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On Monday 18th August 1997
With David Whitcombe at the DTP
University of NSW.

Why did you decide to do the Strasbourg course in 1983?

Well I decided to do the Strasbourg course a) because at the time I'd been working almost ten years lobbying at the UN in New York, in Geneva without any actual formal training, orientation or guide, neither did I have any actual academic expertise in the human rights field. So for me it was a must to take that course which was the only one that I knew was available, second I knew that on weekends I could go to Paris which is not an unattractive proposition.

So even after 10 years at the UN you still thought you should do a formal course?

Well partly because I needed a break, in terms of a break not to rest, but to do some reading and studying, contacting others because I knew that at the Strasbourg course every year there were about 400 people attending from various parts of the world, so it was very good in terms of networking to some extent, that's how I first came in contact with people from Sri Lanka, I had not met anyone from Sri Lanka at the time, and a few other places.

Did you see anything in the Strasbourg course...did you like their content and methods?

I tell you method was terribly ineffective, it was a) very large classes b) very academic... lecture lecture lecture, no workshops, no small group discussions, no simulation models, very European oriented, at the time you know I'm talking about '83, and for someone who had been doing the work on the ground, in New York, at the UN in Geneva, for me was like being in another world. Are these people talking about the UN? I tell you I was totally puzzled!

So what were the main reasons you set up the DTP?

Well even then in 83, as I did that course I was talking with some people about setting up a real human rights training program in New York...being someone who was using the UN institutions to promote, to argue for a cause, I knew exactly what someone like me needed and lacking, so even then I had an idea to set it up in NY, but... there were some people who were enthusiastic, who wanted to give the funds, but a) I didn't have enough experience, expertise, time, resources to do it, b) NY would be very expensive to have a HR training program so we decided to just drop it.

So none existed like that for NGO activists?

No, at the time and until recently until the DTP was set up, there was three HR training programs that I knew of in the world, Strasbourg, Costa Rica and Canada, the Human rights foundation. The one in Canada...I don't know what their methods are, the one in Costa Rica is very similar to Strasbourg. **So you saw the need for the first one for activists?** Yes yes.

Who do you think are the most important targets for HRE?

I believe, well really anyone... ideally HRE should start in kindergarten... age 3...4 the subjects should adjust to the different level of the age group, to high school, university. If we were to do that, if every country in the world were to do that, that is what is going to resolve the conflicts around the world. When people are understanding what HR is all about, HR are not only obligations of states to respect, but how individuals perceive others, many of the conflicts, crimes, wars that happen over the years the, are the result of ethnic, cultural, religious misperceptions, prejudices.

So you think when it gets to university students or activists its almost too late?

No, I wouldn't say too late...ideally it should start from kindergarten, but even at university level, look at UNSW, HR is only an optional class for some students, it should be, I believe obligatory not only in law, in international relations, in geography, in medicine, in maths in every field. Every subject should have HR as a compulsory subject, because doctors need to have an understanding of HR and humanitarian law, engineers should have an understanding, sensitivity about HR and so on.

One thing I noticed when I was trying to find places like DTP around the world in the UNESCO guide, so many were law courses aimed at law students, and I'm wondering why do you think there aren't more aimed at activists?

Well precisely because I believe there is not enough "market", you cannot have too many HR training programs when you don't have too many people interested, and most are attended by people from the developing world, you don't see people from the western world attending it... they do attend only because sometimes they get some extra credit for their degree, not that they are then going to dedicate part of their life to the HR struggle.

In the courses what do you think are the most valuable topics... the theory and documents or more practical things?

I think both go hand in hand. I wouldn't say that one is more important than the other. For some it is important or enough to know about the theoretical, academic, the principals part of HR for their own education so that they can impart that knowledge to others in the community. For those who particularly want to be activists in the HR field they need both. They need to have a good deep understanding of HR principals and concepts, at the same time they need to have a practical knowledge about the functioning of the UN HR system, the procedures, the bodies so that they can put in practice what they learn.

What are the most effective methods that a HR course should use?

I believe the best would be practical, small group study courses, rather than large seminar type classes where the lecturers talk and talk and talk. I believe in one given program one third of the component should be lectures which is important, but all the rest should be group discussions, small group workshops... simulations.

DTP from day one has used lots of role plays and simulations, hasn't it?

Yes yes definitely yes.

Moving on now to the UN decade For HRE... One of the objectives is to build and strengthen HRE programs at all levels, international to local. On a practical level what is the best way that can be done?

