

Speech on the occasion of being conferred an honorary PhD
by De La Salle University
Victor Ordonez
January 26, 2009

I am both deeply honored and humbled by this unexpected award. I realize how unusual it is for a university to issue this honor to one of their own, instead of to some world dignitary or prominent national figure. But in a symbolic way I see it as a fitting testament to De La Salle University's own worth: I went to grade school, high school, college, and graduate school right on this campus, and I am aware that my career rested on the excellent educational foundation that this institution gave me. I remember attending classes at Harvard later on, with America's best and brightest, and I must say that the preparation of my La Salle education was second to none.

I am also humbled by the fact that success is never a solo dance, but group choreography, the result of team effort. Because of that, credit for this honor must be shared with my colleagues here in Manila, Paris, Bangkok, Hawaii and those who have worked with me elsewhere. I also know that success is often less the result of brilliance or even hard work and dedication, than it is the result of timing, destiny, or plain good luck. Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Tipping Point*, articulates this so well in his latest book "The Outliers." He asserts, for example, that Bill Gates would not have achieved his success if he were born three years earlier or three years later. In my case, it was largely being in the right place at the right time. I happened to be in Manila, when Secretary Quisumbing was looking for a trusted Undersecretary. I happened to be presenting the World Declaration on EFA (Education for All) in Jomtien, Thailand, when UNESCO's boss, Federico Mayor, was looking for someone to spearhead the EFA global campaign. I was delivering a memorial lecture at the University of Hawaii, when the East-West Center staff attending it asked me to help them establish a new program for education policy. Of course, once these opportunities were laid at my doorstep, I did my utmost to make the most of them and fulfill the potential that these opportunities provided.

- 0 -

Receiving this honor has made me look back and reflect on the hills and valleys of my educational career. You have heard from the generous citation that was just read that my career has made me cross bridges from one area to another, from teaching to administration, and then from institutional administration to national policy, and then crossing over to international advocacy. Upon my retirement from UNESCO, I retraced my path and crossed over to the academe once again in Hawaii, and even to teaching, here at La Salle and at St. Benilde. There were even times when I crossed the bridges from education to other professional fields. And as I crossed these bridges from one area to another, my renewed perspective made me see the huge gaps that continue to exist between these worlds, and the need for more bridges to address these.

Today I would like to share with you my concerns about four such gaps: the gap between research and policy, the gap between the world's disenfranchised illiterates and the rest of us, the gap between programs of study and the world of work, and the gap between education and the need to develop a sustainable, peaceful world.

- 0 -

The first is the gap between research and policy. We all know that policy decisions based on good research and information tend to be sound decisions.

Everyday, Secretary Lapuz and his senior staff have to make policy decisions on a variety of topics--on additional school buildings, teacher training, use of IT, drop out rates, and so on. Often however, decisions are made without an adequate research and information base.

On the other hand, there are 225 teacher training institutions churning out thousands of graduate theses, many of them gathering dust in libraries. Bridges must be built that can connect this research to the policy needs of the Department of Education. Teacher training institutions could be more proactive by strengthening their linkages with the planning units of the education bureaucracy, both at national and regional levels. They could jointly fashion an inventory of policy research needs to feed into their research efforts.

I myself experienced this research gap when I was Education Undersecretary. We were concerned at the time with survival rates. At that time, only 6 out of ten school entrants finished Grade Six. (The figure today is 7 out of ten.) We were considering four policy alternatives to improve retention rates, and I needed to find out which of these variables would reduce dropouts and improve retention most effectively. These variables were: pre-schooling, school feeding, parent-teacher associations, and subsidies for school supplies and uniforms. The slow pace of academic work in graduate schools was of no help to me, given my tight time frame. I had to commission a study, with control and experimental clusters, by a professional team. The results guided my policy decisions. The most effective variable, by the way, was pre-schooling.

The gap between research and classroom practice is a related issue. Child psychologists, brain surgeons, and related professionals know much more about how a child learns than they did thirty years ago. But somehow there are no bridges that help translate all this new knowledge into the curriculum or the classroom, where curricular and teacher pedagogies have remained basically unchanged in thirty years.

