

Soft versus critical global citizenship education

Understanding global issues often requires learners to examine a complex web of cultural and material processes and contexts on local and global levels. **Vanessa Andreotti** explores how critical global citizenship can be an effective way to support learners in that process.

Introduction

At the end of a ‘Make Poverty History’ (MPH) training session for activists, as an inspiration for a group of about 30 young people to write their action plans, a facilitator conducted the following visualisation (reproduced from my notes):

“Imagine a huge ball-room. It is full of people wearing black-tie. They are all celebrities. You also see a red carpet leading to a stage on the other side. On the stage there is Nelson Mandela. He is holding a prize. It is the activist of the year prize. He calls your name. You walk down that corridor. Everyone is looking at you. What are you wearing? How are you feeling? Think about how you got there: the number of people that have signed your petitions, the number of white bands on the wrists of your friends, the number of people you have taken to Edinburgh. You shake Mandela’s hands. How does that feel? He gives you the microphone. Everyone is quiet waiting for you to speak. They respect you. They know what you have done. Think about the difference you have made to this campaign! Think about all the people you have helped in Africa...”

Listening to this as a Southern person was disturbing, but what was even more worrying was to observe that, when the young people opened their eyes and I asked around if they thought the visualisation was problematic, the answer was overwhelmingly ‘no’. They confirmed that their primary motivation for ‘training as an activist’ was related to self-improvement, the development of leadership skills or simply having fun, enhanced, of course, by the moral supremacy and vanguardist feeling of being responsible for changing or saving the world ‘out there’. This actually echoed one of the

sayings in a poster of the organisation that was running the course “do what you love doing, but save the world while you do it”.

Part of the reason why I felt so uncomfortable was that the group seemed to be unaware that the thought patterns and effects of ‘what they love doing’ could be directly related to the causes of the problems they were trying to tackle in the first place. This points to a central issue in global citizenship education: whether and how to address the economic and cultural roots of the inequalities in power and wealth/labour distribution in a global complex and uncertain system.

In order to understand global issues, a complex web of cultural and material local/global processes and contexts needs to be examined and unpacked. My argument is that if we fail to do that in global citizenship education, we may end up promoting a new ‘civilising mission’ as the slogan for a generation who take up the ‘burden’ of saving/educating/civilising the world. This generation, encouraged and motivated to ‘make a difference’, will then project their beliefs and myths as universal and reproduce power relations and violence similar to those in colonial times. How can we design educational processes that move learners away from this tendency?

This article aims to introduce the argument for *critical* global citizenship education. It is divided into three parts. In the first part I present Andrew Dobson’s arguments in relation to the grounds for global citizenship and his critique of the notions of the ‘global citizen’ and ‘interdependence’. In the second part, I present Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of some cultural effects of colonialism in the relationship/assumptions of North and South. In the last part I compare and contrast soft and critical citizenship education in general terms based on Dobson’s and Spivak’s analyses and briefly explore the notion of critical literacy as a significant dimension of critical global citizenship education. I argue that, for educators, a careful analysis of the context of work is paramount for informed decisions in terms of what focus to choose, but that it is imperative to know the risks and implications of the options available in order to make responsible pedagogical choices.

Common humanity or justice: The material dimension of citizenship education

Andrew Dobson is a British political author and Professor at the Open University, specialising in environmental politics. His most famous work is entitled *Green Political Thought*. He addresses the grounds for global citizenship and the notions of a ‘global citizen’ and ‘interdependence’. He starts his analysis with what he perceives as a common question in the ‘Northern’ context:

“How can severe poverty of half of humankind continue despite enormous economic and technological progress and despite the enlightened moral norms and values of our heavily dominant Western civilisation?” (Pogge, 2002, p.3 cited in Dobson, 2006, p.170).

He states that, for many in the political sciences today, it is precisely the assumptions of progress and values/morality of the West that are at the root of the problem. He poses another question: “what should (then) be the basis for our concern for those whom we have never met and are never likely to meet?”. He proposes that the answer should be framed around political obligation for doing justice and the source of this obligation should be a recognition of complicity or “causal responsibility” in transnational harm (Dobson, 2006).

Dobson argues that the globalisation of trade creates ties based on “chains of cause and effect that prompt obligations of justice, rather than sympathy, pity or beneficence” (p.178). He offers the ecological footprints as an illustration of how this operates “as a network of effects that prompts reflection on the nature of the impacts they comprise” (p.177). He also mentions unjust practices imposed by the North as a global institutional order that reproduce poverty and impoverish people (p.177).

