

## Outsiders on the Inside: Reflections on Social Work Teaching in Vietnam

*Four educators tell stories about their teaching in Vietnam, using a theme of "insiders" and "outsiders." Their recounting of the experience follows a developmental framework, starting with the preparation phase, and continues with planning and beginnings. Next, the process of the training is explored, including discussion of collaboration with participants, bridging the insider-outsider barrier, reciprocal process of learning, and participants' evaluation of the experience. The final re-entry and reflection section suggests five key processes that facilitated the teaching effort, including tuning-in, reframing, working from the experiences of the participants, openness, and egalitarian approach to co-trainer and trainees.*

by

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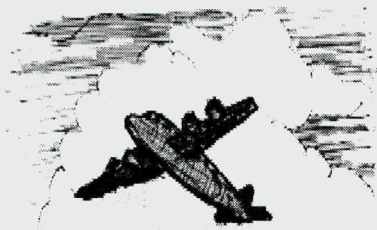
### Introduction

Formal social work practice and education in Vietnam was discontinued in 1975 with the "fall" of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War. Recently, Vietnam has moved to re-establish the social work profession. We, the four authors of this paper, participated in this process during the summer of 1997, providing consultation and training to the faculty, field instructors, and students of Open University in Ho Chi Minh City.

Our partnership began with Open University's interest in expanding its fledgling social work program (a two-year program within the Women's Studies Division) to a four-year program modeled on the baccalaureate degree in social work. The Vietnamese faculty were interested in advancements in social work since 1975, particularly in the ongoing conceptualization of generalist social work practice as the foundation of professional activity. Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service began working with Open University in 1995. Funding for the

project came from USAID, with World Vision serving as the operational NGO. Fordham sent a four-person planning team to Ho Chi Minh City during the summer of 1996 to present lectures on the content and structure of our curriculum. Based on these presentations, two components of the foundation area—Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) and Generalist Social Work Practice with Individuals, Families, and Groups—were identified as training priorities for 1997. Two of us, Robert and Sheila (husband and wife), were chosen for the HBSE component held in early July 1997 for ten days, and the other two, Mary Ann and Carol, were chosen for the ten-day mid-August 1997 component on Generalist Practice. Mary Ann and Carol were accompanied by Mary Ann's husband and Carol's husband and 12-year-old son.

Soon after we returned from our teaching journey to Vietnam and began to tell stories about the experience, the Fall issue of *Reflections* arrived, focusing on the loss of homeland and the insight of "strangers." Clearly, we were not homeless or disen-



franchised during our visit, but we had experienced common consequences of being "outsiders," albeit temporarily (Abels, 1997). As we have had a chance to talk about and make meaning of our work in Vietnam, we believe that this "outsider" status was central to our actual work and has informed our understanding of its impact here in the United States.

As the following pages indicate, we were able to sign on to the project, make sense of our charge, and actually do the work because we acknowledged our status. As "outsiders," we could bring our own knowledge and experience and were, in fact, obligated to do so. This article traces our work through each stage, from initial preparation to reentry, with special emphasis on the impact of the "outsider" theme. We have attempted to highlight our voices through the use of individualized fonts and attribution throughout the text.

### **Making the Decision to Go**

Each of us had thought about the possibility of going to Vietnam when we first asked to be considered for the trip. However, it is one thing to consider a possibility and another thing to actually commit oneself and one's family to the journey once we were selected in February 1997. As soon as we began preparatory meetings in the spring of 1997, it became clear that we had a variety of motivating factors for our participation, ranging from the desire to make restitution to the Vietnamese people, to curiosity and the quest for adventure.

*Robert and Sheila: Both of us had been against the Vietnam*

*War and had protested in various ways. Neither of us felt our actions had any significant impact. The opportunity to teach and in some way help the Vietnamese with their social problems could be reparative—to heal our own misgivings and regrets as well as to make amends in some small way for the damage our nation had inflicted there. We viewed ourselves as good will ambassadors bringing knowledge and assistance. Of course, there also was the excitement of being exposed to a very different culture and of learning from our Vietnamese hosts.*

*Mary Ann: When I first saw the request from the Associate Dean for interested faculty to submit their resumes to do training at Ho Chi Min Open University, I experienced an overwhelming sense of curiosity about the Vietnamese people and the land itself. These feelings are what propelled me to initially submit my resume to the Associate Dean. In thinking now about this initial reaction, I think the curiosity stemmed from a strong desire to learn about Vietnam first hand. My knowledge of the country and its people mainly came from the texts I had read in college, war-related newspaper articles, and Hollywood films. I also had been a social worker employed by the U.S. Army in the 1980's and had listened to the rage and unresolved grief of many soldiers who had lost friends in Vietnam and who felt so misunderstood and betrayed by the American public.*

*My initial curious reaction to the invitation, however, soon turned to feelings of anxiety and dread as I began to focus on how*

*much of an outsider I really was and how little I really knew about where I was going. Would I be safe there physically? Was I putting my health in jeopardy by traveling voluntarily to a land that was fighting diseases we rarely think about? What did I really have to offer since I knew so little about them and their needs? Luckily, these negative feelings continued to be interspersed with enough of the initial feelings of curiosity and adventure that I stayed the course and boarded the plane in July of 1996 with other members of the initial planning team. Little did I know that I would be returning the following summer to conduct the actual training at the University.*

