

Building Capacity for a Sustainable Future in Vietnamese Education

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Abstract

For governments, capacity is measured in potential or realized economic development. In Vietnam, educational training seminars abound, but what evidence is there of transfer: operationalized knowledge in real-world contexts?

Vietnam's recent progress is a South East Asian success story. Between 1990 and 2016, GDP grew by more than 3000% (WENR, 2017), and the 2015 PISA results - 8th in science, 17th in math and 19th in reading - outstripped countries with much higher GDP output and wealth. This incredible rise is not guaranteed into the future. Much is dependent upon a combination of complex factors, including government policy, sustained foreign direct investment, infrastructure development, and the modernizing of systems and services.

Some, notably including the World Bank, have attempted to attribute Vietnam's performance to factors related to education, both cultural (focus on school work, time studying outside classrooms) and systemic (centralized education, school resources, connectivity, more children in early and primary education). Continued growth would then require the expansion and development of the education and vocational training sectors.

We believe that quality of teaching is a reflection of the quality of the teacher training and the institutional support that teachers receive. Further, we believe that capacity development goes beyond practice and policy implementation: it extends to the changing of mindsets and of attitudes that lead to quality of life, and to the empowerment of individuals, leaders, organizations and society. That is, "the training of educators is one of the pillars of sustainable development and national capacity building" (AlAlfi, 2018).

This paper reflects on our many years (well over a decade combined) of working with educators and of leading seminars in Vietnam. Using theoretical understandings of capacity development, we reconcile our participant observations and experiences against the literature, and draw conclusions about building sustainable future capacity in the Vietnamese education sector.

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Introduction

From a platform of a GDP increase of over 3000% between 1990 and 2016 (WENR, 2017), Vietnam's economy is predicted to grow by more than six percent by 2020 (World Bank, 2016), and to become the world's 20th largest before 2050 (PWC, 2017). The World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2017-2018 also highlights Vietnam's progress, moving it up five places from the previous year, and twenty places in the last five years (Hara, 2017). Factor in Vietnam's excellent 2015 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results, where it outperformed countries with much higher GDP output and wealth, and Vietnam's potential is easily recognizable.

A prime candidate as a catalyst of Vietnam's rapid success is its investment in education. For example, the leader of the OECD's Directorate of Education and Skills put the 2010 level of the Vietnamese government's expenditure devoted to education at 21% - a larger proportion than in any OECD country (Schleicher 2015). Researchers at the World Bank (Parandekar and Sedmik, 2016) have used mathematical tools to analyze Vietnam's 2012 PISA results in detail, suggesting two types of educational factor to explain the 'Vietnam effect' in education: cultural and systemic. Examples from the former category include students being more focused on their school work, being less likely to arrive late for school, and spending more time studying outside the classroom than in other developing countries. For the latter, candidates include centralized education (bringing with it an emphasis on student achievement and teacher supervision) and the number of children in early and primary education. Parandekar and Sedmik's work predicts much future research analyzing the sources of Vietnam's educational success, and has been widely commented on, for example (Pfeiffer 2017).

Given the linkage between economic growth and educational performance, a continued upwards path for Vietnam would appear to require an accompanying expansion and development of the education and vocational training sectors. This necessarily brings us to the questions of what capacity development is in educational terms and how can it be pursued?

Capacity Development

For some, capacity development relates primarily to the process of teaching, making it a matter of directly improving educational practices and training. For others, capacity development is more about the strengthening of institutions, even extending to broad interpretations that include improvements in human rights and access freedoms. In terms of actual definitions, the WHO describes capacity building with a broad brush as the development and strengthening of human and institutional resources (United Nations, 2006). With a finer granularity, (UNESCO, 2012) splits educational capacity development into four categories: institutional (rules, policy), organizational (structures and systems to support rules), staff (skills and proficiencies of individuals), and technical (knowledge and tools needed to complete target actions). The Education for All Fast-Track Initiative adopted an OECD (2006) definition with three layers: "the ability of people, organisations and society to manage their affairs successfully" (p.6) carrying an implication that environments

