



Global Engagement: The fashion industry in Vietnam

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Understanding the global fashion industry and the politics, issues and logistics of this immense network of players can be a tough concept for undergraduate students to understand, particularly if they have never traveled abroad. The Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was negotiated over 12 years, was ratified in February 2016. This agreement reduced thousands of tariffs, increased human rights protections and offered intellectual property rights among many other line items. It was felt at this time that the economic impact would be positive for the United States. The larger question was how the third world countries involved would be able to take advantage of this opportunity (infrastructure) and yet keep the standards as promised in the agreement (human rights).

The summer of 2016 provided the opportunity to take US students to Vietnam to attend the Fashion Colloquia hosted by RMIT's Vietnam campus. This educational experience brought universities and industry together for three days of discussions and tours to better understand each other's point of view. The course had the following objectives:

- To network globally with peers and professionals in the fashion industry
- To better understand the scope and scale of the problems and challenges that face the apparel industry in a global context.
- Demonstrate an understanding of Vietnamese culture and fashion.
- Demonstrate an understanding of analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of expanding businesses in a third world country and the impact of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Students in the department were told of the opportunity to travel and encouraged to apply by writing a research proposal on what aspect of Vietnam they were interested in. From these proposals, three students were selected. The first meeting was logistical (how to obtain passports and visas, safety, course objectives, flights, etc.). The students were then given their first assignment to research the culture, daily living (cost of housing, transportation, food), political environment, textile and apparel industry, and overall economy of the country. Discussion sessions were held during the spring semester to prepare for the travel and included a lunch with Vietnamese immigrants living near campus. Grants were obtained to help with travel expenses.

This projects design was based on Problem Based Learning creating a focused learning experience grounded on exploring the fashion industry through the culture of Vietnam. Each student developed their own learning objectives within the context of the overall course. Students conducted preliminary research, gathered information while in Vietnam and supplemented it with post-visit research to fill in any gaps in knowledge. One student researched the history of traditional Vietnamese dress, another the social influences on wearing traditional dress for modern females and the third student studied the retail economy and marketplaces in Vietnam.

All research was guided by the academic providing input, feedback and challenging students' thinking and analysis of what they observed.

Students were required to attend the three day colloquium where they were exposed to Australian and Vietnamese designers, publishers of major fashion magazines, photographers, manufacturers and academics. The theme of the conference was *Made in Vietnam* and many discussions were based on how the country wants to raise their image from inexpensive mass produced items to higher quality items. The group visited museums, factories, traditional retail outlets and modern shopping malls. We also experienced having custom shirts made in 24 hours, one of the challenges the colloquium promoted.

Reflection can promote deep, lasting learning (Suskie, 2009), and it can also be used to assess whether your program or course helped students learn the intended objectives. Each student wrote an in depth research paper on their topic of choice but also were required to discuss challenges that Vietnam may face and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of entering an overseas relationship with the example being one of the factories we visited. After the trip, the students were given one month to write a reflection report on their experiences in Vietnam. Most of the reflections focused on their personal experiences interacting with their peers and observations of the culture. The following are excerpts from their reflections:

Traveling to a third world country has been a life changing experience. Before the trip, most of my inspiration has been based off of American products and American ideology, however, this trip has expanded my horizons and showed me that there is a whole world full of inspiration.

As we got to know the locals, we found out that we share a lot in common. The bonds that I have established in Vietnam are long lasting that will forever change the way I perceive people. It was amazing to me how much I shared in common with people that lived halfway around the world from me.

It's easy to have the image of hundreds of workers operating sewing machines in a tightly packed factory, but it is entirely different to see a production worker sitting alone at a table constructing handbags. This relationship is so important. I am now influenced to take better care of my clothing, and to not let it go to waste so easily.

Learning about cultures in class is a mustard seed in comparison to experiencing it firsthand.

This class was a success in many ways, first of all it met the needs of a Global Engagement required general elective class as outlined by the college. Secondly, from the comments in their reflections, the students embraced this experience and had learning experiences beyond the objectives. The students eagerly encouraged the continuation of these types of learning experiences and plans are underway to travel to different regions of the world in the future.

Suskie, L. A., (2009), *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*, 2nd Ed., San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons.