Taking Your Schoolhouse Global: The Role of Professional Development in Shifting School Culture

By J. Deborah Klein

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."
—Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

It is far too common to find schools with only a few teachers infusing their courses and classroom culture with global issues, the development of compassion toward multiple perspectives, and collaborative global project experiences. According to the National Association of Independent Schools, 95% of independent schools in the U.S. offer some form of global programming, but only 20% of those offer three or more opportunities for global learning. This indicates that most of the work still happens in small, isolated efforts within larger, less globally-oriented educational communities—and that’s within the relatively well-funded private sector. Global education needs to become a mainstream activity woven throughout the core in public and private schools alike, not an isolated subject relegated to the margins of our work or explored authentically in only the richest districts. Achieving this shift requires strong professional development for teachers in the best pedagogies and methodologies for integrating global topics across the curriculum.

Although most educators naturally see the value and benefit of global, project-based approaches, the world of high-stakes testing has led to paralysis in many schoolhouses, as teachers fear that anything “outside of core” is likely to be viewed as fluff, a waste of time given what needs to be accomplished before testing occurs. Even some of the best teachers save extraordinary global projects for *after* state exams have been given, rather than trusting in global integration as a means of deepening and enriching the core. Ultimately, a few brave teachers working in isolation can do good work, but strong professional development can bring the rest of the building along with them, creating a shift in school culture toward the integration of global learning and the development of compassionate global engagement across the curriculum.

Learning to Globalize the Curriculum

To suggest that sticking a few global topics or experiences into a larger unit or course is enough to globalize a classroom is a myth we try to believe as teachers when we haven’t been given the broader toolbox of global approaches and ideologies—or the time to put them into action in our planning. And if teachers aren’t being trained in these pedagogies and methodologies, it’s often because their administrators and broader community have yet to recognize the profound value—and even urgency—of global learning in the
21st Century. In fact, global education is suffering from many of the same growth pangs we’ve seen over the last 40 years with the experiential and expeditionary movements, with project-based learning, and with many other forms of progressive, student-directed education.

The accusation that such learning is fluff around the “real content” ignores reality: that our students will in fact spend their entire educational and professional lives inside of a much more global, collaborative world than we did. If we want our students to succeed and develop the 21st Century skills we know they need, global thinking has to stop being “dessert curriculum” and become the “main course,” an essential component of the school’s mission and daily function, embedded into all of the work of the community. Asking for this level of change in practice means giving teachers significant professional development opportunities and direct coaching in global integration, as well as the time to plan attainable global enrichment projects for their courses.

For far too long, education in North America has been based on what educator and liberation theologian Paolo Freire called the “banking method,” in which the all-knowing teacher deposits learning into the brains of the children, to be spit back on assessments later. If we really want young people to grow up with a vision for the planet and the skills to make that vision into a reality, education must become a dialogue directed by students which develops the five 21st Century skills most essential for human progress and the development of innovative young leaders: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and cross-cultural competence. Best practices in global educa-

- continued on page 18
tion are currently centered around project-based learning and problembased approaches that allow for student choice and that include authentic inside perspectives and humanizing experiences. These approaches are ideal for global learning because they include authentic inquiry, truly substantive real-world content, and opportunities for students to collaborate across borders with other young people in the development of innovative solutions.

In particular, strong global educators are developing classroom-to-classroom partnerships across borders, in which students are collaborating on a project, comparing experiences and culture, and/or sharing perspectives. Inquiry approaches to global curriculum help to empower students as investigators, thinkers, and solution builders, simultaneously improving transference and students’ ability to think for themselves in innovative and creative ways. And the best global projects include significant primary source explorations, developed to ensure that students can move beyond the complex and often abstract nature of global problems and start seeing the world with a human face—in turn making students want to seek out the experiences and perspectives of humans being impacted by the trends and systems they’re studying.

