Making Meaning in a Standards-Based World: Negotiating Tensions in Global Education

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Abstract
In a largely standards-driven educational climate, educators are challenged to navigate the tensions between standards-based, scholarly pursuits and the more experiential, student-driven techniques of technology-enabled global education. At a time when these tensions are at their zenith, we need to prioritize global competencies and other 21st-century skills alongside more scholarly and standards-based education so that all learning has meaning and purpose for our students. This article explores how global educators are developing integrated approaches that include a strategic combination of technological tools, global partner organizations, high-quality resources, and a well-defined sense of the skills and knowledge to be fostered through global learning.

Key words: curriculum and instruction, elementary education, global competency, international education, junior high/middle school education, professional development, secondary education, technology in education.

There could be no creativity without the curiosity that moves us and sets us patiently impatient before a world that we did not make, to add to it something of our own making.

—Paulo Freire

The longer I work in the field of education, the more I recognize the range of complexities surrounding what it means to be “global” in the 21st-century classroom. Whether my work is focused on coaching an individual teacher on global technologies or helping facilitate whole-school global competency integration, the goal remains the
same: to help educators facilitate transformative learning experiences for students, and through these practices to foster the innovative, internationally minded young leaders we so urgently need.

The current reality in our schools—regardless of whether they are perceived as high- or low-performing—is that “students are rewarded for competing against their peers; teachers are held accountable by their class’s performance on exams, and schools are compared through widely published standardized test results” (Millar, 2013). In this “standardized” reality, anything that will not be on the test may, quite realistically, feel like an “extra” that teachers cannot make room for, suggesting that exploring cultures, global issues, and global perspectives is somehow fluff on the periphery of education, while the “real work” is ensuring high scores on state and national exams. In such high-stakes environments, these authentic tensions make it much harder for teachers to take risks and try anything that stakeholders might perceive as taking time away from the core (De Caria, Garthson, Lettieri, O’Sullivan, & Sicilia, 2004). The purpose of this article is to argue that for education to be meaningful and transformative, and for global citizenship to flourish in a deep and authentic way, we need to integrate content knowledge with student-driven inquiry—and global education can offer an ideal blend of both when done thoughtfully and well.

Between Scholarly Pursuit and Student Inquiry

The perceived tensions between scholarly pursuits and student-driven inquiry are not new. As early as 1897, educational philosopher John Dewey openly criticized traditional modes of education as being too focused on the issues of the past, rather than on the process skills that allow students to thrive in the current and future world outside the schoolhouse (Kucey & Parsons, 2012). Dewey pointed out that, given the pace of change, it is impossible to know what the world will be like by the time students complete their education. Given that, he advocated for the development of “habits of learning” in schools, including “plasticity,” an openness to being shaped by experience, over the pure acquisition of knowledge (Roth, 2012). These habits, he insisted, would outlive any differences in content knowledge, allowing students the skills to navigate any reality they might encounter.

During the Industrial Age, curriculum was designed for a future that was seemingly predictable, based on expert knowledge. At that time,

> the knowledge necessary to function successfully and follow a career was seen to already exist; it could be handed down from experts and leaders to learners and workers…. (Curriculum development was a matter of selecting the most important knowledge to transmit to students; experts decided what knowledge to mass-prescribe and in what sequence. (Bolsiad, 2011, p. 3)

By 1970, Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed encouraged educators to reject what he called “banking education” for a more student-driven “dialogue education,” which is less about filling students’ heads and more about awakening their personal conscience (Freire, 1970/2000). This history lies at the core of our current educational challenges, not just in
global education but in the broader tensions between teacher-centered and student-driven inquiry techniques.

Murdoch (2006) suggested that both content- and skills-based educational practices need student-driven inquiry, writing: “The urge to inquire activates thinking on many levels and in many forms. When we seek to make sense of the world around us, we wonder, we plan, we analyse, we create, we reflect. At its very heart, inquiry is all about thinking—thinking in order to make meaning” (p. 1). While the global education movement is not necessarily synonymous with inquiry-model learning, the movement is suffering many of the same growth pangs that these movements experienced because it shares one important feature: the best in global education is student-driven, as the goal is to foster students’ abilities to work across cultures, to navigate complexity, and to think for themselves about how to solve the world’s pressing problems. Global education is about fostering our students’ innovation, creativity, passion, and purpose; it is about fostering their ability to collaborate globally to develop new solutions to issues such as poverty, disease, climate change, and global conflict (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). Yet few of these skills are particularly valued—or even addressed—in our standards-driven K–12 culture.

