youth-adult engagement has been identified by many, although this must not be overemphasized as the role of family structure and the community as a whole is equally vital. Schools, as one scholar noted, "must become the learning field and communication sphere for all forces that stand for the responsibility for the development of the child's personality in society. The school must become a significant node in the network of society from which the responsibility for the child is organized."¹⁹ In our engagement, to bring about a meaningful adult-youth nexus, we must recognize the role to be played by school, family and community, as succinctly put forward below:

"But preparation for social responsibility – preparation that can not only help individuals resist the destructive impulses in society but also empower them to accept the obligation to do so – is not a task that should be reserved for parents alone. It is a community responsibility. In this context we suggest that the school – the social institution that alone commands attendance for a sustained length of time – can play a particularly important role. Schools need to become institutions that not only prepare students for academic competence but also

help them to acquire an extensive orientation to others. Schools need to become caring institutions – institutions in which students, teachers, bus drivers, principals, and all others receive positive affirmation for kindness, empathy, and concern."²⁰

The Nexus as Reciprocal Socialisation

The significance of this adult-youth nexus resonates in humanistic psychology where the concept reciprocal socialization is identified in the parent-child interaction, and by that extension, the adult-youth dimension. According to one writer, "This concept would encourage that parents should be open to change and, in fact, socialized by their children instead of perceiving their role solely in terms of responsibility for the socialization of their children."²¹ Often the school system has coloured the adult-children/youth relationship and experiences, and the limitations it imposed must be noted. This calls for our serious to think of the need of multi-dimensional flow of experience in the adult-youth nexus that we ideally imagined:

"New perspectives on role relationship and interpersonal experience must evolve that will redefine these rigid, structured relationships that depend upon the domination and imposition of one person's perceptions and experience upon another's. Parent-child, child-adult, husband-wife, male-female, teacher-pupil, doctor-patient, patient-therapist, black-white, and perhaps others, are all in need of liberation from the rigid role of definitions that encourage and support the intimidation of experience. The denial of experience is perhaps the most basic level of human rejection for it is a denial of the human composition and the most intimate aspects of the evolving self-structure. To confirm another person, to support and authenticate his worth, is achieved at a deep level of shared interaction and experience, and leads to an expanding of self and others."²²

A paternalistic one-way monologue or admonition, where the adults simply tell the youths what are best for them could no longer work, nor effective in nurturing their mind. Paternalism has characterized in a number of ways in our socialization. When we have been treated in a paternalistic fashion, it is not uncommon that we behave similarly to those

¹⁸ Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time*. (London: Routledge & Paul, 1966), p. 36

¹⁹ Udo Schmalze, "The Importance of Schools and Families for the Identity Formation of Children and Adolescents," *International Journal of Education and Religion*, II, 1, 2001, p. 31

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40

²¹ Willard B. Frick, *Humanistic Psychology: Interviews with Maslow, Murphy, and Rogers*. (Ohio: Chales E Merrill Publishing, 1971), p.5

²² *Ibid.*, p. 6

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whom we supposed to be caring and concerning. Paternalistic pattern of relationship, though may work at certain point of history, has great limitation in the context of today's complex changes and challenges which requires a new way of engagement and approach.

Herein lies the importance of recognizing youth as encompassing group, where their presence and potential efficacy is acknowledged. When we recognize the partner of dialogues, say with the youth circle or cohort, we should always avoid seeing them as needing some guidance, epistolary admonition and discipline. Simply echoing and insisting moralism will not work. To engage with them is meant to see that both sides (youth and adult) have equal responsibilities, and that their voice and vision matters in re-making of the community. However, if we want to engage the youth only for our organizational or personal profiling, than such adult-youth nexus of engagement can never succeed, as the efforts can never be a truly sustained one, nor we are addressing real issues at hand. To put in a more provocative way, we have seen this, as attested by the various projects pronounced earlier whose outcome leads to nowhere, and the much publicized initiatives only to be remembered in the chronicles of community events and organizations.

