

**Western Theory – Vietnamese Praxis**  
*Four Years of Professional Collaboration in Vietnam*  
*as a Teacher Librarian:*  
*An Ethnographical Reflection*

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Abstract

This paper provides an ethnographical account of the experience of setting up an open access library of working alongside and in close collaboration with different parties within an academic environment over the period of four years in Hanoi. It provides useful lessons for consideration for those who would like to facilitate the blending of western practices in librarianship with local knowledge in developing countries such as Vietnam. It also presents a platform for an outside's view of the practice of teacher librarianship.

*"Where do we study and learn?*  
*We study and learn at school, college or university.*  
*We study and learn from books.*  
*We study and learn together from each other."*  
*Ho Chi Minh*

For teacher librarians, story telling is one of the tools of trade. I have a story to tell, a story in many voices. It is the story of my engagement in the practice of teacher librarianship in Vietnam. It is my story and it is their story. Like a beautiful piece of Vietnamese silk it is a story of many threads and like the history of the Vietnamese language it is a story of multiple voices.

Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese Han characters were used as the official written form of Vietnamese but the pronunciation was peculiarly Vietnamese. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of western missionaries, the new mandarins, a Latin based written form was devised. With the compilation of the *Vietnamese – Latin - Portuguese Dictionary* by Alexandre de Rhodes in 1651 this written form was made the official language of the French Administration in the 1900s. However it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Vietnamese patriots were able to use it as an effective vehicle for educating people because it was an easy

writing system to learn, that it became willingly and generally accepted by the Vietnamese people as their national script (Quoc ngu). In the beginning this script was invented to meet the needs of westerners but as much else has now been accepted, as a vehicle to serve Vietnamese needs.

For Vietnam, engagement with western library theory began with the arrival of the French in 1858. However, Vietnamese library practice has a much longer history. In 1070 Van Mieu "Temple of Literature" was built in Hanoi. The original purpose of this building was for the worshiping of the sages and saints of Confucianism. Six years later in 1076 the first university of Vietnam the national College, was built in the Temple grounds. In the beginning, in true Confucian spirit, this college was only for the princes of the realm but entrance criteria were later broadened to admit talented scholars from across Vietnam. It was essentially a school for the training of Vietnamese mandarins

In 1919 under the patronage of the French colonial government, when for the mandarin class of schooling the official language was now French; the Pierre Pasquier Library was established in Hanoi (picture). By 1939 it contained 92,163 books, 20% of which were in Vietnamese. Following the defeat of the French in 1954 it was renamed as the National Library of Vietnam and was Vietnamised under Soviet patronage and training where in turn the language of schooling for the mandarins had now become Russian. Almost as a cross section of tree trunk can reveal the climatic factors affecting its growth across the years, a cross sectional view the National Library's cataloguing systems reflects Vietnam's most recent foreign policy. French influenced to 1954 followed by the Russian BBK system and now post Doi Moi (Vietnamese Perestroika) some attempts to merge on their own terms, with the dominant US MARC compliant systems.

Such a brief telling of the story of Vietnam's engagement with the west has the danger of leading one to an over simplification of what has been and continues to be a very complex process. It is too simplistic to regard the development of libraries in non-western countries as a straightforward transition from 'old' to 'modern' based upon acquisition of knowledge and technologies originating in the west. The reality is much more multifaceted. Non-western countries with traditions of written history have developed various non-western storage and retrieval systems for the housing of records, and for the identification and organization of information resources that are in turn made available to client groups. As for any other non-western country, the Vietnamese praxis is uniquely Vietnamese but the goal for the practice of librarianship is generally a globally shared vision, incorporating the identification and organization of information according to the needs of the client communities.

As has already been signalled this is a multithreaded story I will now take you to November 1998 when I arrived in Hanoi where I was appointed as the Manager of Australian Vietnam Training (VAT) Project Centre Library.

This Project was set up by the Australian government (AusAID) in 1998 to support the Government of Vietnam's Human Resource Development objectives through provision of appropriate English language and technical skills training to Government employees and nominees for Australian Development Scholarships (ADS). Within the Project there are two key sub-projects, English Language and Technical Training. My specific brief was to establish a western style open access library to support the aims of The VAT Project as set

out in the Project Design Document, through the provision of high quality learning and teaching opportunities.

