

IN LIBRIS LIBERTAS (IN BOOKS THERE IS FREEDOM)

How Reading and the Positive Attitude Towards Learning Can Enable the Youth to Change the Country's Poor Education System

ABSTRACT

This paper first recognizes that education is the key to solving widespread community problems. But this paper also recognizes that given the current state of Philippine education, the youth cannot improve themselves and their society because the education that should enable them to do so is hopelessly flawed. The Philippine education system is a vicious cycle which involves the incompetent government, incompetent educators, unfavorable educational environment conditions---and the result is an unsound educational system which produces incompetent students, who are not able to measure up to global standards, as evidenced by tests and surveys conducted by international parties.

The paper then focuses on the answer to the problem of Philippine education: **reading**. Students who take it upon themselves to read and learn on their own have proven that they can escape from the rut the Philippine education system has put them in. But this, too, is problematic, because an alarmingly high percentage of the Philippine youth do not read, either because they cannot afford to, or because they have no wish to.

The paper then focuses on the solution: youth-led organizations such as **Ex Libris U.P.**, an organization which the author of this paper founded and led; an organization which promotes academic excellence, books, literacy, and the youth's ability to affect change. Ex Libris U.P. started as an organization in the University of the Philippines which implemented **an organized system of book-lending** and **a common library** which helped even the poorest college students gain access to the books they needed. Also, the organization addressed the widespread problem of the youth's negative attitude towards books and learning by showing them that reading and learning can be hip and fun, through its various book-related activities which promoted good fellowship among readers and students. In its first year, Ex Libris U.P. also came up with **a scholarship grant** to help send a fellow college student to school.

The last part of the paper focuses on the future plans of Ex Libris U.P., which include the establishment of more scholarships to help send deserving youth to school; volunteering to teach school children how to read, and tutoring our fellow college students in various disciplines, thus encouraging scholarly excellence and promoting the youth's right to proper

education. In time, organizations such as Ex Libris U.P. can radically change the country's poor education system, and enable the Filipino youth to be more globally competitive.

IN LIBRIS LIBERTAS

A boy taps a girl classmate on the shoulder. She turns and raises an eyebrow. "Hey," the boy says with a sheepish grin, "How do you spell *Philippines*?"

"P-h-i-l-i-p-i-n-e-s," replies the girl, "No...wait...I think you should double both the *l* and the *p*, just to be sure." She frowns, "Or you know what, let's go ask someone else."

This scenario will not be that shocking if this was a grade school scenario; if the boy and girl were, say, nine or ten years old. But the boy is eighteen, and this occurs in the university level---in the University of the Philippines, no less---and it is a sad fact that the standard of education in the Philippines has descended to such a degree, that even university students display an appalling lack of education, despite their certificates, diplomas and report cards that should prove the contrary.

The Problem

The Philippines, according to the statistics presented by Atty. Jose Luis Gascon, the former Undersecretary of the Philippine Department of Education, is supposed to have one of the highest literacy rates in South East Asia---90 to 94 percent, according to various sources. But this number is deceptive. Consider the following data that gives us an inkling of how far the Philippine standard of education has fallen:

In the 2005 LET (Licensure Exam for Teachers), only **25-30 percent** passed out of 100,000 Education graduates.

In the Self-Assessment Test for English, only **19 percent** scored 75 percent and higher.

In the 2004 High School Readiness Test (the HSRT), only an alarming **0.64 percent** scored 75 percent or better; only these 0.64 percent are fit to enter college. The mean percentage score was **32.13 percent**.

In the TIMSS (Trends in International Math and Science Study, administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement), the Philippines placed **36 out of 38**.

The national average of Filipino students' performance average is **40 to 50 percent**.

An alarming **81 percent** of Public School Teachers failed to earn a score of 75 percent or higher in the SAT for English.

For every 100 elementary students, only 60 graduate from grade school, and of these 60, only 32 eventually finish high school. In the Philippines, college is a luxury few can afford, and an M.A. and a Ph.D. are nearly unheard of among the masses.