In our age of abundant information, in which students have information at their fingertips and knowledge is no longer entombed out of reach in distant libraries, Dewey’s point is all the more important. With the rate of change globally, how could we possibly predict whether students will need Shakespeare more than Facebook skills or global competencies like collaboration and pluralism? Markham (2013) points out:

As the Google-age fully blossoms, the fundamental shift is from information to attitude. The instant, ubiquitous availability of knowledge puts enormous responsibility on the individual, as they try to sift through, discern, apply, and share information. This is not a simple cognitive exercise. Success in this environment requires a mix of self-awareness, empathy, and collaborative skills, as well as grit and self-direction. Eventually, the measure of student performance will be the demonstrated ability to use personal strengths to move gracefully through a connected world.

Like Dewey, Markham indicates that knowledge is easy to find and ever changing—what students need more is the ability to make constructive and discerning use of that knowledge.

Goals for the Global Classroom

To allow students to develop their skills and knowledge as global citizens, we have to think differently about what the most important skills and knowledge really are. More and more, schools and companies are discovering that peer-to-peer learning across classroom and geographic boundaries is not just necessary, but may be more important than the instructor in the room (Lindsay & Davis, 2013). Vivien Stewart, Vice President for Education at the Asia Society, wrote: “Teaching students about the world is not a subject in itself, separate from other content areas, but should be an integral part of all subjects taught. We need to open global gateways and inspire students to explore beyond their national borders” (2007, p. 3). The truth is that the world matters all the time, and our global challenges have reverberations across all of our disciplines. It is essential that students
recognize global education not as something we engage in only a few times a year when we travel physically or participate in international festivals, but as something we live every day because we are part of the human family. Yet, as Stewart (2007, p. 3) pointed out:

U.S. schools are not adequately preparing students for these challenges. Surveys conducted by the Asia Society (2002) and National Geographic-Roper (2002) indicated that, compared with students in nine other industrialized countries, U.S. students lack knowledge of world geography, history, and current events. And shockingly few U.S. students learn languages that large numbers of people speak, such as Chinese (1.3 billion speakers) and Arabic (246 million speakers).

The best news for educators is that students are already asking for such shifts in the schoolhouse. World Savvy (2012), an organization committed to educating and engaging youth in community and world affairs to learn, work, and thrive as responsible global citizens, found that 74% of young people ages 18–24 wanted to see international issues and ideas emphasized alongside national curriculum, particularly in high school (see World Savvy’s full 2012 study). Sadly, the same study found that only 12% of students believed they had been given the instruction necessary to understand the roots of global problems. Only 38% of respondents felt that world events were regularly discussed in their high school classes, and their knowledge of world geography and history were painfully limited. One of World Savvy’s (2012) most important outcomes was the recognition that “exposure to global literacy education in high school helps to inspire young adults to stay abreast of world events, be active in their communities, and understand the interconnectivity of global economies.”

In February 2013, the University of Wisconsin–Madison hosted a Global Youth Summit that brought together middle and high school students from across the state for activities and dialogue around global education. Student attendees identified four areas that they would like to see addressed more consistently and authentically in their schools, as outlined by Kerry G. Hill (2013), Director of Public Affairs for UW–Madison’s Division of International Studies and member of the board of Global Wisconsin:

1. **Offer a diversity of world languages, with opportunities for authentic use.** Students recognized wide disparities among schools in the United States, many of which offer only French and Spanish, and most of which begin serious language study as late as 9th grade. One group of students pointed out, “If we start training for sports at a young age, why not languages? Can you imagine if a high school quarterback had to start freshman year? It doesn’t make sense.” Students also called for the use of technologies to connect them with native speakers and teachers of a wider diversity of languages, enabling them to explore a broader array of cultural perspectives and to use world languages in authentic ways.

2. **Increase direct engagement through travel and exchange.** Students recognized that some of their most powerful global experiences took place because of exchange programs that brought international students into their schools and homes. They also emphasized the importance of developing scholarship opportunities for physical travel, noting that international immersion experiences are not financially accessible for the majority of students.
3. Connect with the world through technology. Students emphasized the need to make more and better use of technologies in order to integrate opportunities for non-travel international experiences. They would like their schools to develop sister-school relationships with other communities in the world, through existing and emerging technologies, citing the use of technology as a far less expensive and more convenient way to bring the world into the classroom.

4. Foster open mindedness, awareness, and acceptance. Students emphasized the importance not just of learning about the world, but of doing so in ways which develop a less nationalistic lens for engagement. Recognizing that most of their schools focus on national themes far more than global ones, one group noted, “Intolerance and ignorance of other cultures must be minimized. Get rid of patriotic egotism.” Students also recognized their own roles in spreading enthusiasm and open mindedness within their communities, noting that young people need to get involved in global causes and be part of creating change in their schools and the world.

