

## **HOW TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION CAN ENRICH LIVES – CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING IN NORTHERN VIETNAM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Transformative education can be a lofty goal. It implies that the individual is transformed in their thinking and actions to be able to generate positive outcomes for themselves and others. Such transformations may involve shifts in consciousness, changes in relationships, and envisioning alternative approaches and possibilities for social justice. Some of this can be achieved through knowledge building, however the real change occurs through application in the real world. Capilano University places emphasis on experiential learning so that graduates can apply competencies to make positive change in the communities locally and around the globe. On occasion, these changes are transformational – both for the learners involved and the communities that they serve. This paper addresses ingredients of transformative education with specific attention toward the work that Capilano University and Hanoi Open University have been conducting with the villages of Lao Chai and Taphin in the Sapa region of Vietnam. This work has changed virtually every individual that has participated and has helped the villages in their quest to grow from poverty to prosperity in the new tourism economy of the region.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The mission of many post-secondary institutions is to serve communities and engage learners. Most strive to stand out and provide learning experiences that are inspiring, innovative and life changing. One approach is to provide experiential learning that leads to transformational experiences and generates agents of change amongst graduates. This is a challenging and ambitious goal, but certainly worthwhile. This paper explores how Capilano University and Hanoi Open University have sought to achieve this goal through a project in Northern Vietnam.

The paper discusses the concepts of experiential and transformative education, introduces the Vietnam Community Based Tourism project, and then reviews the input of several students that have participated. The impact of the project on the students is discussed through their voice in the context of expectations, cultural awareness, understanding of the discipline, role as an agent of change, and worldview and life trajectory.

### **WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION**

Increased emphasis is being placed on experiential education to build competencies and enhance learning outcomes. It is a highly effective way

of engaging learners and developing skills and knowledge for application in real world settings. In some cases, experiential education can challenge individuals and broaden perspectives in contexts that are unfamiliar, and with others it can hone skills in areas of specialization.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) identifies experiential education in the context of service and community based learning as one of ten high impact educational practices ([https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/HIP\\_tables.pdf](https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/HIP_tables.pdf)). With increased attention on experiential education, many learning institutions are enhancing content and applying resources to engage learners in various practical activities that improve their learning outcomes.

According to the Association of Experiential Education (AEE), Colorado, USA, experiential education is “challenge and experience followed by reflection leading to learning and growth.” They claim that such applications can transform learning and lives. Embedded within experiential education lie principles of the learner taking initiative, investigating, being curious, making decisions, solving problems, being accountable, assuming responsibility, constructing meaning, and building relationships. Through such authentic experiences, the learner will become engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. The outcomes are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning (<http://www.aee.org>).

Within the experiential learning process, the educator plays an important role of creating the environment where there are problems to be solved, relationships to be developed, and where learning results from degrees of risk, adventure, uncertainty, mistakes and successes (<http://www.aee.org>).

Several organizations align experiential education with community involvement. This may, for example, involve applied research activities with a local organization, co-operative education, practicums, or internships with companies or NGO’s, or service learning activities with a village, municipality, or regional district. Natural spaces and wilderness locations are another place for learners to apply knowledge and connect with environmental values and natural networks and ecosystems. Oftentimes this involves challenging comfort zones and building interconnectedness with human physical capacities and problem solving, and in some cases, strengthening mental health and wellbeing. Exotic locations (for the learner) broaden an individual’s understanding of cultures and lifestyle and can sometimes challenge preconceptions and alter worldviews.

Universities, colleges, and schools are highlighting experiential learning as important learning activities to attract students and enhance learning outcomes. Several universities have established Centers for Experiential Learning such as Colorado University, Boulder, University of Rochester Medical Centre, New York, Loyola University, Chicago, Vancouver Island

University, BC, and Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. As noted on the Ryerson website, 'Experiential learning is an important part of Ryerson University's model of education, emphasizing relevance and the integration of theory and practice'.