Two of the central pleas of the MPH campaign point in the same direction. The calls for trade justice and debt relief suggested that the North had something to do with the poverty created elsewhere. However, this acknowledgement of complicity did not translate into the campaigning strategies. The use of images, figures and slogans emphasised the need to be charitable, compassionate and ‘active’ locally (in order to change institutions), based on a moral obligation to a common humanity, rather than on a political responsibility for the causes of poverty.

Dobson argues that acts grounded on this moral basis are easily withdrawn and end up reproducing unequal (paternalistic) power relations and increasing the vulnerability of the recipient (Dobson, 2006). For him, justice is a better ground for thinking as it is political and prompts fairer and more equal relations. He makes a distinction between being human and being a citizen: being human raises issues of morality; being a citizen raises political issues (Dobson, 2005).

Unlike what was suggested in the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign, Dobson emphasises individual - rather than institutional - responsibility. He quotes Pogge (2002) to stress this point:

“We are familiar, through charity appeals, with the assertion that it lies in our hands to save the lives of many or, by doing nothing, to let these people die. We are less familiar with the assertion examined here of a weightier responsibility: that most of us not merely let people starve but also participate in starving them” (p. 214 cited in Dobson, 2006, p. 182).

Dobson also challenges the concepts of a ‘global citizen’, interdependence and world-wide interconnectedness that often accompany unexamined notions of a common humanity in global citizenship education. He asserts that they do not take sufficient account of unequal power relations between the North and the South, as Vandana Shiva states:

“The ‘global’ in the dominant discourse is the political space in which a particular dominant local seeks global control, and frees itself of local, national and international restraints. The global does not represent the universal human interest; it represents a particular local and parochial interest which has been globalised through the scope of its reach. The seven most powerful countries, the G7, dictate global affairs, but the interests that guide them remain narrow, local and parochial” (Shiva, 1998, p. 231 cited in Dobson, 2005, p. 261).

Shiva and Dobson argue that only certain countries have globalising powers - others are globalised. In this sense, the North has a global reach while the South only exists locally:

“Globalisation is, on this reading, an asymmetrical process in which not only its fruits are divided up unequally, but also in which the very possibility of ‘being global’ is unbalanced” (Dobson, 2005, p. 262).

Having the choice to traverse from the local to the global space is the determining factor for whether or not you can be a global citizen. If you are not ‘global’, “the walls built of immigration controls, of residence laws and of ‘clean streets’ and ‘zero tolerance’ grow taller” (Bauman, 1998, p.2 cited in Dobson, 2005, p. 263) to try to contain the diffusion of ideas, goods, information and peoples in order to protect specific local spaces from unwanted ‘contamination’. Thus, we end up with a one way transfusion (in its legal form at least) rather than a diffusion. As the capacity to act globally is limited, Dobson concludes that those who can and do act globally are in effect often projecting their local (assumptions and desires) as everyone else’s global (Dobson, 2005, p.264). This is well illustrated in one of MPH’s

campaign slogans: “Make History” (Whose history? Who is making this history? In whose name? For whose benefit?).

Dobson’s analyses raises important questions for global citizenship education: who is this global citizen? What should be the basis of this project? Whose interests are represented here? Is this an elitist project? Are we empowering the dominant group to remain in power? Are we doing enough to examine the local/global dimensions of our assumptions?

However, Dobson’s account also seems to oversimplify North-South relations by presenting the South as only a site for Western forceful dominance or some ‘grassroots’ resistance. In analysing the cultural aspects of the historical construction of this relationship, other critics present a more complex picture, taking into account the ‘complicity’ of the South itself in maintaining Northern dominance.

Sanctioned ignorance: The cultural dimension

A cultural analysis raises complementary questions for global citizenship education. The emphasis here is on the implications of the projection of Northern/Western values and interests as global and universal which naturalises the myth of Western supremacy in the rest of the world. Gayatri Spivak, a professor at Columbia University in the United States who has had a great impact on the theoretical development in the areas of cultural studies, critical theory and colonial discourse analysis, calls this process “worlding of the West as world” (Spivak, 1990).

Spivak argues that this naturalisation occurs by a disavowal of the history of imperialism and the unequal balance of power between the ‘First’ and ‘Third’ Worlds in the global capitalist system. The outcome of this naturalisation is a discourse of modernisation in which colonialism is either ignored or placed securely in the past, so that we think it is over and does not affect - and has not affected - the construction of the present situation.

