

WHERE I'M FROM
Connecting students through poetry

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FULBRIGHT DISTINGUISHED AWARDS
TEACHING PROGRAM

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Introduction

In September 2016, I traveled to Hanoi, Vietnam as a Fulbright Distinguished Teacher. My proposal for this grant included teaching a series of poetry lessons and creating a poetry-sharing website to develop students' global competencies.

This report includes the steps I took to create the poetry-sharing website, including my inquiry project proposal, research process, final results and goals for the future. I also share several stories to illustrate my overall experience of living, teaching and learning in Vietnam.

Program Experience

The inquiry project was one component of my overall Fulbright program. Before I discuss the specifics of my project, I will share some of the highlights of my time in Vietnam.

Mai Châu

I stood on the rickety bamboo raft trying to paddle down the river without falling. Just beyond the banks of the muddy river I could see the bright green rice paddies covering the landscape. This was not what I was expecting after just a week in Vietnam. In fact, this was far better than anything I had imagined. Instead of fumbling through language barriers and stressing out about how to start my project, I was on a Fulbright orientation in the mountains several hours from Hanoi.

My fellow Fulbrighters and I spent two days in briefings from the US Embassy learning some basics about the culture of Vietnam, the economy, security and health issues, the government, US relations with Vietnam, Fulbright programs and more. It was not only a time for

learning about life in Vietnam, but also a time to get to know the other Fulbrighters and Fulbright staff who would turn out to be an invaluable support system.

In Mai Châu, where I was rafting down the river, we rode bicycles through the rice paddies, learned about the local Thai culture, visited traditional homes and ate a variety of typical food from the region. The orientation and trip to Mai Chau turned out to be essential for creating a network of support. Taking time to support colleagues and friends is one of the biggest lessons I will take home with me. It is easy to get caught up in the frenetic pace of daily life in the US. My fellow Fulbrighters have reminded me of the importance of slowing down and spending quality time together.

Mù Cang Chải

The best way for me to describe my experience in Mù Cang Chải is through a blog post I wrote shortly after the trip. It starts like this:

Sitting at a classroom desk, I heard a tap on the window and could just make out the laughing faces of the Hmong children standing outside in the dark. The principal was grabbing my arm to make another toast, this time because we are both left-handed, as I had a moment of wondering, “Is this really happening?”

[\(http://tflanagan.us/yearabroad/2016/10/13/i-think-this-is-illegal-where-i-come-from/\)](http://tflanagan.us/yearabroad/2016/10/13/i-think-this-is-illegal-where-i-come-from/)

It was a surreal experience to be sitting in a classroom drinking toasts of rice wine. It was the second day of a three-day adventure with the Charity Club from the university. Mù Cang Chải is about 10 hours away from Hanoi by bus and is home to the Hmong ethnic minority people. I was able to participate in handing out donations to local villagers during the day. We traveled by motorbike on muddy paths, passing by water buffalo, endless rice paddies, and children giving us high fives.

In the afternoon and evening, I was an honored guest at a local school. The university students and students from the elementary and middle school prepared performances as part of a cultural exchange. After hosting us for dinner, and the rice wine toasts, hundreds of students from both schools joined together in the courtyard for a bonfire, games and dancing. I learned so much about the culture and traditions of the Hmong people and how they fit into Vietnamese society. I have always believed in the value of giving students opportunities to interact with people from other cultures. Watching the university students and Hmong children dance around the bonfire for hours showed me that it is possible to do this even within your own country.

Halloween

I had not been looking forward to Halloween. Twenty-nine years of teaching middle school has taught me that it is a holiday meant to be endured at best. After teaching three classes of poetry to very excited students, I did not feel like attending the Halloween celebration that evening at school. Still, I went, and happily the students and teachers sparked my Halloween spirit that night.

The party was limited to just over an hour, but during that time there were games and activities at several different booths, singing and dancing by students, music performances and the costume contest. There were decorations everywhere and a lighted red carpet runway for the main event. Hundreds of students from grades 6-12 crowded into the courtyard and just had fun.

Several teachers and students asked my opinion of the party and said it must be very small compared to what I'm used to. They were surprised to hear that schools in the US tend not to have large Halloween parties like this and holidays in general are downplayed for several reasons. I assured them that this was the largest Halloween party I had been to, and that it showed the positive and friendly spirit at Nguyễn Tất Thành School.

