

Bangkok Post

OUTLOOK SECTION: PAGE 01

21 December 1999

Learning both ways

WE CARE: At an innovative course in Chiang Mai, a group of American students are meeting disadvantaged people in Thailand as a way to understand how different worlds impact each other

Vasana Chinvarakorn

On reflection, Amanda Walters feels she is lucky to have missed the chance to spend a semester in England.

Last summer, the 20-year-old psychology major at Kalamazoo College was disappointed to learn the study-abroad programme for Europe didn't have any places for her.

Then somebody suggested she try for a new course in Chiang Mai, Thailand, a country as remote to the young American as Mars is to Saturn.

"I'm glad, I made the right choice," she said.

"I can go to the UK anytime I want. If I was in Europe, I might hop from museum to coffee shop, and not get immersed in a new culture as I am now. Here, I am doing and seeing things a typical tourist wouldn't be able to see."

Amanda's 'classrooms' take various shapes and forms.

At Chiang Mai University, the American student sits in lectures and seminars about theories of development and the history of Thai politics, led by respected scholars.

But there are other sessions, in which she engages in discussions with local social activists.

Then she is exposed to the darker side of urban life; strolling with street kids through the night bazaar, seeing the bridges under which they sleep, and the dim bars where some of the children prostitute themselves.

At a community of Aids patients, Amanda sees the essence of love and care, while a trek up a mountain to a tribal village demonstrates how one can derive simple happiness from living close to nature _ and also how ethnic groups have to struggle for legal status within the Thai state.

"The programme has changed my way of looking at things," said Amanda.

"Before, if I were approached by kids begging for money or trying to sell me things, I'd get annoyed. But now I've had an opportunity to take a closer look at their lives, and it makes me more appreciative of what I have. I won't take anything for granted as before."

Amanda's last statement has been echoed by several of her classmates. For Dr Mark Ritchie, director of the Kalamazoo College

Sustainable Development Studies Programme at Chiang Mai University, the statement is testimony that his ideas about what education should be about are yielding fruit.

Since last September, a small class of American students from the Michigan-based Kalamazoo College have been under Dr Ritchie's supervision.

With collaboration and support from Chiang Mai University's Faculty of Economics and its dean, Dr Sangkom Suwannarat, the five-month programme aims to turn traditional notions of education and development upside down.

"Our approach can be summed up in this statement: 'If you came to help me, you can go home again. But if you see my struggle as part of your own survival, then perhaps we can work together.'

"This quote by an Australian Aboriginal woman is the key to our philosophy of teaching _ students come to learn from the people, and in so doing find out where they, as North Americans, fit into a globalising world, reversing the usual First World/Third World hierarchy of teaching and learning," Dr Ritchie said.

The American professor thinks it necessary for students from the so-called developed countries to come and learn about problems in another country.

First, because American people may consume more of the world's resources than anybody else, and second, because new insights into another culture will hopefully result in the students paying more attention to their society, and realising similar problems exist in their own backyards.

"During our visit to the Klong Toey slum in Bangkok, we were asked if there are poor people in the US or not," said Kaleb Brownlow, Amanda's classmate.

"There is a misconception that America is the land of opportunities and everyone must be rich.

"But we had an exchange of views, and I've found a lot of things are not much different back home. For example, the exploitation of the hilltribes here and the discrimination against native Americans there."

Dr Ritchie reckons his American students may hold some advantage in getting to understand Thailand, not being groomed in Thai culture, which might bias their perceptions.

Dr Ritchie, whose father is a member of the native Eastern Band Cherokees, is struck by how few Thais he has come across are aware of the structural racism embedded in Thai society.

That both Thai and tribal people are on the programme's staff is thus a matter of pride for him.

Dr Ritchie said the gap between a member of a Thai elitist family and slum people in the same country may be wider than that between an American and a street kid at the night bazaar.

He said: "The distinctions between East and West are breaking down. The notion that consumerism is a Western thing is simplistic. Both cultures have their roots in consumerism, just different ways of expressing it.