*Carol: At first, hearing that I had the chance to go to Vietnam, I was stunned, and then quickly thought, "What have I gotten myself and my family into?" The answer soon came: "A grand adventure!" I was unprepared for the questions of friends when we told them our summer plans, who either quickly assumed that my husband was a Vietnam vet on a trip of reconciliation, or that we were going to the next "hot" eco-tourist destination. I must admit to a feeling of pride when we explained the purpose of the trip.*

### **Preparation**

Following our initial excitement came feelings of fear, wonder, and openness to the work. While we had different styles (based on our traditional ways of getting ready for a new situation), our common conceptualization of our roles as "outsiders" placed special emphasis on our preparation for our trip. It drove us to

rigorously prepare, while knowing that we would have to be ready to drastically reconfigure the training as needed. We cannot remember a time when we were more prepared, yet consciously open to new discoveries and surprises. We needed to acknowledge that there were areas in which we would simply be unprepared.

*Robert and Sheila:* Although as outsiders we could not know what our encounter would be like, we approached the experience with some preconceived ideas about our Vietnamese students as well as notions as to how we would be perceived by them. Because of the long, painful, and conflicted history between the U.S. and Vietnam, we approached the Vietnamese with trepidation, concerned with how they would view us. Despite their agreement to have us teach some basic social work content, we wondered if they would harbor some anger and resentment due to the history of our two countries. If we were preparing for work in another country with whom we had a more neutral rather than a conflicted history, we would most likely not have been as apprehensive.

*Mary Ann:* The emotions I experienced in preparation for the second trip were considerably less intense than the first time since I was no longer entering the complete unknown. I had met some of the insiders. While preparing for the first trip, I remember imagining myself sweating uncontrollably 24 hours a day due to the heat. As a result of this fantasy, I found myself obsessing about what to wear. I pounded the pave-

ment looking for 100% cotton, which I was told was the best defense against soaring temperatures. In my clothing search and selection process, I was also concerned about "fitting in"... not wanting to be too "American" in style and dress. Luckily my selection of loose fitting, 100% cotton clothes worked out just fine in dealing with the heat, which was quite tolerable due to the proliferation of air conditioning. To my surprise I also found many of the Vietnamese women wearing very stylish polyester. In fact many of them looked much more "American" in dress than I did. So for the second trip, I did take the same stash of 100% cotton clothes, but threw in a few polyester skirts as well.

Getting the vaccination shots for the second time was a quick reminder of my outsider status and provoked some of the same feelings of vulnerability as the first time. Just hearing the words of the diseases one could potentially contract—typhoid, polio, rabies, malaria—made me realize all over again how very far away we were going and that this part of the world did not have the medical benefits and environmental securities we take for granted in the United States.

Prior to my first trip to Vietnam, I was very concerned about the reaction of the Vietnamese to the war and how that would affect our relationship building. As a result of my employment as a social worker for the U.S. Army in the 1980's, I wondered how they would perceive me. I was fearful of being misjudged and not accepted as a person separate from the Ameri-

can military who brought so much destruction to their country. I wanted them to know I believed the war was wrong and was sincerely sorry for all the destruction it had caused. My first visit educated me that the war with the Americans is very much behind the Vietnamese people. I concluded that they do not have the luxury of dwelling on the past, analyzing it as we do and staying stuck in certain emotional reactions. They appeared to have reached a stage of resolution about the war, evidenced in their strong desire to form new, more productive relationships.

As a result of witnessing this during my first trip, it was not a major part of my emotional baggage in preparation for my second trip. However, the range of reactions from some relatives, friends, and acquaintances to my second trip reflected feelings of guilt (i.e., some saw the trip as an opportunity to pay back) or anger (i.e., some wondered why I would want to be friends with "the enemy") which reminded me again of how little we as a country know Vietnam other than our associations with a war fought 30 years ago.

*Carol:* As the reality of our task sank in, my next question became almost overwhelming: "Who were WE to presume to do this work?" After a great deal of discussion and thinking, I began to reframe the charge—WE couldn't possibly teach the Vietnamese how THEY should teach social work. On the other hand, we were(are) experts in how, what, and why we teach social work the way we do here at Fordham. In addition, as social workers, we like

to think of ourselves as experts in helping others tell their story, look at options, and form new understandings. If we could find a way to share our work and learn how they work, then we might be able to collectively think about how social work should be taught in Vietnam. I was then released from the panic—was, able to “sign on” as a partner and to begin the work of planning the actual contents.

### Planning the Training Experience

Once we all made the decision to go and oriented ourselves to the task, the work of designing the curriculum and its delivery began. Here, too, we each approached the task somewhat differently, but all were mindful of balancing a very high level of preparedness with heightened sensitivity to building on the participants' knowledge. The planning phase of approximately two months was complicated by incomplete and somewhat contradictory information about the projected trainees, their experience, and their scope of knowledge. Sheila and Robert were to go first in July for the Human Behavior and the Social Environment portions, and Mary Ann and Carol were to go in August for Generalist Social Work Practice.