At Capilano University, North Vancouver, BC, experiential education is highlighted as a key practice in academic programming in the 2014-18 Academic Plan:

Experiential learning takes many forms, is found in virtually all of our programs, and represents a cornerstone of our pedagogy and our planning for the future.

Experiential education is embedded notably in professional programming for tourism, outdoor recreation, motion picture arts, performing arts, and early childhood education. Many of these programs feature practicums that engage the learner with local business, arts, and service communities. A cooperative education program in the School of Tourism has engaged learners with tourism businesses across Canada and abroad for over 20 years. In this program, students are trained and evaluated by both faculty and business owners. The outcome is highly productive for all involved with students building networks for employment and honing skills to be job ready upon graduation. On campus, Capilano has film production and screening facilities that are used for high quality film production and presentations. Performing arts students deliver high quality show performances for the local community at a 370 seat theatre and also travel to Europe annually delivering performances at various universities, cathedrals, and performance halls. Early Childhood and Care Education students work with infants at the on-campus provincially registered Children's Centre. The Centre is open to community members and within the curriculum features advanced practices in various activities including routines, creative arts, exercise, and study of nature. Within Liberal Arts programming, students conduct community-based research as part of tutorials and graduating research courses on issues such as indigenization of curriculum and policy for community based organizations. Each of these activities feature formal and informal reflection activities for students to self-evaluate and determine future approaches and actions in their respective areas of interest.

### **WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION**

Like experiential education, considerable discourse on the topic occurred in the 1990's and early 2000's. Many principles of experiential education apply to transformative education however a key differentiator is the extent to which the learner is changed. Such changes may involve shifts in consciousness, changes in relationships, and envisioning alternative approaches and possibilities for social justice. Mezirow explored the concept for over two decades suggesting that transformative education

should include a “disorienting dilemma” that amongst other elements led to self examination, building confidence in new ways, and planning a new course of action (Mezirow, 1995). O’Sullivan (2003) conveyed transformative education from the perspective of the learner as ... a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world.

Central to these notions is the shift in consciousness about one’s place in the world and the place and perspectives of others. It results in a refreshed outlook on the directions one will take and the ways they will contribute.

### **HOW CAN TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING BE ACHIEVED**

Achieving transformational learning requires creation of an experiential learning opportunity in a setting or situation that the individual will be challenged emotionally and intellectually and probably, physically. A variety of factors will likely affect the degree of transformation that takes place. These include the previous life experience of the learner, their cultural environment and the relative diversity that exists within it, the preparedness of the individual for the situation they will be learning in, the support and or coaching and mentoring they receive, and the opportunity for reflection both during and after the experience.

The goal of transformational education is to enrich. The important thing is to facilitate the environment to learn and to help reduce prejudice, expose passion, make positive change, and help facilitate futures of individuals on self-identified productive pathways.

### **A PARTNERSHIP OF TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION: THE NORTHERN VIETNAM COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM PROJECT**

The goal of the Vietnam Community Based Tourism project has been from its very inception to generate a leading example of sustainable tourism development and provide quality experiential and potentially transformational leaning experiences.

The project has been a partnership between Capilano University, Vancouver, Canada, and Hanoi Open University, Vietnam. Since 2002 we have had the privilege of working with the remote Northern Vietnam villages of Taphin, Ta Van, and Lao Chai transition their traditional subsistence economies to tourism. This transition was inevitable as visitors began arriving in the region in ever increasing numbers back in the 1990’s and sought to explore the unique ethnic hill tribe cultures of communities in the area. It has been our principle goal to help the communities retain their culture and determine their own futures as much as possible by generating product for quality tourist experiences and investing in the futures of their communities through education.

