Many of us who have visited foreign lands have tried our hand at one form of writing about the unfamiliar: the traveler's journal. But the writing that Catherine Crystal presents here about her experience in Vietnam is far more purposeful than most writing about exotic foods and awe-inspiring ruins. Crystal is out to answer a question. She wants to know what it is in Vietnamese values and culture that inspires her Vietnamese students at a California community college to form the highly motivated learning community that she so much admires. Here is her answer.

Searching for Excellence in Education

Catherine Crystal

In our daily lives, we expect routine events to occur with a precise regularity we take for granted. When traveling to unfamiliar places, however, one's feeling of discovery is suddenly heightened by differences in the climate, language, and values. The traveler's journal is soon filled with observations of new friends, embarrassing circumstances, and nascent insights. As a teacher-researcher, it was an extraordinary experience to embark on a journey of five months to live and teach in Hanoi, Vietnam. My familiar world of teaching was now turned upside down.

My journey began in an English as a second language (ESL) writing class at Laney College in Oakland, California, in the mid-90s. At that time, I had joined a teacher-research group of the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP), consisting of teacher-consultants from the primary grades through community college. We met as a group to gain deeper insights into classroom learning. Smokey Wilson, BAWP teacher-researcher, chaired the research group and urged us to keep a journal of our observations of classroom behavior, interactions among classmates, and dialogues between the teacher and students. From these journal entries arose questions to explore. What really happens in group work? What is resistance in learning? We reviewed and discussed sociological and psychological factors influencing learning in the classroom. Meanwhile, in my ESL writing class, I noticed a high persistence rate among the Vietnamese students. In looking at the writings of these students, a pattern emerged of familiar themes arising from stories about dedication to school and devotion to family. More importantly, Vietnamese students manifested a near universal desire to excel in their studies. Instructors who have worked with students from Vietnam know of their students' passion for education and deep regard for teachers. Where did this drive for excellence in learning come from?

Stimulated by these questions and given a sabbatical leave in fall 1999, I embarked on a journey to the classrooms of Hanoi, hoping to look at the cultural and educational milieu that nurtures values of excellence in education.

Living and teaching in Hanoi was a privilege and an exceptional experience, deepened by the fact that this city was, until recently, a closed society, unknown to most Americans. From 1954 to 1975, during the years of revolution and war, Hanoi was forbidden territory to Americans. Then again from 1975, which marked the end of the Vietnam War, until 1986 when the new market economy known as doi moi opened the door to foreign investment, Hanoi was seldom visited by U.S. researchers. Once known by its ancient name, Thang Long, Hanoi, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is one of the oldest cities in the world. Hanoians are already gearing up to celebrate the 1000th year anniversary of their city in the year 2010. Hanoi is much older than its sixteenth-century sister city, Ho Chi Minh City or Saigon, the commercial center of Vietnam and once the capitol
of the American-sponsored Republic of Vietnam (1955–1975). Hanoi remains the educational and cultural heartland of Vietnam, boasting more than nineteen institutions of higher education, including the University of Hanoi.

Located in the north where the weather reaches unbearable extremes from freezing-to-the-bones cold to sweltering hot, Hanoi is a land possessed of a strong, determined, and dedicated citizenry. An American reporter with whom I once traveled remarked that “we could never really live there because we didn’t have enough character.” During the five months I lived in Hanoi, the temperature rose to the mid-90s with 96 percent humidity, and in early August, a walk around the block proved exhausting. With no heating or air-conditioning, the old thick-walled colonial buildings tended to hold and exaggerate the outside temperature. “Don’t you think the Vietnamese feel hot too?” responded the aunt of my friend when I complained about the heat. This would not be the first time I would be reminded, ever so gently and not reluctantly, by a determined people to never give in to one’s discomforts. As I was about to discover, for the Vietnamese, education and character development are the paramount virtues one should try to cultivate throughout life.