*Robert and Sheila:* As part of our preparation, we engaged in concentrated reading about Vietnamese history, society, culture, and religion. We were impressed by much of what we read, particularly by the strength, determination, and perseverance of the Vietnamese people in maintaining their culture and beliefs while simultaneously combating

various invading and occupying nations over the centuries. On the one hand, our preparatory reading was reassuring by enhancing our understanding of this foreign land. Thus, for example, we were attuned to the importance of visitors bringing gifts. On the other hand, our reading stirred up additional concerns. Without direct contact with our Vietnamese “students” we were unclear as to which aspects of human behavior course content would be relevant and applicable to their culture. We knew they had a special interest in material related to the problem of homeless street children, but that served as a very limited guideline in preparing our course. The more we read of their culture, the more striking the differences from our own, and the greater our concern about the relevance of our content to their situation. Their strong family and ancestral ties, their commitment to community, their spirituality, and their determination in overthrowing occupying oppressors over centuries created a picture very different from our own society. We were uncertain about our ability to find a common ground where our understanding of human behavior and social environment would apply to their society.

These concerns, deriving from our outsider status, shaped our teaching in three ways. First, we prepared much more material than could possibly be covered in our short stay. Second, we met with program administrators in Vietnam just prior to teaching to discuss our outline to determine which areas to revise and emphasize. Finally, we scheduled con-

sistent time in addition to our lecture for participants' intensive involvement. In short, we depended on the insiders to help us cross the barrier we felt between us. We divided each day into a morning of lecture and discussion and an afternoon of varied exercises which involved them in applying the morning's lecture to the problems they confronted as social workers. Whenever possible, we adapted our material to their culture. We used notions from their cultural belief system as instruments in organizing and illustrating our material. For example, the concepts of Yin and Yang were used as a theme throughout the course in explaining basic systems theory and its application.

Similarly, recognizing the importance they placed on community, we consistently encouraged a comprehensive perspective by systematically considering macro, mezzo, and micro elements in any problem they raised. Further, our reading alerted us to enduring sensitive issues which influenced our presentations. For example, having read about their sensitivity to talk about relations between North and South Vietnam, we discussed our own Civil War between north and south as a way of providing safety in discussing social conflict and its consequences. While our reading about Vietnam sharpened our sense of entering a foreign country, so too did our medical preparation. The numerous immunization shots that were required served as a painful reminder that we were entering a foreign and, in some regards, dangerous new world.

Mary Ann and Carol: In preparing for the training itself we experienced some inner tensions regarding the level of preparedness. While we knew the content of the courses extremely well, we were concerned about how much would be relevant to the Vietnamese context and culture. Since making these decisions ourselves would be utter guesswork, we decided to focus on how to teach the material in a way that would leave the Vietnamese in the position to decide the relevancy question. One critical decision in the preparation process for our focus on generalist social work practice with individuals, families, and groups that reflected this teaching method was to ask the Vietnamese trainees to develop case studies on the first day that they would work with throughout the training. We would then teach the content of the course using these cases. We believed that this teaching strategy would provide the secondary benefit of educating us about the kinds of problems the Vietnamese people are facing and the ecological contexts within which these problems develop and are addressed. While this strategy made sense to us on many levels, it was also very anxiety producing because we were left with so many unknowns prior to the training and so much case material to digest on the first day of training.

We think we approached our preparation somewhat differently than Robert and Sheila, although we were ultimately happy to review the articles they passed on to us. We found ourselves somewhat resistant to reading extensively about Vietnamese cul-

ture. While we knew this type of reading is helpful in creating a sensitivity to cultural differences that may not be readily apparent, we agreed that it also can be limiting if one enters the culture with already established frames of reference. We tried to cultivate the openness needed to rely on the more inductive method of participant observation when coming in contact with another culture. Perhaps this preference is also a result of having lived and visited other countries and becoming quite familiar with people who were quite well read about American culture. Too often in their company, we felt like an experiment in which we were going to prove or disprove some theory about American culture.

Perhaps this preference in preparation also comes from our realization that there will be differences that cannot be anticipated ahead of time. We took some comfort in Mary Ann's survival of the "red flag incident": During one of her lectures on the first trip she was talking about warning signs of domestic violence, and instinctively used the term "red flags" in describing these signs. The translator asked her to repeat what she said since she thought she had misinterpreted it. As she repeated "red flag" (while one of her colleagues shook his head back and forth to signal disapproval), she realized the reason for the confusion and her poor choice of terminology.

The differences in methods to develop cultural sensitivity that we struggled with are reflective of the on-going debate in social work education regarding the best ways to prepare students to

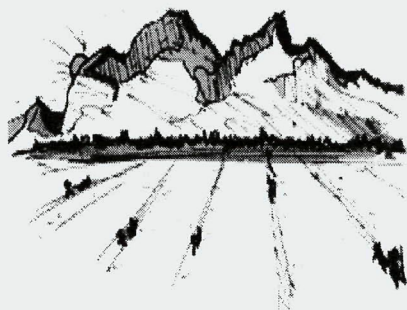
work with diversity, as in the following questions: (a) Should the emphasis be on content about different cultures to increase sensitivity to difference? or (b) Should the emphasis be more on teaching a method to recognize and explore the implications of cultural differences on a case by case basis? Eventually we found a balance to best suit us and our task.

