

The Development of Bann Thawai's Mediated Economics Curriculum for Sustainable Wood-Carved Business

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Introduction

Bann Thawai is one of Chiang Mai's economically resource rich villages generating enormous annual revenues with its world renowned unique and beautiful carved wood handicrafts that have been produced and marketed for over four decades. According to Thongthew (1998)'s study, although Bann Thawai's carved goods generate over 10 million Baht among 161 households, most of the villagers continue to live a hard life with average income that is not consistent with the annual revenue generated by the village's wood carving business. Their lack of understanding about a variety of aspects related to new regional, national, and global market system prompts the villagers to largely depend on richer and more sophisticated investors when it comes to wood carving production, resources, market sources, and marketing, including sales, pricing, etc. The same study also points out that the existing kinship relationship among the villagers; trusting each other in line with their religious precepts and local culture, as well as their habits upon which they based their business-related decision making, make them dependable on savvy businessmen.

Economic Education, teaching and learning economics at school level, may enable people to understand economic forces and principles that influence self and society, as well as how to begin to sensibly and effectively solve economic problem that are encountered (Chiangkool, 1999). Studying Economics thus was posited as an important, and possibly necessary, curriculum reform in schools, for the current situation facing the wood carvers and the wood carving occupation and market in Bann Thawai. Teaching economic reasoning, however, is not easy in pedagogical practice; therefore objections that teaching economic education at elementary level are raised (Stigler cited in Becker, 1995). However, a group of educators note that teaching economic lessons and skills can be taught at the elementary level and can be started at any levels, if provided experiences are incorporated to enable students to have hand-on practice that generates desired behavior (Buckle, 1987, Walstad, 1999).

In addition, studying Economics at the elementary level can heighten the students' skills and positive effects in the long-run (Walstad, 1994). However, we suggest that an integration of Economics with Social Studies and the students' lifestyles into the content can better clarify the Economics contents to the students (Dalgaard, 1994), as well as to make the curriculum locally, as well as globally 'culturally relevant' (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Anderson, 1998).

This article is developed from the research study conducted by Wattanatorn (2004) that was directed at clarifying the current situation of Bann Thawai villagers' wood carving occupation, the economic knowledge they used as part of their occupations and economic life as participants in the wood carving business. While the study was focused on the situated knowledge of the wood carvers, it was also focused on the ways in which some economic knowledge at national and global levels that the carvers did not understand might be helpful in getting the necessary global economics knowledge. The effect of the regional economic expansion on the traditional marketing situation has adversely affected the wood carvers in the village. The evidence from the one year long ethnographic research studied by Wattanatorn indicated that the fast and vast changes in the market situation negatively influenced the villagers' economic concepts regarding their wood carving occupation. Based upon observations and interview, two major factors were evident, *Manufacturing related Economics*, the villagers are indecisive as to whether they should produce only to respond to the high market demand or they should also maintain their unique style of wood carving and *Sales related Economics*, the villagers are indecisive about whether they should care about selling to gain individual and the most profit without taking into consideration their trading culture in which mutual co-operative working and profit sharing concepts play an important role.

After describing the research methodology below, the 'Research findings' section of this article is divided into three parts. Part I focuses on the concise background of the wood carving occupation in relation to Bann Thawai villagers' lifestyles and the changing of the economics concepts in relation to the wood carving occupation during the past four decades. The second part describes the ambivalence between some specific local economics concepts observed among most of the local people in Baan Thawai village and the nature of global economics concepts that lead to the key contents in the Economic Curriculum developed for the elementary school grades 4-6. The stage of the economic curriculum development and more detailed outline of the curriculum is presented in the third part.

Research Methodology

This research is the result of a field study at Bann Thawai during 1999-2004, aims at studying the collaboration of the community in the study of “Community-based Collaborative Research in the Process of Curriculum Development in Economics at Elementary Education : Bann Thawai Case, Chiang Mai Province” (Wattanatorn, 2004). The research focuses on the application of *Mediated Economics* concepts in the process of the development of the *Local Economics Curriculum* for the second key stage (Grade 4-6) for Bann Thawai’s elementary schools.

Ethnographic Research Stage : The research was conducted during a one year period (2003-2004) in Bann Thawai village in Chaing Mai province in northern Thailand. The research involved observations of wood-carvers in multiple sites and also involved discussions with and observations in elementary school classrooms in Bann Thawai village.

There were fifty-six respondents in the entire research project. One target group included nine professional wood handicraft carvers in Bann Thawai village and the remaining forty-seven respondents were wood handicraft laborers or carvers from each of the nine adjacent villages, including Bann Gaad, Bann Goh, Bann Koon Kong, Bann Deau-a, Bann Ton Bann Heu-ad, Bann Pah Maak, Bann Rai, Bann Nong Kong, and Bann Haan Gaew. Four to eight participants were selected from each village to make the total of forty-seven. Bann Thawai village is the center for the wood carving industry, the other respondents from other villages were carvers that supported the artisans in Bann Thawai.

