Innovative teachers go to Vietnam

by Danton Remoto
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For the poet T.S. Eliot, April may be the cruelest month, but for a group of Filipino teachers, a journalist and a Microsoft Executive, it was a month for having a blast in Vietnam. And we’re not talking about the blast that explodes, although we saw the Mausoleum of the Great Uncle Ho, Ho Chi Minh, one fine day while our bus was circling its way around a vast rotunda.

Occasion was the Partners in Learning Regional Innovative Teachers Conference sponsored by Microsoft Asia and held in the once war-torn country of Vietnam. Microsoft Asia Pacific and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) affirmed their commitment to Asia-Pacific’s teachers and students by extending the Microsoft Innovative Schools Program.

The Microsoft Partners in Learning (PiL) Regional Innovative Teachers Conference brings more than 200 leading teachers, educators and Ministry of Education officials representing 21 countries together to share the best practices and develop regional networks. The momentum generated will ensure information and communications technologies (ICTs) that will continue to transform education across the region. It was a time to share teaching experiences using Information Technology, as well as a time to share curricular innovations and exchange pedagogical knowledge.

The PiL Program provides government and education leaders with the local resources to deliver information and communication technology skills training and curriculum leadership to enable students and teachers to realize their potential. Launched in Asia-Pacific in 2003, PiL has trained 812,000 teachers and reached 33 million students across the region. Globally, the program will deliver IT literacy and skills development to more than 5 million teachers and 100 million students over the next five years.
The jovial Philippine delegation is composed of three bright, hardworking and dedicated teachers. Julius Gregory Hechanova teaches mathematics at the Iligan City East High School. This is his first year of teaching, and Julius is not only cool but also lucky. He bagged the best Philippine presentation during the conference.

His module is an application approach on "Right Triangle Trigonometry." Since I’m a complete bozo when it comes to math, let me quote from his presentation. “This lesson is in Micro lesson form, where the students were asked to solve a couple of word problems in right triangle trigonometry. I used a PowerPoint in presenting the word problems with animated illustration for better understanding of the problems to be solved. Due to lack of computers in our school, the students were grouped into five to share one computer. They worked together, solved the given problems, and answered the attached quiz in Hot potatoes. For their assignment, they were asked to show and explain their solutions through PowerPoint. They were then required to pass their assignments using e-mail.”

For this slam-dunk teaching module, Julius will represent the Philippines in the Microsoft conference for global teachers to be held in Thailand. Sawadeeka, kapatid!

Wonder Woman Fedelyn Gomez, a high-school teacher of Makabayan at Tomas Cabili National High School and soon-to-be principal par excellence, showed her mettle with another module.

Called — what else? — “The Wonder at One's Fingertips,” Fedelyn honed her skills by using the computer sent to her school by then-Dept. of Trade and Industry Secretary Mar Roxas II, one of more than 30,000 he distributed all over the country. Her module focuses on entrepreneurship, zeroing in on an Animal Production Project Proposal for students.

Said she: “Their appreciation will encourage and convince them to ‘Go, Negosyo.’ They would realize that successful business endeavors always start with a business plan. The use of technology and the Internet provides information to students with just a click of their fingertips. Their skills of Internet Mining will enable them to gather information and allow them to differentiate the usable from those that are not, by reading and analyzing data and
making use only of those applicable to their plan. Students are required to create a multimedia presentation, brochure, flyer and reflection paper using Microsoft applications. The outputs are eventually published in the web using my space or web logs, for others to comment and interact. Their outputs are then evaluated using teacher-made rubrics.”

The third Filipino teacher is Maria Noemi Bagayaua, who teaches English at the Cembo Elementary School in Makati. She only has high praise for our common friend, Makati Mayor Jojo Binay, who has provided computers and Internet access to all the schools of Makati. Aside, of course, from free health care and education to all the good citizens of that progressive city.

This cum laude graduate presented a literature-based approach to teaching reading for grade six students. “The objectives are to recall details in the story read and to identify a cause-and-effect relationship. It is a literature-based lesson that enhances the comprehension of pupils through different types of graphic organizers. The story will serve as the catalyst in introducing the skill to be taught. In this manner, pupils may develop and improve their creativity, resourcefulness and innovativeness through the use of slide presentation and Internet surfing during the activity part of the day. Most likely, the pupils will be more interested and motivated to listen well with the story in the new manner of presenting it through a Photo story.” The Photo story can be drawn, as in the case of Noemi’s module, or be a collage of magazine cut-outs, or Internet images, or images drawn by hand.

I felt proud watching our three kababayans do their tarpaulin-poster presentation on the elegant lobby of the five-star Hanoi Hilton. Well-liked, articulate, talented and kind, these are the teachers that do our country proud. Along with the cheerful, can-do and jovial Michelle Casio of Microsoft Philippines, I gave a pep talk to our teachers telling them that they would do well, their gowns were lovely (or his barong well-cut, in the case of Julius), that they just needed to speak a bit slower and never let that trademark Filipino smile drop from their lips.

I also talked to Lauren Woodman, senior director, Government and Education Engagement Team at Microsoft. Holder of a double M.A. in economics and foreign policy at Johns
Hopkins, I told Lauren that hers is a job that every teacher would envy – imagine bringing computers to the world’s poorest schools and training modules for teachers and students to learn from! She beamed and added that her mother, who was also a public-school teacher, gave her the inspiration to do well. And I was quite sure I sensed a tremor in her voice when she was paying that homage to her mother.

Another young and cool cat from Microsoft is Singaporean Vincent Quah, director of Public Sector Programs. He said that what keeps them going is the thought that they are pushing the frontiers of knowledge, in places where they are most needed. He has logged in 16 years in the education industry, his finger on the pulse of IT education and multimedia technology in the schools.

During the conference, Microsoft also announced the extension of the Innovative Schools Program that is tailored-fit specifically to Asia’s education needs. The program assists schools by providing intellectual property, technology expertise, experiential knowledge and community support to over 2,000 schools around the region. Microsoft has committed to do that within the next five years.

Michael Donlan, regional managing director, Public Sector, at Microsoft Asia Pacific explained that “Microsoft has always believed that education is the cornerstone of opportunity and that investing in it is the best way to help young people achieve their potential. The Innovative Schools Program in Asia signals our desire and that of our partners from government, teaching and the community to reinvent education and prepare our students for the next digital decade.”

For his part, UNESCO spokesperson Sheldon Shaeffer, director of the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, said that “Education is the key to bridging hope and empowerment for people regardless of whether they are from a developing or developed nation. Our partnership with Microsoft ensures that together, we are able to provide the support that is appropriate and most effective in countries throughout Asia. Together and through programs such as Microsoft’s Partners in Learning, we will have a real impact on entire schools, communities, and nations, especially, we hope, on those most disadvantaged.”
Asia Innovative Schools are selected based on their vision and the process they adopt towards innovation and change, the readiness of the school leadership in meeting 21st-century challenges, their approach to learning, how prepared the teachers are to adopt technology, infrastructure readiness, the potential for impact as well as community involvement. The goal is that through the adoption of new criteria, more schools throughout Asia will be included in the program.

The three Filipino teachers — Julius, Fedalyn, and Noemi — as well as our beautiful guide Michelle had a colorful week of delayed planes, bicycle-choked streets, and spicy food, enough to bring tears to one’s eyes. But that will be the subject of another column.

Promise.

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