The result is a sanctioned ignorance (constitutive disavowal) of the role of colonialism in the creation of the wealth of what is called the ‘First World’ today, as well as the role of the international division of labour and exploitation of the ‘Third World’ in the maintenance of this wealth. Within this naturalised logic, the beginning of the Third World is post-WWII “with ‘First’ World growth patterns serving as history’s guide and goal” (Kapoor, 2004, p. 669).

This ideology produces the discourse of ‘development’ and policies of structural adjustment and free trade which prompt Third World countries to buy (culturally, ideologically, socially and structurally) from the ‘First’ a “self-contained version of the West”, ignoring both its complicity with and

production by the ‘imperialist project’ (Spivak, 1988). Also within this framework, poverty is constructed as a lack of resources, services and markets, and of education (as the right subjectivity to participate in the global market), rather than a lack of control over the production of resources (Biccum, 2005, p.1017) or enforced disempowerment. This sanctioned ignorance, which disguises the worlding of the world, places the responsibility for poverty upon the poor themselves and justifies the project of development of the Other as a ‘civilising mission’.

For Spivak the epistemic violence of colonialism (where colonialism affects the coloniser’s capacity to know their situation of real exploitation) makes this sanctioned ignorance work both ways with complementary results: the First World believes in its supremacy and the Third World forgets about the worlding and ‘wants’ to be civilised/catch up with the West. In line with Said, Bhabha and Fanon, Spivak affirms that the colonial power changes the subaltern’s perception of self and reality and legitimises its cultural supremacy in the (epistemic) violence of creating an ‘inferior’ other and naturalising these constructs. Spivak illustrates that in the ‘First World’ it reinforces Eurocentrism and triumphalism as people are encouraged to think that they live in the centre of the world, that they have a responsibility to ‘help the rest’ and that “people from other parts of the world are not fully global” (Spivak, 2003, p.622).

This is echoed in policies related to the ‘global dimension’ in England in the notion that different cultures only have ‘traditions, beliefs and values’ while the West has (universal) knowledge (and even constructs knowledge *about* these cultures). The idea of a ‘common history’, which only acknowledges the contribution of other cultures to science and mathematics also reinforces this perception, which projects the values, beliefs and traditions of the West as global and universal, while foreclosing the historical processes that led to this universalisation.

This has significant implications for the notion of ‘global citizenship’. However, in terms of the reproduction of this ideology, for Spivak the class culture is more important than geographic positioning: she refers to an elite global professional class (consisting of people in or coming from the First and the Third Worlds) marked by access to the internet and a culture of managerialism and of international non-governmental organisations involved in development and human rights. She maintains that this global elite is prone to project and reproduce these ethnocentric and developmentalist mythologies onto the Third World ‘subalterns’ they are ready to help to ‘develop’. She also states that in order to change this tendency educational interventions should emphasise “unlearning” and “learning to learn from below” (Spivak, 2004).

The analyses of Dobson and Spivak are not isolated examples in their disciplines. Several academics and practitioners have questioned the ideologies behind development and global citizenship education in recent years and a few pedagogical initiatives have been developed based on these analyses. However, in general terms, the articulations between new thinking and new practices have been weak.

Soft versus critical citizenship education and the notion of critical literacy

From the analyses of Dobson and Spivak it is possible to contrast soft and critical frameworks in terms of basic assumptions and implications for citizenship education. Table 1 illustrates this comparison in *very general* terms, in order to prompt discussion.

Table 1: Soft versus critical citizenship education

| | Soft Global Citizenship Education | Critical Global Citizenship Education |
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| Problem | Poverty, helplessness | Inequality, injustice |
| Nature of the problem | Lack of ‘development’, education, resources, skills, culture, technology, etc. | Complex structures, systems, assumptions, power relations and attitudes that create and maintain exploitation and enforced disempowerment and tend to eliminate difference. |
| Justification for positions of privilege (in the North and in the South) | ‘Development’, ‘history’, education, harder work, better organisation, better use of resources, technology. | Benefit from and control over unjust and violent systems and structures. |

