Round Table on
"Inclusivity, Diversity and Convergence: the CiSAP (the Consortium of i-Schools of Asia-Pacific) Story"

A proposal

By

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- Shigeo Sugimoto, Shalini Urs and Ee-Peng Lim

Abstract: Inclusivity – how to be inclusive of the privileged as well as the not so privileged; diversity – how to manage the diverse cultures and systems; convergence – how do we discover the unifying thread of flowing together – these are the issues this Round Table will address. This Round Table will focus on the characteristics, requirements, challenges and opportunities, for i-Education and i-Research in the Asia Pacific region. It will also tell the story of CiSAP – an initiative to foster and support iSchools in the region.

Preamble: The Asia-Pacific region perhaps presents a unique exemplar for diversity in economy, geography, and culture, including education and information infrastructure development. Not surprisingly, there is a confluence – flowing and coming together. The information culture of in this region is quite different from the rest of the world. There are considerable intra-region imbalances and difference too. Concomitant to the impact of globalisation and Information and Communication Technology, especially Internet revolution, societies have been changing and placing increased importance to information and technologies.

Governments, Societies and academia have focussed their attention on building national information infrastructures to support their respective mandates, agendas and concerns. The academia in each of these societies has evolved it own strategies and systems for repositioning, restructuring, reinventing, and innovating its academic programmes in its response to the transformative changes. Concomitantly i-Education and i-Research has also been undergoing paradigmatic shifts and innovations.

Inclusivity: While the diffusion of the Internet and the Web in modern society is indisputable, concerns abound regarding the huge gap between those who have and have not benefitted from the numerous advantages that such technologies offer. A vast majority of population are excluded from the wonders of the "rich & ready access" to information experiences that the privileged have.

At the heart of this digital divide issue is the issue of inclusivity. Inclusivity encompasses a whole range of issues. The ICT including Internet at one level offers a solution and adds to the problem as well. The celebrated columnist and Pulitzer Prize winning author Thomas Friedman in his book "the world is flat" showcases the instances of ICT flattening the world (India being one of the case in point). At the same time, countries such as India are more concerned about the widening of the gap. While for some countries of the world, inclusivity is more an economic issue, in some countries it is more a literacy issue. In many cases, it could also be digital natives vs. digital immigrants or digital literates vs. digital illiterates. In multilingual regions such as Asia, it is also a language issue. Access issues plague us at different levels – physical, content, and cognitive. While physical access has to be enabled by ICT infrastructure and availability, content access is about developing appropriate content in suitable language, form and format. And cognitive and affective access addresses the challenges of overcoming the literacy, language cultural and other cognitive and affective barriers. Therefore i-Education and i-Research have to naturally focus on

inclusivity in all of its flavours from designing and developing inexpensive hardware to voice based interfaces to culturally sensitive content.

Diversity: There is amazing diversity even in monocultures. Given that nature itself is abounds in diversity, we must understand diversity and address the challenges of diversity. Individual differences in cognition to nuances of cultural differences across the information experiences are to be analysed, appreciated and addressed by the i-Community. Issues such as the significance of a particular colour (red for Chinese to Green for Muslims) in web pages; left to right/right to left scripts; huge uptake of mobile telephony/text messaging/blogging/ and other forms of communication in certain cultures; why privacy is huge issue/no issue in different communities – to name a few, are all matter of interest, exploration, and experimentation for i-Research community.

Convergence: Despite the diversity, most societies also confluence at varied levels – be it the human thoughts or values or technologies. The challenge and the opportunity is to identify the common ontological frameworks across diverse communities, domains, requirements and practices. Building integrative levels of theories, technologies and tools that are easily customisable is perhaps best strategy that the i-Community can hope to evolve and establish equity of access to information.

Agility and collaboration are the key ingredients for success in any endeavour to address the issues of inclusivity, diversity and convergence. CiSAP is an endeavour that has been conceptualised to address these issues.

The CiSAP Initiative:

Recognising the need for fostering and strengthening i-Education and i-Research in the Asia-Pacific region, CiSAP was conceived almost two years back and finally became a reality on December 4th during the 11th International Conference on Asia-Pacific Digital Libraries (ICADL 2008) at Bali, Indonesia.

CiSAP is an effort to engender and develop i-Schools in the region. Given the diversity in the region, and the requirements for different kinds of technologies and social skills to help evolve an information society, we need to prepare information professionals who understand technology and society. Our mission is to contribute to the sustainability and the enrichment of Information Society by -

- Providing a cross disciplinary perspective on Information
- Embracing the diversity of communities and cultures across Asia Pacific
- Advancing i-education, i-research and i-practice through collaboration and cooperation

The goals and objectives of CiSAP include -
- To promote the establishment of i-Schools in Asia-Pacific
- To foster collaboration and exchange of new ideas for education and research at i-Schools in the Asia-Pacific region
- To help evolve a global i-School community

This Round Table proposed here is to deliberate on the issues and challenges of inclusivity, diversity and convergence in the context of CiSAP. We will be inviting Ron Larsen, Gary Marchionini and others as discussants.