As I left in the dark at around 6:00, half the students were still there, dismantling the booths, putting away the chairs, rolling up the red carpet, sweeping the courtyard. They had spent weeks preparing for this event, much of it on their own time. The sense of community and positive outlook at Nguyễn Tất Thành School is something I hope to bring back to my work in the US. I want to join with other teachers who value building community spirit through events like this, even if it does not directly impact test scores.

Project Description: Abstract

The purpose of my project was to develop students' global competencies by connecting them through poetry. Students read and analyzed several types of autobiographical poems and used those poems as models for writing poems about themselves. The student poems were then put on a website and shared with other schools so that they could receive comments and read poems from other classes that participate. This project focuses on helping students communicate across cultures and understand different points of view.

I also learned about the textile industry in Vietnam as a way to teach my students in the US why so many of the clothes and shoes they wear are made in Vietnam.

Finally, I investigated many aspects of Vietnamese culture in order to be able to teach students and teachers about it. I focused on Vietnamese language study and the *luc bat*, a popular form of Vietnamese poetry with a unique rhyme scheme.

With the knowledge gained from these investigations, I have created an online curriculum guide for teachers that contains all of the poetry lesson plans and materials for teaching autobiographical poems and participating in the poetry-sharing website. I am also adding resources to the website about teaching Vietnamese *luc bat* poetry and other aspects of

Vietnamese culture. Finally, I maintained a blog with over 40 articles with photos about my Fulbright experience which can be another resource for teachers.

Project Process

Teaching

After deciding on a project and being accepted into the Fulbright program, I spent time reviewing research on global competencies mostly through online sources such as *The Asia Society*. I also tried to gain a sense of what tools would be available to me in Vietnam. I received invaluable practical advice from Libby Frato-Sweeney, the first teacher sent to Vietnam through the DAT program. Since I would be placed in the same school that she worked in the year before, I was able to learn about the working environment and available resources.

One of the biggest questions I had was if the students' English would be adequate for me to teach them to write poems. My advisor at the Hanoi National University of Education, Ms. Hang, introduced me to many people that could be helpful to me and arranged a meeting at Nguyễn Tất Thành School where I could teach poetry lessons. Ms. Duong was my contact at the school where I would teach and she set up a schedule of class observations to help me in my research.

I spent about two weeks observing many classes, from English to physics, music, history and more. I also attended school assemblies and the Mid-autumn Festival celebration during my first week. This helped me to get acquainted with the school and decide which parts of my project might be possible. I was impressed with the level of English I observed in most classes, though I noted that I heard only a handful of students speak out of the 45 students in each class.

After negotiating a reasonable class schedule, I was assigned to teach four classes at NTT. I

agreed to teach eight weekly poetry writing lessons to each class. I learned quickly that many of the quiet students in the back of the class did not understand as much as the students who were always participating. I also learned that not all of the quiet students lacked English skills. Some just lacked confidence, but understood everything I was saying. In addition, I realized that I needed to modify some of the lessons and create templates for certain classes or students. There were students who need much more structure and support, and some classes moved at a quicker pace than others.

Through contacts at the university, I was able to “hire” 3-4 teaching assistants (students from the university) for each of my classes. The assistants were able to translate my directions for students who did not understand and they worked individually with students as they wrote and revised their poems. It was still hard to get to all of the students, but having the assistants made a big difference.

During this time, I also made a connection with an English class from the university. The teacher, Ms. Huong, was interested in my project and offered to have me teach the poetry lessons to her class. This class, which had about 15 students, was extremely shy at first. However, after trying different strategies to get them involved, and with Ms. Huong’s support (she stayed for every lesson and even wrote poems herself), the students began to open up. The perspective of 19-20-year-olds was very different from the middle and high school students I was working with and their poems turned out to be a great addition to the project.

