

Social Education 57(7), 1993, pp. 387-392
1993 National Council for the Social Studies

Teaching as Transformation: The Need to Redesign Courses on Vietnam

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The specter of Vietnam has been evoked by numerous politicians during the last few years. Observing the recent emphasis on Vietnam in our society brings about feelings of both despair and hope. The despair arises from realizing that the perception of issues emanating from the Vietnam War has been shallow, essentially superficial. Hope has swelled because, on a fundamental level, the response of people in the United States was in many respects cautious enough to limit President Bush's options in pursuing a foreign war. Almost in spite of our educational system, U.S. citizens have been touched by the Vietnam experience. They sense the importance of studying Vietnam, whether they have lived through that era or not. On a conscious level, however, the key issues remain unarticulated.¹

At this juncture in history, it is crucial for teachers at all levels to commit themselves to the endeavor of teaching about Vietnam, and to reassess their approach to the subject. For example, we need to pursue aggressively community projects that raise general levels of knowledge on Asian culture and history, and outreach programs that help design cultural units on Asia for elementary and secondary teachers. I would like to suggest one approach, and reflect on several implications of teaching about Vietnam. The methodological approach I take in my own college course, "Vietnam: Revolution in Full Circle," will also be of use to elementary and secondary schoolteachers-as an example of new directions.²

Orientations and Content: The Issue of Culture and Historical Truth

My first argument centers around the idea of orientation and content. The majority of teaching about Vietnam centers on U.S. involvement. This is particularly ironic because one of the crucial errors made by the United States in the war was misunderstanding the cultural, historical, and political environment of Vietnam. Part of this stems from an understandable insecurity on the part of educators in addressing the *foreign* nature of an Eastern culture. Even the place names are difficult to pronounce. This does not mean, however, that events occurring before the Westerners arrived on the scene were unimportant. Moreover, by not exploring this history, we cannot observe a true understanding of twentieth-century Vietnam.

The course I teach at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho, is an upper division course. In the syllabus, the course description clearly states the importance of consciously choosing a focus that addresses Vietnam in its own right:

Courses on Vietnam have become increasingly popular in the United States during the latter half of the 1980s. Why is a country that as the 1990s begin has no diplomatic relations with the United States, that is located in a geographic area of the globe remote to U.S. students be of interest to them? For most it is a matter of growing up with the myths of an Indochina war, and the idea that the Vietnam War has shaped our modern social and political values. Although recognizing these rationales, this course will not focus on U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Instead the approach to this course is to look at the whole context of Vietnamese history and culture, to be recognized in its own right, without a teleological bias. The historical fact is that Vietnam has survived a whole series of invasions and conquests throughout almost half of the last 2,500 years. Most courses on Vietnam have an underlying question of how a

small, backwards country defeated the most technologically advanced nation in the world. This course has an underlying question: what is the Vietnamese identity? This question will allow us a broad perspective on significant questions of twentieth-century ideologies, philosophical spheres of convergence and divergence between East and West, and the historical processes of revolution and anticolonialism. These questions are not just of intellectual interest, but also apply to individual value systems and key ethical questions in a complex world.

This course's required reading (table 1) and lecture topics (table 2) underscore the multidimensional and broad historical content of Vietnamese culture. The classic tale of Kieu (Nguyen 1983), important as an enduring symbol of perseverance, is a great introduction to Confucian values in Vietnamese society. Short stories by the activist Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh in *The Moon Bamboo* (1989) address topics that range from losing parents to bombs to mythical fairy tales. All incorporate elements of Buddhist philosophy and emphasize the importance of Buddhism for the average Vietnamese. Students think that Woodside's (1971) classic text comparing Confucianism in Vietnam and China is difficult to read, but that does not detract from the importance of the material to an understanding of this basic philosophy. Moreover, at the college level students *should* be exposed to challenging works of scholarship on Vietnam because the preponderance of works on Vietnam do not use Vietnamese sources and often contain great amounts of bias.