The project featured two major phases. The first was with the support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and featured four years of capacity building with Hanoi Open University through curriculum and professional development and tourism training in the villages. This helped build the foundation for the villages to transition to tourism and was successful in Ta Van however problems emerged in Taphin after funding ended. These included inequitable benefits for villagers, propagation of street selling, and deterioration of visitor experiences. In 2010, the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Foundation - a responsible tourism funding division of a major international tourism organization - provided support to the project. The mutually identified goal was to try to make this an exemplary case of sustainable tourism. In this second phase of the project, the team returned to Taphin, plus another village, Lao Chai, was added and objectives were set to enhance visitor experiences, build business to business relationships, distribute benefits widely, and establish a sustainable tourism economy that would thrive well beyond completion of the work.

Over 200 workshops have been conducted in the villages involving over 450 participants. These have featured: general tourism knowledge, food safety and preparation, visitor experience, visitor management, entrepreneurship and planning, business networking and partnerships, homestay development, community tourism planning for local authorities and community stakeholders. All workshops were designed and delivered by students and faculty of Capilano University and Hanoi Open University in cooperation with local stakeholders.

The workshops featured a high degree of experiential learning through such activities as scenarios, role-playing, case studies, and practically getting involved. Whenever possible actual stakeholders were invited and engaged in the project's programs. For example, the entire community designed and delivered familiarization (FAM) trips (a key marketing strategy directed at tour operators) inviting nearly 20 tourism organizations to the village to experience the cultural-trekking product they had created. Another noteworthy example was a 'business trip' to Hanoi where village business owners visited tour operators in Hanoi and conducted meetings and presentations on their villages and the experiences they could offer to tourists. For many, this was the first time they had left the village and Sapa region. An intriguing observation was that many villagers that had designed, developed and operated tourist products had never been tourists themselves. This was a profound opportunity to actually learn what it was like to be a tourist and where the tourists were coming from before arriving in their community. For students and faculty involved in this particular experience, it was immensely gratifying to witness value of the work that they had been conducting in the villages over many years.

The project has produced many tangible benefits for the communities and all participants. It has helped distribute benefits, engage youth in community care and education, enhance cooperation between local residents and local authorities, retain the extraordinary and unique ethnic hill tribe cultures, and diversify and strengthen household incomes through tourism. Over 60 local guides have been trained and are gainfully employed by several local tour operators, and over 40 homestays owned and operated by local individuals are supplying accommodation and offering visitors a cultural experience. In Taphin and Lao Chai, the communities have designed and began to offer tourists unique cultural experiences in the form of herbal baths and handicraft workshops.

For the universities, over 100 students and 40 faculty members have been involved over the full course of the project. Since 2010, and on a relatively limited budget, 30 students (22 from Canada and 10 from Vietnam) have participated in the project along with 10 faculty members. While the overall participation numbers are higher from Canada, the same Vietnamese students and faculty returned to the village many times and developed high levels of expertise in community based tourism development. Four students from Canada returned multiple times to the village and in many cases at their own expense just to continue contributing to the communities they had grown to love.

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT**

Ten participants were asked to share their experiences of participating in the project. They were asked about their expectations upon arrival in the village, impactful memories, the way they behaved and/or changed their behaviours in the villages, the impact of the experience on their own cross cultural understanding, and the impact on their knowledge and perception of tourism as a form of community development. Additionally, they were asked how the experience has changed their worldview and their trajectory in life. Their experiences provided insight on how to manage the experience again and the extent to which this unique experiential learning activity transformed individual's lives.

### **EXPECTATIONS AND PREPAREDNESS**

For some students participating in the project, simply arriving in Vietnam, the village was highly impactful and changed pre-conceived notions. As one commented, "Before I arrived I expected to come to a village full of hungry unhappy people, I was pleasantly surprised that in fact the people I met in Lao Chai were happier than most communities in Vancouver!" Many students had previous travel experience but the opportunity to meet and work with locals versus view them through the lens of a tourist changed their appreciation of the people and the community. For example, "In some ways the villages were exactly as I expected them, they looked and felt the way I remembered such places looking. However, the people were different

than I had imagined, far more, well, similar to us than I could have guessed. Spending time around the villagers made me more able to see their character, even associate some of their personalities with friends I knew from home.”