Clearly, Philippine education is in a very sorry state. What makes it worse is that our government allocates very little to Education, allocating more funds to military, police and intelligence services, and allocating to pay off the country's huge debts. Whereas other South East Asian countries allocate 22-25 percent of their national budget for education, the Philippines only allocates 11 percent (and the future does not promise any increase; on the contrary, it is highly likely that it'll decrease). According to the Education Secretary Florencio Abad, the Philippine per-capita budget for education is Php 7,700 or \$138 per student per year. New Zealand and the United States of America's budgets amount to P125,500 or \$2,240 per student per year.

The University of the Philippines, the country's premiere center for education, ranks 48th in the whole of Asia, according to the Asiaweek.com Special Report (the Philippines' other two premiere universities, De La Salle University and the Ateneo de Manila University, rank 71st and 72nd, respectively).

Given these standards for education, how can the Philippine youth hope to compete against the youth from other countries such as Taiwan, Singapore, China, Japan, whose standards are internationally competitive? And how can the Philippine youth hope to better themselves and their country when they are not sufficiently prepared; or worse, when the very people who are supposed to educate them don't educate them honestly---giving them passing marks just for the sake of passing them, thereby perpetrating the illusion that they are "sufficiently educated"? And these youth will not know how they've been cheated of their rightful education until they come face to face with global standards---either by attempting to find work abroad, or by simply meeting their youthful counterparts from other countries. What's worse, when the time comes for their painful epiphany, many of the Philippine youth will simply not care. They've grown used to mediocrity from a very young age---there's even a term for it, the *bahala na* (roughly translated as "It's in God's hands now") mentality---that their drive to succeed is killed. You have the millions of poor Filipino youth who don't finish school at because their parents discourage them from studying; the kids are asked to help out with their family's finances. On the other end of the spectrum, you have the rich Filipino kids

who laze through high school and college, secure in the knowledge that they'll inherit their parents' business empires anyway---so what's the point of studying? Rich or poor, it's all the same. It is rare nowadays to find Filipino students with the motivation to study or succeed.

It's a vicious cycle we cannot get out of. Education, we know, is the great equalizer. It can be a poor man's passport to a better future, etcetera, etcetera. But if the Filipino youth are not educated properly (because, in all honesty, most of their teachers' own educations are also lacking), and if they are then allowed to graduate, get degrees, get teaching jobs, and teach---then it goes around and around. A cycle of mediocrity that spawns a society of youthful ignoramuses.

It's sad but it's true. I'm one of the Filipino youth, and I myself have experienced this. I came from a middle-income family, but I was one of the few lucky ones who got sent to good schools---a private all-girl school run by nuns, then a high school run by La Salle brothers, and for college, I am studying in the country's premiere center for learning, the University of the Philippines. And yet, in these "good" schools, the plight of the country's education system has not gone unnoticed. St. Paul's Pasig, La Salle Zobel, and the University of the Philippines---these have not escaped the touch of mediocrity.

I have a classmate in high school who reported (with dead certainty) that Rome was a city in France. This girl graduated top eight of our high school batch.

Then there was another classmate of mine, also from high school, who thought that Shakespeare was Italian. At least this girl did not graduate in the top ten. She was, however, part of the Honors Section, of which I was also part.

You've already heard of my Math 11 classmate in the University of the Philippines who couldn't spell *Philippines*. My point is, mediocrity is rampant throughout the entire Philippine education system. Even the ivy-league schools are affected. And what goes on in the public school system is far, far worse.

So how do we counter this? I began to wonder, during my second year in the university. I felt daunted, of course. The education problem is so widespread, what can an 18 year-old do that will make any difference?

The Solution

The answer came from one passion of mine: **reading**.

Reading is the fount of all knowledge. Forget MTV, the television, or interactive CD-ROMs---nothing beats reading as the primary source of knowledge and education. It's miraculous, how those little insect-like things scrawled across a page or a computer screen

can open up so many avenues for learning. There's no one to limit how much a person can read; if one has a passion for reading, one will learn. It's as simple and as delightful as that.