Bias is not a problem with Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An* (1972), one of the more objectively written accounts of revolutionary activity in Vietnam, which uses Vietnamese language interviews and presents conceptually insightful analyses of factors such as organization and ideology. Finally, James Freeman's presentation of numerous interviews with Vietnamese refugees to the United States in *Hearts of Sorrow* (1989) synthesizes many of the historical and cultural elements of the course in a way that students can understand on a personal level.

Many other valuable texts are available that offer a wide array of perceptions and factual bases. William Duiker's numerous books on Vietnamese nationalism and colonialism are excellent works of history, in addition to his more concerted monographs such as *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict* (1986). Classic and new standards include David Marr's *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* (1971) and Ngo Vinh Long's *Before the Revolution* (reprinted in 1991), Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietcong Memoir* (1985), and Jean Lacouture's *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography* (currently out of print). The history of Vietnamese resistance groups are well documented in Huynh Kim Khanh's *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (1982) and Hue-Tam Ho Tai's *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (1992). Keith Weller Taylor's *The Birth of Vietnam* (1983) has recently been issued in a paperback edition by the University of California Press. Except for works in French, no full-range textbook on Vietnamese history that uses Vietnamese and Chinese sources exists.

The above readings can help prepare elementary and secondary schoolteachers to devise class activities on aspects of Vietnamese and general Asian culture. For example, teachers in world literature may select a story from *Before the Revolution* (Ngo 1991) to read in class. Another reading exercise could be based on Thich Nhat Hanh's earlier collection of shorter Buddhist stories, *The Pine Gate* (1987). A good source for an introduction to Vietnamese culture generally is *Vietnamese Realities* (Minister of Foreign Affairs 1967). This book is available from Pan Asian Publications Inc. (29564 Union City Blvd., Union City, CA 94587), which also distributes catalogues of translated Vietnamese general literature, folktales, and children's stories.

Although students are somewhat resistant to the idea of not focusing specifically on the Vietnam War, we cannot ignore twenty-five hundred years of history and hope to understand the significance of the modern period. It is important to explain that students will gain an understanding of that war if they

study the historical breadth and cultural aspects of Vietnam. A teacher can reinforce this concept by specifically pointing out connections between earlier events and the later Vietnam War. Early uses of guerrilla warfare in resisting the Chinese, the key role of Vietnamese women in maintaining the Vietnamese identity, the wooden spikes hidden in the Bach Dang River that devastated the Mongol attack, rivalries during the periods of dynastic independence, the important historical southern expansion, and the differences between the delta and mountain Vietnamese—all are salient issues in the twentieth century. This idea of relevance and reinforcement can also play a part at the elementary and secondary school level; teachers can infuse these ideas in several social study areas organized topically throughout the curriculum, such as religions, World War II, or revolutions.

A guiding principle of interaction can inform both the standard college-level lectures and readings and the educational activities of elementary and secondary classrooms. The use of interactive lecture and reading discussions can enhance the sense of continuity and relevance in the course. I use a small-group discussion technique³ that focuses on a series of primary course themes, two to three subtopics, integration of the material with other ideas, personal application, and evaluation of the material. To facilitate a critical-thinking approach, students bring prepared discussion outlines to class for their small-group discussions. One step toward preparing these discussion outlines is to select one of ten primary course themes and prepare to discuss it in relation to the material (table 3). One student, for example, explored the theme of filial piety presented in the lecture material through the primary course theme of "the role of Confucian culture in shaping Vietnamese society." She specifically linked material learned in lecture to the reading. One approach for the elementary and secondary teacher to bring out these connections through student input would be to first present information on Confucianism or Buddhism, and then have the students read aloud or arrange skits of Asian fairy tales. Later, art projects, essays, or further discussion can link the broader themes.

Thus, in the case of Vietnam (as, indeed, in all history) teachers should consider connecting culture and what kinds of historical questions should be asked. The focus of the course, the primary course themes, and the breadth of the cultural context considered are significant because the broader these questions are shaped, the closer we can arrive at some of the historical truths, and the better we can understand the wider continuities and implications of the Vietnamese conflict.