The VAT Project is housed in a refurbished four-story building with 12 classrooms, staff offices and library on the campus of the Hanoi University of Foreign Studies. Up to 60 Vietnamese and Australian teachers supported by two teacher librarians, six librarians and two computer network technicians work together to deliver training activities. The Library facilitates quality training by providing access to digital and non-digital resources and learning activities for both trainers and students. The principal English Language Training activities are Teacher In-service Education (TIE), Pre-departure Training for applicants to Australian Development Scholarships (P-DTP), and English for Specific Purposes. The principal Technical Training activities, which are delivered in English with simultaneous translations into Vietnamese, by short term Australian consultants, are: International Law, Training of the Trainer, Solid Waste Management, Urban Management, Negotiation Skills and Rural Project Management.

When I arrived there had been set up, a library space, housing various language teaching and learning materials and staffed by three Vietnamese trained librarians, one of who was nominated to act as the library coordinator. It was envisaged that this coordinator would act in a “counterpart” capacity to me. In the management structure of the project prior to my arrival, the Vietnamese library coordinator was reporting to the coordinator of the Pre-departure Training Program.

There was a relatively rich diversity of teaching and learning materials available but the teaching staff were expressing a degree of frustration, as what they saw in the space housing the materials met their expectations of what a library should look like (Electronic catalogue/Dewey/ borrowing system) but they felt that their teaching needs and the learning needs of their students were not being met. They had all the physical ingredients needed to make an open access library work. What was lacking was the overlay of experience in operating a library that could meet the needs of the teaching programmes. There was the need for the insights, understandings and experience of a teacher librarian so that the library could actually service the teaching and learning needs of the Project community.

The primary focus for most of the teachers at this stage was the student's linguistic needs. Most teachers were aware of the deficit of experience in using and accessing information that students had but did not have a coherent methodology for developing the students' information handling skills. Many teachers also felt that they did not have the time. The teachers were experiencing difficulties in determining how students could be taught the information handling skills. The teachers experienced intense frustration on taking students on library orientation tours and watching as these new students wandered off to explore something they had seen, chatted in small groups, or looked on with glazed eyes as the mysteries of the open-access library were being explained. They were clearly easily distracted and were taking in very little of what they had been told. On reflection it seems that the teacher's methods in developing students' information skills fitted into two categories.

The first category was the “throw ‘em in at the deep end” method. The students were given assignments (or tasks) and the teachers hoped that by doing the tasks or assignments the students learnt how to use the Library. As the students moved towards the Library with trepidation the teachers went to the staff room, lamenting the fact that the learners were probably not going to do their task well. Little explicit instruction was given in how to use the

Library, either because the teacher felt that it wasn't their role, or that there wasn't enough time to do so. Whatever the reason, an essential aspect of the process of preparing to work in the new academic environment went largely unlearned. There may have been some critical evaluation of how effectively the students had used the Library at the end of the assignment, but, by and large, teachers gave little time to remedial work on how to use the Library because "there wasn't enough time in such a busy program".

The second method of developing information skills was the discreet item approach. In this method, the ability to access information was taught as a stand-alone skill. The teacher devised activities or assignments, the sole purpose of which was to teach the students information skills. While this approach is clearly better than the "throw 'em in at the deep end" approach, it too has serious shortfalls. First of all, the students invariably found these kinds of tasks incredibly boring, and this was reflected both in the attitude with which they approached the tasks, and the learning outcomes. Because it was boring they tended to recall very little of it. Secondly, because the skills were taught as discreet items, students often failed to see the relevance of the skills to their learning needs. Thirdly they were frustrated by the focus on seemingly trivial and irrelevant tasks.

This failure to see the relevance of the skills tended to result in students failing to recall or employ the information skills they had been taught in the performance of their work or assignments. Another problem was that there was no integration of these skills into the curriculum of the program as a whole. The students approached information skills as an optional extra to the program, one that could be dropped, or skipped over when the pressure of getting assignments done or preparing for exams hit them.