The Vietnamese civilization has been influenced and shaped by Chinese cultural values and has embodied many of the Confucian ideals of high education, family values, and sense of community. However, throughout its long history, Vietnam has fought to maintain its own national identity when confronted by bigger and more powerful nations, such as China, France, Japan, and the United States. Every adult student from Vietnam whom one encounters in community college classrooms will be able to narrate with pride how their small nation fought against the Chinese for a thousand years until they gained independence in 939 A.D. They also know about the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, in northwestern Vietnam, when the ill-equipped, poor nation of Vietnam defeated the French in 1954, successfully overcoming the colonial power that had dominated their country since the mid-nineteenth century. Students in Hanoi are especially prepared to remind visitors that in the twentieth century, the small nation of Vietnam again defeated a western power, the most powerful nation in the world, the United States of America. This fervent desire to preserve its national identity, “one that will compete with the other powerful nations in the world” is a theme that runs throughout the educational system. Clearly, one purpose of education is to instill in the youth the ideals of a strong Vietnamese national identity and to nurture in students the importance of their vital role in strengthening their country.

To excel in learning has been a time-honored tradition in Vietnam. The Vietnamese love the learned man who is both knowledgeable and virtuous. In society and within the social system, the scholar is ranked above all others. Vietnamese students in Oakland and those I met in Vietnam have wanted to convey to me the notion that learning is more valuable than material wealth. Traditionally, a higher education meant that one might serve the emperor and one’s status within the family and society would, therefore, be elevated. Only the best intellectual minds were chosen to serve and counsel the emperor. High titles and court positions were assigned on the basis of academic merit. Examinations at the regional and national level at that time were achieved through mastery of ancient texts, which meant that students with extraordinary memories excelled. In Vietnam, it is still true today that “learning by heart” forms the foundation of study. Moreover, a belief in a true meritocracy demands that only the best can be recognized as leaders, which may explain, in part, the competitive tradition of this nation of highly motivated learners.

One way to ensure the strength of a nation is through education. Evidence of this drive to learn is apparent everywhere. At Lenin Park, in the shade of the large trees surrounding Ba Mau Lake in Hanoi, statues of national heroes rise in the middle of concrete pathways. Of the numerous stone sculptures in the verdant gardens, what is noticeable are the large white statues of children sitting side-by-side absorbed in reading a book. These sculptures capture a moment in stone that in reality is a monument to education. This innocent portrayal, which may appear at first to be a harmless political message by the government, is nonetheless precisely what I observed little children doing on my daily walks through the tree-lined streets of Hanoi. Children typically were sitting on doorsteps, on stubby plastic stools on the sidewalks, or on the lap of a grandparent reading their newsprint textbooks. Even the fruit and vegetable vendors or pedicab drivers prop open a book if business lulls. One is left with a distinct impression that everyone is learning something no matter what age or station in life. This drive to learn is present everywhere. Impressive are the statistics: Vietnam, a third-world country with over 75 million people and a per capita income of $400, has a 97 percent literacy rate.

Learning is not limited to the school classroom. Due to the overcrowded conditions in the schools, students throughout the nation are forced to pursue a half-day...
Searching for Excellence

schedule. In Sapa, a mountain town near the border of China, high school students attend school in the morning and the junior high students in the afternoon. In urban Hanoi, split sessions are the norm, so it is not uncommon to devote half the day to studying with a tutor or in small groups. Tutoring is in high demand and provides an excellent source of income for the poorly-paid teachers at all levels of instruction. It seems everyone is either a teacher or a student sometime during the day. To supplement incomes, university students work as tutors in English, math, or the sciences. Mini-classrooms are set up throughout the city in private homes and in storefronts. In the late afternoon or early evening, one can readily see students seated side-by-side at narrow wooden desks reviewing lessons with their tutors. In the evening, a small forty-watt bulb suffices to light up a small makeshift classroom. The storefront classrooms are always identifiable by the queue of older brothers, sisters, and aunts on bicycles and motorbikes who promptly appear at the appointed hour to whisk the children home to family dinners and more study. No matter what station in life, everyone is interested in finding the best tutor that a family can afford.

This drive to learn includes adults, who are not exempt from the need to improve themselves or put themselves at an economic advantage. Adults eagerly take up the challenge of learning, particularly a second or third language. The older people who went to school under the French can speak French with some flair as though it were a way to express their sentiments better. But at this historical juncture, the language of choice is, of course, English. Those at the university who are engaged in the study of Vietnamese literature or international relations are strengthening language skills in Chinese or English. Also those who studied French or Russian in a previous era are now eagerly engaged in learning English. When my progress in Vietnamese lagged, I once lamented that I, being in my mid-fifties, was perhaps too aged for any productive language learning. My tutor gazed at me unsympathetically and felt the need to tell me about her father, who at sixty decided to learn English on his own. After her own four years of study in Russia ended, she returned to Hanoi to discover that her father’s proficiency in English, as evidenced by his richer vocabulary, had far exceeded hers. It is not unusual to find the older generation of French/Russian-educated people studying and speaking English.