Teaching as Transformation: Process and Meaning

Having argued that the content and focus of teaching about Vietnam should be expanded, I would suggest that the *process* whereby we teach about Vietnam is also significant, and can lead to a key goal of education: true transformation of students into critical thinkers with a content base. Many routes lead to this goal, and dozens of outstanding teachers painstakingly teach about Vietnam. Teachers, however, also have a pronounced tendency to rely on television documentaries and feature films on the Second Indochina War, utilizing the strengths of a multimedia, multidimensional teaching environment. While teaching about Vietnam should include the excellent documentaries and films that are widely available, it seems, however, that relying too heavily on the television in teaching the content of the Vietnamese conflict abrogates our responsibility to our students. It is almost a paradox that we rely so heavily on a medium that is, indeed, an actor in modern warfare. Furthermore, passively watching the war through the eyes of journalists and artistic directors is not appropriate to the scope of our historical task for three reasons:

1. We need to directly face our students. Maybe we are not as eloquent as the guts and gore of the visual, but our students deserve some direct interaction with their teachers. We need to look them in the eye and talk about Vietnam.
2. We need to conduct the necessary research to present learning activities that are deep and well-rounded

rather than the sound-bite mentality and dramatization of television documentaries.

3. We need to interact because we need to learn, to ask and re-ask questions. This process can lead to some reevaluation of fundamental questions, basic premises, and new conclusions.

Preparing class activities is a time-consuming task, but has several advantages over a documentary, for example, breadth of material, new questions and foci, and the possibility of new interpretations.

Covering Breadth of the Material

Class activities allow students to explore a broad range of historical contexts and issues. Because of the difficulty of exploring a foreign culture for U.S. students, I prepare study guides that include a lecture outline, terms (especially Vietnamese names), and (often) documents, maps, or charts. For instance, in the lecture on Vietnamese anticolonialism (table 4), the students realize the broad dimensions of Vietnamese history: that there was a fundamental crisis of reform or revolution in Vietnamese Confucian society, that Ho Chi Minh was not the entire Vietnamese revolution, that there were earlier and contemporaneous nationalist leaders (including religious leaders), and that the ultimate organizational capacity of the Indochinese Communist Party in many ways reflected the necessity of the coalition tactic of combining with other nationalists, thereby broadening the ideological foundation of the fight for independence. This lecture material is reinforced by literary materials in Ngo Vinh Long (1991) and the autobiographies in Freeman (1989). Thus, a combination of learning activities can enhance the scope of the lesson and students' intellectual engagement.

New Questions and Foci

Teachers can also ask questions that journalists and documentary makers may have neglected. Teachers should note that the world for average Vietnamese people was not divided into Communist and anti-Communist, and, similar to the Japanese, the Vietnamese people seem to display an ability to adopt and even syncretize ideologies, making them receptive to outside religions and philosophies. Given these facts, your students might consider, did the mixture of elements in several ideologies diffuse the range of action? Did the Leninist organizational pattern make for a more effective ability to act for the Marxists? What elements of belief, colonial collaboration, and organization made the Catholic Vietnamese a stronger societal force than their numbers would indicate?

For many Asian people's ideologies, the hinge, in general, has always been the issue of moral leadership. Therefore, the ethical views of any ideology is important. The exploration of the ethical bases of Confucianism, Marxism, nationalism, Buddhism, and Catholicism in the context of anticolonial activity can lead to suggestive and sometimes new interpretations, which is the third advantage to a directly interactive approach to teaching about Vietnam. Teachers of history should take an active responsibility in challenging our students by posing new questions and interpretations.

