

MEDIA RESOURCES

Engaged Learning and Filmmaking by Way of Vietnam

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Virginia Wesleyan professor Steven Emmanuel and five students spent four weeks in Vietnam in the summer of 2007. Their work, supported by an ASIANetwork Student-Faculty Fellows Grant, resulted in a documentary film that won several awards in national and international film festivals. In the following piece, he describes the project and talks about how the grant experience gave him a new perspective on study abroad.

Despite remarkable economic progress in recent years, Vietnam continues to struggle with serious problems such as poverty, environmental contamination, and disease. These problems are partly the legacy of decades of war and partly the disastrous economic policy of the early postwar period. The situation began to improve in the mid-1980s, when the Vietnamese government embarked on a program of liberal reforms known as renovation. The prosperity generated by those reforms mainly benefited people living in major urban areas. By 2006, three-quarters of Vietnam's population still lived in rural poverty, and many families still depended on subsistence farming to survive. To make matters worse, rapid industrial expansion, combined with the absence of environmental protections, posed significant threats to Vietnam's forests, waterways, and air quality. In addition to the increased health

risks associated with industrial pollution and environmental degradation, the growing disparity between urban and rural development exacerbated long-standing tensions between the government and Vietnam's ethnic minority populations.

Our Student-Faculty research project, carried out in the summer of 2007, focused on various humanitarian efforts undertaken by the Vietnamese government, foreign NGOs, and private individuals to address the problems of rural poverty and disease. Our main contact was Dr. Ngyen Viet Nhan, Head of the Department of Medical Genetics and Director of the Office of Genetic Counseling and Disabled Children (OGCDC) at Hue Medical College.

The Project

Dr. Nhan's office coordinates the efforts of government bureaucrats, medical researchers, foreign humanitarians, local civic groups, and Vietnam's religious community. Balancing the interests of all these groups is a delicate business. For example, elements within the Communist bureaucracy are hostile toward religion, yet arrangements are worked out so that government funding can go to support an orphanage or special education program operated at a Buddhist pagoda. There is also significant concern within Vietnamese Buddhist and Catholic communities about whether and how reproductive technologies ought to be used to ameliorate the physical and economic suffering caused by severe birth defects. In less obvious ways, humanitarian efforts are also shaped by culturally embedded attitudes toward physically and intellectually disabled persons and ethnic minorities.

As Americans, we were naturally conscious of the ever-present subtext of the "American War." Hue was the site of some of the fiercest and bloodiest battles in the conflict. Both Hue and Quang Tri province to the north were targeted for extensive bombing and herbicidal spraying missions. Few Americans are aware that nearly a million gallons of Agent Orange were sprayed over Hue province, or that the problem of unexploded ordinance still poses a severe hazard to the people

of Quang Tri, where bombs and mines left over from the war claim more lives every year.

Our research approach was interdisciplinary. Religious Studies major Julie Maggioncalda was interested in work done by Vietnamese Buddhists to improve the welfare of poor and intellectually disabled children. Lan Tran, an environmental sciences major, focused on governmental efforts to educate rural communities about environmental health issues, such as dioxin contamination. Business major Matt Ryan looked at the structure of the Vietnamese micro-loan program. Sarah Tytler, an international studies major, examined the impact of liberal reform on the rural economy by comparing published data with the perceptions of people living outside urban centers. Lauren Perry, a journalism and philosophy major, reported on the ongoing consequences of the war and Vietnamese attitudes toward Americans.

For my part, I was mainly interested in humanitarian work from the perspective of peace and reconciliation. I planned to produce a documentary film that situated the work of the OGCDG in the context of efforts to heal the wounds of the war, with a special emphasis on humanitarian work being carried out by American veterans of the Vietnam War. A documentary film seemed an ideal way to tie together the various strands of student research and to disseminate the results to a broader audience. As a whole, the project promised to yield useful insight into current social and political realities in Vietnam, as well as some of the historical and cultural factors that shaped them. The film would also shed light on the important role that humanitarianism plays, not only in helping to create economic stability and prosperity in Vietnam, but in effecting reconciliation between our nations.