### First Encounter with Vietnam

Entry experiences can have great power, and ours certainly had that dimension as we were immediately immersed in a very different culture. Our individual narratives of arrival reflect our expectations, our preparation, and pure chance. We each tried to make sense of our beginning encounters in order to face the inauguration of the training. While different in content and meaning, each of our entries cried "Welcome to Vietnam!"

Robert and Sheila: We were fortunate in having a three-day stopover in Hong Kong. This provided some rest and time to recover from jet lag. It also afforded us exposure to culture with some similarity to the one we were entering. However, it did not prepare us for the dark, dismal, largely empty Ho Chi Minh airport which was our midnight entry point to Vietnam. Nor did it prepare us for coping with the immigration guards' confiscation of our teaching video tapes. After a heated argument with three armed guards, our tapes were screened and returned. While we had struggled with the sense of outsider in preparing for this teaching, in retrospect we realize we considered ourselves as spe-

cial outsiders. In arguing with the airport guards, our sense of specialness emerged as we identified ourselves as connected with a Vietnamese university and the



Ministry of Education. Our host, having witnessed our confrontation, later informed us that we could have been deported or jailed. Our naivete served us well.

Mary Ann: On my first trip to Vietnam, it was strongly recommended that we build in several days to adjust to Vietnam and to Ho Chi Minh City in particular. This adjustment period was deemed necessary due to the time difference (23 hours!!); the temperature change; and the social, cultural, and environmental differences of Ho Chi Minh City. It was good advice and I took it. On the second trip, it felt less necessary since I knew what to expect in Ho Chi Minh City. In addition, I planned to be in China for a week prior to arriving in Vietnam, so I would have already adjusted to the time difference. Therefore, my itinerary had me arriving in Vietnam on Sunday afternoon at 4:00 p.m. This plan would allow for dinner with Carol and possibly some of the Vietnamese faculty that evening with

the training scheduled to start at 8:00 a.m. Monday morning. Unfortunately, this itinerary left no room for the typhoon that hit Hong Kong on Saturday resulting in all flights being either very delayed or canceled. Somehow I managed to make it to Vietnam very late Sunday evening but none of my luggage did. So I arrived in Vietnam with my purse and fortunately my training materials but without my 100% cotton wardrobe and other little transitional objects that ease the adjustment to a strange land. Fortunately my colleague Carol, who, needless to say, was anxiously awaiting my arrival, loaned me some clothes for our training debut (despite our 4" height difference) which was to occur in less than seven hours. Having no luck getting to sleep, I spent the night lying awake in a strange bed in a strange hotel room in a strange land wishing I had taken more seriously the need for an adjustment period the second time around.

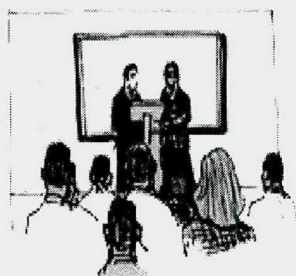
Carol: My family and I arrived in Ho Chi Minh Airport after a glorious week in the rain forest of Malaysia. We had climbed and caved and also survived jet lag and initial stomach troubles—we thought we were "ready" for Vietnam. It was with sadness and dread that we encountered the airport. In the dreariest of buildings, with the most dour customs inspectors, subdued travelers, and more policemen than would seem necessary, we waited with our papers and luggage. We were shocked to be waved right through customs since we had been warned for battle by Robert and Sheila.

As we left the customs lines we entered a larger room, no less somber but alive with family reunions, loud voices, laughter, and great confusion. With the crowd, we exited and saw a man holding a sign with my name. They knew us here! Through limited English, we greeted each other and put our enormous amount of luggage in his small car. We were brought to the Palace Hotel on the French built Grand Boulevard (down the block from the famous Rex Hotel, home to western journalists during the war). Ho Chi Minh City on a Sunday evening seemed like a festival, with bright colors and activity everywhere, even balloon sellers in the square.

Our hotel room was fine, and the tiny swimming pool on the roof looked inviting. I settled in for Mary Ann's arrival and a welcoming call from our hosts. After a few anxious hours came the call that we would be picked up at 7:55 the next morning. Mary Ann had not yet arrived, so we walked outside, with my 12 year-old son, robust and blond, encountering the intense stares and touching from strangers that would become a daily trial. The square was lit by white light bulbs everywhere, adding to the festive atmosphere. The constant traffic of motorbikes, bicycles, "cyclos" (like a backward rickshaw, powered by a tricycle and rider), and the occasional taxi cab was intense; the absence of street lights or any other traffic control added a touch of danger to crossing the street. We were excited and entranced—but definitely out of our element.

The waiting for Mary Ann

*continued and I was getting a bit worried. Finally she arrived, with quite a tale of adventure herself. Once we sorted out what clothes of mine she could wear until her luggage arrived, we said goodnight. My son fell asleep to*



*the familiar signals of MTV, Asian edition.*

### The Process of the Training

Our "outsider" status had a profound effect on the actual training experience and our relationships with the participants. We were formally introduced to our role as outsiders by the existence of a language barrier between us and our students. They denied any ability to speak English and acknowledged only limited understanding. Thus, we taught our classes in English while two or three interpreters took turns translating our lectures.

Surprisingly, the translation process was not as challenging as we had feared. For us, the requirements for effective translation, including speaking slowly and clearly, observing delayed reactions, listening to both speakers and translators, and carefully pacing material, became second nature rather quickly, helped by the translator's expertise and knowledge of the content areas.