But what in the case where the adults themselves lacks the vitality, become jaded and trapped in the abyss of hopelessness? Yet we adults complain easily that youths today lack the aspiration, commitment or simply "lost". To simply dismiss them, and therefore justifying our paternalistic approach in dealing with them thus become the norm. Instead it calls for our discerning empathy and criticality of the challenges confronted by our youth (and adults too) where it posed the very problems in community building. The observation on the effect of consumerist capitalism by Cornel West on this point is apt and deserves to be highlighted. While he noted the potential of the youths to take up a vital role in society, they are confronted by an incessant distraction from the consumer market structures, as much as the adults do:

"...one of the most effective strategies of corporate marketers has been to target the youth market with distractive amusement and saturate them with pleasurable sedatives that steer them away from engagement with issues of peace and justice. The incessant media bombardment of images (of salacious bodies

and mindless violence) on TV and in movies and music convinces many young people that the culture of gratification – a quest for insatiable pleasures, endless titillation, and sexual stimulation – is the only way of being human. Hedonistic values and narcissistic identities produce emotionally stunted young people unable to grow up and unwilling to be responsible democratic citizens. The market-driven media lead many young people to think that life is basically about material toys and social status... The media bombardment not only robs young people of their right to struggle for maturity – by glamorizing possessive individualism at the expense of democratic individuality – but also leaves them ill equipped to deal with spiritual malnutrition that awaits after their endless pursuit of pleasure."²³

A conscientised generation can only be developed if we have nurtured substantively the adult-youth nexus into an engaging culture which will enable both groups to make sense of their conditions and predicaments, yet affirming their ability and potentiality to confront those challenges. To empower the young means to give them the opportunity to lead; give them space, and instilling a sense of concrete hope, self-love to combat nihilism and hopelessness. Empowerment means recognizing and legitimizing their unique contribution to the community. To give our youths a sense of hope means telling them "You are loved" and we truly care of their well being, future and present predicament.

The engagement is a learning process where the ideals of democratic culture and personality, civic courage, commitment to cooperation, are infused via the act and thinking. In communication, with mutual respect and civility, infuses the ethos of solidarity, cooperation and inclusivity. The resources of engagement can be found from the democratic ideals that we cherished as citizens – values of plurality, tolerance, cooperation, justice, equality and the like. In the process engagement we should hope for the emergent of a more progressive voices and circles in our midst. Issues of important urgencies, rendered as invisible or dealt with ambivalently, not just by the dominant discourse, but also by ourselves, must be addressed accordingly, with ethical integrity and moral courage. Ambivalence, hopelessness, persisting myth of culture deficit and its dysfunctional effect on families, must be scrutinized in social engagement.

23 Cornel West, "The Necessary Engagement with Youth Culture," in *Democracy Matters*. (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 175

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Social engagement is not on the realms of speculation nor moralistic fervour, but one where concrete issues as confronted by the community, and future problems and trends are debated and deliberated. Problem-posing slant in the engagement is vital to unravel the issues of importance to the community. This problem-posing is to be distinguished from the dominant approach of problem-solving. Problem-posing is diagnostic and on-going in its enquiry and engagement on the issues of the day, alongside thinking of possible alternatives, whereas its opposite is the problem-solving type of thinking where solutions are found and readily to be implemented.

At present we need various platforms for engagement. We need a more stable, sustained site, for instance such a serious community journal that can become a reference point in our engagement, so that it can reach out to the wider community, at a level accessible for many without high brow academic parlance, yet suffice to encapsulate rigorous discussions and reflections. The site of engagement is called social as it operates beyond the campus community, although academics too can perform the intellectual leadership in leading and taking part in the engagement. The significance of the social site is not only that it opens the access of engagement wider, but it mitigates the jargon ridden academic analyses that often lack emphatic tenor, apart from resurrecting the established positions. But being in the social/public sphere, the site also (like in the academic realm) susceptible to the Ortegian mass man type whose substandard ideas and insularity saps the intellectual creativity, and bringing about the leveling down of ideals and standard.²⁴

In social engagement, we embark in critically questioning the current wisdom in policy implementations; in challenging the dominating myths and simplifications; in presenting alternatives ideas and approaches for addressing problems of the community. The evasion of engagement and dialogue means continuing the grip of dominative narratives that devoid of emancipative ideas apart from circumscribing the feeling of individual and community pride that is vital in the face of nihilism, self-depreciation and pessimism.

