TEACHING VIETNAM TO WESTERN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Jack D. Harris

In 1995 Hobart and William Smith Colleges affiliated with the Vietnam National University in Hanoi and launched its full-term study-abroad program in Vietnam. In 1999, after having fielded three full academic-term programs in Vietnam, Hobart and William Smith formed the Partnership for Global Education (PGE) with Union College (UC); and since its formation, this partnership has annually sponsored the Vietnam study-abroad programs and is celebrating its 17th anniversary. The study-abroad program is at the center of students learning about Vietnam and students take a gateway course on the Sociology of Vietnam and a three week language intensive course in Ho Chi Minh City prior to two months of study and internships in Hanoi.

The Sociology of Vietnam course honors the multi-dimensional complexity of Vietnam. It starts with the history of Vietnam, concentrating thematically on the waves of foreign invasions that have been the Vietnamese experience. The course shifts to looking at Vietnamese cultural patterns, patterns created during long occupations by the Chinese and later the French. Students learn about Tet and other celebrations and festivals, water puppetry, religion, Vietnamese gender and family patterns, differences between rural and urban life, regional differences, politics and economics, art and music, and the multiplicity of ethnic groups each with unique cultural patterns. The course turns to the 20th century Vietnamese struggles and vicories against French colonialism and the American War, concentrating on the Vietnamese experience of the war, and concludes by looking at Vietnam since 1975, including the disastrous occupation of Cambodia, the embracing of the market economy, the problems of corruption, and the trajectory of Vietnam’s future internal and external relationships. The course is supported by a rich BlackBoard site that contains historical and cultural materials, as well as contemporary articles on Vietnam. Our Vietnamese exchange scholars and exchange students provide real-life experiences and help with conversational Vietnamese.

* Professor of Sociology, Hobart and William Smith Colleges.
Thus, students going on the study-abroad program become re-cognizers of social and cultural patterns and can place locations and events in historical and political contexts. However, the course also provides a context for students to ask their own questions and arrive at different conclusions than the instructor. The pedagogy is straightforward: an enthusiasm for the subject and the country, combined with a sense of inquiry that places Vietnam in a relevant relation to contemporary issues. For example, the course starts with the following propositions:

**Why study Vietnam?**

1. Vietnam is an ancient and sophisticated society and culture;

2. Vietnam is the 13th most populous nation in the world, with over 92 million people;

3. Vietnam has been historically important geographically, at the crossroads of many other cultures. It is again important geographically and politically because of its location in southeast Asia, especially its proximity to China;

4. Vietnam will expand its importance as a global trading partner based on its rich natural and human resources;

5. Americans should study Vietnam to better understand our involvement in a failed war;

6. Of all of the Asian nations, Vietnam best bridges east and west given their almost 100 years of French influence;

7. Vietnam remains Communist-led, providing an opportunity to see the tensions between communism and the market-economy.

8. The effects of the global economy in Vietnam are much more apparent than in the United States.

Students come to understand Vietnamese historical and cultural patterns, including those that represent conflict and contradiction. They look at Vietnam’s progression from a colony, to a communist state, and to a free market economy. Thus, students come to understand Vietnam’s French colonial experience, the American war and its aftermath, what life was like in a command and control post-war communist society, and how that has changed by the development of a market economy.

In my view, based on this history of invasion and resistance, Vietnam is a marvel of endurance and optimism. The primary reason for this, I think, is a culture
that has been indefatigably future-oriented. Fortune is the dream and hope for a better future, and the Vietnamese have been denied that fortune for a very long time. The question remains, after impressive economic growth and more opportunities for the good life, how are the Vietnamese to be and to live, when the future has finally arrived?

In fact, contemporary Vietnam is not a settled place - there are substantial areas of conflict, contradiction, and change. Students examine these sources of conflict and contradiction and come to understand how political ideology and autocracy may conceal conflicts and contradictions. Students are asked the following:

Where Are the Strains for Change and Which Way Will Vietnam Go?

- What is the Cultural Basis for Consensus and Change?
- What is the Political Basis for Consensus and Change?
- What is the Economic Basis for Consensus and Change?
- What about China?

Students seek to understand how Vietnamese live with conflict in such a dynamic society, and what chances they assess for Vietnam’s success.

The course is not exclusively for students who are going to study abroad in Vietnam. The Sociology of Vietnam course is part of a larger Colleges-wide effort to internationalize the campus, to engage students in the worlds of other societies and their cultures, and to immerse students as participants and not simply visitors and consumers when they are abroad. With support from a Mellon grant, and later a US Department of Education Title VI grant, there has been considerable faculty development and the dramatic expansion of our library holdings. As part of our faculty development efforts, we now have a faculty member steering group for Vietnam studies and a number of faculty have modified their courses (such as Current Issues in Macroeconomics, What is Christianity, The Good City, and The Politics of Development) to include Vietnam-related content. A student interested in Vietnam may choose such courses as Sociology of Vietnam; Male and Female in East Asian Societies and Cultures; Vietnamese Literature in Translation; Buddhism; Feudal Women in France, Vietnam, and Japan or The War in Vietnam. To support the program and to reach more students, the faculty has developed a web-based product called IN FOCUS: Vietnam that highlights 15 mini-lectures on various topics related to Vietnam history and culture. In addition to preparing students for their trip to Vietnam, this course will have the benefit of preparing the students’ parents for their children’s trip as well.
The design of the Vietnam program is to provide an integrative learning experience, one that has pre- and post-study-abroad experiences. Students do not simply parachute into a society unprepared, and students return home with the expectation that they will, among other things, have opportunities to share their knowledge with students in the public schools, write for a journal, and continue course work, including self-instructional language study. Because of this we arrange activities to coordinate with the courses include seminars, symposia, guest speakers, musical events, art shows, and films, and have over the past several years hosted exchange students and faculty from Vietnam with support from ASIANetwork and The Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia.