Often, my twin sister Gabi and I felt that we were not learning enough from our teachers---in high school, we had several teachers whose concept of teaching consisted of reading aloud from the textbook, or writing in the blackboard until the one-hour class period was up. In those instances wherein we felt that we were being cheated of our rightful education, we turned to books. Those of us who really wanted to learn trooped to the library and learned on our own. We could learn anywhere because we could take our book with us practically everywhere we went. We read at home, in school, in bed, in the bathroom, even---and we enjoyed ourselves while we were at it. For us nothing was too good or bad, heavy or light, holy or obscene. We were ravenous; we read Descartes and Danielle Steele, Socrates and Stephen King, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, and the Filipinos Jose Rizal, Stevan Javellana, and others.

Then my twin sister and I went to college, to the same university---the UP (University of the Philippines). The teachers were better, for the most part---but there were still those bad ones who had wormed their way into the system, and again, we turned to books.

But then I noticed that in the University of the Philippines, more and more of my classmates and peers **did not read**. One reason for this is because in the University of the Philippines, where every student is a scholar being sent to school by the taxpayers' money, most of my classmates and peers **could not afford books**. Some of them cannot even afford the Php 6,500 pesos (less than \$ 120.00) that is our tuition per semester. What little they have, they spend on food and lodging (most UP students come from the distant provinces), and books---even secondhand books bought from book sales or bazaars---are a luxury very few can afford. Money, of course, had to go to basic survival. The same goes for majority of the Philippine youth, who want to get out of the state of poverty they're in, but whose preparation for competitive education is sadly lacking.

Not all UP students, however, are poor. But those who can afford to buy books don't read because of the widespread notion that people who read are bookworms (it's a 'bad' thing), and don't have lives outside their beloved books. This negative attitude towards scholarly pursuits further hampers their ability to further their own education.

Yet another reason why the average UP student doesn't read is that although the desire to read is in that student, he hasn't yet found the genre of books that he would fall in love with. And so he doesn't read, because he thinks that the books that are available to him are not worth reading.

Of course, there's always the library. But the UP Library, while it certainly has an extensive book collection, cannot cater to every student's need. Thousands and thousands of students who are all after a single book cannot all borrow the mere five or six copies that the Library owns. And it is a known fact that most of the libraries in the Philippines are severely neglected---their funding, support and book collections are quite limited.

Then I asked myself: But what if it was possible to gain access to more books, without having to pay that much? What if there was an organization in the UP wherein every member can have access to the books owned by all the other members? What if there was a book organization whose members can pool funds together to buy much-needed books? And what if there was a book organization run by the youth for the youth that will change the negative attitude of fellow students regarding reading and learning?

What if there was a group of young people that can tackle all these problems regarding reading and education? What if we can promote books and literacy, thus improving the education of the youth?

What if there was a library of many? An organization that will encourage UP students and fellow youth to READ? A reading organization that will cater to book enthusiasts and non-book enthusiasts alike? A system that will promote literacy among students in an atmosphere that is fun and engaging, not classroom-like?

A month later, in June, at the start of classes, my twin sister and I founded **Ex Libris U.P.**, (Latin for "*from the Library of U.P.*"), the university's first organization primarily geared towards learning and literature. For our first batch of members, we tapped our friends from the UP College of Arts and Letters, the UP College of Music and the UP College of Architecture. The amazing thing was, when word got out that we were forming Ex Libris U.P., many other students from various colleges and disciplines volunteered to join---people from the College of Engineering, the College of Science, the College of Mass Communications, and many others. This enthusiastic reception encouraged us further.

Thus Ex Libris U.P.'s first year began, with myself as Founding President.

METHODOLOGY

Ex Libris U.P. In Action

Our goal was simple: to promote learning and literature among the students of the university. In Ex Libris UP's first year alone, we were able to actively do our part in helping to solve the widespread problem of education and literacy in the country by targeting UP students.

First, we addressed the problem of **the lack of reading materials**. We implemented an **organized system of booklending** among the organization's members that would give UP students the chance to gain access to all kinds of books through the personal book collections of others---from the most erudite of literature to the lighter, entertaining fare. The student who couldn't afford to buy books could now be able to read the books he'll be able to borrow from fellow Ex Libris UP members.

