

Beating tight education standards with alternative models: A model for peer-to-peer development education in the United States

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Historic barriers and current landscape

While the need to prepare young Americans for informed and responsible participation in the global community has never been more apparent, support for development education in the United States (US) lags perilously far behind initiatives in Europe, Australia and Canada (NetAid, 2004).

Implementing curricular reform can be a challenge under any set of circumstances, but when a national education system prides itself on decentralisation, tight teaching standards and high-stakes testing, reform can seem like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. From within this context, efforts to integrate development education formally into the US education system have encountered countless hurdles.

In recent years, a handful of *international education* initiatives - which aim to promote Foreign Language, Maths and Science instruction as means of preparing young Americans for competition in the international market place - have been backed by the US State Department and Department of Defense, gaining traction at the state and local levels. By way of contrast, incorporating *global citizenship* and *development education* – education which aims to help young people learn about the interdependence of the world’s systems, believe that solutions to global challenges are attainable, feel morally compelled to confront global injustices and take responsible actions to promote a just, peaceful and sustainable world – remains an uphill battle.

Despite some innovative initiatives in the US, systemic barriers prevent many development education programmes from reaching significant numbers of students. These barriers range from the lack of teacher training opportunities to the pressures of tight assessment and curricular standards (Reimers, 2004). The most common approach is for educational and humanitarian non-governmental organisations in the US to produce curricular materials for teachers (e.g. the Choices Program, Action Against Hunger, and the National Peace Corps Association).

Due to the challenge of distribution through the formal US school system, distribution typically relies on posting materials online or mailing curriculum to a self-selecting group of interested teachers, leaving these valuable resources largely untapped and under-used. A second model offers engaging *extracurricular* opportunities which allow students to participate in development education outside of the formal school system. Some examples include the World Affairs Challenge and Operation Days Work. To date, lack of funding and coordination have limited these opportunities in both scale and impact.

Amidst these challenges, it comes as little surprise that that American students continue to rank low when compared to their European counterparts in World Geography and Literacy, and harbour skewed perceptions when it comes to global development and the role of the US (Asia Society, 2001). Poignantly, recent survey data show that the average American believes that the US contributes 24% of the federal budget to overseas development, when the actual amount is significantly less than one percent (PIPA, 2001).

Toward a new model for development education in the US: The NetAid Global Citizen Corps

To help overcome the barriers which have prevented most American students from gaining exposure to development education, NetAid, a New York-based nonprofit organisation working to educate, inspire and empower young people to fight global poverty, has developed the Global Citizen Corps (GCC). Unlike traditional curricular and extracurricular approaches, the GCC is a peer-education model for development education drawing directly on lessons learned from the international community, while simultaneously addressing traditional barriers to widespread distribution specific to the US context. The model grows from two basic assumptions:

- there is no shortage of young Americans who innately understand the value of teaching and learning about global poverty and development, and
- globally-minded young people have the potential to be highly effective messengers of development education among their peers.

The NetAid Global Citizen Corps (GCC) is a youth leadership programme designed to equip secondary school students in the US with the training and resources they need to be effective peer educators around issues of global poverty and development. Through the recruitment and training of a dynamic corps of young change agents, the GCC aims to significantly

increase the number of students in the US who internalise a sense of global interdependence and the value of civic responsibility in the global community. The programme is organised around a series of ‘Global Action Days’ throughout the school year timed to coincide with internationally recognised days such as World Food Day, World AIDS Day, and the Global Campaign for Education’s Week of Action.

The pedagogical approach which informs the GCC draws on research performed by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Aspen Institute on effective techniques to engage Americans in global issues, as well as on the work of psychologists and educational theorists who have articulated the cognitive requirements for making a message stick. As important as defining the message and its mode of delivery is choosing an effective messenger. Research shows that by age ten, young people are far more likely to have their minds changed by their peers than by their parents or other adult figures in their lives (Gardner, 2004). Given this, the promise of a peer education model which empowers young people themselves to be the messengers of global citizenship – particularly in light of the constraints of school-based distribution – is a particularly promising approach to the distribution of development education in the US context.