influence the behavior of institutions and individuals by defining the rules, the structures and the outputs. With this stance, low performance would be attributed to lack of skills and training (*ibid.*). As capacity development is context dependent, it requires “systematic effort to strategically [aim at]... three levels of capacity (individual, organizational and institutional)...” (*Op. Cit.*) and consideration of the interactions between the three levels. In this interpretation, educational capacity development predominantly becomes the purview of local institutions, organizations, and individuals, more than any agency, institution or training program. It becomes “a process undertaken jointly...in collaborative partnerships” (Vallejo & When, 2016, p.4). Collaborative partnership can be a facilitator of sustainable capacity development, as it can help communities address the issues arising when new skills and knowledge are introduced.

A yet more detailed approach is followed by UNESCO (2012)¹, which outlines six actions and identifies five domains that need to be considered when assessing capacity needs. The domains are strategic policies, governance and management, human resources, financial resources, and technologies. The actions range from the first step of “engaging stakeholders” at all levels from government to local individuals when developing a sustainable capacity development strategy (p.20), to the final action of ‘closing the loop’ through “monitoring and evaluation”. An understanding that capacity development is “not an isolated one-off activity (such as provision of specific training)” (*Op. Cit.*) is identified as crucial. This view brings with it an acceptance that although a training may target stand-alone capacity development, unless it is embedded within a context it may neither transfer nor be sustainable. Potential difficulties arise from the complexity of ascertaining the impact and sustainability of change, especially as budgetary limitations and long-term access to participants are constraints in many capacity development programs. Benefits may not always be tangible – especially in the short term. To offset this problem, many organizations and institutions use basic numeric data as success indicators (for example, participant numbers and exposure time) rather than attempting the more demanding measurement of whether changes in behaviours and practices have actually resulted, and whether any such outcomes are in fact sustainable.²

Within this mix, our focus is on educational development, with a strong awareness that developing educational capacity does not exist in a vacuum, but within an integrated system. We mind the many lessons from the literature that “not enough thought has been given to the broader political and social context within which capacity development efforts take place” (OECD, 2006). We concur with the UNDP (2009, p.5) view of capacity development that: “it is the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time.” The UNDP argues that any capacity development approach must lead to transformation, sustainable over time, and generated from within (*ibid.*). As such, capacity development goes beyond performing tasks and activities and policy implementation: it is about changing mindsets and attitudes that lead to improved quality lives, the empowerment of individuals, of leaders, of organizations and of societies.

¹ An in-depth look at this publication is outwith the scope of this paper, but highly recommended.

² Refer (Vallejo & When, 2016) Capacity Development Evaluation: The Challenge of the Results Agenda and Measuring Return on Investment in the Global South.

Throughout our combined more than ten years of conducting numerous and varied training workshops and seminars, we have attempted to provide new skill sets to teachers, educational managers, leaders of schools and higher education, and by extension, to other educational trainers. Our aim has been to help in producing better and more efficient learning outcomes that can be applied both in educational environments and in a wider cultural context to build, enhance and maintain quality of life. In this, we would like to believe in the sentiment expressed by the AIAI foundation that:

“...the training of educators is one of the pillars of sustainable development and national capacity building ... Quality in teacher and principal education for teaching future citizens will, in the long run, contribute to alleviation of poverty, promotion of equity, democracy, professionalism, ethical conduct and good governance.”³

But training seminars abound, with diverse objectives running the gamut from professional development to inner peace. We must therefore ask how it is that evidence of transfer from events to the real world can be provided? How can skills and proficiencies operationalized in real-world contexts be measured and reported on?