Vietnamese Language and Culture

While I was teaching, I was also focused on learning as much about Vietnamese language and culture in order to be able to teach students and teachers back at home about Vietnam. I spent five hours a week in a Vietnamese language class attempting to learn some basic phrases. It

was challenging! I wrote about these challenges on my blog and did manage to learn a lot *about* the language but not much in terms of actually speaking it. (See this blog post: <http://tflanagan.us/yearabroad/2016/11/07/learning-about-vietnamese/>.) This turned out to be one of my greatest challenges in Vietnam in general. I knew that by not speaking the language I was missing out on so much of the experience. I also was approached almost daily by strangers who wanted to practice their English (and ask for lessons). So even when I did try to practice Vietnamese, most local people wanted to try out their English instead.

I also spent two hours a week in private classes focusing more on different aspects of Vietnamese culture. I learned about the history, economy, religion and poetry of Vietnam. It was helpful to gain insight into these aspects of culture.

During this time, I interviewed many teachers and students about their lives in Vietnam. I found that once I got to know people, they were very willing to share their stories. What was interesting to me was how similar so many of the stories were. Vietnam is a diverse country, but the cultural expectations and customs are very strong throughout the country. All students are expected to work long hours, study hard, and enter university. Marriage and children are expected soon after. Still, I met young people (and a few older people) who spoke critically of their culture and the expectations it places on individuals.

Another helpful resource for me were two Vietnamese-American Fulbrighters who were also working on projects in Hanoi. Both had been raised in the US by parents who had fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. Their perspectives and honest reflections about being Vietnamese-American in Hanoi gave me great insight into the complexities of this society. And even though they experienced many of the frustrations I did, they were able to help me understand why things work the way they do in Vietnamese culture.

As the teaching phase of my project came to an end, I began to focus on other aspects of my research.

Luc Bat Poetry

Learning about luc bat poetry was not too difficult. Everyone in Vietnam is familiar with this traditional form of poetry and is eager to share their knowledge of it. I interviewed students, attended lectures on poetry and read many articles on it. The Vietnamese were very excited to know that an American was interested in their traditional poetry. At a lecture given by a luc bat expert, I was presented with an autographed book about poetry in Vietnam. The other attendees were so excited for me!

Applying what I learned about luc bat was a challenge. I tried writing my own luc bat poem and wrote about what I learned in this blog post:

(<http://tflanagan.us/yearabroad/2017/01/04/luc-bat/>)

Designing a Website and Curriculum Guide

I wrote detailed lesson plans for each of the eight poetry lessons I taught, in addition to plans for some alternative lessons. I decided to use Google Docs to create a curriculum guide with these plans and included a clickable table of contents for easy navigation. The thirty-three page guide can be downloaded or viewed from the project website:

(<http://tflanagan.us/shareyourpoem/>).

Designing the project website took a lot of time, trial and error, and outside help. I wanted to make sure the poetry site had room to grow and would be organized in a way that was user-friendly. It would start with about 100 poems and hopefully include many more schools and poems in the future. I researched and experimented with several different platforms including Joomla, Google Sites, Wordpress.com, and Wix. Each of these had components that met my

needs, but none of them had everything I wanted. In the end, I chose Wordpress.org so that I would have more flexibility in customizing the site, even though that would involve more time and trial and error.

After trying dozens of layouts and themes, I finally settled on one that had *almost* everything I wanted. I set up the basic structure of the site and experimented with adding poems and pages. I turned to an outsourcing website, Fiverr, for help with the details that were beyond my capabilities. I chose one of the hundreds of Wordpress experts on Fiverr, contacted them, and negotiated a price for the help I needed with the website. Within a few hours, the programmer from Suriname had done everything I requested and my site was ready to go.

The next step involved formatting and entering the poems I had received from the students. Luckily, I had help from a university student. She was able to upload most of the poems I received in a short time, while I focused on editing and commenting on each poem.

Finally, the poetry site was ready to be shared. I contacted readers of my blog, my school district in Connecticut, Twitter followers, Fulbrighters, and others so that they could read and comment on student poems. Many people responded and soon there were hundreds of comments on the site. When I revealed the site to the students in Vietnam, they were stunned and amazed that readers from around the world had taken the time to write a comment on their poems. This also inspired more students to submit poems since many were too shy to do so at first. Here is a blog post that includes videos of the students' reaction to seeing comments on their poems: <http://tflanagan.us/yearabroad/2016/12/23/reaction/>.