Research tells us that a child's aptitude for linguistic skills comes at a much earlier age than his or her aptitude for computational skills. But in classrooms, an equal amount of time, at every grade, is given to both. An experiment in Michigan had 50 schools that did not teach arithmetic at all in the first four grades, to give more time to language and other subjects, but only in Grades 5-7. At the end of that period they took

the standard arithmetic tests that all the other schools were taking, and fared equally well. Did the other schools waste 40 minutes a day teaching arithmetic for the first four years?

The brain function for language acquisition is one that requires concentrated effort. I remember Brother Andrew once telling me that learning a language for an hour three times a week is the worst way to learn a language. My classmates who took 24 units of Spanish and still cannot carry on a decent conversation in it are classic examples.

But how do you fit a concentrated approach into the structures of a traditional curriculum? It can be done. In Kapiolani Community College, nestled on the slopes of Diamond Head in Hawaii, they require 12 units of a foreign language (usually Japanese, Chinese, or Korean—difficult languages) for all students of Asian studies, or international business. But what they do is to devote an entire semester of 12 units exclusively to that language, after which students seem to carry on in that language quite well.

Around the world, curriculum continues to be divided into 40 minutes of standard subjects of reading, biology, history, art, music, physical education, language, and so on, and that is how teachers are trained. But the world is plagued with major challenges, and demands that from the very beginning our children must be made aware of these challenges to prepare themselves to meet them. Fundamental curriculum reform is long overdue. I realize this is difficult and threatening, and will be resisted by teachers who have been trained in set subjects with set ways of teaching them.

But reform is possible. Some schools have pioneered with abandoning the standard subject approach in their schedules and programs.

One school in a ghetto of Culver City in Los Angeles has their students learn only about the home in Grade One, the neighborhood in Grade Two, the town in Grade Three, the state in Grade 4, the nation in Grade Five, the world in Grade Six, and the universe in Grade Seven. As their “circles of concern and interest” expand, they pick up the needed math, geography, writing skills, along the way, but with much greater interest, and as tools to pursue their concerns about home issues, local issues, and national issues.

Another school, right here in the Philippines, has realized that intelligence is not enough for success. It has therefore emphasized not just IQ, but a composite SQ, success quotient, which includes IQ intelligence quotient, DQ diligence quotient, EQ emotional quotient, and SQ social quotient. They have factored their four Qs into their daily lesson planning.

I could cite examples of other innovative approaches, but the point here is that an issue driven curriculum, rather than a subject driven curriculum will ultimately benefit the students. They may never have to diagram a sentence, or remember the chemical table, or solve an algebraic equation with two unknowns in the future, but they will have to live in the real world and relate to it. They will find it more useful to have a keener

understanding of Islam and other belief systems, an awareness of environmental threats to our planet, an appreciation of the geographies and cultures of the world, and the ethical and custodial function of money and wealth. In other words, they should be learning from a curriculum that is driven by issues rather than by standard academic subjects.

- 0 -

The second is the gap between the world's illiterates and the rest of us. The realities are intolerable. There are 900 million illiterates; one out of every 9 adult men in this world cannot read or write; and one out of every 6 women. And as you know, illiteracy is the indispensable handmaiden of poverty. They are a deadly combination, for literacy is the only door that gets them out of their abject poverty. For literacy does not just give them the ability to read and write, it gives them a sense of self-worth and a hope for the future. Literacy is empowerment.

One vivid proof: illiterate women deliver an average of 6.5 live births; literate women, perhaps with a sense of responsibility and hope for the future, deliver an average of 2.5 live births.

In the course of my work with UNESCO, I have come face to face with poverty the likes of which I have not seen in the Philippines or many other developing countries. I have looked into the blank stares of Bangladeshi women for whom their only goal is to stay alive for another day. I have been to the arid fields and towns of Burkina Faso in Africa, where men with no future sit around glumly and hopelessly all day. I have been to towns in Ethiopia where they are allowed to eat only five times a week. I have been to villages in Pakistan where only two people, both men, can read or write--and they dictate what the rest of the village should blindly do. Poor and illiterate, I sensed their hopelessness and resignation—all social work programs, food programs, and so on were closed to those who could not read or write. Literacy had to be the key.