Educational Capacity Development 1: Macro down

Education’s role in improving lives and economies is well documented. From UNESCO’s Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to the OECD’s PISA global rankings and China’s rise, education has been seen as a prime avenue to enhance social lives, improve economic productivity, and develop technological prowess. It follows that it is initially at the macro-level that the country and political objectives and systems either aid or hinder capacity development in education. As an example reference, consider the conclusion of (Land *et al*, 2015) that “discourse has been intimately associated with evolving discussions around country ownership, partnership and aid effectiveness, with increasing appreciation of the political, cultural and related contextual dimensions of capacity development”. Relevant issues include the structures of education systems, accreditation of courses and awards, financing, resources, policies, rules, teacher training and political norms.

Time, space and context are crucial to this discussion. By time, we refer to the ongoing monitoring of educational goals, objectives and delivery of learning potentials. Many of these in Vietnam are focused on single-set skills, sometimes described as I-type skills. A general trend of an evolution towards T-type professionals (depth of knowledge in one discipline or skill and a wider general knowledge) has been one result of the Web 2.0 revolution, and its effects can be witnessed in urban centers in Vietnam. A logical endpoint here is π -type skill portfolio, denoting at least two in-depth skills or disciplines along with a practical understanding of general knowledge and global interaction. Some, for example Joi

³ The authors have no affiliation or agenda relating to this organization, which we encountered via a random walk of the Internet, see <http://www.alalfoundation.org/en/talent-center/capacity-building-for-school-teachers-principals.aspx>.

Ito from MIT, have gone further to propose that the future of education is 'no-discipline', with multidisciplinary frameworks melding into one.

Space refers to how and where educational practices occur and learners engage: are policies enabling or are they restrictive? It is here that organizational practices and procedures intersect with local communities. Space relates to the autonomy and accountability of educators: do the tools available to educators and learners ensure that stakeholders (such as policy makers, educational leaders, teachers and even parents) understand the consequences of implementing policies in their local environments?

Finally, context recognizes that educational practices are situated within the frameworks of countries: histories, customs, beliefs, political systems, fears and creativities. Naïve application of international assessment and comparative educational practices, such as those often forthcoming from the OECD, can do more harm than good when countries are attempting to develop sustainable educational capacity. To offer just one example, focussing on Korea's high tertiary graduation rates can hide the reality of degree inflation and that many there may soon be at risk of losing jobs to advances in technology. In the context of Vietnam, claiming that the country's exceptional educational results contribute to economic growth carries risk, since much of Vietnam's output is arguably based on low-knowledge and low to medium-skill production of goods rather than high-end technological and innovative ventures.

Educational Capacity Development 2: Micro up

"...for capacity building to be effective, it must respond to the growth and development needs of the individual as well as those of the relevant institutions. For all practical purposes, building teacher capacity is, ultimately, engendering development, growth and excellence within an education system."
(Egbo, 2011)

Many educators recognize that the micro-level is where capacity development is most powerful. In the final analysis, it is at this level that the educational goals and objectives for both learners and macro-level systems must be realized. There is a plethora of publications that focus on sound pedagogical practice (*e.g.*, Moyles *et al*, 2002; Lozano, R, *et al*, 2017). It is no accident that of the six areas identified by Hattie as contributing to effective learning (Hattie 2012, Hattie & Yates 2014)⁴ at least four - the individual, the home, the teacher, and teaching/learning beliefs and pedagogy - are primarily 'micro' in nature, even if societal contexts may give them some 'macro' flavor. The remaining two areas (school and curricula) also have a significant 'micro' characteristic, depending on the extent to which centralized authorities play a part in their implementation⁵.

⁴ A visualization of the six components can be found at <https://visible-learning.org/nvd3/visualize/hattie-ranking-interactive-2009-2011-2015.html>.

⁵ There are significant questions regarding the statistical validity of Hattie's work, for example see (Bergeron 2017). However, its policy impact is undeniable, with even non-converts making acknowledgements such as "Hattie's work is everywhere in contemporary Australian school leadership" (Eacot, 2017).

In some of our training seminars we have introduced an educational framework proposed by the Harvard professor Richard Elmore (Elmore 2014). To quote Candice Bocala, a member of the teaching team for the framework who contributed to its philosophical basis:

“People learn best when... they are able to apply knowledge about themselves... when... they can create clarity out of confusion... when... they can develop and test new designs.”