I would encourage educators at kindergarten, primary, high school at the local and national level to adopt into the curriculum the subject matter of HR. I think there is a lot of goodwill for people to do that, because it serves their own interests for communities at the national and local level to be sensitive about human rights because that is a prerequisite for peace, for tolerance. So, in the long run a society that is thoroughly educated in the value and principals of HR is a tolerant society and there is an absence of conflict. Look at Costa Rica, it hasn't had a war for over a hundred years, it doesn't have an army, in a region that is extremely tense and conflict ridden... Central America.. Costa Rica is an oasis of peace and democracy. **And they have a strong program in the schools? Yes.**

Another objective of the decade is the use of the mass media, in your lecture the other night you mentioned the BBC world service and Radio Australia... how else can we use the MM for HRE?

This is a very complex and difficult issue, in a sense that you can have very good ideas that run against prejudices and narrow mindedness on the part of the media. Ideally HR educators could approach journalists at the policy making level to make strategic decisions to devote parts of the newspaper or the airtime on radio and television to HRE. I know that is easy said more difficult to be done. The best way is by word of mouth ie, to educate people in the community at the primary and secondary school level. **Then it would get into the media that way?** Oh yes.

With the dissemination of the Universal declaration of HR... What is your response when people attack the UDHR... like Soeharto?

Well these are dinosaurs and dictators, only dictators do not like the UDHR. Do they want to strengthen it, when they talk about revising it? Well their action on the ground, their behaviour does not suggest that. If their reason they want to revise it is to strengthen it, well they can start by first ratifying the many covenants that remain to be ratified. They can start by supporting the creation of the war crimes tribunal, but when you hear not democracies, and democracies are both in the North and South, you hear instead dictators, autocrats calling for the revision of the UD, well what can you expect? What they would like is for the UN, the international community to get rid of the UD and the covenants.

So their arguments that it is an Asian cultural thing and that it is the west imposing their ideas of human rights...

Well it is maybe Mahatir's, Lee Kuan Yew's, Soehartos culture, definitely it is not an Asian culture. Are Asians different from Africans in terms of ways they perceive life, human life? Are Asians different from someone from Bolivia, from Chile, from Argentina? Are Asians so different from someone from South Korea? Are Asians so different from the Japanese, who have had a democratic system for years? Are Asians different from the black South Africans, the way they perceive human life, freedom from torture, freedom from arbitrary arrest, from summary arbitrary execution, well if thats what they mean then maybe they really are a special people... really different to every other human being... maybe they didn't evolve since millions of years ago..... **So its just the people in power?** It is an Asian culture of Mahatir, Lee Kuan Yew and Soeharto not of the people of Asia itself.

So the dissemination of the actual declaration, do you think that should be an objective?

Certainly yes. There should be a massive distribution of the UD, discussion, debate in every level, it should be accessible in every language, in kindergarten and primary school.

In general what are your thoughts on the decade for HRE, how do you see it performing? What do you think could be done to make it better?

The UN is very into declaring decades... a decade of this a decade of that as if only during the decade Im going to be worried about HR, or only during that decade Im going to be worried about decolonisation... by the year 2000 the UN should be getting rid of the remaining colonial territories, they declared that some time ago. No I don't take it as a point of reference, I believe that the struggle for HR which started 50 years ago... every year should be a special year and unfortunately its going to have to continue for the next generations to come... so to talk about decade, what does it mean? what are they going to do especially different from ten years ago? Does it mean that after 10 years they stop it? Anyway these are the anniversaries the UN sometimes proclaims and actually not much happens, like what happened with the year for indigenous people. It has been going on for more than ten years, the discussions on the draft declaration, then it went back to a committee of the HR commission.

So in general these 'years of and decades for', you are not too supportive?

No well fine I have no objections, Im just very sceptical that the UN make interesting declarations, declare a decade of this and that, but the actual behaviour of the states that are members of the UN, to follow through with high sounding proclamations. Look at the Vienna declaration and the plan of action, we end up with Indonesia, Singapore and others saying now they want to revise the UDHR, we could end up retrogressing rather than progressing in the next few years. **Right in the middle of the decade for HRE!**

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

29 July 1997

Mr. David Whitcombe  
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Dear Mr. Whitcombe:

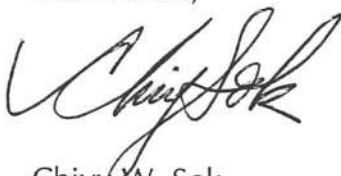
Dr. Paul Martin, the Executive Director of the Center has informed me of your research proposal on comparative human rights training programs. I would be delighted to discuss the Center's Human Rights Advocates Training Program with you.

It will take me a few weeks to go over your questionnaires and answer them in detail. In addition to answering your questions, I will also provide you with our internal and external evaluation reports.

If you have access to email and fax, please let me know immediately. It is most convenient for me to use email. If you do have email, does your program have the capacity to read and transfer files?

I look forward to working with you.

Best wishes,



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