

Think Global Thinkpiece Series



It makes you think: learning together

In this thinkpiece Rob Bowden argues that an East meets West project points the way for global learning to be truly transformative

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For the past three years I have had the privilege of collaborating on an 'East meets West' project rooted in Shanghai, China, and reaching beyond this to include educationalists in the UK. The project has a simple premise - that there is much to be learned by bringing Eastern and Western perspectives and pedagogies together and that such a process not only nurtures a global learning disposition in/for/with young people, but is global learning in its own right.

In my own experience, the most profound shifts in my learning have occurred when I have sought or taken up the opportunity to learn together with others. There is something about the continuum of learning from self, through others, to the wider world and back again, that opens perspectives, broadens minds and challenges received wisdom like nothing else. This 'stretching' is for me, at the very core of what good quality global learning is about.

Stretched beyond comfort...

Of course, if we stretch too far then it becomes uncomfortable, even painful and in all likelihood we will not repeat such actions in future, for risk of repeating this sensation. This is something that global learning should be mindful of, for it can be a source of resistance or outright rejection if we take (or challenge) learners too quickly or too soon. It is important to bring learners with you and to create the time and space for them to engage with new content, perspectives, maybe even ways of learning. This is true for adults (those educating) as much as it is for their learners.

I was reminded of this recently in preparing for a visit to deliver professional development to teachers working for the Xiehe group of schools in Shanghai. I had been asked to design and deliver training around values and global learning, building on an earlier pilot project in England completed in partnership with Think Global, Oxfam, British Red Cross and Practical Action. How though, would I take learning through values to China? How would the ideas and concepts translate? How would values be received in a Chinese context? Would the pedagogies we were using be transferable?

These were just some of the questions I was asking. In addition there were the pragmatic aspects of delivering the training bilingually with all of the very real challenges that this presents - timing, pace, comprehension etc. Hardest of all, and particularly in a sensitive area such as values and global learning, is the ability to 'sense the temperature' of the room when working across languages and cultures. It was a situation that demanded an 'eyes wide open' approach and I knew that this would stretch me as much as it would others.

The value of global learning

In reflecting on the experience, many of my concerns were validated in practice, but more than anything I feel heartened, encouraged and inspired. Yes, there were concepts that did not translate smoothly, and there were certainly moments in which I could sense the discomfort of participants as well as of myself. Above and beyond this however, there was a sense of opportunity, of challenge, of being pleasantly stretched, and of learning together.

As a word, term or concept would falter in its conversion from English to Chinese, so time would be spent unpacking its meaning as opposed to simply translating it away. New and better understandings began to emerge, founded on varied cultural perspectives and calling into question the power of our received wisdoms and the languages we use as a vehicle to assert this power. These new understandings were not just about comprehension, but moved theoretical underpinnings forwards to clarify or create new conceptual spaces. The learning was unquestionably enriched and the experience of co-constructing meaning brought about a greater sense of ownership and therefore impact. It reminded me that the true value of global learning is as much in the process as it is in the content, and that the skills, dispositions and knowledge inherent in quality global learning can, when the balance is right, have a disproportionate impact on individuals, communities and learning.

Transformative learning

I continue to question, adapt and modify my practice around values and global learning as a result of working alongside colleagues in Shanghai, and from communications since my return I know that the same processes are alive and well there too. Such transformative learning is a privilege to be part of, but need not involve traveling half way around the world. In fact I find there is as much global learning to be had on my local doorstep - especially when engaging in values and big issues as a context for this. With the current emphasis on teaching 'British' values in schools I would argue that there has never been a better time for global learning; to explore beyond self, through others and to the wider world. We cannot define what it means to be British or indeed what might be considered British values if we ask such questions in a vacuum. We have to see the bigger picture because we are part of it.

In China similar questions are being asked and the government has recently begun promoting 'Chinese' values through the education system. As in England, this focus on values is associated with a sense of identity and a feeling that something has been lost in the shadow of globalisation. But that shadow is long and persistent - globalisation is increasing, speeding up, and is unlikely to do otherwise anytime soon. Under such conditions, when our context is transforming around us, I would suggest that we can not shy away from the responsibility to help young people understand, negotiate and navigate their emerging futures. Those pioneering educational reform in China believe the same, as do many committed educationalists within global learning in England. If we want learning to be transformative then we have to first learn how to transform ourselves. By default this cannot be done in isolation, but must be done together.

Learning together

During my recent visit to Shanghai I attended and spoke at an international conference 'Developing 21st Century Global Education' attended by over 380 delegates. The day focused on the central position of values in shaping 21st century learning and on the benefits of global learning as a context for this. More than anything however, the day emphasised the benefits of learning

together; of individuals, communities, nations and international bodies (such as UNESCO) collaborating to turn well-meaning rhetoric into observable reality. A Chinese colleague suggested in her keynote that it takes 100 years to change a mindset. I do not find this daunting, but more a call to action. It gives me permission to change, but where to start?

A new publication called 'Learning Together' is one such place. Co-produced through bilingual and intercultural exchanges between some 50 educators from the UK, China and beyond, the book is a dialogue on developing global schools. Its unique 'East meets West' perspective may not directly translate to your own context, but that for me is its real strength. Just as going to China to deliver professional training forced me to occupy the spaces in between East and West and to transform my own learning, I believe this book provides a great stimulus for educators in the UK to reflect on their own practice; to re-vision their own spaces and opportunities; and to find the time and space for their own transformative learning.

Like all good practical books, it is packed with ideas, diagrams, frameworks and useful talking points to aid engagement, but to focus on those is perhaps to miss its core strength. This lies in the fact that Learning Together has not been constructed simply as information to absorb, but as insights, from likeminded and passionate professionals. Their process of learning globally together and its manifestation in this publication achieves an often undervalued outcome - it makes you think!

Learning Together (2015, 250pp, £18 + p&p) can be ordered directly from Lifeworlds Learning as the UK distributor of the book on behalf of UK partners including Think Global, Institute of Education, Development Education Centre (South Yorkshire) and the Geographical Association.

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