The act of engagement calls for a wider participation of the concerned citizens to take part in engaging with issues or policies that are affecting their life

and others. A conscientised generation is created in this process of creative and critical engagement. A progressive social engagement, introducing or floating ideas is instrumental in discoursing about the community, namely critical concepts, idioms and perspectives about society, individuality and humanity.²⁵ It also demands accountability of the community and political leadership. It must interrogate those perspectives that downplay structural analyses inasmuch as it scrutinizes the behaviorist prejudicial positions that are not uncommon in dominant narratives.

Initiating Culture Circle

Looking at the bright side, we have for the past decades, develop the craft of social engagement, and only discerning practitioners know how far we have gone so far, or which areas we yet to be explored fully. We have various forms of social engagement, and today's forum can be seen as one of the main platform for engagement. However much more can be done to enhance engagement and planning a vision to nurture it is imperative. One area that can be explored is the formation of culture circle. The culture circle is a site where critical consciousness is nurtured and experimented, and where possible alternatives are imagined. To be conscious of the effects of the dominant ideology and practices, to infuse a sense of dignity via empowerment, and the cultivation of a collective, democratic and cooperative spirit, the need of cultivating culture circle amongst our youth is therefore imperative. This cultural circle is not a special organization or body, but is a site where dialogue, criticality, empowerment and sense of hope are infused. It is a site where dominant myths that deform us are problematised and alternative paradigms are suggested and evaluated.

Culture Circle as Site for Illumination

Ideally our school environment should already prepare our young to dialogue between them and the educator in school, as well as members of the community in their surrounding, including their immediate family. Critical learning, exchanges and dialogues make the culture circle a site where the illumination of the reality becomes center stage, while the domination in the real world made known and scrutinised. A summary on the scope of culture circle is useful here:

²⁴ Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The revolt of the masses*. (New York: Norton, 1932)

²⁵ For example, the efficacy of the concept of nihilism, which has been introduced in Black progressive discourse, is one example of social engagement that question the limitations of the structuralist position, inasmuch as the prejudiced position of the conservative behaviorist. Read Cornel West, *Race Matters*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2001)

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"A cultural circle is not an abstract reality that we can rationally define. It is rather the result of a whole critical learning process, intimately linked to the social reality in which the group with which one wants to work lives. Speaking of cultural circles means at the same time speaking of dialogue, animator, education, and politics... The cultural circle...in which we discuss problems that in one way or another concern the inhabitants of a certain region. It is a different school, in which there are neither teachers nor pupils – a place where there are no lessons taught, as in traditional schools. The culture circle is not a knowledge distribution centre, in which the students are supposed to learn by heart what the teacher "serves" them. It is a place (near a tree, in a small room of a house or a factory) where group of persons meet in order to discuss their everyday life, and the problems connected to it, such as: their work, local or national events, their family life. This practical life is represented in codifications, and analysed in order to gain deeper and more critical insight, enabling the people to translate the critical view gained into action... a cultural circle is a place where men and women have a right and an obligation to express freely what they think and how they live their daily reality, and where one cannot imagine the kind of repressive silence designed to keep the popular masses ignorant."²⁶

But if we extend the culture circle outside the school environment and situate it in community/social educational initiatives, the culture circle can still have a vital role to play, or even becomes so important especially when the school system has given no place or recognition for the culture circle to emerge. In Freirean critical pedagogy, the essential constituents of culture circle are: (a) the raising of generative themes; (b) the problem-posing approach in dealing with the themes compiled; (c) the engagement in dialogue with divergent groups; (d) analysing and suggesting solutions to the problem raised, and (e) carrying the actions at personal and/or societal level.²⁷ In sum, the culture circle "must permit the development of the intellectual capacities of the people."²⁸