"Thais may waste food while Americans burn gas in their cars. But the question I'd like my students to ask is why Americans tend to consume more? Because they have the opportunity."

During the five-month stay, each student is exposed to different sectors of society, from middle and upper middle class host

families, to slum dwellers and hilltribe communities.

Every Thursday, the class will be out in the field to explore some of the social problems discussed earlier in the course.

Once a month, they spend a few days staying at, say, a community of organic farmers, to conduct a more in-depth investigation of various topics, from sustainable agriculture to biodiversity and appropriate technology.

At the end of the programme, the students spend a month's internship at one of the NGOs they have paid a visit to (see list in Info for Donations). At the end, each produces a lengthy report on their experiences and observations of how local people deal with their problems.

"Our programme is not about philanthropy, to give hand-outs. We want students to consider themselves as learners, to witness first-hand the indigenous people's direct engagement in their struggles for survival, and never as the big white saviours," said Dr Ritchie.

"I strongly believe the problems of globalisation and development we see nowadays aren't going to be solved without true North-South partnership.

"But participation by the grassroots people is a crucial element; otherwise no development will ever be sustainable. And by participation, I mean the ability to make a choice, to say 'no'."

The American sociologist, with his extensive experience evaluating performance of development projects in Thailand, said a fundamental problem with previous programmes was their top-down imposition by state officers, which created a dependency on such programmes.

Alternately, a few NGOs simply act as facilitators to empower local communities to be able to identify, analyse, and search for solutions by themselves, which Dr Ritchie sees as having a more lasting effect.

In parallel, the American teacher feels his young students are going through a similar growing-up process, in which their preconceptions are being torn down and the learners gradually piece together a new body of knowledge on their own.

After each field visit, students engage in lively debates on what they think might be the best alternative to addressing the social ills they have witnessed.

"Those sessions are fun to listen to, as these kids start to question things," Dr Ritchie said. "For example, they argue over how to invest money. Should we put it in the factories we have visited, some of which exploit child labour? Some would say 'you don't have to worry about that', others would shoot back that 'yes, you do!'"

A good example of this transformation is Kaleb, who is having second thoughts about mainstream economics. A junior in biology, he used to think breaking down tariffs to liberalise trade would open up job opportunities.

"But I'm not sure anymore. It has become clear to me not everyone will benefit from globalisation. The push for cash cropping won't be good for the environment.

"Having had a chance to observe subsistence farmers, I can see rice farming is more than just trade issues, it's about people's culture and way of life."

Amanda herself is intrigued by the participatory aspect of the course. The American student is mulling over a plan to pursue a higher degree in social research,

and to apply the methodology to her academic work.

May Saetang, a Thai-American student of political science, is particularly touched by the abuses suffered by hilltribe people and their lack of citizenship. She is thinking about going to law school, and perhaps returning to work for the marginalised people in her ancestors' homeland.

"Ethnic people have been used as scapegoats, for tourism and then blamed for deforestation. I feel particularly sensitive to this issue, as my parents migrated to America, and enjoy citizenship status there. Many of the hilltribe people have lived here for years and are still treated as second-class people," said May.

Dr Ritchie admits he cannot foretell what his students will be doing down the road. Some may choose to go into developmental work; others may join the private sector. But he feels certain the seed of awareness he has planted in the youngsters' minds will at least guide them in how they should live their lives, to become educated consumers and citizens.

"I believe education can change people's thinking, if it's done well – not rote memorisation and chalk-and-talk. It will make a real impact if the students are learning from experiences.

"I can see a scenario, when these students are back in America: They walk into a restaurant, and order food. When they see baby corns on their plate, they will recall their visit to a farm here, where they saw the farmers' hands turned purple after exposure to the pesticide that coats the seeds. They are going to remember that."

In one of his books, *Looking at America to find solutions for Thailand*, venerable Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto) urges Thai people to pause in their drive to emulate Americans' consumer lifestyle, and contemplate whether or not that is the right

path to follow. Curiously, the Americans seem to be paying better attention to the Thai monk's message than his own compatriots.