The model of education that was the only educational reference for the students further complicated these issues. The Vietnamese education system has been one designed to teach people to do things the one right way as defined by the authority figure. Where students are taught to recite what is heard or read without critically interacting with the information as it moves in and out of short-term memory. In this type of exchange the information leaves no tracks, and independent thinking skills are not nurtured let alone developed.

A very different model of education to that we are familiar with in the west? Not really.

Current western educational systems predominantly evolved to produce workers for the Industrial Revolution's factory – based economy, for work that requires patience, docility, and the ability to endure boredom. Students learned to sit in orderly rows, to absorb facts by rote, and to move as a group through the material regardless of individual learning differences. Where are the differences? Just a different stage of development.

In theory we accept as a given that learning is not about acquiring information but:

- thinking
- understanding
- knowledge
- wisdom

How ingrained in our thinking is the right answer approach?

By the time the average person finishes university they will have taken over 2,600 tests, quizzes and exams. The right answer approach becomes ingrained in our thinking. This

may be fine for some mathematical problems where there is only one right answer. The difficulty is that most of life doesn't present itself in this way. Life is ambiguous; there are many right answers – all depending on what you are looking for. But if you think that there is only one right answer, then you will stop looking as soon as you find one.

Vietnam is the flavour of moment in the global economic community. It has a vast source of cheap semi-skilled labour. But as a nation they are aware of issues such as "How many factory jobs will be left in 2019"? Except for a few technicians to watch over the control panels, tomorrow's factories will be automatic, with computers directing robot workers. In the west the market place now requires a different style of product. They require workers with initiative and who are willing to be life long learners. Vietnam is aware of this and is endeavouring to leapfrog the development process in order to successfully equip their workforce to meet these demands. It is attempting to ensure that they have the opportunity to develop the key intellectual skills of

- thinking analytically,
- making judgements,
- reasoning quantitatively, and
- balancing opposed points of view.

This they are planning to achieve through the provision of high quality learning opportunities and university libraries are recognised as being a key component of such a strategy.

It is generally understood that as educators we are no longer able to guarantee student mastery of content and that we must focus on the process of how to learn and how to think. It is the role of the teacher librarian to help students master the process of appropriate information retrieval and use. The world economy that our students are inheriting is one where excellent information skills are essential if they are to succeed. These skills are not used in isolation from each other, nor are they used in isolation by discipline. They build from individual actions to personal decision-making to social interaction and philosophy.

The learning environment that is required to support such a learning organisation is where all members cultivate their innate desire to learn. The organisation relinquishes its role as a delivery system for discreet and often fragmented bits of data packaged in the guise of curriculum. They learn how to create processes that encourage the continuous improvement of one's abilities, the expansions of one's interests and the growth of one's character. Such an education is good for the individual student, good for the economy, and good for ... society (Bostingl 1992, p. 67).

In this world of increasing diversity and global interconnections we need to be as comfortable with answers from people who live halfway around the world as we are with the opinions of friends and neighbours. The "one right answer" concept just isn't appropriate anymore. Dichotomistic, product-orientated modes of thought and behaviour do not fit the needs of the global village, which must be viewed, as one unified system of diverse people and processes.

What is needed in educational institutions is students working alongside their teachers who are process orientated, replacing the old product orientated paradigm of teaching and testing. A learning organisation where teachers and students take time to figure out how they did their work together and how their collective and individual efforts might be fine-tuned to maximise success and optimise collective and individual learning processes. Quality learning comes from quality processes.

One small part of that organisation is the classroom/faculty teacher and the teacher librarian working collaboratively to design and teach learning programs where the emphasis is on the nature of the learning process and the creation of knowledge rather than the methods of instruction to transfer information.

At the VAT Project we have undertaken to ensure that students leave programs with information skills that equip them to deal with and make sense of information for which they may not have an immediate need, as well as the skills of articulating an information need, and seeking out and evaluating information to meet a need. We attempt to do in three to nine months what is done in primary and secondary schools over a period of twelve years.

Learning to learn requires that learners acquire the ability to identify their own learning needs, formulate learning objectives, locate and identify appropriate resources and strategies to accomplish objectives, carry out the planned learning and evaluate learning outcomes. (Eisenberg and Berkowitz) These outcomes are paramount for all learners and an essential component of lifelong education.....learning to learn suggests that all learners begin to question the habitual givens about their thoughts, values, attitudes, and knowledge and become critically reflective thinkers (Galbraith, 1995).