There is the companion problem that fuels this illiteracy. It is the 85 million children who have never been to school. You will forever be mopping the floor unless you turn off the faucet. Because of the success of the Education for All decade (1990-2000), primary schooling has at last received priority attention from many governments. Hopefully, this will eventually bring down the illiteracy figures.

Perhaps my most important professional achievement as the global coordinator of the EFA movement was the E-9 project. My research bridges told me that 63% of the world's out-of-school children were in only nine high population countries. My Director General and I visited the heads of government of all nine, persuading them to come to an E-9 summit, which India volunteered to host, to brag to the rest how much they had done for primary education. A year later they came with their pledges and plans. The results were phenomenal, with many doubling or even tripling basic education budgets over the next few years. We calculated that the summit had created an additional 52 million new school places.

All UNESCO had to spend was the media coverage, the travel of some technical professionals, and the preparatory meetings. It was a classic example of doing things with other people's money. It was just as well, since my budget then was even smaller than that of Bro. Armin for De La Salle.

Professors at Sussex University have calculated the cost of putting every child on this planet into a classroom. The figure they came up with in 2001 was \$8 billion, with some of that provided by the governments themselves, the rest from multilateral and bilateral donors. I retired from UNESCO a few months before the 9/11 tragedy. Airlines stopped flying for three days right after that and were in bad financial straits. They asked Mr. Bush for help and he gave them \$15 billion. I said to myself, I have been struggling for years on getting all children to school, and if only I had eight billion of that I could achieve my goal. Today's financial meltdown has released hundreds of billions for rescue packages and distressed firms. The \$20 billion to Bank of America last week merited only a sidebar in the newspaper.

I have spent ten years of my life persuading governments that investing in the basic education of all their citizens, boys and girls, men and women alike, is the necessary and surest way to further their development and progress. I have argued that, in spite of their other budgetary priorities for infrastructure or military spending, this investment is in the long run the best they can make. It has not been easy, even in countries like our own.

What bridges do we have to build to generate the political will, nurture the needed networks, and release the necessary resources to address the world plague of illiteracy and out-of-school children?

- 0 -

The third gap is the disconnect between standard programs of study and the world of work into which students will find themselves. Our programs of study assume we know what that future is: a continuation, maybe an improvement, of the present. Nothing could be more dangerously wrong.

For example, technical information is doubling every two years, and will double much faster in the future; this means that much of what a student learns in his freshman year will be obsolete by the time he graduates. Former US Education Secretary Richard Riley says that "The 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004. We are currently preparing students for jobs that currently do not exist, using technologies that have not been invented, in order to solve problems we do not know are problems yet."

Job mobility is an inevitable consequence. The U.S. department of Labor says that one out of five workers have been in the same job for 5 years or less; by the age of 38 today's graduates will have had an average of 10-14 jobs.

I owe many of the above facts to an 8-minute You Tube video entitled "Did You Know." How many of you have seen it? If you have not, please do so. It was made by a high school teacher in Colorado to open the eyes of his high school students to the future. Since then 54 million people have seen it, and hopefully have started to expand the vision of education in hundreds of schools. It is a good example of the power of technology when used well.

This brings me to the reach, the speed, and the power of technology. Teachers may be slow to grasp the impact of the technology explosion. My Space now has a membership of over 13 million and growing (630,000 new members this week alone), ranking its population between the seventh and eighth largest countries in the world. Google has 37 million hits daily, providing information to students, more perhaps than they get from textbooks and teachers. Wikipedia is fast becoming another major source of information. Urban youth now spend more time with media (internet, television, cell and land phones, and radio) than they do in school.

How we teach must take all this into account. If we are teaching them in the way we were taught, we will miss the boat. Mark Peasley warns us "students think differently from us... they develop hypertext minds...they leap around... their cognitive structures are parallel not sequential." They do homework with i-pod earphones on, watching a television screen that often has a running subscript, pop-ups and side bars of information. And they seem to absorb it all.

In this regard, teachers must adjust to their students and not the other way around. 98% of urban students play video games (becoming an industry that has outgrown formal schooling), but only 37 % of their teachers have even tried one. In a survey I did for the PCER in 2000, I found that teachers under 40 generally had no trouble with technology training, but teachers over 40 seemed allergic to it. Hopefully by now things have changed, but it is an age issue--students are technology natives, we older teachers are the immigrants; technology is their native tongue, for us it is a second language. Greater and greater use of technology in classrooms is inevitable, just as is happening in real life. There will be a shift from print to digital media as primary teaching vehicles, and teachers should be ready for it.