Speaking of culture circle as a discursive site brings us to a point to reflect critically as to whether we have provided ideational space (as discursive site) or even physical space for engagement activities to take place. We may have libraries and meeting rooms within our community institutions and organisations, but do we have a space where it becomes possible for exchanges, forums, debates can take place, plus a viable receptacle (such as journals) to document these exchanges and debates. To Freire, culture circles are "spaces where teaching and learning took place in dialogic fashion...spaces for knowledge, for knowing, not for knowledge transference; places where knowledge was produced, not simply presented to or imposed on learner...spaces where new hypotheses for reading the world were created."²⁹

Dialogue in Culture Circle

Without going into details of this Freirean method, we shall only focus on the aspect of dialogue which we think youth and adults can undertake to ensure serious communication and engagement between them. In the culture circles, dialogues open communication, inasmuch as it can pose a challenge to the present domination. Freire's view on the meaning and purpose of dialogue is relevant here:

"dialogue must be understood as something taking part in the very historical nature of human beings. It is part of our historical progress in becoming human beings. That is, dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more and more communicative beings. Dialogue is a moment where human reflects on their reality as they make and remake it.... To the extent that we are communicative beings who communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able to know that we know, which is something more than just knowing... On the other hand, we know that we know, and we human beings know also that we don't know. Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality."³⁰

²⁶ Hilda and Miguel Escobar, *Dialogue in the Pedagogical Praxis of Paulo Freire*, (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1981), pp. 8-9

²⁷ Read, Mariana Souto-Manning, *Freire, teaching, and learning: culture circles across contexts*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2010)

²⁸ Hilda and Miguel Escobar, *Dialogue in the Pedagogical Praxis of Paulo Freire*, p.34

²⁹ Paulo Freire, *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work*. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 121

³⁰ Ira Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), pp. 98-99

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Through dialogue we can “take agentive roles and transform their own realities.”³¹ Dialogue in culture circle enhances the critical understanding of the participant; be wary of the challenges around them, and be committed to suggest a way out after a sound and substantive analysis and diagnosis. “Through dialogue, we build and change the world. Through dialogue, culture circle participants can challenge beliefs and realities commonly perceived as static... participants can challenge socioculturally and historically constructed oppressions... Through a variety of topics which are connected to their very lives, participants engage in posing problems, dialoguing, and deriving some possible solutions and responses in individual and societal realms.”³²

The participation and engagement of youths with adult in culture circle is one where dialogue is made possible, where both can learn, unlearn and relearn from each other. Adult, having more resources and experiences, can share and guide without imposing. Only with such dialogues we can ensure the process of maturity and sensibility amongst our youth, listening to their anxieties and frustrations, and channelling their potentials into self-realisation at individual and societal level. And this self-realisation can only be possible if we provide a milieu of empowerment, creativity and criticality.

Indeed we have devised many top-down approaches, yet we are rather timid to try out bottom up empowerment initiative due to our very much bureaucratic and technocratic approach in dealing with things. As a result, we continuously heard the various youth's conventions with almost repetitive proclaimed visions and goals for youth, yet we see little empowerment done in the sense it works organically from the grassroots where the youths take the main initiatives. If this approach continues, youth's empowerment remains illusive inasmuch as we fail to garner the potentials of our younger generation to be part of this transformative process of community-and nation-building. Moreover, it is constantly repeated that we need to make our young to think better. But the point here, as Freire has rightly points out: “Our task is not to teach students to think – they can already think; but to exchange our ways of thinking with each other and look together for better ways of approaching the decodification of an object.”³³ This brings exactly to our point that the dialogic initiatives between our youth and adult are imperative.

Engagement for Empowerment

We need to nurture and groom the liberatory impulse amongst youths. The age of paternalistic tendency of domesticating youth still persists (or must be ended). The time of empowering them in the next stage of social transformation and resistance against inhibitive practices and ideologies is therefore crucial. Adults cannot simply hand over what transformative thought to the young, just as no revolutionary populist can simply hand over freedom to the masses. (just like in Freire's thought that educator can never empower the student, except by providing the situation where the student can empower themselves in the process of learning.) The young must be part in the process of fighting for and experience the process of the desired transformation. A genuine empowerment averts paternalism as the latter can never lead to the real growth and maturity towards liberation, but often end up in domination. Through empowerment we could a check on hopelessness where the motivational drive is dampened, and thus easily succumb to surrendering our fate to a dehumanized condition.³⁴