I also contacted George Ella Lyon, the author of the original "Where I'm From" poem and a Kentucky poet laureate. It was exciting to hear back from her that she loved the site and thanked the students for the poems they wrote.

School Visits, Conferences and Presentations

Another aspect of my project included visiting schools, attending a conference and presenting seminars. I was fortunate to attend the DEEP Learning conference in Malaysia. This exposed me to many new ideas and people who could help with teaching global competencies. I now have contacts in international schools throughout Southeast and East Asia. I am also ready to try new digital tools to engage students in projects for telling stories about themselves to share with students in other countries.

The four schools I visited, in addition to the high school and university I worked in, gave me more information about school life in Vietnam. I visited a combination of public, private, rural and urban schools. In talking with teachers and students, I learned much about the education system. Students in Vietnam work very hard, and high school is often more difficult and stressful than college. Everything depends upon the frequent exams that are given, and there is little room for creativity. Teachers and students are at school for long hours, usually ten periods a day for six days a week. Teachers have little time to plan lessons. They follow the government-issued textbooks and teach through lectures. Many teachers are interested in applying better teaching techniques, but find it hard to make the time to do so. Despite this, students in Vietnam have scored very well on the last two PISA tests, especially in math and science. I have written much more about schools in Vietnam on my blog, particularly in these two posts:

<http://tflanagan.us/yearabroad/2016/10/21/student-life-middle-and-high-school/>,

<http://tflanagan.us/yearabroad/2016/10/28/student-life-university-edition/>.

Finally, I presented eleven different seminars for teachers, professors, administrators, fellow Fulbrighters and university students who are studying to become teachers. This work was

not part of my research, but I learned a lot about the needs and interests of these groups by presenting seminars. Many groups want to know about teaching strategies for engaging students. They are also interested in critical thinking and what education in general is like in the US. With each seminar, there were many challenges. Schedules and the intended audience changed frequently. The topics I was asked to present on often included a long list of big ideas, any one of which could have been a multi-day workshop. Several presentations were planned and then canceled due to scheduling problems. And every seminar ended with a line of people waiting to ask me to present about another topic for their faculty or class.

Despite these challenges, there were many successes in each seminar. Teachers and professors reported back to me about trying some of the strategies I had presented. I learned more about the realities of teaching in Vietnam. I was impressed with the eagerness, intelligence and enthusiasm of the students who were studying to become teachers. I met many teachers and professors who were working hard to make improvements in Vietnam's education system. I was also able to promote my project, the Fulbright program, and make new connections with educators.

Results

I came to Vietnam to explore ways to make connections between students here and students in the US through poetry, Vietnamese culture and by learning about the textile industry. Following are the results of each component.

I was able to create a website with nearly 100 student poems. The poems are already being read by students in the United States as well as other people from around the world. Visitors have left over 400 comments on the poems and at least three other classrooms have

committed to having students contribute poems to the site. I will also have my students add poems to the site when I return to the US next school year. As of now, people from at least 13 countries have visited the site, including the author of the original “Where I’m From” poem, George Ella Lyon.

The value of this site in helping students understand others from other cultures is already evident by some of the comments on the poems. One student from the US wrote this after reading a poem: “You explained plenty of struggles teens have worldwide!” Other comments from students include:

- “I feel inspired about getting out of your ordinary routine and trying different ways to help other people.”
- “I love how strongly you wrote about why people who judge you by where you’re from are wrong. Thank you for sharing this piece of you!”
- “You are like me because I love music!”
- “I love the 3rd stanza and the 6th stanza because I can relate to them. About listening to music, and laying in bed thinking about tomorrow!”
- “Smoking is less common here in America, but it’s still a major problem! My Grandmother died from smoking before I was born, so I feel a connection with this poem.”
- “I love how you named all of the stereotypes about Asians. It sends out a great message on not to judge people.”