Hooking into the urges and interests of students does not mean ignoring significant core content; it means creating a space for students to think and create for themselves within the context of our academic disciplines. It means recognizing that education is less about covering a breadth of knowledge and more about uncovering our students’ sense of passion and purpose, of facilitating their voice and empowerment, and of helping them see how our disciplines matter across the patchwork of the human experience (Goyal, 2012).

Defining and Fostering Global Competencies

Recent work around how to teach and assess global citizenship is beginning to provide a solid foundation for global educators—and with that comes a level of legitimacy that is helping the global movement to develop and maintain momentum even in the most traditional school settings. There is a multitude of organizations working to define “global competencies.” For example, Oxfam defines global competency in its own unique terms, based on the commitment to social justice and equity that the organization is known for. In Oxfam’s Education for Global Citizenship: A Guide for Schools (2006), emphasis is put on exactly those concepts, particularly on acting against social injustice and developing empathy for the experiences of others. And while empathy can be harder to teach and assess than the correct use of prepositions or the right solution to a mathematical formula, it is one of the most important dispositions fostered in any global classroom.

In partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers and Edsteps, the Asia Society’s publication, “Educating for Global Competence: Preparing Our Youth to Engage the World” (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011), has helped the global education movement gain both traction and validity by offering rubrics and design strategies with strong research behind them—created and tested by educators more than policy makers. Its four-part conceptual framework offers both design and assessment strategies, as any good educational tool should, asking educators to facilitate students’ exploration of the world, consideration of varied perspectives, communication of what’s been learned, and action in response.
The inclusion of an action component is particularly noteworthy; World Savvy’s excellent Components of Global Competency includes a similar category for behavioral goals. Including behavior and action alongside knowledge, skills, and values suggests that we are not true global citizens for offering the most compassionate and pluralistic answers during class—we are true global citizens when the values we have acquired through global learning translate into new behaviors in every aspect of our lives. It is not enough for students to think about the planet and the needs of others only when their teachers are watching, grade books in hand; we need evidence that new insights are shaping students’ behavior and leading them to “walk the walk” even when no one is looking.

The Intersection of Global Citizenship and Digital Democracy

The intersection of emerging technologies with student-driven constructivist approaches is what makes this new era in global education so remarkable. Today, e-technologies make the whole world feel accessible—and while that’s not entirely true, internet connectivity is spreading at staggering rates in almost all global contexts. Particularly with the advent of mobile technologies, most of the world really is in reach for a growing majority of the world’s students. With such technologies in place, we have the opportunity to bring global learning into every discipline and grade level inside the schoolhouse.

As we learn to make increasingly constructive use of these technologies ourselves, teachers have the opportunity to help students connect with youth around the world so that they can understand each other and collaborate to solve global problems. With the goal to “Inspire, Inform and Involve” young people in creating change, TakingITGlobal (TIG) is one example of an educational online organization that is working to harness the power of the Internet as an educational and collaborative tool, developing students’ digital citizenship alongside their global citizenship through “social networking for social good.” In my work teaching the graduate-level e-course “Project-Based Learning for Global Citizenship” to international cohorts of educators for TIG, I have found the tools equally powerful for connecting educators and helping them deepen their global practice. TIG offers a broad range of action opportunities for youth to engage in building change, as well as a healthy balance of user-generated, primary-source material and more “academic” material for student research. TIG also hosts a variety of projects that classrooms can get involved in, and all provide excellent opportunities for both global competency building and core knowledge gathering with a student-driven philosophy (Hassan, Gatto, & Walraven, 2012).

In one project example, DeforestAction, students around the globe monitor illegal deforestation in Borneo. Using satellite technologies to monitor specific hectares of land for even the subtlest changes, and TIG virtual classrooms to communicate across the globe, students are centrally involved in creating real change, sounding the alarm through activists on the ground when illegal logging occurs, and allowing communities the chance to protect their primary forests. Beyond the benefit to animals and humans in Borneo, the project provides the opportunity for a wide array of curricular applications. Geometry teachers have students measure area and graph changes, teaching students to communicate effectively about the land they are monitoring. Other math teachers turn the project into an opportunity to learn the math behind social entrepreneurship, having students
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develop and market products to support anti-deforestation campaigns. Science teachers
explore the local species in Borneo, particularly the orangutan, as well as the impact of
destroying native trees and introducing millions of palm oil trees in their place. Even
English teachers find ways to apply the project, having students compare articles on the
pros and cons of logging, and then debating perspectives or persuading others through
writing, film, and other means. Projects like DeforestAction allow students around the
world to acquire core knowledge and skills while simultaneously developing the digital
skills and global competencies 21st-century learning requires—and the passion for creating
that “world of their own making,” which global education is all about.

