Michele Van Hoeck

# It's not about the "stuff"
## Teaching information literacy in Vietnam

How would you teach information literacy to students with minimal print resources and no access to subscription databases? What if you had a whole semester to teach an eager class of college freshmen, but their only resources were what they could find for free on the Internet?

Maybe you've taught a session or several on evaluating Web sites, and certainly, in recent years, there has been a movement away from database demos in information literacy instruction. But to my knowledge, no academic library has completely removed proprietary databases



Students in uniforms, in class. Photograph by Michele Van Hoeck.

from their instruction program, not to mention books.

Is information literacy instruction inextricably tied to an institutional library, with the usual budget for print and electronic materials?

In May 2012, I had the opportunity to ponder these questions, as well as attempt to answer them, while teaching a class at the Vietnam Maritime University (VIMARU) in Hai Phong. My institution is assisting VIMARU in developing an undergraduate program in Global Studies and Maritime Affairs (GSMA), modeled after our own.

This new program is being taught in English by California State University Maritime Library (Cal Maritime) faculty at VIMARU. Because the Cal Maritime GSMA program includes a required two-unit Information Fluency course, I was invited to Vietnam to teach the same course to students in the new program at VIMARU. The course would be taught over two weeks, every day, for three hours per day.

### East-West partnerships

Our institution is not alone in partnering with universities in Vietnam. In 2009, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that hundreds of institutions outside Vietnam have

Michele Van Hoeck is instruction coordinator at the California State University Maritime Library, e-mail: mvanhoeck@csum.edu

signed memoranda of understanding to offer dual degree programs, help design curricula, or share teaching materials.[1]

These partnerships have been encouraged by a series of Vietnamese educational reform measures, the most significant of which was the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) of 2005. HERA set ambitious goals for expanding the number of students, teachers, and research activities in higher education in Vietnam.

At VIMARU, Global Studies and Maritime Affairs is the first social science major to be offered. This university of approximately 25,000 students has a library focused on technical information for marine navigation, engineering, and business programs.

Before leaving for Vietnam, I e-mailed a helpful library staff member who told me their library offered the "usual" resources, but no databases or catalogs that could be accessed from off campus. Later, the program coordinator informed me that while VIMARU had plans to build a new library, the current one contained no resources related to the new Global Studies major.

As I prepared a syllabus, I asked myself if information literacy was about using the library. I wouldn't have defined it that way, but when faced with teaching in the absence of one, I became acutely aware of how heavily my lesson plans depended on library "stuff."

Furthermore, I was reading reports about government censorship of news and social media that had me concerned about what would actually be available online. I picked up a copy of a scholarly-looking journal called *Vietnamese Studies* at the consulate and was surprised to see almost no citations, except one to the Vietnamese Wikipedia. Clearly, I would be teaching in a different environment than what I was accustomed to.

But I would be traveling with another Cal Maritime faculty member, who had much academic experience abroad, including Asia. We heard nothing but glowing reports from the



Front/entrance of VIMARU. Photograph by Michele Van Hoeck.

faculty who preceded us, although they did tell us teaching in Vietnam relies on lecture, with students even more reluctant to speak in class than our American students.

I devised a tentative syllabus and posted it on the Moodle course page. A few days before I left, I sent a short welcome e-mail to my students, imagining the message flying thousands of miles across the Pacific to young people in another country who might be just as nervous as I was. As the second cohort in the VIMARU's new program, Information Fluency would be their first class. There were 58 students enrolled in my class.

## Sage on the stage

We arrived on a Monday morning at the Ha Noi airport and were greeted effusively by the chair of the Business Department. A VIMARU student presented us with enormous bouquets of flowers, the first of several gifts we received from our students. Throughout our stay, we were treated like honored guests, which we came to realize

was at least partly to do with our being teachers. On the first day of class, my students stood up when I entered the room and applauded.

Vietnam is strongly influenced by Confucianism, which has traditionally placed a high value on education. Teaching is a respected profession in Vietnam, and university education has a long history there. The Temple of Literature in Ha Noi was the first university in Southeast Asia, built almost 1,000 years ago. It contains a collection of centuries-old stelae, mounted on the backs of giant stone turtles, a symbol of longevity, and carved with the names of scholars who completed their studies at the university.

I thought of these stone tablets when I toured the computer lab in the VIMARU library. To access a technical database, a student would request an IP address, which could only be used from computers within that room, much like the CD-ROM systems I trained on in the early 1990s.

I was reminded of a simple fact: the library resources I take for granted in the United States, even at my local public library, are expensive. Hardware, software, and proprietary databases are not one-time expenses. They require regular, ongoing outlays of funds. The average cost of attending college in Vietnam was $500 in 2010, within the reach of only a small proportion of the population.[2] The per capita income in Vietnam is $1,260.[3]

The students I taught at VIMARU worked very hard. Because of the large size of the


The stelae at the Temple of Literature. Photograph by Michele Van Hoeck.

class and frequency of meetings, I could not grade homework individually. But *every student* completed *all the assignments* posted on Moodle. I reviewed these in the afternoons, so I could give general feedback to the class the next day.