The data gathering methods included in the study are; participant observation, as the key method, informal interviews ,formal group interviews and also focus group interviews.

Participant Observation firstly author observed the ten villagers’ lifestyles in regards to their wood carving production at home and in all sizes of factories (small, medium and large), observation also were directed at their trading styles, both retail and wholesale to domestic and international customers.

Informal Interviews included respondents from all ten villages, including workers, store owners and entrepreneurs. Attention was paid to women and men

interviewees as well as to workers who were engaged in different parts of the general 'wood carving occupation'. Carvers were primarily men, while women engaged primarily in decorating and production of the dyes.

Formal Group Interviews included the forty-seven workers from nine adjacent villages selected by using the purposive sampling technique to ask about the wood carving work condition.

Formal Focus Group Interviews that included the nine villagers in Bann Tharwai selected by using the purposive sampling technique for core information, comments and perceptions as a group of villagers.

The research included the study of textbooks and documents as references and for the purpose of data analysis. The data were analyzed with common qualitative and ethnographic methodologies that allowed for a triangulation of data to validate the accuracy of information. Data that were analyzed included observations, group interviews and focus group interviews, curriculum documents, textbooks, the government reports, photos and fliers.

The interviews were conducted in the standard Thai language understood by most villagers. A local interpreter worked as an assistant for the interviews done in the research. Occasionally other collaborator-villagers helped to clarify some unfamiliar points in the local dialect called, *Kam-Muang*. Most interviews were conducted in the standard Thai language, as it was well understood by most. Thus language is not an obstacle. Since authors had worked in Bann Thawai village and Chaing Mai province for several years and both were known to many of the villagers by the time this research project started, and also were able to understand the cultural background – both seen and expressive cultures—as well as the reasons authors gained their trust by accepting their opinions as the practitioners of their own culture. The researcher used pseudonyms for the nine collaborators (respondents) in Bann Thawai, and for those from other villages.

Curriculum Development Stage : After data were analyzed, the information was used to develop the twelve related *Capitalism Economics Concepts* that were used as a base for a new curriculum for the elementary school curriculum; the twelve principles were then grouped under four themes based on the situated economic and cultural knowledge wood carvers have. The balance between the Capitalism Economics

Concepts and local culture and wisdom was mixed and matched during this step. The *Local Economics Curriculum* was developed to be consistent with the Thai Ministry of Education national curriculum for subject group of Social Studies, Religion and Culture and Science at the elementary school level.

Research Findings

Part I : The Concise Background of the Wood Carving Occupation and the Changing of the Economics Concepts in Bann Thawai

Bann Thawai is one of the nine villages in Koon Kong Sub-district, Hang Dong District, Chiang Mai province. This medium-sized village with 161 families and 572 residents is 4 kilometers away from Hang Dong and 19 kilometers from Muang district which is the center of Chiang Mai. The villagers are involved in carving and trading teak and garnishing wooden puppets with colored trims. Although wood handicrafts promote their reputation and generate income for Bann Thawai village, it is interesting to find in the study that the villagers learned how to carve wood only 40 years earlier. During 1951-1956, a small group of villagers went to work in a furniture shop in Chiang Mai during the unusual draught periods when they could not work on their farms and fields. This group of villagers learned carving from the shop's resident carver and thus began the occupation of Baan Thawai's villagers (Wattanapan, Wattanapan and Srijamnong, 2001). The most famous products currently found are the carved wooden handicrafts sold in nearly 430 stores located on both sides of the main canal in the "Inner Center" of the village. The Inner Center, locally called Talad Song Fung Klong is located right at the center of the village.

From data collected, the researcher found the local carvers, neighbors and relatives within the village co-operatively help each other produce and sell product, and distribute their products in vendor like style. In addition, the researcher also noticed the uniqueness of economics concept among local vendors that they did business for money profit while emphasizing on the mutual well being of their neighbors and relatives. The researcher terms such concept as Mutual Co-operative Economics Concept after Luykx's Mutual Co-operative Economics Principle. (Luykx, 1999)