However eager I was to observe classrooms in Vietnam as a researcher, I found this a difficult task. The Ministry of Education controls the state curriculum, and any input from foreign scholars on educational policy was carefully gauged and guarded. Allowing foreigners into public classrooms to ask how things are done was a rarity more often discouraged than openly encouraged. But I was able to gain access to classrooms as a guest teacher, a role that made it possible for me to observe how teachers teach and students learn. From the vantage point of a small private school on the outskirts of Hanoi, I was able to gain insights into the questions I originally posed back in Oakland.

The Nguyen Van Huyen School (NVHS, kindergarten through tenth grade) serves approximately 500 students; it was founded in 1996 by Dr. Nguyen Bich Ha, a retired chemistry and physics professor. Her father, the namesake of the school, served as the first Minister of Education under Ho Chi Minh in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The school is located in the suburbs west of old Hanoi, close to the new Daewoo Hotel where President Clinton stayed during his last year in the presidency. In 1996, the Vietnam Ministry of Education announced that private schools could openly compete with public schools. The notion that new methodology could be used in these schools to present the state-mandated curriculum would provide incentives for innovative instruction and impetus to competitive educational opportunities in Vietnam. According to Bich Ha, the school was established to help give children from a variety of backgrounds an opportunity to succeed in school. Children whose parents are divorced or whose parents both work are becoming an increasing phenomenon in Hanoi society. The school was a haven for many of these students as well as for a small group of mentally disabled students. These children would not have successfully matriculated from the public schools where conformity of behavior and tolerance for large numbers of students per class (fifty or more students) are the expected norm.

My duties at NVHS included teaching English to the first- and third-graders. I also worked with the English teachers, critiquing their delivery and demonstrating techniques on how to use a new textbook published in Singapore. Since children in the first through third forms were not yet assigned a state-mandated English language textbook, the school was free to experiment. English, normally taught in all the public schools by the third grade, is offered in the first grade three times a week at NVHS. As one of the subject instructors, I was sent from classroom to classroom adhering to an intricate schedule to teach English. The students remained in their permanent classrooms and a teacher’s aide, assigned to each homeroom class, disci-
plined the children and kept records for each instructor. Each thirty-five- to forty-minute session stopped at the sound of drumbeats, struck on a very large, deep-sounding drum by the school guard.

Memorization of vocabulary was essential in the English language classes and centered around social functions such as greetings, expressing health and personal feelings, and locating objects in a room. Singing songs in English played a big role in motivating students at the elementary school level. The instructors were very young and their language proficiency was impressive considering they had only studied English at the pedagogy school.

Mentoring of young teachers and consistent evaluation of instructors was also an important part of the educational program. Two veteran teachers, retired, were hired as consultants to play the role of advisors and mentors to the new younger instructors. Every month the vice-director, along with faculty in the English department, observed each instructor. On the day Ms. Hoa, the seventh form English teacher, was to be observed, she wore her bright blue ao dai, the traditional outfit of Vietnam. As she floated about, preparing the overhead projector and rearranging her notes, the rest of the English faculty sank into seats in the back of the classroom, next to the doorway. They were encouraged to observe their colleague, make notes, and learn from her. The lesson began when Ms. Hoa selected a student to answer questions from a homework assignment. The student stood next to the teacher’s desk, while Ms. Hoa asked random questions from the homework assignment. What impressed me was the demeanor of the student, respectful and listening carefully to the teacher’s corrections of her grammar and sentence structure. When she made a mistake and was corrected, her fellow classmates remained respectful and some raised their hands in an effort to help make corrections. She was given a nine on her homework, a very decent score, since ten is considered perfect, and not given without real merit. Ms. Hoa’s peers readily made notes of any grammar mistakes their colleague made in the lesson.