There have also been unexpected results from working with students in Vietnam. I was surprised when many students told me they had never written a poem in Vietnamese, and certainly not in English. Students here read and analyze poems, but they rarely write them. Few students thought they could write a poem when I first came, and some later admitted they couldn’t wait for me to leave! As they began to write and share poems in class, however, they grew more confident. Nearly half of the students I worked with ended up submitting a poem to the website. These comments reflect the progress they made:

- “Before, I think writing poems is very hard and I can not do it. However now, I feel it is funny and useful. It help me to improve lots of skills such as writing, reading...”
- “I think the most changing to me after this unit is I don't think write poem is difficult anymore. And I feel happy whenever I write a poem.”
- “I know more about myself.”
- “I learned that writing poems is a great way to relieve stress and create something that resembles art that makes me feel good about myself.”
- “Thank you for helping me find my creative gene. This is something I have never been able to use in school.”

And my favorite comment came from a university freshman, Hoang, who said, “At first we were shy, and now some of us are still shy, but you have helped us to find ourselves through poetry.”

I also created a complete curriculum guide for teachers and have posted it on the project website. The guide contains all of the lesson plans and materials for the classes I taught in Vietnam.

I have learned a lot about Vietnamese culture and have made many contacts which will help me to continue to make connections between students and teach global competencies. Each experience discussed in this report and on my blog taught me more about life in Vietnam. I am beginning to develop a new section of the project website which will include resources and lesson ideas based on my experiences. I am starting with information about teaching luc bat poetry. I am also sharing much of what I have learned through my blog. Many teachers are reading my posts and using resources I share in their classrooms. I have also had two Skype sessions with students in the US to talk about my experiences here, and I will have more in the future as I continue to travel.

The area of my research which did not produce much results was my desire to learn more about the textile industry. I originally thought that since my students wear clothes and shoes made in Vietnam it would be interesting to learn more about this industry to make a more

meaningful connection for them. I envisioned visiting factories where Nikes are made and interviewing workers. I thought I could learn more about the economics behind this system and, why, for example, wealthy Vietnamese students order Nikes from the US or Europe at a great expense, even though they are made in Vietnam. I did attempt to contact several representatives from companies that make products here (Nike, Asics, UnderArmour, Adidas), but did not receive any replies. I understood before I came here that this was a long-shot, so I was not too surprised. I did manage to arrange some private lectures with a professor from the Vietnamese Faculty who taught me more about the overall economy of Vietnam. I also attended a “field trip” with this professor to a town specializing in weaving silk. This helped give me a better understanding of the overall economy of Vietnam.

I also learned from my Vietnamese students, who were very interested in the US elections and how the outcome would affect them. In every class, I was asked who I would be voting for. Many understood the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal and had hoped the US would ratify it. It was interesting to see the level of knowledge these students had in world affairs and how decisions in the US have a direct impact on their lives.

Application

I teach in a public middle school in Pawcatuck, Connecticut. My school receives Title I funds for the high percentage of students who come from low-income families. The students in Pawcatuck have limited exposure to cultures, languages, religions and people in general who are not already living in their community. I hope to bring the world closer to my students and to help them understand other cultures by continuing my project and expanding it when I return to school in August.

I will teach the same autobiographical poetry lessons to my students in Connecticut and have them contribute poems to the poetry-sharing site. I will also have them read poems submitted by students in Vietnam and other countries so that they can learn about other cultures and leave comments for the authors. This is just a first step in teaching global competencies. Ultimately, I hope to have my students begin collaborating on projects with students from other countries. Perhaps they can write poems together that reflect their similarities and differences. Maybe they will investigate a problem that affects both of their communities and present solutions that could be applied. Students could use digital tools to communicate, create and share their findings. I am hopeful that the contacts I have made through this program will lead to future projects that I have not even imagined yet.

The project website will continue to grow and be shared with educators everywhere. I will continue to seek schools that want to read and comment on poems, and write poems to contribute to the site. I will promote the site and the curriculum guide by writing articles, blog posts, and sharing via social media. I will add more resources and lessons based on what I have learned about Vietnamese culture and living in Vietnam. I will attend local, state and regional conferences to share my project work and promote the poetry-sharing site and resources.

This work is relevant now more than ever. Students today will grow up to live in a world that will involve working collaboratively across cultures. Students need experience in understanding multiple perspectives, using technology to find reliable and accurate information, and collaborating with others to make a change in their communities. We may not know what jobs will exist in ten or twenty years, but we do know that students with these skills will be at an advantage in the future. My project will not teach all of the skills needed for the future, but it is a step towards showing students, teachers and administrators the value of this work.