

Critical thinking in the context of global learning

DEA uses the term 'global learning' to describe education that puts learning in a global context. For us, an important part of such learning involves developing critical and creative thinking about how we can create a more just and sustainable world. In this article, six elements of critical global thinking are explored before the discussion turns to consider what such an understanding of critical thinking may mean in the classroom.

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Making connections within and between systems

The grandfather of critical thinking in the Western tradition is Rene Descartes, the 17th Century philosopher. He was so intent on the need to think critically that legend has it that he locked himself in a stove so that he could step away from distraction to think.

Western thinking took an important turn with the work of Descartes. He believed that the best way to understand something was to break it down into its component parts. This mode of operation has dominated Western thinking and there are good reasons for this – it is very powerful. It is this way of thinking that has enabled most of our academic insights such as the discovery of the atom.

But the weakness of this model of thinking is that the interconnection between the parts in any given system is more important than the individual parts. So understanding the constituent parts is not enough. We need to know how they interact. For example, the new chair of the Financial Services Authority has admitted that the FSA's failure to fully explore the ways in which individual risks compounded each other meant that the overall risks in the financial system were underestimated. This played an important role in the recent economic crisis.

Issues such as climate change require us to think systemically, and to understand that change is not just a linear process but in some instances non linear due to vicious (or sometimes virtuous) circles. For example if climate change goes beyond a rise of 2 degrees centigrade, this could lead to 'runaway climate change' through a cycle of warming.

We see this issue most of all in how we tend to think of the economic sphere as separate from the social and environmental sphere. But as research by WWF shows¹, if everybody consumed like we do in the UK, we would need three planets to sustain us. We can only really start to understand global challenges and issues when we make connections within and between systems.

Awareness of how much is contested

All of the major concepts that global learning is concerned with are contested. For example, the notion of 'sustainability'. What is it? Is it mainly an environmental concept, or is it about social justice as well? What makes someone a global citizen? Is global citizenship a useful concept at all? These are live debates about which there is no consensus. Similarly, what does being a developed country mean? What are the causes of international poverty? Does aid help, or does it prop up corrupt regimes? Is the best route to resolve poverty more or less globalisation and free markets? Can we equate increased wealth with greater development?

It is easy to fall into treating abstract nouns such as 'sustainability', 'global citizenship' and 'development' as though they are the names of real, clearly defined objects. In describing why he would not want his children to be educated for sustainable development, Jickling warns against conditioning young people to believe that sustainable development constitutes a

¹ WWF (2006) *Living Planet Report 2006*.

constellation of correct environmental views². Instead, he argues, we should debate, evaluate and judge for ourselves the relative merits of contested positions.

Responding to complexity and change

Relatedly, and perhaps rather obviously, the world is complex and changing. This means that individuals need to constantly question and update their own models of the world. For example some educators talking about development use a model of the world that makes a very strong distinction between poor and rich countries. There are, however, challenges to this model of development, rooted as it is in dependency theory which emerged in the 1950s. Where does China fit in? How does it make sense of the fact that India's middle class now stands at 100 million people – bigger than Europe's? And what do we make of one in three children in the UK living in relative poverty? We need newer models to understand development which see that deprivation and wealth occur within as well as across nations.

Critical global thinkers also need to explore the very real trade-offs that we must grapple with in how we might create a more just and sustainable world. In the sustainability debate this is all the more important now that everybody is 'for' sustainability and so debates must move to the next level. What would the impacts of higher energy prices be on the very poorest in society? What does 'local food' mean in its impacts on trade with poorer countries?

By developing our abilities to explore such trade-offs and to be open-minded about our models of the world today, we will be better placed to respond effectively in the future to challenges that we cannot yet anticipate.

Understanding the significance of power relationships

All global learning, indeed all education, is political. Everything has an ideological and political underpinning and is shaped by patterns of power distribution. Following the Freirean tradition, critical reflection on the way in which reality is shaped in this way can be seen as the impetus to move individuals to change that reality. The link between awareness and action is not necessarily as clear as this, but viewing the world through a more political lens is nonetheless revealing. For example, it can move us from a benevolent charitable mentality towards other countries to considering the structural issues that shape global challenges and influence the ways we view them.

An important trap to avoid in global learning is that this is not just a set of agendas about individual change and moral refrains ('be responsible; give to charity; feel bad when you fly'). Change is political, and politics needs an analysis of the roles of all different actors – government, business, NGOs as well as individuals. A systemic analysis also seeks to try and understand the incentives within the system – why do people act as they do, and what are the systemic changes that will help create behaviour change? For example in relation to

² Jickling, B (1992) Why I don't want my children educated for sustainable development. *Journal of Environmental Education* 23(4).

international poverty, moral exhortation and charitable giving may have a relatively small effect in comparison to changes in UK tariffs policy or in consumers' shopping habits.

The political nature of global learning also means that critical global learners need to avoid swallowing anyone's line too quickly. They need to recognise that NGOs, government, business and academics can have their own agendas. Thus they need to consider: Who has power? Who is voiceless? Who benefits?

Self-reflection

The global is not somewhere 'out there' – we are all part of it. Therefore an important element of critical global thinking involves situating ourselves in the global. This can involve making connections between the global and the local, between global processes and systems and ourselves as individuals. For example, collectively and individually we are key contributors to the problems of environmental sustainability and climate change, and therefore this global issue does not sit 'out there'. Similarly, there is relative poverty in the UK and we need to consider our own 'development trajectory' as much as that of other nations.