The downside to all this respect and the Confucian legacy in education was a "sage on the stage" classroom, in which students are expected to listen in silence to an all-knowing authority figure. At VIMARU, I actually spoke from a short stage, with a microphone so the last rows could hear me.

I believe students need to engage with new material by asking questions and proposing answers in class, and I know this doesn't happen automatically, especially for freshmen. But none of my usual techniques for soliciting participation worked. I could not even get a show of hands in response to a yes or no question. When I asked VIMARU faculty about it, one said, "All their education before this has trained them not to speak in the classroom, but we are trying to change that."

The solution was to act like a daytime talk show host and walk into the audience with the microphone. I explained that talking in class would help them remember the material and practice their English. Then I gave them the microphone and waited. They gave it a good try, but then a new issue arose. Whenever one of their classmates was speaking, the rest of the class started to chat and joke with each other. It took constant reminders to get them to listen to another

student. I realized that if the sage wasn't on the stage, for them, class wasn't in session.

I kept at it with the microphone and it was worth it. Not only were students verbally engaging with the material, I started to learn more about their perspectives, which to me is one of the rewards of teaching. After a news searching exercise, I asked students, "What surprised you about what you found?" One said, "That there is so much information available." Other students nodded their heads.

I moved down the aisle and offered the microphone to the next student and repeated the question. He said, "How sad the news is." I looked around the room and saw agreement in some faces. I was taken out of my professional focus on search strategies and information quality and reminded of the more personal side of learning.

## Let go and let Google

So what do you teach when you aren't "teaching the library?" Every day in Vietnam, I revised my lesson plans and lectures as I learned more about the environment. One conversation I had with a VIMARU faculty member midway through the trip helped me set my course with confidence for the second week of instruction.

We were on a boat on Ha Long Bay, the eerie and beautiful World Heritage Site. The faculty member was telling me how the Vietnamese education system has emphasized math and science, with little attention paid to history and social sciences, even Vietnamese

history. She said that while studying abroad for her graduate degree, she felt embarrassed at her own lack of knowledge, and determined to educate herself. "How?" I asked. "Some books," she said. "Whatever I could find. But mostly by talking to people I met."

This sounded like a job for information literacy to me, but not in relation to research papers. This was information literacy for lifelong learning. As I planned the second week of lessons, I focused less on preparing Global Studies majors to write research papers and more on how they could educate themselves.

What were the options were for finding out about a country, a historical event, a political movement? What were the advantages and disadvantages of these various options? If Google, Wikipedia, and the rest of the free Internet were all my students had, then I was going to help them be more savvy and discriminate users

Here are some of the topics we covered:
• The cycle of publication as a framework for how students learn about events in their own city and country.
• English language sources for world news and the pros and cons of Western-style journalism.
• Boolean concepts and faceted searching via the Google Advanced interface.
• How copyright impacts what is available on Google Books.
• Traditional peer review vs. the Wikipedia approach to quality control.



Ha Long Bay with boats, from above. Photograph by Michele Van Hoeck.

Here are some of the exercises we did:

• Found full-text sources on a country-specific topic in Google Books.

• Made edits on the Vietnamese Wikipedia pages for VIMARU and Hai Phong.

• Read and responded to one open access scholarly journal article, which we dissected in class and compared to more popular sources.

• Dug into data about another Asian country using agency sites like ASEAN, the International Maritime Organization, and the World Bank.

• Watched and posted comments about the Eli Pariser TED video on Google and filter bubbles.

In the end, there were plenty of tools to teach with. To repurpose a Barbara Fister line, information literacy instruction is not about celebrating the "shiny tollgates" that our subscriptions and book budgets represent.[4]

My hard-working VIMARU students deserve access to the resources not found on Google Books or Google Scholar. But knowing that their only options were things like open access scholarship, government-archived data, and country backgrounds produced by the BBC and the *New York Times* made me deeply grateful that those sites exist. And for the sake of these students who had bravely signed up for a program conducted entirely in a second language, I had a new appreciation for Google, Wikipedia, and TED videos, all of which include multilingual versions and workable translation options.

I still prefer by far LexisNexis to Google Advanced for finding news stories. I cannot recommend a good, free substitute for databases like Academic Search or JSTOR. You won't hear me dismissing the need for a library book collection.

But I did bring home plenty of new ideas for starting where my Cal Maritime students are most comfortable (Google and Wikipedia) and making connections between these popular tools and the more sophisticated tools and sources of academia.

Having experienced both the limitations that traditional, subscription-based access presents for so many people in the world, and the very positive difference the Internet can make in a country like Vietnam, I now have a more personal commitment to the value of open access to information. This was an unexpected outcome of a class that taught the teacher as much about information literacy as it did the students.

## Notes

1. Martha Ann Overland, "American Colleges Raise the Flag in Vietnam," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* May 15, 2009.

2. General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2011, *Household Living Standard Survey 2010,* www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=483&idmid=5.

3. World Bank, *Vietnam,* http://data.worldbank.org/country/vietnam.

4. Barbara Fister, "Do Librarians Work Hard Enough?" *Library Babel Fish,* www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/do-librarians-work-hard-enough.