

From accessible to inclusive education for the differently abled

26 January 2015

by Dr. Alma Maria O. Salvador

ATENEO DE MANILA'S recent collaboration with partners in the Institute on Disability and Public Policy for the ASEAN Region (IDPP) has opened many gateways for strengthening its nation-building thrust through accessible and inclusive education. Launched on April 4, 2011, the IDPP seeks to promote barrier-free education for persons with disabilities (PWDs) through inclusive access to higher education and public policy, and an advocacy for regional commitment to the implementation of the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

While Ateneo's historical experience with PWDs began with the accommodation of and adjustments to the special needs of a student with disability (Roselle R. Ambubuyog was the first visually impaired student to earn a university degree with honours in Math in 2001), it has since moved away from ad hoc to a more purposive and targeted approach to accessible and inclusive education.

Accessible education may be defined as the ways and means to ensure that people of all walks of life, including persons who are differently abled (such as the visually, hearing and mobility impaired), are able to use and access learning facilities with ease. Accessible infrastructure aims at connecting people, particularly PWDs so that they can move and integrate with members of the mainstream community.

On the other hand, inclusive education policies offer a more programmatic approach such as a rights-based perspective that informs institution building and affirmative action for persons who are differently abled.

Some examples are policies and practices that promote the integration of assistive teaching and learning technologies for the visually, hearing and mobility impaired, or the allocation of seats for admitting persons who are differently abled.

Many units within the Ateneo, including the Institute of Sustainability (AIS) and the Facilities Management Office (FMO), have transformed the university into an accessible campus. Initiatives and projects on inclusive mobility such as the

construction and installation of pavements, speed tables, ramps, protective railings and elevators with Braille for new buildings have made it possible for the mobility impaired and the elderly to be connected to all destinations in campus.

Project Pedestrian, which paved, tiled, levelled and linked all pavements to speed tables (or tiled pedestrian crossings), walkways and ramps on campus is probably the most visible of the AIS' inclusive mobility program's commitment to "moving people, not vehicles" thrust.

The project also contributes to the elevation of the discourse, so to speak, i.e. from compliance to the Building Code to changing people's behavior.

This and discussions on inclusive mobility through sustainable cities and sustainable transport by champions in the Socio-Anthropology Department, Manila Observatory and the Ateneo School of Government are all shaping mindsets and redefining notions of access and inclusion of people to living spaces.

These are enablers of the current institutions on accessibility: Among these, the 2012 Student Handbook provides for "responsive, available and accessible" student services. The Student Affairs Office is tasked to ensure the physical accessibility of "all passageways, doorways, walkways, driveways, PWD ramps and emergency exits." Beyond these, the Student At Risk (STAR) program that involves three key offices -- the Academic, Guidance and Student Affairs -- is engaging the community to be sensitized to students with special needs.

Through the nation-building pillar, the Ateneo de Manila can take a more proactive stance in promoting a wider access to higher education learning.

At the onset, Ateneo's admission practice of customizing the administration of the entrance test (ACET) to suit the needs of students with physical and learning disabilities already has seminal value. The Ateneo's student-centered learning approach has also recognized the need "to invest a critical edge upon our ways of appropriating teaching methods."

This can now be interpreted to include more experimentation in the development of hybrid curriculums and blended teaching methodologies that incorporate Web-based teaching and learning modalities and that support applications for accessible cyber learning.

While Web-based modes have been tried and tested to bridge geographical and cultural gaps by the Ateneo Centre for Journalism, there remains a lot of room to spread the use of online and assistive technologies for bridging the equity divide -- between the able and the differently abled in the country.

Former Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Eduardo Calasanz said in an e-mail exchange: "We have the best 'facility' to have around -- people (students, colleagues,

maintenance and staff) who are always ready and willing to help.

“I’ve seen students pushing wheelchairs or even carrying their wheelchair-bound classmates up to the third floor; students spontaneously offer to carry the bags of their classmates.”

The biggest premium of all, this practice operationalizes the “many helping hands” approach to accessible and inclusive learning. It signals to ripened opportunities and low-lying fruits that should be taken advantage of in order to promote education for all.

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