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| Basis for caring | Common humanity/being good/sharing and caring. Responsibility FOR the other (or to teach the other). | Justice/complicity in harm. Responsibility TOWARDS the other (or to learn with the other) - accountability. |
| Grounds for acting | Humanitarian/moral (based on normative principles for thought and action). | Political/ethical (based on normative principles for relationships). |
| Understanding of interdependence | We are all equally interconnected, we all want the same thing, we can all do the same thing. | Asymmetrical globalisation, unequal power relations, Northern and Southern elites imposing own assumptions as universal. |
| What needs to change | Structures, institutions and individuals that are a barrier to development. | Structures, (belief) systems, institutions, assumptions, cultures, individuals, relationships. |
| What for | So that everyone achieves development, harmony, tolerance and equality. | So that injustices are addressed, more equal grounds for dialogue are created, and people can have more autonomy to define their own development. |
| Role of 'ordinary' individuals | Some individuals are part of the problem, but ordinary people are part of the solution as they can create pressure to change structures. | We are all part of the problem and part of the solution. |
| What individuals can do | Support campaigns to change structures, donate time, expertise and resources. | Analyse own position/context and participate in changing structures, assumptions, identities, attitudes and power relations in their contexts. |

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| How does change happen | From the outside to the inside (imposed change). | From the inside to the outside. |
| Basic principle for change | Universalism (non-negotiable vision of how everyone should live what everyone should want or should be). | Reflexivity, dialogue, contingency and an ethical relation to difference (radical alterity). |
| Goal of global citizenship education | Empower individuals to act (or become active citizens) according to what has been defined for them as a good life or ideal world. | Empower individuals to reflect critically on the legacies and processes of their cultures, to imagine different futures and to take responsibility for decisions and actions. |
| Strategies for global citizenship education | Raising awareness of global issues and promoting campaigns. | Promoting engagement with global issues and perspectives and an ethical relationship to difference, addressing complexity and power relations. |
| Potential benefits of global citizenship education | Greater awareness of some of the problems, support for campaigns, greater motivation to help/do something, feel good factor. | Independent/critical thinking and more informed, responsible and ethical action. |
| Potential problems | Feeling of self-importance and self-righteousness and/or cultural supremacy, reinforcement of colonial assumptions and relations, reinforcement of privilege, partial alienation, uncritical action. | Guilt, internal conflict and paralysis, critical disengagement, feeling of helplessness. |

The notions of power, voice and difference are central for critical citizenship education. Thus, for the creation of an ethical relationship with learners (and with the South), the development of critical literacy becomes necessary. I conceptualise critical literacy as a level of reading the word and the world that involves the development of skills of critical engagement and reflexivity: the analysis and critique of the relationships among perspectives, language, power, social groups and social practices *by the learners*. Criticality, in this context, does not refer to the dominant notion that something is right or wrong, biased or unbiased, true or false. It is an attempt to understand origins of assumptions and implications. In this sense, critical literacy is not about ‘unveiling’ the ‘truth’ for the learners, but about providing the space for them to reflect on their context and their own and others’ epistemological and ontological assumptions: how we came to think/be/feel/act the way we do and the implications of our systems of belief in local/global terms in relation to power, social relationships and the distribution of labour and resources.

Critical literacy is based on the strategic assumption that all knowledge is partial and incomplete, constructed in our contexts, cultures and experiences. Therefore, we lack the knowledge constructed in other contexts, cultures and experiences. So we need to engage with our own and other perspectives to learn and transform our views, identities and relationships - to think otherwise. Action is always a choice of the individual after a careful analysis of the context of intervention, of different views, of power relations (especially the position of who is intervening) and of short and long term (positive and negative) implications of goals and strategies.

In contrast with soft global citizenship education, this approach tries to promote change without telling learners what they should think or do, by creating spaces where they are safe to analyse and experiment with other forms of seeing/thinking and being/relating to one another. The focus is on the historical/cultural production of knowledge and power in order to empower learners to make better informed choices - but the choices of action and meaning (what ‘we’ are or ‘should be’) are never imposed, as the ‘right to signify’ is recognised and respected (as an ethical relationship ‘commands’).

However, as there is no universal recipe or approach that will serve all contexts, it is important to recognise that ‘soft’ global citizenship education is appropriate to certain contexts - and can already represent a major step. But it cannot stop there or the situation illustrated at the beginning of this paper will become the norm. If educators are not ‘critically literate’ to engage with assumptions and implications/limitations of their approaches, they run the risk of (indirectly and unintentionally) reproducing the systems

of belief and practices that harm those they want to support. The question of how far educators working with global citizenship education are prepared to do that in the present context in the North is open to debate.

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