As the project has progressed, films have been produced and teachers and past participants have shared their experiences. This has perhaps changed the level of impact and surprise when students reach the village. Many had, in fact, conducted a great deal of research on the communities that altered the immediate impact on them. They were nevertheless affected by the engagement of locals and their keenness to interact. As one student noted, “due to the amount for research that I had done on the hill tribe people surrounding Sapa, I had a strong sense of how the people were, what they would do in their daily practices and how they would act with tourists. What I had no idea about is how they would act with our volunteers. They were so keen to learn ... you could really feel their hunger for knowledge. They were so personable and relatable and we ended up making great friends. Working with them was an absolute pleasure.”

### **PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE**

One of the greatest impacts participation in this type of experiential learning can have is to broaden cross-cultural learning and appreciation. Most participants in the project have experienced relatively privileged lifestyles and standards of living compared with the subsistence lifestyle of the villagers. They were provided the opportunity to witness other kinds of values and hard work that takes place. For many, their small glimpse into this life brings into focus important things in life. As one student who visited the village four years ago commented, “The villagers surprised me. The words that come to mind are beautiful, determined, awe-inspiring, hopeful, united. It was a very humbling experience.”

A student from a more recent project team was struck by the challenges faced by community members and their resilience. “I stayed with one homestay owner who was 20 years old. She was married with two children (and living with her husbands parents). Not only did this young couple have to take care of all of their traditional responsibilities (farming their rice field, growing other food, taking care of their livestock, providing and taking care of their family), but they were also just beginning to take guests into their homestay. I was truly impressed by how hard the couple was willing to work to break into the world of tourism. It was a huge undertaking on top of their already heavy load of responsibilities.”

The experience noted above demonstrates that the students recognized change was afoot in the villages and they were able to recognize that culture is complex. As one mentioned, “I think it’s important to understand that ‘foreign’ cultures are dynamic, just like ours. I think tourists sometimes project a simplistic (sometimes essentialist) understanding of other cultures



onto them. This trip re-enforced to me the idea that cultures are unique, different and can have an 'essence' but they are not static." Another student noted, "This trip has only strengthened my interest to learn about other cultures. It has made me really think about all of the little things that build up a culture and how any particular culture is like an iceberg-with a lot under the surface." These comments are indicative of the outcome on most, that the experience made them think and that they should approach the experience with an open-mind. As one commented, "Patience, respect and a nonjudgmental attitude is what's needed to communicate and learn."

What is perhaps most gratifying is the way that students are willing to try new experiences. Some may not however repeat all of them. As noted by a student on the most recent visit to the village, "The project first hand showed me what it is like to live in another culture. My eyes were opened to different drinking, eating, and spiritual ways. As an example, instead of taking medicine for my sore throat, I let Pen pinch my throat (until it bruised) and gave me lemongrass, ginger and honey tea. Now that I'm back home I probably won't do the bruising, however the tea will accompany my medicine well!"

### **ROLE AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE**

The students on this trip became acutely aware of how they were changing the village and the lives of individuals by their presence and their efforts. They were placed in the role not just as learner but also educator and agent of change. For some this was a journey of discovery with significant reward. As one student commented, "We were just beginning the community based tourism process in Lao Chai so building relationships with the residents was really our main goal. I went to Lao Chai with an HOU student, Trung, and although we tried, nothing went right. We seemed to find a roadblock with everything we did. But it didn't matter. We kept trying and got creative because we really wanted to make a difference. We walked through the village and we began to meet people, we met with the local authority, we had lunch with the school staff, and we provided a food safety workshop. Two days later we were invited back to the schools to teach the children, we held stakeholder meetings, we made friends with the villagers. We did it!"