To support the documentary side of the project, we were fortunate to have at Virginia Wesleyan a modest video production studio, two professional HD video cameras, and some basic portable equipment. One of the students in our group, Matt Ryan, also had significant experience in the technical aspects of video production. He captured much of the footage included in the final version of the film.

In Country

From the moment the students stepped out onto the street on the very first morning in Hanoi, they knew they were completely out of their element. For a few of them, this was their first real experience traveling abroad. The sites and smells of the old quarter, together with the wilting heat and humidity of summer, were overwhelming. They all reported the feeling of having stepped back in time—a feeling that only increased as they traveled out into the remote rural areas of the country, where farmers still worked the fields behind water buffalos, and vestiges of the war could be seen everywhere in the form of bomb craters, war cemeteries, and abandoned military bunkers. The war they had merely read about—at best an abstraction for them—suddenly became tangibly real.

Due to the specialized nature of our project, we did not prearrange any travel or accommodations inside Vietnam beyond the first hotel. For the rest, we had only a very general plan and worked out the details of the itinerary as we went. There were, of course, a few people we had arranged to meet on the trip. These included Dr. Nhan and a few American humanitarians living and working in Vietnam. The rest was improvised.

After spending a few days in Hanoi to adjust to the new climate and diet, we began to make our way south toward Hue, where we would end up spending more than two weeks working closely with Dr. Nhan and his staff. We followed OGCDC case officers as they conducted home visits in rural villages, toured various rehabilitation and education facilities for sick and disabled children, met with families served by the heart surgery and micro-loan programs, and visited ethnic minority communities in the mountains of Nam Dong.

On free days and weekends we experienced cultural life in and around Hue or pursued our individual research projects. We rented motorcycles for local travel and hired drivers to take us to more distant destinations of interest. The students were especially interested in learning about Vietnamese Buddhism and life in the pagoda. They spent time with the monks of Tu Hieu, one of the oldest pagodas in the city, and

made friends at a few others. They learned about Buddhist teachings and practiced meditation. Julie Maggioncalda worked closely with the nuns of Duc Son and Long Tho monasteries, both of which ran special education programs for children.

From Hue we traveled south to Da Nang and Hoi An for a few days before concluding the trip with a tour of sites around Saigon and the MeKong Delta. We covered a lot of ground in one month. The students braved miles of walking through rice paddies in sweltering heat, twelve-hour days, and all the challenges of being culturally isolated for an extended period of time. They experienced parts of Vietnam that tourists never see, and confronted some of the harsher realities of life in the developing world. I asked a lot of them, but they never complained.

Engaged Learning

As I watched my students interacting with Vietnamese families, and especially with children in orphanages and other state-run facilities, I began to realize that they were not just studying the country, its culture, or its problems. The word *study* suggests an emotional distance that separates the inquirer from the subject. Yet the students were thoroughly engaged at every level: cognitively, emotionally, and morally. They bonded with the children, sharing songs with them, teaching them English, and playing games. They were not just learning about the effects of the Vietnam War; they were literally becoming part of the continuing story of that war and its legacy. They were actively engaging in the work of reconciliation, of healing wounds and building new bridges of friendship and peace.

For Ken Herrmann, an American veteran and humanitarian who appeared in our documentary, the key to bringing about true reconciliation is “the building of a relationship, showing that you care.” In the final analysis, meaningful change depends not on charity but the capacity for empathy, the willingness “to feel what the Vietnamese feel, to smell what they smell, to taste what they taste, to think the way they think.” My students were doing that; and they were indeed effecting change, even as they were being changed by the experience.

From a pedagogical perspective, one of the things that stood out for me was the extraordinary sense the students had of the relevance and importance of their work. Not a single one of them would return to the classroom the same kind of learner. Within weeks of coming home they began looking for ways to put their experience to work in the local community. A lasting contribution was the creation of “Mindful Marlins,” a student service organization that formed a partnership with Seton House Youth Shelters. Drawing on what they had learned from the Buddhist monks about meditation, the students began to offer a weekly relaxation/meditation session aimed at helping young girls in crisis develop skills for coping with stress and anger. That program is now in its third year.