We were fortunate in having multiple translators and found that having more than one present most of the time enhanced the validity of the translation. During the rare instances when one of the translators noted a discrepancy or was searching for equivalent language, we took a "time out" to negotiate the meaning of a comment or concept. We moved into a comfortable rhythm rather quickly, and the translators were encouraged to stop us when they needed clarification.

While respectful of local conventions, as "outsiders" we felt we could be creative in our approach; the novelty of training by American professors gave us some room to introduce exercises, small group discussion, and other learning strategies. The openness and directness of the Vietnamese was unexpected, but welcome. It appeared that while they were unfamiliar with many of the activities we used in training, they were (for the most part) willing to experiment. We hypothesized that since they were engaging with "outsiders," our Vietnamese colleagues were open to taking risks that they had not ever been asked to take before. The "outsider" role, coupled with their openness, fostered our experimentation with each other.

The following section headings—launching the collaboration; bridging the insider-outsider barrier; reciprocal process of learning; and participants' evaluation of experience—are used to organize narratives about how we experienced the process of collaboration and training.

### Launching the collaboration.

*Mary Ann: On the first morning of the training, Carol and I were met at 7:55 a.m. sharp at the hotel by one of the Vietnamese faculty members who gave us a card with an address on it and swiftly put us in a cab, while he followed behind on his motorbike. When we arrived at the training site, we were enthusiastically greeted by approximately 20 trainees who appeared very eager to begin. Having not slept at all and feeling quite sensitive to the heat and noises of the city, I found myself secretly wishing that I could just disappear. Since that wasn't going to happen, I plodded on, going through the motions of the activities prepared but not feeling emotionally connected to the experience at all. We introduced ourselves and heard from each of the trainees about their background. I remember how this activity made me wonder how I could possibly teach these experienced teachers who had seen much more human misery than I ever would. I tried desperately to ignore these insecure feelings knowing that their intensity was most likely linked to my physical exhaustion.*

*During the first morning, we also did a contracting exercise in which the trainees anonymously wrote their expectations for learning on a piece of paper. They were quickly translated and we wrote all the expectations on the board and explored with the group which expectations we were prepared to meet and which ones we were not. This felt like an easier activity to do given its straightforward nature. I did not fully appreciate until the end of the training the impact that this*

contracting exercise had on the group and how different this type of open negotiation was for them.

In the last activity before we broke for lunch, we asked the trainees to break into small groups and develop their cases. Following this we asked them to briefly describe each of the cases before the entire group. The descriptions were overwhelming in terms of the multitude of problems and the lack of any formal resources to deal with them.

At lunch, Carol and I discussed how disturbed we were by the case material and admitted how hopeless we were feeling that our training would be helpful and relevant. To make matters worse, I was still feeling quite weary and questioned if I could really make it through the rest of the day. We discussed how to best handle this. After some thoughtful discussion, it was decided that the events of the night before, the typhoon, the late arrival, the absence of clothing, the lack of sleep, should be revealed to the trainees and my resultant feelings of exhaustion shared. When the training resumed we shared my travel story. I immediately felt their support and understanding and the weight of having to pretend was lifted. To my surprise and relief, the emotional honesty resulted in a surge of energy that allowed me to finish the day in pretty good shape.

The afternoon activities may also partially explain the lift in mood as well. We began the afternoon with a presentation on the strengths perspective. Following the presentation, we asked them to identify the individual, family, and environmental strengths of the cases presented

earlier. As the strengths were recognized, the hopelessness that seemed to pervade the morning presentations seemed to disappear. There was a lightness to the strengths presentations shown in the participants' spontaneous sharing and much laughter.

### **Bridging the insider-outsider barrier.**

Robert and Sheila: Our status as outsiders was not totally problematic. In our teaching, it actually had a liberating effect. After all, as outsiders our ignorance about their culture and special circumstances was understandable. This freed us to involve them in guiding and teaching us. We easily put aside a more traditional "gas and go" approach to teaching—i.e., where students are treated as cars in a garage in need of a filling up with knowledge. Instead, these students became our collaborators, as we worked together in forging solutions to the problems confronting them using the knowledge and skills we presented.

Our husband and wife status was particularly potent in breaking down the outside-insider barrier we had apprehensively anticipated. Our marital relationship and interactions in the classroom stimulated numerous observations and personal questions about our lives. Our openness in responding fostered an increasing openness from them regarding not only their professional lives but their personal lives as well. A reciprocal process of sharing ensued in which they joined us in sharing personal as well as professional circumstances and dilemmas. Revealing information

about our relationships with our children or aging parents evoked their sharing information about their struggles with these same relationships. The erosion of barriers between outsider and insider, teacher and student, led to the continued building of a climate of trust. Within this climate, they were able to openly share in discussions and to participate in the various exercises and role play used in the teaching. One sure sign that the barriers had eroded was that many students gradually spoke to us in English, revealing that they were initially too shy and embarrassed to risk making mistakes.