As students learn new skills and attitudes, they must be given ample opportunity to practice the skills in controlled and safe environments until a significant degree of confidence and executive control has been achieved. "Executive Control" refers to students learning how to learn and the acquiring of new strategies as they practice them in real learning situations. Through a blend of immersion and continuous guided reflection in real learning situations the process of learning to learn is given the chance to take root. The challenge to the educator is to provide a program that allows for the proper matches between learners and experiences.

The VAT Project is housed on the campus of the Hanoi University of Foreign Studies. This university like most in Vietnam is attempting to come to terms with changing perceptions of how the tertiary sector should service their client communities.

There have been dramatic changes in the culture and the economy of Vietnam since the introduction of Doi Moi in 1986 and the 2001 trade agreement with the US have resulted in a focussing by government and educational institutions on the pivotal relationship between libraries and education.

Vietnam News Headline 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2000:

**Deputy PM Briefed on knowledge-based growth**

Senior World Bank Officials yesterday discussed with the Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem ways to tackle challenges posed by the emerging global economy. They talked with Khiem about a national conference on *Knowledge and Development* planned to be held in the country in July.....Khiem was briefed on how developing countries could effectively take advantage of the global revolution in information and communication technologies to accelerate development.

A particular example of this focus has been a World Bank Higher Education initiative in Vietnam where millions of dollars US have been allocated to the tertiary sector for the provision of library facilities.

The Hanoi University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) in the last quarter of 2001 received funding from the World Bank Higher Education Funding Project to build and stock a new library on their campus. The Rector of HUFS approached the VAT Project with a request to provide training for their university library staff. This request was made in view of the university being the host institution for the Project and his having watched the development of the VAT Centre Library. He has been impressed by the collaborative teaching model that he sees in action and the way that The VAT Centre Library teacher librarians manage the centre. More importantly, he was able to make the connection with what would be needed in order for Vietnam to create libraries that could function as effective open access facilities. Library staff that possessed attitudinal characteristics of service and the necessary professional expertise to develop the capacity of users to become information literate. He wanted to see the same model of library services for his new facility recognising that what he was asking for meant creating a whole new set of behavioural characteristic for Vietnamese librarians.

The challenge has been accepted and the developmental strategies that have been subsequently devised for HUFS are based on the four years of experience of working with the students and the bicultural teaching dyads of the VAT Project.

A key component of the training strategy for the library personnel has been the identification and provision of opportunities for the Hanoi University of Foreign Studies Library staff to come to understand the new requirements of their work as librarians in an open access library. When asked to attempt something new, we use our existing knowledge and tools of different kinds to close the gap between what we already know and what we need to know. Routine tasks are generally well defined. Responding to new or non-routine tasks requires conscious thought and is directly associated with new learning. To close gaps in our knowledge there must be models for how to proceed to aid the learning of new knowledge. It is planned that through the act of learning about "Open-access Library Management" the staff of the HUFS library will become active participants in the construction of their own knowledge.

It was recognised that the HUFS Librarians would need to revise their beliefs about the nature of University Librarianship.

They will be having to:

- ☐ Respond to new tasks, to
- ☐ Understand new concepts and
- ☐ Develop new procedures

All of which will make the work more demanding.

They will need to be able to adapt to new situations:

- ☐ How technology is applied,
- ☐ How the demands of changing work practice are manifested and
- ☐ Identifying the changing organization of work.

These changes can best be understood at the workplace level, where they manifest themselves in particular work practices.

However, like the US - Vietnam trade agreement the introduction of Western concepts of Librarianship can be seen as a challenge to prevailing Vietnamese cultural norms, a challenge that will need to be addressed on their terms in the Vietnamese context.

In principle, Vietnam has adopted a market style economy and since 1986 the pace of development and change has been hectic. However it has been a relatively uneven and selective development. Within the library community this uneven nature of the development is reflected in issues such as the generally accepted understanding of the need to implement western styles of managing resources if libraries are to become open access facilities, coupled with the perceived threat to the status quo that such a move unleashes.