Data obtained from documentary analysis in the study showed at least two major factors spurring the growth of wood handicraft economics concepts from the

mutual co-operative economics concepts to the modern global economics concepts. The first one is internal factor, including the growth of competitive trading outlets in and around Baan Thawai. The second one is external factors, including the government's policy to move toward an export-oriented and tourism economy in 1999. As stated by Thongthew and Wattanatorn (2004), the shift from mutual cooperative working concept to individual and to corporate profit based economics value emerged during 1998-2003, a time when export-oriented industries and corporate profit based economics concept gained prominence in this part of Thailand that aroused widespread ambivalence about the value of accustomed economics concept among the villagers. The unique mutual co-operative working concept of Bann Thawai villagers has been altered gradually in the past seven years, accommodating more modern global economics concept in response to the corporate profit based economics value. The villagers have to switch from mutual cooperative concept toward more profit based economy. Instead of relying on a neighbors and relatives underlying traditional mutual co-operative working concept, a household head has to hire several permanent, and low wage workers from other nine villages in order to catch up with the increasing demands and yield the maximum profits for him. Thongthew and Wattanatorn (2004) concluded :

“Although most local woodcraftsmiths foresee Bann Thawai’s prospects for craft exports, they feel somewhat uncomfortable for such changes. The majority often express nostalgic feeling for the good old village unity and uniqueness of their famous wood handicrafts.”

Part II : The ambivalence between some specific local economics concepts observed among most local people in Bann Thawai village and the nature of global economics concepts that lead to the key contents in the economic curriculum developed for the elementary school grades 4-6

The problems caused by the ambivalence between some specific local economics concepts, noticed among most of the local people in Baan Thawai village and the nature of global economics as observed through the study that lead to the key contents in the economic curriculum are elaborated as the followings.

The ambivalence between specialization in the craftsmanship as distinguished artistic products, and the wood crafts as made- to- order sale products.

Traditional wood carving products have played a very important role in the life of the villagers. Wood carving styles, well recognized throughout the region have been originally dedicated to the northern history, but later on to global business purpose. Every household here in Bann Thawai, thus make a living by creating hand made wooden products. The outsiders' increasing admiration for the products' uniqueness turn the villagers' original dedication to the set sale targets. In order to spice up even greater sale volume, the later generation of the villagers turn most of the artistic craftsmanship into products for sales and for profit, leaving out the delicate wood handicrafts since such products take too much time to produce.

The key content of the Bann Thawai Local Economic Curriculum at this point concentrates on the concept of economic activity that measures the above situation in a way that encourages the villagers to add up the value of artistic uniqueness into the wood carving products for sale and profit. The value of *specialization* in the craftsmanship as distinguished artistic products is therefore emphasized as the core of the first learning unit, accompanying with one economics concept, namely the *division of labour*.

The ambivalence between the focus on low price competition for the survival and more market shares and the craving for maximum profit.

Technically, the price determination for wood carving products is made out of the cost of raw materials, uniqueness of the products, and more important the desired level of the customers demand. The price determination for wood products in Bann Thawai according to the mentioned market mechanism is therefore set at high value. However, during market low seasons, the demands for the wood carving products are lower than the supplies. The market rivalry of suppliers, thus focus on low price competition. However, the one important ingredient that can keep the set prices and yet elevate the price of the products even higher is the typical nature among villagers, the compassion and warmth towards customers.

The key content of the Bann Thawai Local Economics Curriculum at this point concentrates on the concept of the traditional sense of compassion towards visitors and strangers as value added up to the wood carving products in order to enhance better market activity. The typical sense of compassion as an ingredient to the price determination is therefore emphasized as the core of the second unit, the largest unit in the curriculum. There are five economics key concepts accompanying the core

concept in this second unit. The customers' satisfaction as the producers' *incentive* to better productions is the first key concept. The *producers' decision to make* certain kinds of products well accepted by the customers is the second one. The producers' decision on the kinds of products worth *investing* in is the following. In addition there are also two economics concepts introduced in this second unit. The customers' *voluntary exchange* their money for satisfied products is the fourth concept. And the expected profit that will be gained only from selling worthy and well satisfied to customers is the last concept in this unit.

The ambivalence between the crave for maximum share in the profit market and the need to distribute profit equitably among kinships so that to establish community strength.

Technically, successful wood carving businessmen in Bann Thawai focus on the feasibility to quickly gain the maximum wealth achievable by cornering the sale markets only to themselves, leaving other wood carving competitors behind. The concept of typical wealth equity and community togetherness have been overlooked inevitably. This situation creates economic disparity among villagers, and gradually leads to community weakness. As an improvement to such predicament, the concept of profit equity and community consolidation approach has been introduced. According to the concept, complete information on characteristics of wood carving specialization among villagers is necessary to retain the efficiency feature of well-known wood carving market. At the same time the wealth distribution must be done appropriately to those contributed to the allocated tasks. This fact underlines the essential roles of both the distribution of profit equitably and the restrictive nature of global economic market.

The key content of the Bann Thawai Local Economics Curriculum at this point concentrates on the concept of the traditional sense of profit equity and community strength in the wood carving market. This sense serves as the core of the third unit in the Bann Thawai Local Economics Curriculum, accompanying with 3 new economics key concepts namely the relationship between *demand and supply* in the process of price setting, the promotion of equal opportunity for *sale competition* , and the *allocation of equitably wealth* among producers and native entrepreneurs.