The interior design of all the primary and secondary classrooms is uniform, whether in Hanoi, in rural Sapa or in the dark classroom spaces at the National University of Social Sciences and Humanities. The rooms had large open windows with shutters and a carefully appointed electric fan to move the humid air around. As a Californian not accustomed to the extreme humidity of a tropical climate, I was always fanning and mopping my face while the children sat comfortably in their seats. Occasionally, a student would turn his or her head in my direction and smile as I took out my paper fan and waved it frantically in an attempt to temporarily cool myself. The layout of classrooms is simple, with long wooden plank desks with attached seats where students can sit side-by-side facing the teacher’s desk and blackboard. Facing the blackboard and the teacher’s desk, students are able to look at a picture of Ho Chi Minh, framed and hung in the center of the wall, and recall the five teachings of Uncle Ho:

1. Love your country and love your people.
2. Study well and work hard.
3. Be cooperative and disciplined.
4. Keep good hygiene.
5. Be modest, honest, and courageous.

Students from a young age are required to memorize these five teachings. Adjacent is another framed text consisting of a singularly important speech given by Ho Chi Minh, in 1945, on the occasion of the first day of the new school year. Uncle Ho’s Reminders to Schoolchildren rallies students to the overarching goals of education.

Whether the Vietnamese country becomes glorious, whether the Vietnamese people are able to compete with other powerful nations of the five continents or not, depends much on your effort and dedication to studying.

This saying, which all schoolchildren also must commit to memory, clearly epitomizes the goal of education for every student in the nation. It is a convincing piece of sentiment that educators rally around and take as a serious mission. It is a source of inspiration for a country that not only values intellectual prowess but prides itself on having citizens of strong character, who will continue to assure Vietnam’s national integrity.

The once full-day session of the public schools is now mostly the province of the private schools. Private schools in Hanoi, allowed since 1996, provide a full day’s curriculum from 7:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. For example, a student in the first form studies at least nine subjects: writing, reading, math, spelling/dictation, morality, physical education, singing/drawing, crafts, popular knowledge of science (botany, geology, biology). Between 11:30 A.M. and 1:30 P.M., the school serves a hot lunch of rice, stir-fried pork, vegetables, and fried potatoes on a flat tin tray and a thin green vegetable soup served in a tall plastic cup. Students, regardless of age, from five-year-olds to fifteen-year-olds take a nap after lunch. Resting is essential to the well-being of the
Searching for Excellence

student, and no one questions this rule. In the Nguyen Hue school near Hoan Kiem Lake, the principal proudly showed me how the desks can be pushed together to form a sleeping platform for the children; blankets stored conveniently in nearby cabinets were readily available. Almost tripping over the rows and rows of shoes parked outside the classroom door, I peeked inside during the noon hour and saw the second grade girls sleeping in rows like little sausages, ponytails dangling over the sides of tables and the boys on mats on the floor. I saw the classroom assistant who stayed to oversee the children napping on a floor mat. “If a student doesn’t nap, he won’t be able to think well,” chimed a veteran teacher. Even the administrators recline on plastic foldout divans in their offices. The director of one school changes into casual clothes and takes a nap, a break from administrative duties, which is an acceptable convention in this traditional country. I was offered a place on a wooden bed placed on the balcony, and I, too, welcomed this quiet reprieve, a solace from the mental strain of trying to understand and fit into a new cultural environment.

The Vietnamese love of teachers is expressed in many ways. November 20 is an annual event designated as National Teacher’s Day, and students throughout Vietnam use this event to honor their teachers. It is celebrated in the schools with performances of songs, speeches, and skits. Flower vendors fill the street corners as they prepare the bouquets they will sell to students. It may take considerable time to prepare for the event where speeches and flowers are presented to teachers, teachers’ aides, and the office staff at each school. It is also an opportunity for instructors to laud students for their achievements. The look is festive with colorful flowers and long flowing silk ao dai worn by the female teachers. At one primary school, each class came to the stage as a group to present songs and dances honoring their teachers. The affect towards teachers is clearly illustrated in a dreamy song all Vietnamese children know by heart.

Bui Phan (Chalk Dust)

When you, my teacher, write on the board,
Falling, falling is the chalk dust.
Is there chalk dust
Falling on the teacher’s platform
Falling on the teacher’s hair?
This is the moment I love so deeply.

My teacher’s hair appears more gray
Becoming more gray after teaching us the vital lessons.
When I grow up and mature
How could I forget my teacher,
My teacher who has taught us when we were so young.