But let me return to my concern for connecting with the world of work. The Baltimore Sun a few months ago had an article on the workplace of the future. Some features they pointed out were: virtual work at home, a four-day work week, less conference travel and more video conferencing, no more large corporate headquarters but small specialized satellite offices, contractual hired workers instead of corporate employees, flatter organizations around flexible teams, and so on.

Last summer, I had an actual glimpse of this: My nephew who works at the Google office in Manhattan invited me to lunch there, and I entered what looked more like a country club than an office: lounge areas with a full range of drinks and snacks and

sandwiches (all free), a leisure section for chatting, or solving the puzzles which were strewn all over, a massage area, and a yoga and mediation room. The office proper did not have standard desks and work cubicles but long corridors (employees just picked up parked scooters to move along faster), and glass enclosed rooms of different sizes for meetings, for personal use to concentrate on a job, or for teleconferencing.. I asked my nephew where his office was and he smilingly pointed to the bright red laptop under his arm. The lunch was a buffet spread that would rival that of the Sofitel, and it was all free. He said he could have free breakfast and dinner there, and even a bunk to sleep in, if his work required it. Sounded like a spoiled and easy life, I said. Ah, he replied, but we forge jointly my quarterly outputs which I am expected to deliver, and that keeps me very busy. Besides folks here are really motivated by the Google performance spirit, or they don't last.

What does this all mean for education? How does one build the bridges between our programs of study and the world out there after our students graduate? If we are preparing our students for a specific profession like engineering or business, who is preparing them for the 10-14 other jobs they will move into before they reach 38 years of age, and later to other jobs that have not yet been created? If we are preparing them for the four-day work week, who is preparing them for the other three days? If we teach them individual competitiveness (as tests and grades do) and hierarchies, how will they function in team endeavors and flat organizations?

Four years ago, Goldman Sachs in Hong Kong put out an ad for eight new financial managers. Hundreds of applications were received, many of them from MBAs and even PhDs in business. They reduced the number to thirty and ran these thirty through a battery of tests and simulations. The final eight chosen included only a handful of finance graduates. But there was a dentist, a real estate broker, and other non-finance types. Goldman Sachs did not care for credentials, but for traits and skills that they knew the position needed: teamwork, persuasiveness, flexibility, a pleasant disposition, integrity, and hard work. Their simulations sought to measure these. They then provided the type of corporate training that the recruits needed.

Universities are no longer the ivory towers of the past, the sole dispenser of knowledge and credentials, the only knowledge store in town. Now they exist in a world where knowledge is available from a veritable megamall of information sources--the internet, corporate training, distance education, internships, specialized training centers, and so on. Universities must learn to collaborate and interphase with these various sources. And yet it must be able to find its unique niche as the flagship store in such a megamall setting--focusing on developing the total person, establishing the benchmark professional standards, participating in international recognition, quality, and accreditation standards, and ranking initiatives.

There are practical implications arising from job mobility and changing technology. More and more adults will return to university for updating. In Korea and Japan, there are less high school graduates than before, and universities have used the

excess capacity to design more adult education programs . In the State University of California system, the average undergraduate age was 21 fifteen years ago, now the average age is 29. Older students are coming back to the classroom, and bringing in a lot more experience. Short term specialized courses are overtaking degree programs. In UCLA, more revenue is now generated from the extension programs (e.g. medicine) than from the degree programs themselves.

There is a paradigm shift here evolving here: The clientele of the university is no longer just the high school graduate, but all of society. Its delivery mechanisms must therefore be re-designed to suit their diverse circumstances and needs. This means not only more evening classes, but distance learning, hybrid classes, and joint programs. It also means collaboration with other learning institutions, corporations, media, and civil society in general.

- 0 -

Finally, the fourth is the gap between education and peaceful and sustainable development.

Sustainable development has become such a catchword that it has recently been narrowed to mean environmental protection. While this is important, and I commend the recent legislation to include this as a subject in schools at all levels, there is more than an environmental dimension to the health and survival of our planet. There is the economic dimension: the human race cannot equitably develop or long survive, if greed makes the rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer. There is the socio-cultural dimension: development cannot be sustained if a culture of war and intolerance and violence prevails; where men and ethnic and other groups hate and kill each other, building nuclear capabilities that threaten the very survival of this planet.