The Global Studies Foundation (GSF) promotes learning and preparedness for our
emergent, global era through scientific research, educational outreach programs, and a
growing array of grants and awards. In his article “Going Glocal: Adaptive Education
for Local and Global Citizenship” (2010, p. 72), GSF President Chris Harth prioritized the
development of a “glocal” mindset in our work with students, a mindset that allows young
people to see the interconnectedness of our challenges around the world. He wrote,

As part of their attitudinal repertoire, our young citizens must develop an ethical
compass that enables them to see beyond themselves, to recognize their connections and
obligations to others, and to chart a responsible course of action that will serve them,
their families, and their communities—including their schools, their neighborhoods,
their towns and cities, their counties, their states, their regions, their countries, and
their shared planet.

“Glocal learning” empowers students to make the world a better place right at
home, engaging them because of the meaning and personal investment that come
with authentic local relevance and the opportunity to construct knowledge, not just
consume information.

Toffler (2013) has been quoted as saying, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be
those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” The
more we head in the wrong direction in education, down the path of “drill and kill” courses
and exams—what Cooper (2013) refers to as “DLR: drill, lecture and repeat”—rather than
deep, meaningful learning and authentic assessment, the more urgent such ideas become.
We need schools to produce creative, curious thinkers who feel empowered to understand
their place in the world amid the myriad perspectives on any given “truth.”

The Next Steps for Global Education: Recommendations and Implications

As global educators, we need to better understand the relative strengths and challenges
that students of self-directed global programming face, both in college and professional
life. We need evidence from a myriad of fields that students raised on a healthy balance
of 21st-century skills, global competencies, and core knowledge excel beyond their peers.
High-stakes schools need a legitimizing affirmation that the skills garnered from global
experiences (both in and out of the schoolhouse) increase flexibility, resiliency, creativity,
critical thinking, collaboration, and the transfer of all disciplines across settings and
contexts.
While the Asia Society, World Savvy, Oxfam, and a host of universities have advanced the area of assessment in global education, measuring global learning remains an Achilles heel for educators struggling to legitimize authentic global engagement in more traditional schools. Anecdotal evidence is strong, but it remains difficult to quantifiably assess “immeasurable” skills, such as empathy, connectedness, and curiosity. Global educators are connecting through networks such as Global Circles to address these concerns, hoping to develop assessment strategies and toolkits that will fit the needs of teachers and help them to mainstream global thinking and experiences in their classrooms. If we want our institutions of higher learning to value global curiosity and empathy as much as geographic or historical knowledge, we need strong assessments that tie global competencies to core knowledge and 21st-century skills in legitimate, quantifiable terms.

Another area that needs attention is more transformative professional development for teachers who want to take their classrooms global. In order to be fully successful, such professional development should not become yet another task on teachers’ already-full plates; schools need to capitalize on educators’ passions, to connect them with global communities and organizations working toward the same purpose, and to honor their good intentions with the time and support needed to take their practice in new directions. International Professional Development Programs such as those offered by the World Leadership School can help faculty groups experience the world and collaborate across cultures, but they also provide the space and inspiration for developing new global initiatives and classroom integrations that help shift entire schoolhouses toward compassionate global engagement. As I wrote recently in a blog on professional development travel for teachers (Klein, 2013), based on my experiences leading teacher trips to Peru for World Leadership School, “It is powerful … to turn off the [expert] persona and allow ourselves to take the position of learners, to admit what we don’t know and immerse ourselves with the kind of naive, enthusiastic curiosity we so want to inspire in our students.” The more we can honor teachers as humans and learners themselves, the more we can engage them in the work of global citizenship development in deep and meaningful ways.

Perhaps most importantly, the field of global education needs substantive research into which fields our more globally oriented students go on to pursue professionally. If we are effectively teaching with a global mindset, our increasingly creative and innovative students will develop entirely new fields of work and study, all of which will employ the flexibility, pluralism, collaboration, and navigational skills that come from understanding how deeply interconnected human life really is. Global educators can only benefit from deeper research into such trends and shifts resulting from our efforts.

Students want to see their schools become creative, intercultural environments that foster innovative, even divergent thinkers. While scholarly pursuits still have their place in education—and always will—it is time to reexamine much of what we assume is important. Often, the best educational moments happen in spite of well-developed lesson plans, not because of them; often, our real role as educators is simply to create a culture of curiosity and innovation, to create the circumstances in which student-driven learning can take place and creativity is welcomed.
Global classrooms should be exactly that—vibrant, messy, interdisciplinary spaces that take on real-world challenges and worry more about the values students are practicing than the exams they will take at the end. Global schoolhouses should care more about meaning than grades, focus more on complexity, interdisciplinary thinking, and action than on clean, neatly packaged, isolated areas of study. They should be places where the oddest, most unexpected answer is the best answer because it offers a solution that we have failed to consider before—places where students are authentically engaged and empowered as learners, leaders, and global citizens.

References