Service Learning in a Global Context

Prior to the Vietnam trip, I had been thinking about some ways to contribute to our nascent service-learning initiative on campus. Up to that time our efforts were limited to partnering with local businesses and community organizations dealing with issues relevant to life in the Hampton Roads region. However, my experience in Vietnam had convinced me that we should start thinking about service-learning abroad, and more particularly with a view to getting students involved in projects in communities that had suffered the effects of violence, poverty, and social injustice. Though we sent many of our students on educational tours of the major cities of Western Europe, we did not provide any opportunities for them to experience first-hand the realities of the developing world. This was regrettable, given the fact that the greatest challenge facing their generation would be to develop global strategies for solving the world’s problems. If they were to make any serious progress toward creating a sustainable future, they would need to be educated about global realities, to experience the material conditions that define reality for the majority of the world’s population. It was not my intention to disparage the more conventional type of study abroad, but rather to describe a service-learning experience that could be transformative for our students.

The proposal that emerged was for a rubric course entitled “Service-Learning in a Global Context.” Students would spend the first part of the course in the classroom, where they would learn about the social, political, and economic history of the target community. In the second part, they would participate in a thoughtfully designed service project addressing the particular needs of that community, and engage in structured reflection on their service experience. The very nature of the service experience would force the students to draw upon, or learn to develop, skills and capacities that often remain untapped in the traditional classroom.

Two of the students from the ASIANetwork trip, Matt Ryan and Lan Tran, returned to Vietnam with me in January 2008 as members of the inaugural course. They brought invaluable leadership and a measure of continuity to the second trip, which also provided an opportunity to collect more footage for the documentary. In the classroom portion, the students studied the Vietnam War and its social, political, and economic consequences. In country, they interned with Ken Herrmann’s NGO, the Da Nang/Quang Nam Fund, Inc. My students lived and worked with participating students from other schools around the country. They took part in organized activities at an Agent Orange group home, provided direct aid to the homeless and to families with sick children, and made a special visit by boat to the Hoa Van leper colony to deliver food and medical supplies.

In 2009, two of my colleagues teamed up to offer “Service-Learning in a Global Context” in Ghana.

Documentary Film

Fortunately I was able to devote a sabbatical semester and the rest of the summer of 2008 to the task of editing. My colleague, Stu Minnis, who teaches video production, shared some of this work with me, as did Matt. Another colleague, Lee Jordan-Anders, performed some piano pieces for the soundtrack. One of the pieces was composed by a former student. Indeed, one of the more satisfying aspects of the project was the way it brought together so many of the creative resources of our campus community.

A rough cut of *Making Peace with Vietnam* was ready by late August. We previewed this version of the film at several campus screenings during September. After some additional editing, we decided to enter it into a handful of film festivals for the 2009 season.

As documentaries go, *Making Peace with Vietnam* is a very modest film. It could have benefited considerably from some professional editing, audio engineering, and scoring. But these technical shortcomings are balanced to some extent by the compelling nature of the subject matter, for which it has been well received by audiences both stateside and abroad. The film won Best Long Documentary in the Beijing International Film Festival, as well as awards in the Red Rock Film Festival in Utah and the Buddhist Film Festival in Sri Lanka.

Epilogue

Four of the five students who participated in the original ASIANetwork research project have now graduated. Sarah Tytler entered the Peace Corps and is currently serving in Tonga. Matt Ryan was accepted into the graduate film program at Florida State University. Julie Maggioncalda is working toward an MSW degree at the University of Pennsylvania, with a concentration in international social work. Lauren Perry followed up the Vietnam experience by joining our first service-learning trip to Africa. She now works for a law firm in San Diego as she prepares for her next step. The only student that has not graduated yet is Lan Tran. The year after Lan returned from Vietnam, she landed a prestigious two-year fellowship from the Environmental Protection Agency to study groundwater contamination in the U.S. She will graduate in May.