The value of Elmore’s framework is that it positions learning as the base upon which all other factors can be understood or audited and reconciled. What a community or individual understands about learning influences the educational structures they build, how they design curricula and classrooms, how they teach or instruct and what pedagogy to adopt, and how they lead and manage institutions and classrooms. These factors affect whether capacity development can be sustained. What emerges from frameworks such as those of both Hattie and Elmore is that the micro level is crucial.

We believe that with the exception of outliers, the quality of teaching is a reflection of the quality of teacher training and the institutional support that teachers receive. As Sindhi and Shah (2016) note: “The vicious cycle of poor quality in-service teacher development begins with the absence of high quality teacher educators”. We agree with the conclusion that well-trained teacher educators are necessary for sustainable education.

Although economic constraints may be used as a first recourse to explain sub-optimal teacher training, examples from across the globe highlight that much can be achieved even in the face of less-than-ideal financing. The challenge for schools and for training institutions and policy makers alike is addressing how learning can be sustainably supported and improved within the limitations of the available resources (Mirunde, 2015).

In summary, we believe that capacity development at the micro-level is a necessary starting point for discussion of educational futures. This is the level that directs research-teaching-administration-community pathways and drives philosophies about the purpose and role of education and the development of capacity. It is here that collaborative partnerships facilitate sustainable capacity development because they can effectively address the issues that communities face with the skills and knowledge deemed necessary for progress. It is with this in mind that we attempt to frame our own learning from Vietnam.

A Long-Term Vietnam Relationship

Combined, the authors have an association with Vietnam’s education sector that exceeds ten years. This has encompassed many experiences, including practical (for example, visiting schools and observing classes and talking with teachers), professional (delivering training seminars) and academic (presenting at international conferences). We have worked with international organizations, private conglomerates, universities, training institutes, NGOs, private schools, and even with the tourism sector. We have met with educational managers and leaders, participated in numerous planning meetings, enjoyed socialization, and of course committed many cultural *faux pas*. Throughout, our objective has been the

development of a sustainable capacity. Throughout, conversations with participants have always led to their local contexts. Throughout, we have targeted follow-up in local contexts.

Especially from our seminars, there is one key observation that emerges: the people we encountered displayed notable motivation and desire to be exposed to and to adopt new leadership strategies and teaching pedagogy. Even when seminar attendance was *required* by local authorities, the active engagement with the learning material and tasks was an indication that individuals in local contexts were open to additional learning opportunities and leadership pathways. We also found that creativity was often more evidenced than logical and rational thinking - a realization that we explain by the coincidence that most of our seminar participants did not have primary backgrounds in mathematics or the sciences (although on one memorable occasion a professor from an Engineering faculty expressed his delight upon realizing how an apparently unrelated practical task could be transferred to the specialist education of his students). Nevertheless, in several of our seminars, the application of scientific and mathematical concepts with cultural ideas demonstrated that educational standards could be localized.

Of course, we sometimes encountered circumstances beyond our control that negatively impacted on potential, resulting in a lack of engagement or in mis-aligned expectations. Prime amongst these was the scheduling of extended seminars on weekends, taking away from the family time traditionally valued in Vietnamese culture. Further, over the course of many years of varied seminars, we came to recognize a gap in basic educational and pedagogical practices. This gap seemed most prominent between the private and public sectors. Using just the blunt metric of participant numbers, we came to be unsurprised by enrollment numbers at seminars in rural setting to rise as high as 300, whereas when working with NGOs in bespoke sessions in the environs of Ho Chi Minh City numbers could be as low as 25. Participation rates for intermediate urban sessions hovered at around 100 or below, particularly when working with private conglomerates or universities. Maybe unsurprisingly, we found that the higher the number of participants, the more difficult it became to manage tasks, to allow for differences in perspective towards strategy and outcomes, and to arrive at task completion. Notwithstanding this background, after we modified a seminar following direct requests from participants in a rural setting (that is, dialogue with stakeholders at the community level), the level of educational practice and understanding demonstrated was equal to anything we had witnessed in urban settings – school, bespoke training institution or university.

