

*Speech delivered in Miriam College during the International Conference on Learning and Teaching. The other panelists were Senator Leticia Ramos Shahani and Ateneo President Jose Ramon Villarin*

I salute all our teachers this morning (special mention to my elementary math teacher and philosophy teacher in college who are both here). Thank you for the gift of knowledge. Congratulations to the organizers of the conference, our participants, our speakers, all of us who are gathered today as we affirm our commitment to share the power of learning and dignity of teaching in the world.

I'm often introduced as a blogger, activist, and legislator. But before that, I was an educator. To teach was my original dream in college. Mr Fermin, the Principal of Miriam High School and one of the core initiators of the conference can attest to that since he was my blockmate and seatmate in college. Through this conference, my desire to be a teacher was rekindled. So thank you Miriam College.

Today, the world mourns the death of Steve Jobs. We pay tribute to a man who gave us Apple, Macintosh, iPod, iPhone, and iPad. Most of all, we are thankful for all the revolutionary ideas and dreams that he had shared with us. Jobs was a school drop out. So is Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Bill Gates of Microsoft, and Joseph Estrada of San Juan. Except for the last person I mentioned, these individuals are hailed by almost everybody in the world for inventing things and ideas that change the way we live and work.

So should we all drop out from schools? Of course not. But the story of Jobs and other superstar drop outs should force us to re-examine the schooling process. Schools will never lose their relevance but the learning process can either improve or deteriorate depending on our efforts to make it work. Then and now, we try to answer these questions: Do students always learn better through formal schooling? How do we harness and integrate formal and informal learning? How do we make education responsive to the needs of individuals, families, and our communities?

Teachers play a big role in motivating students to experiment with ideas and to believe in their abilities. They make it easy for us to accept, understand, and even change the present conditions of the world. But if students stumble along the way, teachers are often the first to be blamed by arrogant bureaucrats, clueless commentators, and shallow scholars. If students get low grades in national examinations, teachers are criticized for failing to educate the youth.

When Soviet Russia launched the Sputnik satellite into space in the 1950s, policymakers blamed the U.S. education system for causing the United States to lose to Russia in the bid to conquer space. No less a statesman than former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote then: "Educators, parents and students must be continuously stirred up by the defects in our educational system. They must be induced to abandon the educational path that, rather blindly, they have been following as a result of John Dewey's teachings."

Dewey was the foremost American educator and philosopher during the first half of the 20th century. He criticized the methods of teaching in schools and successfully required the inclusion of play, vocational studies, work and leisure in the curriculum. His works became a bible for

educators disillusioned with the ravages of industrial ideology over education. Experiments in pedagogies concerned with encouraging the experience of the learner as a first step in learning became widespread.

Of course Eisenhower was wrong to blame Dewey. But the president and military strategists found a convenient scapegoat for America's failure to send the first satellite into orbit. The U.S. government used Sputnik to justify widespread reforms in the education sector. Sputnik suddenly created a high demand for scientists, engineers and technology experts. The United States started producing thousands of PhD academicians in weeks.

The obsession to beat the Russians forced U.S. schools to abandon the educational reforms proposed by Dewey and other radical philosophers. A decade later, students from major U.S. universities criticized the undemocratic character of American schools. On the other hand, many insist that the focus given by the government and academe on science, technology and math after the launching of Sputnik has allowed the public to own and enjoy their laptops, cell phones and the Internet today.

Earlier this year, President Barack Obama said that he hopes for another 'Sputnik moment' that would spur American education. He clearly saw the direct link of education in revitalizing industries that will not only create jobs and livelihood but also contribute to the economy's competitiveness.

But the view that education should faithfully sustain the imperatives of the corporate economy is not universally embraced. Radical educators of the 1960s like Jonathan Kozol, Paul Goodman, and Ivan Illich criticized the dehumanizing set-up in our schools. Instead of enriching humanity, schools are systematically redirecting the creativity and passion of the youth to strictly conformist and conventional directions.

Paulo Freire, author of the book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', emphasized the value of dialogue, reflection, and action in schools to help the oppressed articulate their oppression, break the culture of passivity, and begin to understand social reality and how to change their present condition. In order not to be tools of oppression in a very exploitative society, teachers should consciously adopt a democratic teaching method that respects the 'cultural capital' of the learner.

Resistance Theorists like Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Michael Apple warned against the creeping invasion of conservative and corporate ethos in the formal schooling system. Under the guise of promoting efficiency, schools are transformed into mass-production assembly units producing graduates who possess skills and the right attitude required by the corporate and global economy.

There was a time when schools trained students to become responsible citizens. Today, schools mold students to be competitive in the job market. But education should be more than just job preparation. The liberating power of education shouldn't be misused to convert students into mere consumers who are interested on how to increase their purchasing power instead of their real power to change the world.