But the former is not something that can be attained by grace, but via discursive dialogues. The stamina for dialogic struggle must be present, and this requires a sense of historical mission as well as the calling to fulfill one's responsibility to the larger society. Thus our youths' spirit for the collective endeavour must be re-invigorated, and to understand the meaning of struggle becomes imperative. Moreover, the vocation of youth is not something that we (adult) should simply declare or stipulate for them. If there is no vocation on the part of the adults to be partners of dialogue with the young, the latter have very little source for guidance and role model. And soon they will be more conditioned by the mass media, especially in this milieu of hyper gadgetry, than they are connected with their community, family, neighbourhood and even their parents. The failure of adults to fill this role would mean a more complicating challenge ahead of us.

Youth towards Conscientised Generation

The current paradigm of youth and community development is essentially one that advocates an individualised response – that if we have good attitude and values and change our mindset, or if

³¹ Souto-Manning, Freire, teaching, and learning: culture circles across contexts, p.39

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32

³³ cited in Lesley Bartlett, p. 37

³⁴ As West puts it very well: “And when you have motivational structures breaking down, you usually don't have an encouraging environment. Or persons are convinced that the work that they are doing supposed to be doing will not lead to something better. And right now the larger the crisis in the environment – which is partly economic and political and personal, as I said before – makes it difficult for persons to be motivated enough to think that this kind of energy exerted would generate the kind of results that they want. Cornel West, *Restoring Hope: conversations on the future of Black America*. Edited by Kelvin Shawn Sealey. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), pp. 204-5

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we have good achievement oriented motivations, then all will be in the right track. This individualised approach that conditions us to accept the existing status quo and work within in the system, while questioning the fundamentals are invariably seen as disruptive and unproductive. To put in another way, the dominant approach in community development is one of a conservative type, albeit the liberative and empowering lingo that it regularly incorporated in its repertoire of development pronouncement.

In as much as we are zealous in our call for youths' transformation, we must be equally humble and critical to look at the current youth and community development initiatives. In other words, there is a need to look into the limitations of the bureaucratic or administrative approach to community/youth development initiatives that have been carried out. In this approach, contrary to empowerment approach, the needs of the community/youth are formulated in a rather paternalistic way, with the ideas that the experts, planners and administrators can think better for the community and youth. Often in this approach, the failure to consult the community itself, listening to their problems and taking their suggestions seriously, is a classic example of a paternalistic bureaucratic mind, which after ignoring the perceptions of the local people, will in the end, it demand the local community to be responsible in solving their problems.

Last but not least, in our local parlance, we identified the conscientised generation as one of generasi berkepedulian. The term peduli entails the consciousness and concern for the individuals and members of the community; taking side with those who are in need most, and with empathy of the situation and predicament, spurs us to action. The craft of social engagement is crucial so that we can weave in critical and emancipative ideas into the fabric of our community life. There is no magical formula to attain it except to sharpen and refine

our craft of engagement along the way, equipping ourselves with basic skills, techniques, aesthetics, imagination, will and sensitivity to the fast changing conditions that we are confronted today. Central in the conscientized generation is the fact that the process of conscientization nurtures and strengthens in breadth and depth, substantively amongst its members. Freire's reflection on this subject brings us to the end of this discussion, as the points that he highlights bears apt correlation of what we have discussed earlier:

"A person who has reached conscientization is capable of clearly perceiving hunger as more than just not eating; as the manifestation of a political, economic, and social reality of deep injustice. If that person believes in God and prays, his or her prayer will certainly focus on asking for the strength to fight against the deprivation of dignity to which he or she is subjected. The person who has reached conscientization and is also a believer in God sees God as a presence in history, but not one that makes history in lieu of men and women's actions. In fact, it is up to us to make history and to be made and remade by it... The person who has reached conscientization is able to connect facts and problems... A person who has reached conscientization has a different understanding of history and of his or her role in it. He or she will refuse to become stagnant, but will move and mobilize to change the world. He or she knows that it is possible to change the world, but impossible without the mobilization of the dominated...."³⁵

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