New Interpretations

One need not be a specialist to advance new ideas for analyzing Vietnamese history. The obvious biases of many materials derived from the Vietnamese conflict encourage a healthy skepticism. Taking a more recent popular interpretation with serious flaws as an example, the deluge of post propter hoc analyses of the post-1975 human rights abuses in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have obscured the fact that Marxism was a moral alternative for many Vietnamese because of its emphasis on social justice. Even more difficult to understand is how Marxism appeared to the Vietnamese, whose Confucian sense of social responsibility had a genuine symmetry with Marxism. Moreover, beyond the question of Eastern and Western systems, Marxism as a prominent ideology in the twentieth century deserves some study, especially in the little understood field of Marxist ethics. For example, a popular view among Asian Marxists was that the implementation of a communist state eliminated the need for ethics. It was not a case that the end justified the means, but rather that in the creation of a communist society, the end

eradicated the need for ethical means, because equality, freedom, and justice were inherent in a communist society. By understanding this rationale, we can gain insight into the actions of Vietnamese communists throughout the last six decades.

Teachers can explore these themes of ideology, organization, and moral issues with students in the context of examining new interpretations, by posing new questions. For example, how relevant to the Vietnamese reality is the widely accepted interpretation first posited by Robert Shaplen (1966) that at the end of 1945, had the United States supported the cause of Vietnamese independence led by Ho Chi Minh, Ho would have become an attenuated communist? We cannot ignore that the Viet Minh (the anti-Japanese resistance group) was definitely controlled by the Indochinese Communist Party, and that the leadership of the ICP—particularly Ho Chi Minh—were dedicated internationalist communists.

The question that Shaplen does not ask, although equally important, is: If the Viet Minh used a national liberation ideology to gain mass support, could they have succeeded in importing Marxism to the larger Vietnamese society? It is significant that as a result of the First Indochina War, the Viet Minh existed for another decade and later the pattern of national liberation, not an emphasis on class struggle, was resurrected for the National Liberation Front. This issue of interpretation is important because the phrasing of Shaplen's argument of a lost opportunity is almost an exercise in pathos and ethnocentrism that presupposes the tragic consequence of later increasing involvement by the United States. Why not look at the organizational and ideological realities of 1945 Vietnam in its own context? Why not examine the differences between the North and South and the issue of coalitional politics and the goal of national liberation? If one is to look at later history, why not ask why Ngo Dinh Diem was able to consolidate political power in South Vietnam after 1954, initially *without* U.S. support?

Several exercises can allow students to search for both the content and new ideas in the context of Vietnam. Class activities could include creating time lines, learning songs, reenacting famous episodes in Vietnamese history, or performing folktales in skits. Specifically, girls may want to do a story based on the famous Trung sisters who fought against the Chinese occupation during a.d. 40-42. High school juniors and seniors may want to explore the various Vietnamese anticolonial groups that existed in the twentieth century. As a smaller unit in U.S. history, the Vietnamese famine of 1945 under the Japanese occupation, which decimated the population, might be compared to the Holocaust. Another comparative venture might be to inject Vietnam into a topical curriculum area, such as revolution, ideology, or warfare. Finally, students at most levels could explore biographical approaches, especially in studying some of the Vietnamese kings such as Dinh Bo Linh (Dinh dynasty, 968-980), Le Loi (Lê dynasty, 1428-1527), and Gia Long who founded the last Vietnamese dynasty (Nguyen dynasty, 1802-1945), and modern revolutionaries such as Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940), Ho Chi Minh (1890- 1969), and Vo Nguyen Giap (1912-).

Given the emotional content and political relevance of Vietnam as a topic, a social studies unit on Vietnam can result in a transformative experience for both teacher and students. It is easy to manipulate the emotions of students when teaching about Vietnam; it is more difficult, and more rewarding, to present various viewpoints at the same time allowing analysis to enter the teaching environment. For example, Lewis-Clark State College has a 30 percent "nontraditiona" student population; the Vietnam class included veterans who, to a person, remarked that the class helped them understand their experiences in a historical and cultural context, even though they had spent years in Southeast Asia. The students who were too young to remember the war directly also discussed the personal importance of the course to their understanding of past and current social trends. For instance, one relevant insight about current society raised in several oral presentations by younger students was the treatment of the returned Vietnam veteran as different than other war veterans. They asked if this was because the war was

undeclared or because it was the first U.S. defeat. This student-raised question explored the significance of the Vietnam conflict in relation to current events.