Some students were gratified by the significance of their modest input. As one student explained, "The most impactful experience was teaching the finance lesson. I made monopoly styled VND and broke the group into 4 groups. Each group was then assigned a translator, and given a water bottle that said 'Bank.' We then told them two people are hypothetically coming to your homestay. How much will you charge them? We then gave them that amount in our VND we created. The groups were then told to go through every expense and put the corresponding money in the bank. I was humbled to see the puzzled look on their faces as they realized all the



hidden costs (toilet paper, cooking oil, gas to go shopping). What seriously impacted me was when Mr. Chu came up to me, tears in his eyes, and thanked me with a two handed shake and expressed how I would never know how much this would help their livelihood. That moment made me realize that I had made a difference.”

In some cases, trying to make a difference in communities such as this is humbling as it reveals what the students and teachers in many cases do not know as much as what locals do. As one student noted, “I struggled with my role of ‘facilitator’ when it was clear that the women/homestay owners often knew more about a topic than I did. As we went through our lessons we changed from delivery to discussions (and it became clear to me that sometimes the benefit was for me and my learning rather than for the homestay owners).” She explained what she learned in a quite self-critical way, “I only realized now, however, that my lesson plans were based on western assumptions and I didn’t cross-reference against Vietnamese norms. Perhaps there are some significant differences. This is an ignorant decision that I would change if I had the opportunity to go again.”

### **UNDERSTANDING OF THE DISCIPLINE**

Each of the students involved in this project are completing Bachelor of Tourism Management degrees. The experience of teaching about tourism management and development in an environment where the outcomes are so critically felt is highly impactful. These experiences can change the ways that participants in the program view the costs and benefits of tourism and helps them decide how they will contribute in this field in the future.

Some students realized the complexity of the challenge that they were now a part of in the village. As one student mentioned, “I think that developing tourism in a way that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable is more complicated than I originally thought. There are so many different factors at hand... a lot of different parties to deal with, a lot of different interests... I now see how difficult it is to manage all of this so the result is positive and sustainable.”

For others, the trip provided an opportunity to critically assess the value of tourism and the implications of their actions. For example, “This trip has impacted my thoughts on how tourism can be the main industry in an area and how that can make or break a culture or society. A major thought that has emerged is how cultural community-based tourism may in fact act as a barrier for ‘natural’ community development. The local people are encouraged to keep things as they always were so tourists can see an ‘authentic’ or ‘traditional’ home, we discussed how this could, in turn actually restrict the normal progression of development in their society.”

The experience also enabled participants to recognize some of the gross

inequities that exist in the ability of individuals to travel and how this translates to an issue of social justice. As one student observed, "I think it's a great injustice that some people can travel freely and others can't even dream of international travel. This is a complex issue but some reasons include developing nations do not have the affluence of developed nations and passport privilege. This issue has been weighing heavily on my mind. I think we (in wealthy, developed nations) need to address how we 'do' tourism and to acknowledge our privileged access to other places. I think a truly 'responsible' (or perhaps the better word is 'just') tourism is one that is open to everyone. Spending time with the people of Lao Chai who I had previously only 'theorized' about has brought this issue into stark focus for me."

### **CHANGING WORLDVIEW AND LIFE TRAJECTORY**

A key feature of transformative education is the impact that the learning experience has had on the worldview of an individual and how this has impacted the way that they think and act. Life in the village is so profoundly different to life in Vancouver or even in Hanoi. Although modern amenities are creeping in, people still live a daily lifestyle that is centuries old. As one teacher mentioned while sitting on the floor of a villagers hut about to tuck into a meal of fried chicken intestines, "I think I am in a National Geographic moment!" Being in such an environment provides individuals the opportunity to reflect on their life, and about what is of value and what should be prioritized. As one student mentioned, "The connection I felt with the people in Lao Chai was unique, and unlike what I had experienced before. The Lao Chai people are the most kind-hearted people I have had the pleasure of meeting. Coming from one of the wealthiest countries, where what I am going to eat has never been on my mind, I feel humbled to have seen this way of life. If anything, it has made me stress less. I now feel relaxed knowing that life can be so much simpler than we grow up to believe, and happiness can still be achieved."