Recruitment and baseline assessments

Each year, NetAid recruits a diverse group of ‘GCC Leaders’ through outreach to mass media, networks of educators, associations of schools, and youth-serving organisations. The selection process is rigorous and designed to identify those who are likely to be the most effective messengers of global citizenship in their schools. Successful candidates demonstrate leadership ability, entrepreneurial flair, significant interest in global issues, and a commitment to inspire others to action. While the GCC model is, at its core, student run, to ensure that students are able to work effectively at their schools, each student must secure the support of a faculty advisor who serves as liaison between the student and the school’s administration.

Once selected, GCC Leaders compile baseline measures for their year of service by completing an online self-assessment and a peer and teacher survey at their school. With these baseline measures in place, GCC Leaders embark on a year-long programme designed to deepen their own understanding of global poverty and development, and to strengthen their ability to engage their peers in learning, exchange, reflection and action around a variety of themes.

Training

To prepare for their year of service, all GCC Leaders participate in an intensive training programme, either through a series of online e-Training modules or an in-person training summit. Through a curriculum which draws on experiential and service-learning pedagogy, participants are challenged to think critically about the US role in the world while beginning to develop a more global perspective characterised by a sense of individual responsibility to the global community, a commitment to social justice and a belief that individuals have the power and responsibility to make a difference in the fight against global poverty. Specific thematic focuses include units addressing hunger, poverty, HIV/AIDS, development assistance, debt and trade policy, and access to education.

To complement this substantive learning, a series of skills-building workshops, emphasising leadership, message framing, working with the media, networking and resource mobilisation, help GCC Leaders develop effective peer education and campaigning skills. At the conclusion of the training, GCC Leaders receive a ‘Global Citizenship Toolkit’, which equips them with key resources (e.g. banners, videos, games and activities, and a CD-Rom with downloadable posters, fact-sheets, teacher lesson plans and slide-shows) to help promote global citizenship in their high schools and communities.

Ongoing support: online action centre and mentors

Throughout the school year GCC leaders receive ongoing support in planning and implementing their activities through an innovative Online Action Centre. Employing online technologies which are increasingly second nature to today’s youth, the GCC Online Action Centre provides a central meeting space for students across disparate geographic regions. The Online Action Centre aims to help students build a sense of belonging among a network of similarly-minded peers while allowing them to connect with NetAid and collaborate with each other as they organise and implement their educational activities. To support these objectives, the online platform includes a wide array of tools from individual profiles, regional blogs, listservs, e-Training modules, connections to adult mentors and links to external opportunities and resources.

Additionally, by connecting the students to other organisations and networks of youth from around the world, this online platform helps to ensure that students have the opportunity to interact directly with people participating in and affected by development, fulfilling this critical

dimension of development education. GCC leaders are encouraged to collaborate with the GCC faculty advisor at their school, as well as a network of committed adult mentors drawn from pools such as returned Peace Corps volunteers, college activists and international development professionals. These mentors provide support online and in person throughout the year.

Learning in action: global action days

The greatest impact of the GCC comes through the series of coordinated Global Action Days which are organised by each GCC Leader and implemented with the support of his/her faculty advisor and a group of peers. For each Global Action Day, NetAid provides GCC Leaders with a variety of resources and suggested activities which can be adapted to work in a variety of settings – from hosting a classroom hunger banquet, to convening a school-wide simulation to demonstrate the prevalence of HIV/AIDS around the world. To complete the experiential learning cycle, activities which raise awareness about global poverty are always paired with opportunities for action – whether through advocacy, media outreach or fundraising drives.

Looking to the future

Following a regional pilot programme in the 2004-2005 school year, NetAid has now launched the GCC nationally. During the 2005-2006 school year, NetAid selected and trained 120 GCC leaders representing diverse schools across the country. By early 2006, these students had already reached 150,000 of their peers in diverse communities across the US. While early qualitative and quantitative learning assessments are promising, as we work to take the GCC to increasing scale, much work remains in assessing the long-term impact of the programme on the attitudes and behaviors of GCC Leaders and their peers.

As NetAid continues to identify models for the growth and sustainability of the GCC, we look forward to exploring new avenues for cross-Atlantic collaboration, and for supporting direct connections between young global citizens in ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries. Ultimately, it is through such partnerships that our combined efforts might build a global partnership for development - supporting poverty alleviation today and for generations to come.

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