In addition to these intellectual transformations of content breadth and interpretation, and a sensitization to the historical reality of a culture other than our own, teaching about Vietnam is an experience of transformation in a deep personal sense. We are all affected by our pedagogical experiences, and history teachers around the world complain not only of the lessening standards of historical knowledge, but of an increasing cynicism and desensitization on behalf of our students to the fellowship of the human community. We rightfully blame factors such as a quick pace technology, television, weak family structures, and a society that does not adequately cherish education. One might consider adding to the list that teachers, overworked and undervalued, have become disillusioned. Teaching about Vietnam can therefore be a stimulus for both teachers and students.

By focusing on the long-term historical issues in Vietnamese history and taking responsibility for interactive class activities, the possibilities of transformation are *mutual*-a unique and important opportunity for both teacher *and* student-because, clearly, the issues raised by the U.S. involvement in Vietnam need to be articulated. Although many have used the image of Vietnam frequently, its significance has remained largely misunderstood.

Articulating Issues and the "Vietnamization" of the Persian Gulf War

Many of my colleagues were surprised by the recent political manipulations of the image of the Vietnam War, as if the situation were identical to that in the Persian Gulf. On the one hand, it appeared that several genuine lessons had been learned, and questions raised, ranging from the use of warfare technology to the violence used in conflict resolution. Without a doubt, the U.S. military apparatus had learned several lessons from the Vietnam War that served as both checks and guides during the Persian Gulf War. On the other hand, many felt that Vietnam was an unhealed scar ready to be rubbed raw if the conflict in Iraq were to continue for a long period of time. In speech after speech, the top political leaders commented on the omnipresence of the Vietnam conflict. President Bush wisely pointed out that the situation in the Persian Gulf was different than the Vietnamese conflict, but later caved in to the implicit pressure to "Vietnamize" the Persian Gulf War by claiming that we could forget the wound of Vietnam. This claim was made in the throes of victory, however; most likely, every effort would have been made to distance the Persian Gulf War from the Vietnam War had it been drawn out. In truth, though, the U.S. administration may have been hampered by the potential stigmatization of Vietnam, and thus consciously chose the bombardment or blitzkrieg military strategy, which essentially crushed the Iraqis.

How can teaching about Vietnam clarify some of these important issues? How similar are the cases of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Iraq? Does the victory in Iraq mean that the United States has been morally absolved of its involvement in Vietnam? What can we learn from these conflicts in shaping the New World Order? What are the legacies of Vietnam and Iraq for the people of the United States?

First, by teaching about Vietnam in a substantial manner that includes the aspect of long-term culture and history, the pattern of understanding current conflicts such as the Gulf War gains a long-term and culturally broad perspective. History can illuminate factors of both differences and commonalities. Our students will understand points of uniqueness such as the importance of Confucianism in Vietnam and Islam in Iraq, the ongoing historical territorial and cultural conflicts within regions such as Southeast and Southwest Asia, and the way the jungle terrain and mountains in Vietnam and deserts in the Middle East have affected these societies. Once our students gain some understanding of foreign peoples, they will be sensitized to them as human beings rather than as stereotypes. We can begin to overcome barriers such as racism and linguistic differences. As teachers of history, we should celebrate the richness of the

human community.

Second, when we discuss key ideologies (such as fascism, communism, and even democracy) with respect to leaders such as Saddam Hussein, Ho Chi Minh, or the Saudi and Kuwaiti monarchies, we need to put them in their particular historical context so that we avoid illogical and noncritical thinking for our students. For example, glib comparisons of Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler abounded. Although both leaders were ruthless dictators who initiated territorial conquests, the socialist bases of the Nazi Party and the Ba'athist Party are more comparable dimensions. Another comparison might take place around the U.S. administration's rhetoric of a New World Order and slogans found in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Although we can find a number of similarities, it is dangerous to identify one leader completely with another; such comparison obfuscates many genuine issues. Because earth-shaking changes have occurred in world history since 1945—particularly in the growth of technology—the potential destruction has increased; whereas it took Hitler years to execute millions of innocent people, it only took Saddam Hussein a few days to wipe out whole villages and the U.S. Army one hundred hours to destroy more than one hundred thousand people. Advanced technology (especially advanced jets and bombing raids) and what it means in the dehumanization of society is an overwhelmingly important issue for teachers to address with their students. It ultimately returns to the issue of ideology. As the last thirty years have shown, an ideology can overcome dictatorships and strong invaders. We must not, however, divorce ideas from methods. That is why it is relevant to argue about "process" in teaching about Vietnam. The more we can link the means with the ends, the more genuinely we can infuse in our students a sense of independent and critical implementation of a democratic value system.⁴