For some, it made them reflect on the ways that their so-called modern societies behave. As one student mentioned, "their community and way of life was so different than my own that it did encourage comparisons in the way our societies work. For example, the way that the children are raised in Lao Chai is clearly with an 'it takes a village to raise a child' attitude, with the children running around having fun and helping out with daily life without supervision. This, compared to the cotton wool like child rearing practices of western society was so refreshing to see. It did, however, take some time to get used to."

From the experience of working in the village, many students have altered their life trajectories. A very common response is to become more involved in community based tourism studies and work. For example, "In terms of my future career and volunteer work, I would love to begin on a pathway where I can be involved with tourism (and community development) in a

way that supports sustainable development and some positive differences for the world". In some cases it has altered outlooks quite significantly, "Before CBT Vietnam I was set on being a General Manager for an upscale hotel. I now feel there is more to life than money. The gratification I got from helping people was more than I had gotten from any school or work accomplishment in my life. I now question how I can make the biggest difference opposed to the biggest paycheck."

For students of Hanoi Open University that have participated in the project, seven have continued on to Masters level studies. Most attribute the experience of working on the Community Based Tourism project as key to their desire and ability to continue onto higher levels of education. Three Canadian students have continued onto higher education and one in particular is now on a fully funded masters program in Europe. He attributes the success he has had on his learning pathway to his undergraduate experiences in the project. As he noted, "There is absolutely no way I would be where I am today (or following the path I am today) had I not had the opportunity to participate in CBT Vietnam. CBT was one of the most rewarding opportunities that I have ever been a part of, and I can sincerely say it has shaped a direction for me which I am still following today, almost 4 years after the last time I worked on the project."

## **CONCLUSION**

The opportunity for Capilano University and Hanoi Open University to work with the people of Ta Van, Taphin, Lao Chai has been a true privilege and a significant responsibility. As the universities became more deeply entrenched in the project, the stakes for success increased. This made the efforts of all involved all the more important and meaningful. The project has made us, as educators, think more carefully and critically about our approaches and our impact, and at the same time has enhanced our ability to take on challenges and find productive solutions.

The participation has, without doubt, been a rare and special experiential learning opportunity. It has provided challenge and experience and been followed with reflection, learning and growth. In virtually every way, it has fulfilled principles as articulated by the AEE and related AAC&U high impact learning practices.

The greater question is whether or not it has been a transformational learning experience. Those involved in running the project are confident in saying that it has changed the lives of virtually all involved for the better. The villagers have taken more control of tourism as a result of building capacity and knowledge within the community and the relationship of villagers, local authorities, and the tourism industry has been built on respect, consultation, and partnership. For the learners, they have been provided an opportunity to become entrenched in the culture of others they have never experienced before, and in a way that was greatly more

intimate than normal. They learned more about their subject of study, the impact it has on people, and they learned much more about themselves. To use Mezirow's notion of a 'disorienting dilemma', some students experienced this more than others and, perhaps, the change felt by some students was more profound than others. On a spectrum, all have to some extent been transformed and lives have been improved. Over time we will find out just how much.

### **POSTSCRIPT**

The Vietnam Community Based Tourism project has been acknowledged by several organizations. In 2014 it received the PATA Grand Award for Education and Training in their Gold Awards competition. In 2015 the project was acknowledged as a finalist in Wild Asia's Most Inspiring Responsible Tourism Initiative competition and it is currently being featured as one of Wild Asia's 10 most inspiring projects of the past 10 years. The project was also recognized with an honorable mention in the United Nations Environment Program 'InSpire' Sustainability awards in 2015. The story of this project has been told through film and been honored with 11 official screenings and several individual awards including grand prizes in film festivals around the globe. For more information or to view the films please visit: <http://www.cbtvietnam.com>

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