A particular example is the adoption of the Dewey system and notions of quality client service. These notions are culturally challenging and problematic for Vietnam. The Vietnamese language sustains a rigid form of hierarchical interpersonal relationships. The concept of service quality, which is a widely accepted notion in western librarianship, is a difficult concept for Vietnamese to put into practice. Serving others can be seen as placing one low in the social hierarchy. It is happening but it is a difficult path for Vietnamese librarians to tread. Vietnam's reading of politics and history is very different to the US centric version presented in Dewey.

"Minor" issues on a global scale but capable of disempowering Vietnamese librarians who are charged with delivering services to their learning communities. Learning communities that are developing very western expectations of library services.

Jurgen Habermas's social theory portrays human relations as dialectics, that is, a constant give and take between individuals and groups. All power relations in our society involve control and resistance. One strategy that can be used to resist hegemony is by groups telling their own stories of the way they believe things are. Resistance is an intelligent response and the Vietnamese praxis will be effective only if the players in this praxis of change are given the opportunity to tell and share their stories in their own words.



**Nguyen Hong Chung**  
**Teacher Librarian**  
**VAT Centre Library**

**Understandings Developed through Working as a Teacher Librarian the VAT Project through 1999 - 2002**

August 1999, back from Australia after one year and a half of undertaking a Masters degree in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages, my mind was fresh and my spirits were high. I had my regular work at the Vietnam National University where I was a lecturer in the English department, but I had I set myself the immediate goal of looking for further employment opportunities in order to apply the knowledge and skills that I had so recently acquired.

I applied for a position as a teacher of English at the Vietnam Australia Training Project and then found out that the position had become redundant in the event of student numbers being cut. I was subsequently invited to apply for a position as a teacher librarian working in partnership with an Australian teacher librarian in a modern open access library.

My appointment was to replace a librarian who had previously worked in the capacity of library coordinator. However, my predecessor did not have the teaching qualifications or the teaching experience deemed essential to best fulfil her roles and responsibilities and was therefore no longer required.

However, looking for a teacher librarian in Vietnam is like “trying to conjure water out of the desert”. In fact, it is no exaggeration at all to say that there are no teacher librarians in Vietnam. That is up to now, as I am more than half way becoming the first one. Teacher librarianship is a totally new concept and the title might even cause a look of confusion to appear upon the faces of several lecturers in librarianship or university library managers across the country. Before my appointment, the Project could not find a qualified person who both had library and teaching degrees. It was then decided that the best strategy was to recruit a teacher and then provide on-the-job training in librarianship.

The next hurdle to be negotiated was to find a teacher who was willing to work as a library professional, almost a mission impossible. Teachers in many ways are held in far higher esteem than their library colleagues. It is still true of today that teaching staff are better paid, and more respected in Vietnam. In fact, the common practice at educational institutions in Vietnam is that teachers who can no longer perform in the classroom due to limited capacity are often directed to work in “libraries”. The question now is why a young promising teacher like myself was willing to trade his status for a career that is regarded as both obscure and insecure and work as a teacher librarian.

To be honest, when I was offered the job, I said to myself I would try it for a trial period as an experiment. Once I became more and more involved in the work, I came to realise that it was indeed as interesting as any teaching job. Approximately three years have gone by and I have always considered it a truly rewarding experience full of challenges.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of all was trying to overcome the feeling of loss of status in the eyes of other Vietnamese university teachers. Taking part in meetings with classroom teachers was not easy and sometimes caused resentment. Having fewer contacts with students also mean that they value teacher librarians less than their “true” teachers in the

classroom. All these difficulties are psychological hurdles that I had to overcome on a daily basis.

The fact that librarianship was a completely new avenue was also very intimidating. It took me months to get a feel for the work and almost a year to build up enough confidence to perform effectively in the role.

There are numerous difficulties that are commonly shared with other teacher librarians around the world. One of the most intimidating tasks that I would like to mention has been the on-going “tug of war” between the classroom teachers and the teacher librarians over numerous education issues such as the research process models, whether information literacy should be incorporated in the curricula or should be taught by teachers in the classroom or co-taught by both teaching partners in the library, just to name a few.