While in Vietnam (on the study-abroad program), students attend presentations provided by Vietnam National University faculty and specialists in respective fields of the arts, and participate in field trips (to Hanoi-Halong Bay, the border region near China, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, Danang, and Hoi An) organized by the HWS faculty director of the program. Students learn about Vietnamese history, aspects of Vietnamese culture, and current social and political issues, as well as continue their Vietnamese language instruction. In addition, students take a course taught by the HWS faculty director, in the director’s field of expertise, and design and implement an independent field project or complete an internship. Independent projects are diverse and range from studying Vietnamese traditional medicine (with the student attending a course at the leading traditional medicine school, accompanied by a translator, and visiting several traditional medicine practitioners) to working as an intern at the American Embassy in the Foreign and Commercial Services area, to studying Vietnamese street children and the social service and educational resources available to them. Several students join the BRIDGE project which creates query-based lessons on Vietnamese topics for several classes in the Geneva elementary schools.

We continue to build lasting relationships with Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese academics and experts in a multitude of disciplines, as well as artists, musicians, and lots of families, from north to south in Vietnam and also in the United States. We also have committed to effective relationships with several Vietnamese organizations that provide student and faculty support and opportunities for study and internships while abroad. This web of relationships enliven and enriches our students’ and faculty’s experience and understanding of Vietnam on campus and when abroad and brings Vietnam home.
The sociology of Vietnam: conflict, colonialism, and catharsis

Description

In this course we explore the social world of Vietnam. We will study the varied and complex history, culture and social relations of Vietnam. Through our study of their institutions, arts, and artifacts, we will find ourselves immersed in the life world of Vietnam, and are likely to achieve a fuller appreciation of the modes and meanings of what it means to be Vietnamese, and what it means to be American.

We examine the many forces of social relations that impinge on Vietnamese life. This includes geography and geographic location, social institutions such as kinship, village, religion, economy, education, and arts, tribal and ethnic history and the continued influence of ethnic groups, and the diversity of its urban and rural regions. In addition, we examine Vietnam’s legacy of conflict and colonialism, including the American/Vietnam war and its human social, political and environmental effects on the nation.

Finally, we explore at how the Vietnamese are negotiating and seeking to reconcile and resolve the contradictions of socialist and capitalist theory and practice, as they seek to improve the lives of its people, and position themselves as a significant Southeast Asian political and economic force.

Course Objectives

(1) Develop a sophisticated sociological imagination as students engage in study of a dissimilar culture;

(2) Learn to appreciate societal, cultural and sub-cultural diversity and an interest in things and ways of life that are "different," acquiring the intellectual tools to understand these other ways of life;

(3) Learn how their own national and social location influence their assumptions and how they view the world;

(4) Become sensitive to issues of personal and social development, the distribution of power and rewards and how the quality of social relationships is everywhere a matter of concern;

(5) Become aware of how "modernity" has affected societies all over the world and how the peoples of the world are becoming increasingly interdependent;
(6) Become aware of the transformative power of sociological consciousness and their role as world citizens and seek to arrive at an understanding of social groups as well as exploring social problems and social-justice concerns;

(7) Become more sophisticated as observers, readers, and writers.

(8) Come to understand that ethics and morality require a careful and deliberate analysis in heterogeneous, multi-cultural societies and cross-cultural relationships.

Methods of Evaluation

Your work will include 3 short (5 page) papers (60%) and a fourth and final (10 page) paper (40%) and active participation in film discussions, guest lectures, and seminars, and positive contributions to class discussion about readings.

Reading List

Ashwill and Diep, Vietnam Today
Borton, After Sorrow
Duiker, Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam
Duong Thu Huong, Paradise of the Blind
Jamieson, Understanding Vietnam
Halberstam, The Making of A Quagmire
Kolko, Anatomy of a Peace
SarDesai, Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity
Templer, Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam
The Gior, The Traditional Village in Vietnam

Course Outline:

1. History and Cultural Patterns
Readings: Jamieson, Understanding Vietnam, Chapter 1
SarDesai, Vietnam..., Chapters 1, 2
Duiker, Sacred War..., Chapters 1-4

2. Organization & Structure:
Readings: Jamieson, Understanding Vietnam, Chapters 2-4

Tradition and Modernity:
The Gior, The Traditional Village in Vietnam
3. The American War
Readings: SarDesai, *Vietnam...,* Chapters 5, 6

**Its Aftermath**
Duiker, *Sacred War...,* Chapters 3-7, Epilogue
Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*
Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam, Chapters 5-7*
Borton, *After Sorrow*

4. Contemporary Assessments:
Readings: Duong, *Paradise of the Blind*

**Is Vietnam on the Right Path?**
SarDesai, *Vietnam...,* Chapters 7-10
Kolko, *Anatomy of a Peace*
Templer, *Shadows and Wind*
Ashwill and Diep, *Vietnam Today*

**Paper Topics and Due Dates:**
Paper One: "Distinctive Aspects of Vietnamese History", Wednesday, February 5
Paper Two: "Distinguishing Elements of Vietnamese Culture", Wednesday, March 5
Paper Three: "The American War: An Interpretation", Wednesday, April 9
Paper Four: "The Future of Vietnam & the Vietnamese", Tuesday, May 6