Self-reflection also means exploring our deeper prejudices and stereotypes about poorer countries. Work done by the Reading-based Development Education Centre RISC shows that when children are asked to draw pictures to respond to the question 'What is in Africa?' many of the drawings are of very poor communities and mud huts³. There is no recognition that there is a lot of variety in this huge continent, and that poverty is not its only constituting factor. Critical global thinking should involve challenging ourselves to remain open-minded, and aware that change for a more just and sustainable world may well involve changing ourselves.

Values literacy

The learning outcomes of global learning are often couched in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. However, critical global thinkers also need to connect to their deeper narratives. All societies have understandings about what constitutes a good life, which go to the heart of our values. Global learning needs to grapple with these questions.

Well-being research suggests that increased material affluence has not necessarily made us happier: the UK economy has trebled in size over the last 50 years but happiness has remained relatively flat⁴. The research suggests that we adapt quickly to material gains – lottery winners experience a surge of happiness and then return to their previous levels of well-being. This is not to say that well-being is the key or the only goal of society – there are many other values such as freedom, or participation. But young people should be given the space to explore what values they hold, where these values might come from, and where they

³ Lowe, B (2008) Embedding Global Citizenship in Primary and Secondary Schools: developing a methodology for measuring attitudinal change. *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, 1(1).

⁴ Layard, R (2005) *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. London: Penguin Books.

might clash. How do their environmental values sit with their desire to fly and travel? There may be no easy answers, but critical thinking requires us to begin by bringing to the surface the contradictions in the values that we all have and to challenge our own deeply held values and preferences.

So often, in educational literature and elsewhere, statements about values are made as though they are statements of fact. In becoming more conversant with their own values, critical global thinkers may be better able to identify the values implicit in what they see, hear and read.

What does this understanding of critical global thinking mean for teachers?

Learning is a complex process, and it is difficult to understand the relationship between young people's exposure to global issues and their ability and inclination to respond to global challenges both now and in the future. Against this backdrop, it is challenging to assess the relationship between specific teaching interventions and learning outcomes.

Whilst acknowledging the need for a greater understanding about the relationship between teaching, learning and life patterns, we make here some pragmatic suggestions about what the elements of critical global thinking outlined above mean for educators.

Firstly, our understanding of a critical global thinker extends to teachers as much as it does to students. Modelling is crucial in teaching, and to support students to be self-reflective, and to respond to complexity and change, teachers need to be doing so themselves. Anecdotal evidence from practitioners who support educators suggests that some teachers hold views that reinforce stereotypes on global issues. Hence fostering critical thinking means teachers, as well as students, questioning their own understanding and assumptions. Like students, teachers need to be supported in this.

What's more, to navigate the wealth of resources and advice available for teaching the global dimension, teachers need to be thinking critically, considering the values and power relationships that have shaped the material. As made clear in the National Framework for Masters in Teaching in Learning, teachers need opportunities to develop their own skills of enquiry, allowing them to feel their way in a contested field.

However, whatever resources and activities teachers select, we see some shared approaches and underlying pedagogical principles as valuable in fostering critical global thinking. For example, helping young people think systemically could start with making links between sharply delineated curriculum subjects. Within subject areas there are also many opportunities to make links between local and global: news stories about Somalian pirates can be linked to the topic of migration in the UK; local issues about drugs can be linked up to questions about the global drugs trade.

To help students understand the contested nature of concepts in global learning, we believe that educators need to be putting forward a variety of perspectives on issues they are dealing with – including intelligent 'right wing' theory as well as views from the left. Approaches such as Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) can provide useful ideas on how to encourage learners to identify how values and power

relationships contribute to the formation of individual or organisational viewpoints and the 'knowledge' generated from those perspectives. The use of questioning in the classroom can be important in encouraging students to consider the epistemological claims of any teaching resource or source of information.

Young people are often extremely adept at responding flexibly to changing and complex situations. Often it is teachers who are understandably reticent in entering debate on controversial issues, where values, opinions, and priorities are conflicting and where it is not possible to know the full picture. It is a challenge to build and shift teacher/student relationships in a way that makes it possible to enter discussions on a more equal footing, with no one knowing the 'right' answer. Activities such as role play, formal debates, tiered discussion groups, and ranking can all help to structure and stimulate 'talk' in the classroom, and developing clear ground rules with students can help everyone take part constructively⁵.

Finally, whilst we believe that critical thinking is crucial to global learning, we recognise that supporting such approaches is not unproblematic. Asbrand⁶ worked with German adolescents to try to understand how they learn about globalisation and development. She found that school students who explored values and global issues critically and intellectually were less able to transfer their knowledge to action than young people who learnt through volunteering in organizations outside of schools (for example, through selling fair-trade products). It clearly cannot be presumed that critical approaches to global learning lead directly to action for a more just and sustainable world. Teachers, with their knowledge of the young people they work with, have an important role in reflecting on how to support critical global thinking whilst enabling young people to feel sufficiently optimistic and aware of their power for change to take their chosen action in a complex world.

⁵ Brown, K and Fairbrass, S (2009) *The Citizenship Teacher's Handbook*. London: Continuum.

⁶ Asbrand, B (2008) How adolescents learn about globalisation and development. In Bourn, D (2008) *Development Education: Debates and dialogues*. London: Institute of Education.