It is this last dimension that most worries me. Every time I pick up the morning paper and read about man's cruelty to man, I am quite saddened. And it is not always because of the big tragedies in Gaza, Darfur, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, and Mindanao. It is also because of the small acts of violence that have become increasingly frequent in our country: a jealous jeepney driver stabbing a friend whom he suspects, a wealthy scion shooting his own assistant, killings over inheritance, journalists and activists disappearing without a trace. Life has become cheap and we have developed a culture of violence.

Why has education not succeeded in instilling a culture of peace, conflict resolution, using reason and respect, instead of bombs, guns, and knives as the weapons for handling differences? I can only imagine how the terrorists and suicide bombers went to koranic schools where no dissent was ever allowed, teacher always correct and to be followed to the letter, faulty memory of the Koran rewarded with a smack on the head with the rod. The student emerged a blind follower. Illiteracy produces the same result: blind obedience. It is because they are shut off from the rest of the world and know and follow only what their master says.

By contrast and implication then, the role of education in generating a culture of tolerance, understanding, and thus peace, must begin with the conduct of the teacher in the classroom, and the atmosphere of openness in the school. The UNICEF project of “Child Friendly Schools,” where children want to go to school, is certainly a step in the right direction, So is Milweda Guevara’s Synergia project, involving the community in striving for better academic school performance..

The world is increasingly becoming more interconnected and shrinking. Even in provincial schools, the likelihood is that every classroom has an ethnic mix of Chinese, perhaps Korean, other nationalities, and some of our Moslem brethren. This presents a prime laboratory for tolerance, mutual respect, and understanding. The total school setting and atmosphere is the larger laboratory. The relationship between principal and faculty is not lost on the students. A harmonious teaching faculty serves as a model for how differences can be worked out.

Globalization has at once brought the world closer together, with common products, common lifestyles, instant communication, and homogeneity. But it has also torn the world apart; it has polarized those precisely threatened by this homogeneity. They are fearful that this would overwhelm their own local and even tribal identities, cultures, and traditional ways of life. The result is a fierce resistance to the globalization brought about by the big Western “globalizers”, to the extent of war and violence, which only harvests a responding violence from the other side.

Education must be seen as the escape from this vicious cycle. I am reminded of the ringing words of the preamble of the UNESCO constitution, written right after the devastation of World War II, and the founding of the United Nations,

“Since war is made in the minds of men, it must be in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be built. A secure and lasting peace is not achieved by treaties, negotiating panels, or arms control, but by the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind.”

The foundation of any bridge on the education side must be a re-statement of what propose of the university is. Is it to prepare for a meaningful job, or is it to prepare for a full life in a harmonious society? If the latter, then where is the emphasis on education for citizenship, for appropriate use of leisure, global awareness, understanding and respect for diversity of cultures and faith systems?

In this country of ours, which is woefully slipping away from a culture of peace, and I might add, from a culture of integrity, should our educational system not make this our top priority? Shouldn’t education focus on building the bridges towards a more just, equitable, harmonious, and peaceful Philippines?

These then are the four concerns that have driven my efforts over the years: bridging the gap between research and policy and practice, bridging the gap between the disenfranchised poor and the rest of the world, bridging the gap between curricular content and the world of work, and bridging the gap between education and the culture of peace. It is my hope the educators here and around the world strive to build more bridges to overcome these gaps.

Oh, and there is another set of bridges that I would like to see more of--the bridges on the teeth of educators. Educators do not smile much; they are generally an intensely serious lot. And although the challenges before them are enormous, still, they should be motivated, yes joyful even, and inspired by the potential they hold in their hands: that of helping shape the future.

Today is the feast day of St. John Baptist de la Salle. It was he who wrote, in one of his meditations for his Brothers in time of retreat, and I paraphrase: "Artists work on canvas, builders work on stone, even doctors work on human bodies, but teachers work on human souls, which will shine with them like stars for all eternity." How can one not smile with satisfaction? How can one not be motivated and inspired, knowing one is truly in the noblest of professions?