The ambivalence between the high demands for raw materials in wood carving industries and the sense of environmental conservation.

The increasing demands for teak wood and other endangered woods for the wood carving industries exercise pressure on the environmental and ecosystem around the Northern part of Thailand. The need of most businessmen to have maximum profits has somewhat overruled the concerns for such risky environmental damage. To lessen the environmental issues ones must look seriously into the matter of the deforestation and the environmental degradation. While emphasizing on maximum profit, the sense of environmental conservation must be strongly considered side by side. The agreement on the other kinds of trees as well as other substitute materials must be proposed and utilized among wood carving producers and entrepreneurs.

The key content of the Bann Thawai Local Economics Curriculum at this point thus concentrates on the concept of the wood handicrafts production and sustainable development. This sense serves as the core of the last unit in the Baan Thawai Local Economics Curriculum, accompanying with 3 new economics concepts namely *scarcity* as the key to high *price determination*, the substitute materials as the key to set a certain price for better market competition, and the *financial institutions* as the key access to more selection of alternative substitute materials for production.

Part 3: The stage of the economic curriculum development and more detailed outline of the curriculum is presented in the third part.

The Mediated Economics Concepts Curriculum developed for Bann Thawai students contains four major Learning Units, with 2-4 Sub Learning Units in each major Learning Unit. The following paragraphs depict four stages in the curriculum development.

The first stage is Constructing Four Cultural Themes From Four Mediated Economic Concepts,

The related global and local economics concepts obtained from the research findings concerning the critical ambivalence between the mutual co-operative working

1) *The Local Integrity in the Wood Handicrafts Production.* The value of specialization in the craftsmanship as distinguished from artistic products is emphasized as the core of the first theme, accompanying with one economic concept, the division of labour.

2) *The Promotion of Local Handicrafts through Quality Products and Local Hospitality.* The typical sense of compassion as an ingredient to the price determination is emphasized as the core of the second theme. There are five economics key concepts accompanying the core concept in this second theme. The

customers' satisfaction as the producers' ***incentive*** to better productions is the first key concept. The ***producers' decision to make*** certain kinds of products well accepted by the customers is the second one. The producers' decision on the kinds of products worth ***investing*** emphasize is the following. The customers' ***voluntary exchange*** their money for satisfied products is the fourth concept. And the ***expected profit*** will be gained only from selling worthy and well satisfied to customers is the last concept in this theme.

3) *Building up Community Strength Through Co-operative Working Concept and Profit Sharing.* The third theme concentrates on the concept of the traditional sense of profit equity and community strength in the wood carving market. Three economics key concepts namely the relationship between ***demand and supply*** in the process of price setting, the promotion of equal opportunity for ***sale competition***, and the ***allocation of equitably wealth*** among producers and native entrepreneurs are included in this theme

4) *Wood Handicrafts Production and Sustainable Development.* The fourth theme concentrates on the 3 economics concepts, ***scarcity*** as the key to high ***price determination***, the substitute materials as the key to set a certain price for better ***market competition***, and the ***financial institutions*** as the key access to more selection of alternative substitute materials for production.

The Second Stage is Integrating the Four Cultural Themes With Related Subject Strands in the Core Content Standard.

In each cultural theme, the content offered is the integration between selected economics concepts and related subject strands so that students could learn it in the holistic manner. The learning standards from the two subject strands, the Social Studies, Religion and Culture Strand and Science Strand are used as cores for the integration.

The Third Stage is Setting up Learning Unit and Sub-Learning Unit in Response to the 4 New Integrated Themes.

Four learning units have been developed and structured under the four local cultural themes. Each learning unit is composed of 2-4 sub-learning units elaborating specific detail information necessary for the comprehension of the particular cultural theme. There are four major learning units named after the four cultural themes while the thirteen sub-learning units in the curriculum are structured within the mediated economic concepts and related subject strands. These learning units and sub-learning units are provided as the guideline for teaching local economics in Bann Thawai village school.

Conclusion

The Mediated Economics Curriculum is initiated as the author's attempt to balance the economics concepts related to profit based capitalism and the still existing local mutual co-operative working and profit sharing concepts on which most villagers based their wood carving occupation. Although it needs longitudinal and systematic studies to follow the consequences of this curriculum on the new personalities among villagers in Baan Thawai, the data obtained through direct contacts with the villagers during this study has shown positive attitudes toward the expected outcomes. Students and their parents have expressed their needs to conserve their local integrity and unity while accommodating the global economics trends. They have argued strongly that if they can somehow balance their local practices while applying the global capitalistic concepts, their wood handicrafts market will be unique and more charming. The Mediated Economics Curriculum, thus has been developed and offered to serve as a responsive measure to these villagers.

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