Teachers in Vietnam have historically been highly regarded by their students. Teachers are viewed as loving and devoted beings who have unselfishly imparted knowledge and wisdom to their students. Memories of school and one’s teachers are cherished throughout a person’s life, and this phenomenon may explain why a popular theme of Vietnamese students in our writing classes may focus on a favorite teacher, a village school, classmates, or even inanimate objects associated with school, say a favorite tree located in the school yard. In Hanoi, I viewed a television program that featured a story of a successful businessman returning to his village to visit his teacher to honor and thank him. He bowed deeply and presented a small bouquet of flowers. Such scenes of a successful man returning to thank and honor his elderly teacher are admittedly moving. On the evening of Teacher’s Day, students traditionally visit teachers at their homes. So on this crisp, cool evening, it is not uncommon to see many motorcyclists, with a classmate in tow, clutching a small bunch of roses and zipping through the traffic on his or her way to a beloved teacher’s home to enjoy a memorable evening of conversation and tea.

If schools provide the setting for the interaction between students and teachers, then the dilapidated classrooms I saw defy any notion that a warm and bright school environment is necessary for effective learning. With some exceptions (the private schools), the classrooms were often small and dark. Most were in need of a fresh coat of paint; the tropical moisture often fades the colors and leave exterior walls peeling and moldy. The university classrooms were in the worst condition, rundown and sorely in need of repair. Whenever the lights or ceiling fans did not work, a student volunteer would come forth to hot-wire the electrical system to function properly. Everyone would take these classroom shortcomings in good humor. What else could they do? In winter months, there is no heat, and the doors and windows are shut to keep out the wind and most of the natural light. Teachers and students don warm jackets and continue to study. It was evident that the poor physical condition of the schools was not critical to the teaching and learning going on inside them.

Enthusiasm for learning is derived in part from singing. Singing boosts the spirit, and students will often ask a guest to teach them a song. School songs are often about teachers, classmates, and humorous tales of little animals. Each school has an anthem invoking the names of national heroes who fought for independence. They not only engender a sense of connection to the
The Quarterly—Winter 2002

Searching for Excellence

I suddenly recalled the manner in which my Vietnamese students in Oakland helped one another, took classes together, shared notes and texts, and became close friends. During the first few years in the United States, overcoming language barriers and surviving in a new culture, the students bonded quickly in order to help one another in their studies. Lien’s essay explains why helping one another is important for Vietnam’s survival.

At present, when living in peace, the Vietnamese people still have to unite to struggle for life, especially natural disasters. The Vietnamese climate and terrain are very complex and they influence much of the agricultural production as well as ordinary life. We consider ourselves brothers and sisters under the same roof—Vietnam—

continued on page 37
Searching for Excellence

continued from page 15

and are willing to help one another when it is necessary. Our unison challenges any enemies and difficulties.

A colorful sign reinforcing this notion has a prominent place on the wall of an elementary school. The words Giup Ban, Vuot Kho mean “Help friends through difficulties.” This sense of community remains strong within the first generation that came to our shores, but how long, I wonder, will these values survive in a new setting and environment such as America?

My five months in Vietnam allowed me the opportunity to discover the role of traditional values in the educational system and the importance of learning in the survival of that nation. I was left with a sense of awe and respect for the people of Vietnam and am deeply grateful for their hospitality. When I returned to Oakland, I wondered whether I could relate to the Vietnamese students, whose parents suffered at the hands of the Communists. Without question, the Vietnam War, or “the American War” as it is known in Vietnam, brought about many tragedies. Many of the students we meet in our classes today are refugees from this war. Many are soldiers who fought on the side of the Republican Army and who, after the Communist takeover in 1975, were imprisoned in isolated reeducation camps for more than a decade. Clearly, refugee students may not share the political aspirations of the communist regime in Vietnam today. However, it is fair to say that the traditional cultural values, devotion to family and education, and a strong allegiance to the identity of Vietnam as a distinct nation are precious to all Vietnamese regardless of political affiliation. Allegiance to a Vietnamese identity and traditional values is an essential key in understanding why educational excellence is so avidly pursued by the Vietnamese.

When I returned to the Laney College campus, the Vietnamese ESL students, knowing I had visited Vietnam, asked, “You go to my country. What do you think of my people?” Their pride could be heard in their voices.

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