How did I overcome these challenges?

Over the course of three years, I can now take great pride in saying that I have managed the job quite well. Problems and difficulties were inherent but were dealt with in the most effective manner. This success is first and foremost attributable to the staffing structure at the VAT Project.

In the terms of employment, I am considered as an academic staff member on equal footing with any other teachers in the project. Together with the library manager, I am a member of the management committee and thus participate in every decision making process. A great source of assistance comes daily from the library manager who has been at my side and with her experience and expertise; we have promoted the library’s position well in all the education processes. On the more technical side of librarianship, I was helped a lot by the Project’s generosity in funding me a distance education course in teacher librarianship with Charles Sturt University in Australia. With the staffing structure, the theoretical knowledge and the tutelage of the Australian teacher librarian, I have made a considerable contribution to realising the goals of the VAT Centre Library. The fact that year in year out, the library has won the nod from even the most cynical of teachers and students alike, tells it all.

Essentially what was achieved during this period can be summarised as follows:

#### **Collaboration with the academic programs teachers**

- Model of cultural dyads supporting each other in teacher librarianship: One local and one expatriate.
- Working in close partnership with teachers in planning weeks, throughout the course and in evaluation weeks in areas such as curriculum, delivery of information literacy skills, acquisition of resources.
- Working closely with students and providing services that they require giving consideration to quantity and quality. Positive feedback from students is paramount to the achievement of the library goals.
- Using management as a channel to inform staff of the mission, philosophy and the important roles it plays in the delivery of all programs at VAT.

### **Library advocacy**

- Library as a key, integral component of the project in the design document
- Library teacher librarians are members of management committees (having a say in all decisions)
- Employing not only library degree holders for positions in the library but also teachers
- Networking with local professionals in exchange of information and experiences.

**Phuong Minh Nguyet, Vu Bao Linh, Pham Thi Hue, Nguyen Duc Manh, and Pham Xuan Hoan**

### **VAT Centre Librarians**

**A selection of comments from a focus discussion group where they reflected on their experiences working at the VAT Project Library:**

Motivation to work in libraries in Vietnam is very low. There is no respect for the position of librarian or the work done.

Most of the staff working in libraries do not have library training and this demotivates the trained staff.

Most people think that being a librarian is a very “simple” job.

The librarians think that it is a lot of work to create an open access library and are not interested in doing the job. They are worried about students having access to the books as they might take (steal) them. Maybe the library will run out of books. They think that making an open access library means putting in a computer system, putting the books out and making sure that the books are not stolen cut up or put in the wrong place.

In the Vat Library the thing that makes our library work well is that we spend time training the participants when they come into the centre but in experience at university there was no help to learn how to use the library effectively.

In university the library is closed (access) not open we depend on the librarian but they only give us the rules and regulations...not how to find a book.

Training for users is really important.

The new DaNang University Library (a modern library facility built and resourced with overseas funding) is being used as a study hall for students because the librarians have not been trained. They sit back and wait for the students to ask a question.

When we are trained to be librarians we are not taught about how to work with the users.

For the first month that I came to work in the VAT Centre library I was so worried...It was all so new.

It was a flexible system where we worked as a team.

The way we think about libraries has changed since working at the VAT Project. We now know about meeting learner needs.

Changes in Libraries in Vietnam...we need new course materials new infrastructure in the universities that teach about how to become a librarian. When I came to work in the VAT library it was the first time that I had seen an open access library.

We need more training in English for Librarians so that we can take advantage of the many sources of information that are available digitally.

If you work in a library and are not familiar with the Internet you are way behind the library users.

### **Implications for Vietnamese librarians**

- The need for English language training to be effective in the role as librarian
- The traditional custodial role of the librarian is deeply embedded and needs to be actively addressed
- The need to be aware of the snare of seeing the Internet as the answer to all information problems
- Need for the professionalization of the role of the librarian
- The provision of funding for new buildings and resources is only meeting a part of the need

### **Conclusion**

Socrates realized 2000 years ago, knowing the right questions to ask brings one closer to wisdom than having all the answers. We don't have all the answers but we are learning a great deal by seeking out the right questions.

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