We claim no statistical significance for any lessons drawn from our experiences. There were many variables far beyond our control, for example the capacity of seminar participants to understand a second language. We brought with us a strong weakness to all our interactions: an inability to function in a common language other than English. This made us reliant on the translation skills of interpreters (not to mention interpreters' theoretical educational knowledge and experiences). Teaching Assistants (TAs) also became a filter of information and knowledge, which could only be practically monitored if errors were evidenced whilst on-task. In general, we found that the pool of TAs was lacking in the specific areas of capacity development being asked of participants. Given the luxury of some repeated seminars with the same assistants, we were able to improve TA knowledge and practice, but never fully to desired levels.

Over our long Vietnam relationship, we have re-iterated at each possible juncture our desire to (and need for access to) work with communities and teachers in local contexts. With the exception of a large private urban school, we have not able to instigate such collaborations in a significant way. It is this specific shortcoming that we address in the following section, in the hope that the forthcoming decade may be one of significant progress and may benefit from a grounded insistence by those taking the lead (be it our own renewed resolution, or the choice of those that mobilize after we step to one side).

Sustainable Futures

Our experiences support the thinking developed in the Education for All – Fast Track Initiative Framework that capacity development cannot be defined or limited to short-term training activities, workshops or courses. Ideologically, our closest inspirations have become educational philosophers such as Dewey or Illich, who argued for strategies that grow from interaction in ‘micro’ contexts involving all stakeholders. Whereas external or top-down interventions are rarely sustainable, trust and capacity can in contrast be built when schools, communities and individuals at the local level have some stake in a process. Such approaches require commitment, ownership, a consistent and transparent leadership and a long-term vision that transcends institutional politics and policies. An inspired example here is the work in Peru of the NGO “PRATEC” – from the Spanish acronym for the Andean Project for Peasant Technologies. They took a failing top-down transplantation of a centralized education system and transformed it through micro-level action that incorporated a framing concept from the native Quechua language: *Iskay Yachay*, or “Two Kinds of Knowledge”. This work deserves to be better known, but since it lacks a canonical English language print reference, we encourage readers instead to view its publicly available videos.⁶

Within Vietnam there are individuals, organizations and governments that are mobilizing under similar kinds of principles. We take the opportunity provided by this paper to highlight just one representative: the “Teach for Vietnam” movement, an NGO created by Phuc Huynh (MBA, Harvard) under the auspices of Global Education Network “Teach For All” program. Teach for Vietnam invites people (usually young) to teach, work with and live in local communities for at least two years. Currently, most of the training of these “fellows” is as teachers of English, but there is no systemic reason why this should be the only discipline. A description from the organization’s web site is instructive: “Fellows are equipped with deep local understanding, skills, and expertise to make positive impacts on students, local teachers, parents, and community.”⁷ Although working with curricula laid out at the national (macro) level, the realization via a partnership with (micro) local communities results in trust gains that act as a genuine catalyst for “collective impact” change in classrooms and in schools. Both the model and the outcomes differ significantly from the often-seen top-down (macro) trainings that can suffer by being insulated from localized community needs and practices.

⁶ For example, here is a 30-minute sub-titled program made available by “InsightShare”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98FU3DX9EKs>

⁷ Teach for Vietnam, <http://teachforvietnam.org/?lang=en>

Our “Vietnam decade” gave us an invaluable impetus to consider the experiences of others (both in Vietnam and elsewhere) and to frame our experiences within the existing literature on capacity development. Let us sign-off as simply as possible: for a goal of sustainable future capacity development, we believe that Vietnam’s enormous potential can be nurtured by privileging the ‘micro’ of individuals and communities, which in turn may impact the ‘macro’ of institutions, organizations and policy-makers.

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