Second, we addressed **the widespread problem of the youth's negative attitude towards books and learning**. Through the Ex Libris UP organization's bonding activities (i.e. book sessions conducted several times throughout the year, and other various activities which encourage member interactions) the student who had a negative notion of bookworms and of people who read could now get to meet people who are passionate about books precisely because *there is something to be passionate about*, **for in books, there is life as well as learning**.

Also, the student who doesn't usually read because he hasn't found his literary niche can now take his pick from all the kinds of books that are now made available to him; so he can read more and thus learn what kinds of literature he likes, and **the desire to read and learn would flourish within him**.



We pooled our money together several times in order to buy books that a lot of us wanted but could not afford---thus forming a **common library**, aside from individual book collections. Thus, even the poorer members of our organization can gain access to the better and more expensive books out there.

Ex Libris U.P. also came up with a **scholarship project** in order to send a fellow UP student to school, thus upholding the organization's ideals about education and literacy. We

held fundraisers and, in our first year, came up with **the Ex Libris U.P. Scholarship Grant**, which we recently awarded to a deserving UP student, enabling her to further her studies in the university. **The Ex Libris U.P. scholar**, Miss Jennifer Bukas, is only the first of many more to come. Already, the Ex Libris U.P. is planning more fundraisers in order to help send more students to school, **thus encouraging scholarly excellence and promoting the youth's right to proper education.**

We also formed ties with various bookstores, especially **Book Sale**, the country's leading supplier of secondhand books, and went on several excursions to the Book Sale Warehouse. Since the books sold there were a lot more affordable than the books usually sold in normal bookstores, members (even the poorer ones) were able to buy more books (and even huge textbooks for class!) to add to their individual collections.



WHAT LIES AHEAD

It seems like such a simple plan, but it makes sense. Obviously, the present education system is flawed (a lot of Filipino educators are incompetent), so we, the youth, must take it upon ourselves to learn on our own---through reading. Through reading we can truly learn and learn how to think critically, and not be dependent solely on (incompetent) teachers' lectures.

Through activities and organizations such as the Ex Libris U.P., more and more youth can gain access to proper books and education, as well as gain a different perspective on the nature of reading and learning---for we can show them that being nerds and bookworms *can* be cool and fun! Also, while fostering good fellowship with fellow book enthusiasts and scholars, and encouraging academic excellence, organizations such as the Ex Libris U.P. **can** also help their fellow youth go to school. It's the youth working for the youth. The answer lies within us; we are the future educators and leaders of the country. As early as now we can make our mark and help better ourselves and society.

Future plans of Ex Libris U.P. include the establishment of more scholarships to help send deserving youth to school; the formation of ties with other schools, university libraries, and publishing houses; sponsoring author appearances; and participating in various noteworthy literary causes---such as volunteering to help teach school children how to read, and tutoring our fellow college students in various disciplines.

In the future, Ex Libris U.P. plans to reach more of the youth by recruiting more members from the University of the Philippines. In time, through our connections to other schools, the Ex Libris U.P. may form a branch in the Ateneo de Manila University (Ex Libris ADMU), or the De La Salle University (Ex Libris DLSU), and help propagate even further our advocacy of learning and literature. If we reach enough of the Filipino youth, we can encourage literacy and reading, and the positive attitude towards studying and academic excellence.

For myself and the members of Ex Libris U.P., the nobility of ideals and great vision should not just exist in the pages of books or in the minds of authors long-dead and gone, but in reality. This is the dream, and Ex Libris U.P.'s first year has proven that it can be done, and that the youth can, in fact, help better themselves and their community as early as now.

Our organization's motto is *In Libris Libertas*. **In books there is freedom**. Truly, we believe that the first step to answering the country's education problems lies in books, and in the youth's ability and energy to transform what they learn from books into actual reality. If enough of the youth act now, we can turn the flawed education system around, and enable the

Filipino youth to have the proper education that will equip them with the necessary tools to be globally competitive, constructive members of society.

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