In the 1990s, school reforms were justified to promote globalization. While I support the globalization of research, the healthy exchange of academic discourse, the improvement of communications and distance learning, I'm against the globalization of education-for-profit which translated into reduced state subsidies for schools, anomalous partnerships with big business, and attack on the democratic rights of teachers and students.

As schools scrambled and competed for dwindling public funds, they instituted reforms that conform to the narrow standards of business efficiency like non-unionized teaching workforce, market-driven academic programs, and depoliticized student body. In short, what deteriorated in the past decade was not merely the quality of education but also the fighting capacity, the democratic potential, of our schools.

And maybe we didn't notice the transformation because we got distracted with the ubiquitous emergence of Information Technology. We immediately recognized its varied pedagogic applications. Somehow, we expected it to be a solution to some of our problems like rural-urban education gap, shortage of resource materials, and inequality in schools.

Indeed, it initially made teaching a little bit easier. Communication is now faster, news and information are instantly available, and teachers can share experiences through virtual means. Classroom teaching can be more fun if IT is effectively utilized. So many web and mobile applications, including interactive teaching modules, can still be developed to address the needs of the academe. IT is still in its infancy and schools should continue to embrace the wonderful opportunities offered by this technology.

But IT also created new problems for teachers. For example, the digital gap has contributed to inequality in society. But the biggest challenge is how to properly motivate the new generation of students, the digital natives, whose worldview, attitude, and behavior were already shaped by the rise of IT in society.

Thanks to the internet, many students today are obsessive fact-checkers who expect instant results for the little effort they exerted. They equate googling with research while Wikipedia is seen as a reliable online library. There are students who do not even rephrase what they copied from websites. Thanks to texting, online chat and microblogging, many students are incapable of expressing beyond 140 characters. Reading is reduced to monitoring the status updates of their Facebook friends. Multitasking means opening several tabs on the internet browser. Good citizenship is accomplished by signing online petitions or supporting advocacy pages.

IT didn't render teachers obsolete. On the contrary, we need more teachers who will guide students on how to maximize the learning potential of IT. It isn't the capacity to absorb information that counts but the skill to filter the relevant data from trash or spam. Students must learn how to effectively organize, interpret, and use the data he receives from the web. IT is useless if students don't have the basic communication skills. IT is just empty entertainment if not linked to other meaningful and offline activities of students. Teachers will continue to be relevant despite the laughable prediction that robots will replace teachers in the classroom. Didn't they predict the same thing when TV was invented?

The internet can make a person a walking encyclopedia but not necessarily an enlightened or educated individual. One can be obese with excessive data intake but it doesn't instantly make him a better person. The role of schools and teachers is still to educate a new breed of 'total' persons, critical thinking persons, who can contribute to the advance of civilization.

But enhancing the skills of students is only one of the duties of our educators. Part of their mission should be to cultivate individuals with a strong sense of social responsibility. Students must see themselves not as individuals competing against each other but as members of the same community. The spirit of solidarity must be promoted in schools so that students will be inspired to stand up for the rights of the weak and minority. It's a necessary antidote to the dominant thinking which reinforces individualism and unhealthy competition.

Teachers are political creatures and schools are political institutions. Teachers must realize that they can't completely hide their own biases inside the classrooms. Instead of denying it, they must admit in the open their political standpoint. They must be encouraged to participate in the social struggles of the day. Why? Because political solutions are needed to fix education problems because the organization and distribution of knowledge in a society has always been a political question. And teachers are most credible in articulating the essential issues that confront the schooling system.

At the minimum, schools must be cultural sites where there is "contestation and struggle for meaning," where student resistance is positively analyzed, where conflict is theorized as a step in completing the project of democracy. But it shouldn't stop there. Schools are not autonomous sites that operate in an uncorrupted social universe. They mirror the imperfections of the community. They reproduce the values, habits, and know-how that are required for the survival of our social institutions. Therefore, we cannot sincerely advocate a better education system without yearning and fighting for a better social set-up. If we really desire good schools, we should build a more progressive society. Therefore, the democratization movement inside schools should not be divorced from the struggles of various social forces. If we refuse to recognize the political character of education issues or the relationship of the struggle for meaningful schooling with the broader socio-political process, all conflicts inside schools would remain parochial concerns with no power to alter the educational landscape. De-politicized school conflicts pit teachers, students, and administrators against one another while the real enemies of the people are unscathed. Political school struggles should involve everybody in the campus against the unequal social order and those who defend and control it.

Teachers as 'organic intellectuals' who recognize the humanistic value of the teaching process, the political impact of their work inside schools, and the imperative to speak, organize and act for genuine social change.

Che Guevarra said that "a true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love." Teachers teach because they believe that it's a noble thing to do. They teach because they are dedicated to the idea of sharing the power of life and love. They teach because they continue to believe in humanity and progress. Teachers are therefore among the genuine revolutionaries of society.