Field Methods and Ethics

ANTH-3500 (3 Credits / 45 class hours)

SIT Study Abroad Program:
Vietnam: Culture, Social Change, and Development

Introduction

This seminar (FME) provides the conceptual preparation and skill development for the overall integration of the program components. Beginning with the sessions during orientation week, and continuing through the semester, FMS provides the skills and fosters the ability to observe, interpret, and appropriately function in ethical field studies in Vietnam. This is initially done through a series of discussions and exercises designed to break down stereotypes and sensitize students to the values they assign to behaviors and customs based on their own cultural heritage. Later, field exercises and discussions will focus on various methods and techniques of field research and the utilization of primary resources. Lectures and hands on learning activities are designed to familiarize students with developing hypotheses, methodologies, and analytical approaches to field based investigations in the social sciences. The FME seminar complements all other program components but will be most directly applied to the development of the Independent Study Project.

Course Objectives

- To become aware of experience-based learning processes outside an institutional structure, and to develop confidence and initiative from experience.
- To discover how to function in Vietnam and cope with the logistics of day-to-day life.
- To gain basic skills in various methods of field study, including participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, note taking and transcription, and keeping a field journal.
- To be able to apply language skills, thus increasing information from thematic seminars, and information from other sources, to extend and deepen interest, knowledge and development in Vietnam.
- To learn to deal with primary sources in the field, such as information acquired through observation and interviews; and to learn to work with a foreign language, interpreters, and informant.
- To enable students to pursue Independent Study Projects utilizing the human and natural resources available in Vietnam by gaining direct experience in field methodologies;

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To aid students in selecting an ISP topic (and corresponding methodology) which is realistic considering the constraints of time and resources, that is ethical, appropriate, and respectful of the host culture.

To introduce the functioning of SIT’s IRB/LRB policies and their Human Subjects Review policy.

Class Format

The seminar is presented in close association with the Culture, Social Change and Development Seminar. The FME is designed to involve students in a range of projects that require them to develop their own theories and collect data in the field and from secondary sources to test the validity of their ideas. Both written material and oral presentations are emphasized in communicating results from field project and critical thinking exercises.

Methodology

This course will enable students to become familiar with basic methodologies needed for an effective and ethical study in Vietnam culture and society, especially for the Independent Study Project (ISP). The FME will also provide direct experience in field methodologies. This course will combine lectures, class discussion, field exercises, educational excursion activities, and independent investigations. In line with the experiential learning model of the SIT Study Abroad Program, the methodology used seeks to balance the presentation of academic works and investigations with the students’ own ideas and experiences. Students will be expected to analyze critically the strengths and weakness of social, cultural, and anthropological methods across regional zones, ethnic and gender groups, socio-economic demographics, among other factors in order to reflect upon the nature of their results and those of experts.

This course will provide students with the background knowledge needed to understand techniques used for information gathering, to perceive and evaluate critically the contextual basis for reported results and to develop their own methods for conducting investigations. Students will:

1. Practice and study relevant material on field study techniques through individual reading, field observation, and information from expert guides;
2. Conduct different types of interviews from open-ended to semi-structured interviews in rural and urban settings in the host country;
3. Expand the applicability of holistic approaches toward human demographics, thus promoting a comparative outlook.

Topics and Field Activities

- Conceptual understanding of Infrastructure of Qualitative Field Research: Paradigm and World View
- Prelude to Qualitative Field Work:
- Basic Methodology: Observation, Interviews, Analysis and Interpretation
- Ethical Issues in Qualitative Field Research
- Field exercises such as: Observation, critical questioning, interviewing techniques, Analyzing categories of statements; and reliability of data and bias;
- Introduction to ISP Research Proposal;

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• Setting goals for the Independent Study Project;
• Process of Independent Study Project proposals.
• The IRB/LRB process

Requirements

• Field Investigation project requiring collection and oral presentation of field data;
• Interview project requiring both intensive and extensive interviews and an oral presentation;
• Work journal, kept through the semester, that includes information from interviews, reflections on observations, focus questions for the Independent Study Project, and list of resources;
• Field research: data collection, data analysis, and data condensation etc.
• Short-term case studies with focus questions
• Independent Study Project proposal;
• Reflection on the Independent Study Project process.

Assignments

Field Investigation Projects

Field projects require that each student formulate and test a field question in each of the excursion sites. Although each project should be created with applicability—or possible adaptation—to each site educational excursion, guidance will be given at the onset of the project to access the feasibility of the project. Projects may focus on the practice, comparison and/or analysis of particular methodologies, the special field methods used to study natural history, rapid assessment techniques, or techniques to evaluate human-environment relationships.

Field Exercises

During the educational excursions in Mekong Delta, Central Vietnam and Red River Basin, students will be required to complete a series of field exercises associated within each specific local context. The goals of these assignments are to introduce students to a series of methodologies utilized in these local systems and allow students to practice them individually in order to obtain direct experience.

Oral Presentation

Each student will choose favored topics either from the field trips or recommended readings and prepare a brief oral presentation on main points to his or her peers. The goal of this assignment is to identify methodological techniques of oral presentation—including visual and audio techniques appropriate to present the study to the target audience, and prepare relevant questions/responses and evaluations in regard to the presentations of others.

Field Notebook and Work Journal

Each student will be required to create and maintain a field notebook that documents, synthesizes, and processes information from the field excursions in a written or pictorial manner. Points will be given for completeness, organization, creativity, and depth and quality of analysis.

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Each student will maintain a work journal during their Independent Study Projects that documents and organizes data and information gathered from observations, informants, and secondary sources. The work journal includes a condensed account, in which direct tones are taken; a daily account, which records work goals and schedules, an analysis of methodology, and personal reflections; and an expanded account, which organizes all data acquired – including interviews, observations, and secondary sources – and a section processing analytical questions raised during the investigation.

The goal of the field notebook or work journal is for students to consciously organize and process their notes in preparation for their written work, highlighting missing information and important points.

**Evaluation & Assessment**

- Based on the following criteria, the Academic Director assigns students a grade assessing: Regularity, process, and documentation of field investigation projects, excursion field exercises and work journal;
- Quality, creativity, persistence, and consistency of Independent Study Project process;
- Observation and reflection from field notebook, reading articles and journal assignments;
- Field investigation and interview projects;
- Ability to present and debate ideas
- Ability to undertake independent study in a Vietnamese cultural context and Independent Study Project Proposal; Reflection on the Independent Study Project Process.

This course is graded according to SIT grading policy. To encourage creativity and individual needs, assignment format and content can be changed if previously discussed with the AD.

40 % Field Investigation Projects (FIPs) – written and oral
30% Excursion Field Exercises (EFEs)
20% Oral Presentation
10% Field Notebook & Work Journal

**Selected Readings**

The following is a sampling of the books, articles, and other materials that are normally used for this course:

Bernad, H. Russel (2003). Research Methods in Anthropology: *Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

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