In addition to our position as outsiders, our status as co-teachers and as husband and wife afforded special teaching opportunities. In preparation, we carefully balanced responsibility for the teaching material, each taking areas of expertise. We further balanced by dividing the teaching time equally. Our marital and co-teacher relationship allowed us to demonstrate an egalitarian approach to teaching, where we worked together as equals at times openly disagreeing and publicly resolving differences. This style was in contrast to the hierarchical one they were familiar with, where faculty are ranked by status and lecture to the students. Perhaps, this was particularly important as students observed the synergy which flowed from gender equality. In addition, co-teaching facilitated our fuller engagement with them. While one of us focused on the content of the moment, the other was free to attend to the process, i.e., the students' response to what was

being discussed.

Mary Ann and Carol: One of the initial challenges in the training was dealing with the topic of social work values and ethics. Our training format consisted of a review of the major ethical standards of NASW followed by a discussion around these standards and how they fit with current social work practice in Vietnam. The first standard addressed was confidentiality. In the discussion that followed, we were surprised by the lack of application of this standard to social work practice in Vietnam. Instead, there seemed to be more of a value placed on talking to as many people as possible about a family's difficulties in order to better understand their situation. Asking the family's permission to make these inquiries did not seem important to them. When asked how they thought the family would respond if they found out about these inquiries, some did acknowledge that trust could be affected but others felt that the inquiries could also be construed by the family as a caring gesture.

In reflecting after the training upon this difference, we theorized that in a more community-oriented, collective society in which individual rights are not as honored, more is expected to be known about each other and more collaboration is expected. What we might see as intrusion and violation in our more individually oriented society is seen as caring in Vietnam. However, the traditional value of community concern for its members is currently challenged by Vietnam's rapid social dislocation. Thus, the kindly enlistment of others to

serve a family in need in a close community could alternately be interpreted as a violation of privacy in a community of strangers. We returned to issues of confidentiality and protection with a far more complex understanding of traditional Vietnamese values and their challenges with migration and industrialization.

The other area that presented particular challenges was dealing with issues of power and authority. In our teaching of social work practice, we emphasize the need to acknowledge our position of power and authority with the client as a way of dealing with the unspoken feelings of intimidation and threat. Contracting with the client is a strategy used to deal with the imbalance of power that we believe always exists between a person who has something that another person needs. Acknowledging that a power differential exists between a client and a worker was difficult for many of the trainees. Some insisted that they do not have power over their clients and that the relationship is based on equality. Their emotional reaction to the word power tuned us in to thinking that something deeper was going on with this issue for our Vietnamese colleagues. Again, we theorized that perhaps in a socialist structure where values are based on the good of the community vs. the individual, individual power is not a concept thought relevant for consideration.

Power over another is something that did not seem acceptable or compatible with their feelings of altruism. There were, however, a few Vietnamese who

quietly acknowledged that they had power over their clients because they were in control of resources that the client needed. We did not pursue this difference of opinion among our colleagues at that moment because we sensed a high level of discomfort in the room, including our own. In the end we were left with the recognition that there will be differences in the way we interpret certain concepts, stemming in part from our very different political traditions and contexts. These issues did, however, emerge as we discussed interventions and concepts of doing "for," doing "to," and doing "with" clients, bringing us back to the nature of power in the worker-client relationship. We found that we could talk about these issues in greater depth when we did not use the word "power," but talked openly about its dynamics, influence, and consequences.

### **Reciprocal process of learning.**

Mary Ann: A wonderful surprise in the training was their embrace of the various family assessment tools used in social work practice. As they worked diligently on their eco-maps for the case study families, we experienced a renewed sense of appreciation, the power of these visual tools in helping to organize historical and environmental information. The eco-maps drawn by the trainees were inordinately rich compared to the first eco-maps drawn by our typical American students. Initially, we have found that our American students have a tendency to somewhat dismiss the eco-map or have some difficulty naming the particular envi-

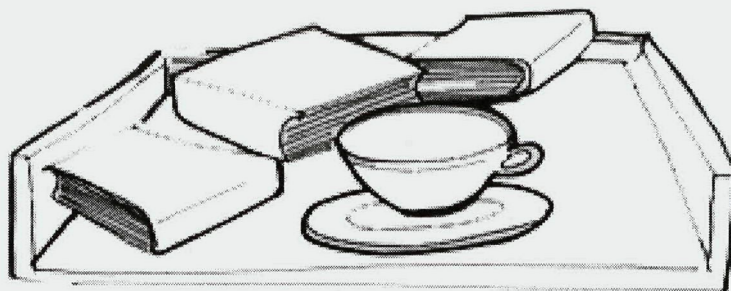
ronmental influences in the clients' lives. This did not seem to be a problem for the Vietnamese who went into great detail in their maps in describing the clients' interaction with their environment. Again we wondered if this difference could be explained by our different orientation to the individual vs. community. We also hypothesized that the different reactions could be related to the Vietnamese lack of exposure to a medical disease model in which the focus becomes the pathology of the individual. Could this lack of exposure lead to their valuing environmental influences as much as or more than individual characteristics of their clients?