Third, we need to articulate several veiled concerns surrounding the Vietnamization of the Persian Gulf War—for example, the complete lack of genuine reportage throughout the war. A book on the Gulf War might be appropriately titled *The Unreported War*. Although journalists have biases required by the instant analysis of events, they are in a sense a good basis for primary materials, not to mention an integral part of a democracy. In the Gulf War, most journalists abrogated their responsibility to report about the war and acquiesced in reporting only government-approved stories that were set up or offered whole by handlers and guides from the government. Pictures of the real devastation that tons of bombing produced in Iraq and the difficulties in even photographing U.S. casualties (no body bag pictures please) sanitized a war that was still gruesome for all its speed.

Fourth, we also need to articulate the serious effects war has on U.S. society. Why were giant antiwar demonstrations occurring *before* a war erupted? How can one explain why initially almost half of the people in the United States opposed the Persian Gulf War, but that we essentially unified to support our troops, even among the antiwar activists, once actual hostilities began? Were U.S. citizens concerned with the cruelties of war or with avoiding the societal divisions that had occurred during the Vietnam War? Is the defeat of a third world country like Iraq the proper medication to heal the shame of defeat left over from Vietnam? What is the role of war as a foreign policy tool now that the United States perceives itself as the sole superpower? What price are we paying to keep our society unified?

Teachers must simply present these issues for our students to think about. It is time for the teachers of the United States to stop relying on self-interested politicians to define the New World Order. The New World Order will arise out of our youth and the values and ideas they learn from us. Youth are our most precious hope. We can make that hope rich with substance if we actively design courses, such as the history of Vietnam, in ways that develop the genuine mutuality of learning. As Glenn Paige, one of my professors, pointed out, *educio* means "to lead out of." We must recognize that, ethically, we cannot erase the past. The responsibility of the United States to the Vietnamese, and to its own people, should never be forgotten or rewritten. Nor should we submerge ourselves in guilt. Instead, we must first understand

and articulate the substantive issues and then design our future. Creative teaching projects based on the content, process, and articulation of issues *can* take place in the classroom. Teachers can provide a truly transformational leadership model for our students. By actively responding to our responsibilities, we have the power, *now*, to shape a peaceful and prosperous future.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Rhett Diessner, Dan Mayton, Brian Brown, Donna Moe, and Genevieve Barman for their valuable comments. I would especially like to express my deep gratitude to the late Don Cioeta, who encouraged me to write this article in the midst of the Persian Gulf War. He served as a fine example of reaching out and sharing with the wider community.

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2 Although the model I present here is based on college-level teaching, I hope that elementary and secondary schoolteachers will benefit from my remarks. Indeed, more outreach and collaboration between all three levels of pedagogical endeavor should exist; the issues are too important to ignore. For example, through grants by the Idaho Humanities Council, I have been able to organize multidimensional community symposia on aspects of China that have been strongly supported by teachers. Currently, along with the Lewis-Clark State College Education Division, I am developing cultural and history units on Asia for the elementary and secondary school curriculum.

3 This technique is adapted from William Fawcett Hill, *Learning thru Discussion* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1969). 4 Teachers might present a comparative unit on the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf War. Depending on the time available, time lines, religion, geography, leadership through biographies of major actors, and warfare technology could be explored, and students could be challenged to draw out similarities and differences. To develop critical thinking, part of the project preparation could include some samples of current events reporting after the students had been exposed to the basic cultural and historical facts. This would develop both a knowledge base and analytical skills.

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