

## Casual Conversations Spark Dramatic Changes

As a newly-minted Peace Corps Volunteer (Thai X, 1965-67), I was assigned to teach English in a government secondary school in Thailand in a village six hours south of Bangkok. My roommate, Thongchai Chewprecha, a Thai teacher of chemistry, and I shared a small house on the school compound.

The village was small and most nights were spent on our porch discussing anything and everything. One topic, however, came up again and again which had to do with the relative efficacy of various teaching techniques.

Thai public schools predominantly used the “lecture-listen” approach whether the subject was science, math, or language. This was understandable since the school system evolved from earlier forms of education which took place in the temples and involved monks lecturing and pupils listening. This was the methodology Thongchai used. I, however, had been trained in a Socratic approach which relied on a developmental questioning methodology. This required students to engage actively with presented material and reach their own conclusions; questions were encouraged, not discouraged.

There was no resolution to our friendly arguments and after two years I returned to the States. Thongchai remained in Thailand and obtained his Master’s degree. He later received a United Nations scholarship that allowed him to get his Ph.D. in science education at the University of Maryland. He stayed with me and my family in California over two summers as we worked on polishing the English in his dissertation.

I was surprised to learn that his dissertation topic investigated the very issue we had spent so many nights discussing. Page 21 of his dissertation reads:

*Discovery learning, Inquiry learning, inductive learning, investigative learning and active learning are procedures to be developed in the science classroom. An important technique suggested by several educators...is the use of questions.*

Subsequent to the awarding of his degree, Dr. Thongchai returned to Thailand and became an influential figure in the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology. He became responsible for the development of the science curriculum in Thailand’s secondary schools, and he used his own and others’ research to change substantially how science was taught in Thailand.

Those late-night conversations taught me about how the Thai educational system worked and planted a seed in Thongchai that ultimately led to the transformation of science teaching in Thailand -- truly a serendipitous moment.

Thongchai is now the director of Mahidol Wittayanusorn School, a Thai Science High School, that provides an internationally recognized science education to gifted students from every province in Thailand. Students receive free room and board and entrance is by exam. The primary force behind the school’s establishment was Her Royal Highness,

Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who invited Thongchai to develop the school and its programs, and to become its first director - - a great honor indeed!

All of Thongchai's theories regarding science education came to fruition in the establishment of this school. Our friendship has continued through the years as we meet on Thongchai's occasional work-related visits to the U.S.

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Thai X