Carol: Once the training was underway, we had many informal conversations with the participants. These were particularly helpful in understanding our encounters with Vietnamese people. I was grateful for the chance to talk about the problem my son was having with people touching him wherever he went. After a few days of training, I related the problem to a senior member of the University faculty. She reassured me that people meant no harm and were, in fact, showing welcoming affection to an obviously "foreign" child. As we were talking, I suddenly realized that she was stroking my arm as she spoke. It was one of those memorable moments in which facts and understanding come together—I turned even closer to her and said, 'Like you are touching me now?' We laughed, and she said, "Yes!" We continued our conversation (and the stroking) and moved into a discussion of how the Vietnamese are grappling

with how to help children distinguish between "good touching" and "bad touching," in terms of child sexual abuse and exploitation. The personal entry point of helping my family cope with a

our validation of them as professionals struggling with a myriad of complex social problems.

Perhaps the diminishing of outside-insider barrier was most evident in the final closing.



problem became a window to a whole new dimension of our professional discourse.

### **Participants' evaluation of the experience.**

Robert and Sheila: In ending, we asked each of the students to share with the class what of value they had taken from the experience. Interestingly, one of the most frequent comments we heard was that they had gained a new understanding of teaching as a collaborative, egalitarian endeavor, with teacher and student working together. This instead of a more traditional teacher as superordinate, student as subordinate arrangement. In a sense, they were talking of replicating their experience with us. Rather than functioning as outsider (teacher) and insider (student), they planned to teach as insider with insider. Another frequent comment was that their initial self doubt had changed because of

We thanked the students for their warmth and for their active participation. We then distributed the gifts we had brought them. We were surprised and touched that they reciprocated with gifts to us. Another strikingly clear sign of the shrinking of the barrier then occurred when all of us joined together in a meditative closing ritual. While the class sat quietly with eyes closed and one of us conducted the exercise, we were startled back to alertness by a bright light. One student had abruptly stood and, using a camera with flashbulb, snapped a picture of the class. One of us rushed to him and, after some struggle, confiscated the camera in order to prevent a reoccurrence. The class responded with good natured laughter. Our act and the group's response indicated a bond beyond cultural differences. We then repeated the meditation creating an imaginary silk fabric whose threads con-

sisted of all of the good moments we shared. In ending, each of us removed one of the threads, free to use its positive energy in our own way.

Mary Ann and Carol: On the last day of training, the participants had an opportunity to share their reactions to the training. Hearing from them what had the most impact caused us to take a much closer look at our orientation to teaching and practice that sometimes get taken for granted. For example, they spoke of our initial contracting process in the training and the mutuality it conveyed. They felt like real partners in the training process. They emphasized that this was a very different experience for them. They also commented on our co-teaching. Several of the participants had attended the earlier training with Sheila and Robert and said that initially they were disappointed that we were not "a couple" given their positive experience earlier with Robert and Sheila. However, as the training went on, they said they really began to appreciate how we worked as a team and that they gained so much from observing our checking in with each other, the clear split of responsibility coupled with a certain amount of flexibility in response to participant or trainer need. We felt that the extensive time spent planning for our teamwork, including evaluating our individual strengths and weaknesses, had paid off.

The participants also expressed a real joy and excitement in learning about the various visual tools, such as the genogram, eco-map, and family map

(Hartman & Laird, 1983), for creating a mutual understanding of the client's situation ecologically and for developing a multi-level intervention plan. The use of roleplay in learning about individual and group process was also a new way of learning for them that they embraced with much enthusiasm. They felt strongly that they had their own experience validated, and many made comments such as: "In the past I just did it—I never knew it was real social work practice!" These themes were particularly strong in the areas of assessment, engagement, and practice with groups.

At the end of the training we felt very empowered as teachers as a result of their hunger for knowledge and skills and their expressed appreciation for the learning that occurred. We also were left with a sense of awe at what can be accomplished when both student and teacher have the amount of openness, curiosity, and discipline that our Vietnamese trainees demonstrated during our ten days together.

### Re-Entry and Reflection

Once we left Vietnam, our "outsider" status gave us a unique vantage point from which to re-enter and reflect on our "insider" experiences here in the United States.

Mary Ann and Carol: The training experience in Vietnam had the overall effect of allowing us to see and understand social work practice through a much wider lens. The effects of one's sociopolitical context on practice became much clearer. We began to understand more about the struggles our American students

have with some of the social work practice concepts in light of this context. For example, the difficulty our students often have in fully integrating the strengths of clients must be understood in relation to our historical ties to the medical model, which presents many obstacles to this integration. Our Vietnamese students do not share this history and, as a result, seemed to have a more natural inclination to look for and work with their clients' strengths. The tendency of our American students to assess and intervene on the individual system level rather than on the family and environmental level may also reflect our more individualistic-oriented, socio-political context. On the other hand, our Vietnamese students demonstrated an ability to much more readily identify environmental strengths and intervention processes. Our willingness to acknowledge the power/authority differential that exists in the helping relationship clearly had a different meaning for our Vietnamese students who live within a socio-political context that is not organized around individuality and does not recognize the exercise of power by one community member over another. We had to look critically at the value that we as American social workers place on confidentiality and self-determination, given our individual rights orientation, and to understand that these concepts had different meanings in the more community-oriented Vietnamese society.

In looking at this experience from a narrative perspective, the Vietnam training resulted in a "restorying" of the meaning of

social work (White & Epston, 1990). The Vietnam training helped to "perform meaning" on those parts of social work practice that tend to get unstoried in a world of private practice, DSM IV diagnoses, and empirically based practice. The critical importance of creating a mutual partnership with clients; the fundamental importance to social practice of an ecological assessment that balances the strengths and limitations of the client's individual, family, and environmental systems; the power of multi-level intervention focused on strengths; the constant need to work on one's self awareness in order to effectively use one's self in practice and to respect client self-determination are concepts that all claimed a more meaningful and legitimate place in our story of social work practice. This restorying process has impacted profoundly on our teaching. As we teach, we feel more in touch with the powerful meaning of these concepts for social work and have thoroughly enjoyed telling this "new story" to our students.

Robert and Sheila: Our experience in Vietnam gave new meaning to and respect for the concept of outsider. The importance of erasing the barrier between outsider/educator and insider/student has been sharpened by this experience in a foreign land. Whatever the content taught, one focus in social work education must be on the process between student and teacher. This entails sensitivity both to the student's special circumstances and to a unique way of using new knowledge. Validating the student's efforts is one significant

way of erasing the classroom barrier and collaborating in the exciting process of learning.

Self revelation (i.e., openness about one's own life) is another powerful tool in dissolving barriers. Sharing stories of our own personal family experience was acknowledged by several participants as particularly helpful. They could easily relate our experiences to their own, which in itself reduced barriers. They also noted our sharing often facilitated their discovering solutions to their painful family and work problems. For example, one participant thanked us after a class in which we shared our own personal experience with an aging parent. She spoke of the death of her mother a year earlier and the difficulty of living with her depressed father. After listening to us, she realized he needed some purpose to live. She then created a new role in the family for him which evoked significant improvement. Clearly our sharing our story helped us reach each other across the insider-outsider barrier.

### Summation

It is difficult to bring this article to a close—the thoughts and feelings connected with this journey keep coming into consciousness. However, when we step back from the experience and its details, we see that we were able to successfully join the insiders, without losing our outsider status. Five key processes facilitated this effort. First was the importance of tuning in (Schwartz, 1971). Through this process we were able to access our own concerns and worries and then were able to find means

to ease and, in some cases, build on them in our relationships with the Vietnamese. Second, we used reframing extensively, especially during our preparation stage. Rather than seeing ourselves as ignorant, we viewed ourselves as learners, thus reducing our burden of responsibility and encouraging us to seek ways to involve the participants in guiding the training process. Third, we immediately set a standard of working from the experiences of the Vietnamese participants. We rarely used case material from the United States, and when we did so, it was only to highlight differences that would lead to greater understanding. Fourth, we practiced openness, modeling the appropriate sharing of personal matters that reflected universal themes such as parenting, marriage, and collegial support. Fifth, we demonstrated an egalitarian approach in regard to our co-trainer and trainees. Our view of participants as collaborators enriched all of our experiences and made it possible for us to learn a great deal from the Vietnamese, thereby enriching our work back at home.

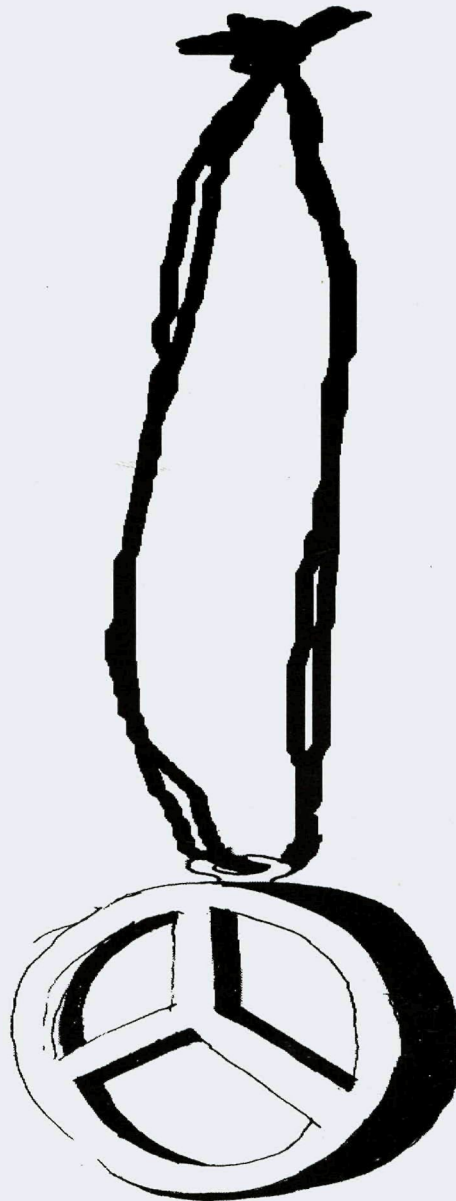
Thus, the frame of "insider" and "outsider" served us throughout the project. Of course, we were very privileged "outsiders." However, we learned that these terms are not as cut and dried as one might think. For example, with the faculty of Open University, we were members of the same social work education community. On the other hand, are we not "outsiders" as we enter the realm of students in the classroom here in the United States? Rather than seeing it as

a problem, we embraced the "outsider" label and acknowledged how much it brought us, including the right to be curious, to make mistakes, and to learn more than we had ever thought possible. We discovered that the insider-outsider relationship does not have to be frozen but can empower students and teachers to learn from each other and to benefit from a fluid enlarging of each other's worlds and perspectives.



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