The best curricular design strategies for global education include an action component of some kind, whether to educate others and present learning, or to take tangible action on a given global challenge (or, in ideal situations, a bit of both). Such solutions-driven assessments allow students to think creatively about the perspectives they’ve explored, and to take the kinds of action they believe are most valuable. Methodologies like “glocal learning” approaches give students an opportunity to act locally on the global issues they’re studying, and this approach shows students that global problems aren’t just an issue “out there” in the larger world, but are actually a challenge right here at home—because they’re human problems and we’re part of the human family.

Most importantly, however, an action component can help students feel empowered to make a difference. While many teenagers find their lives are transformed by deep epiphanies about the human condition, particularly students who participate in developing-world service learning, those experiences are not always positive—students are often over-

- continued on page 27
Global Schoolhouse — continued from page 18

whelmed with feelings of helplessness before what Bill Gates calls “the barrier of complexity.” When teachers develop solutions-driven curricula with authentic human interactions and the opportunity to act, students become deeply and personally engaged with the world—and with the material they’re exploring—and start understanding how they can make a tangible difference.

Rather than taking time away from the core, these approaches ensure that the most important facets of our disciplines become part of students’ essential tool boxes. This kind of learning is the foundation of students’ enduring understandings, those ideas they remember from our courses decades later and that have the potential of shaping lives and career paths—largely because our field is being explored in the context of significant, relevant global problems in need of the real solutions and insights our discipline has to offer.

E-Technologies and Professional Development

There is nothing which can truly replace the in-country experience and relationships which are built on the ground through physical student and teacher travel. However, e-technologies have significantly changed the face of global education; suddenly, even the most under-funded districts in the United States have the world at their fingertips, and the opportunities for global enrichment are endless. Although much of the developing world is still struggling with access to technologies and the internet, this is changing rapidly; new organizations are constantly emerging with the mission of equipping even the most remote schools in the world with the e-technologies they need to connect.

This burgeoning field of technology-enabled global education has its challenges—time zone and school calendar differences, internet accessibility differences, and even the cross-cultural skills of teachers tend to determine the success or failure of a global project. But the potential for humanizing students’ sense of the world, for putting a real face on the global issues they’re learning about—and even for collaborative learning with other young people in the world—makes technology-enabled global learning more than worth the training and patience it requires.

As teachers experience increased access and connectivity around the world, opportunities for e-based professional development have also exploded. E-courses and webinars on global education, such as those offered by TakingIT-Global for Educators (TIGed), allow teachers to gather with an international cohort of practitioners without ever leaving home, making the courses a technology-driven global experience in and of themselves. With participants from places like Australia, Kenya, India, Singapore, Britain and North America, the e-courses I teach for TIGed have consistently included rich and fascinating intercultural dialogue about the needs of our students and world, all facilitated through synchronous and asynchronous technologies. When it comes to developing the cross-cultural and collaborative skills of teachers, those key skills they’ll need when it comes to managing global enrichment planning, global action projects and sister-school relationships, there is nothing more effective than the practice offered by technology-enabled global learning. And once teachers understand the value in and best methodologies for global learning and project development, the more effectively they can foster the same essential skills in their students.

Teacher Travel for Professional Development

The essential element of an excellent global education program is, of course, the inclusion of broad and regular opportuni-
ties for international student travel, particularly the service-learning and leadership development models which are becoming a powerful alternative to the pre-packaged tours of the past. However, student travel is not yet accessible to all young people in all schools across North America—not even close—though it is increasingly clear how important it is to narrow the gap and allow all students such transformative experiences. In the meantime, a growing branch within global professional development is international teacher travel, developed on the premise that globally-minded teachers will always produce more globally-minded students.

Large, federally-funded programs like the Fulbright-Hayes scholarship give teachers the opportunity to research and explore a region of the world through programmed trips, with the goal of developing global units for their students upon return. Travel grants for teachers, such as those which member teachers in the Expeditionary School network can obtain from the Fund for Teachers, allow teachers to plan their own trips for the development of classroom projects. Travel to globally-focused professional development conferences, such as those run by the Global Youth Leadership Institute and the International Studies Schools Association (to be revived by the Center for Teaching International Relations in January, 2013), bring together educators from a variety of backgrounds and fields, all with a passion for globalizing their curriculum. Traveling to such conferences and sharing our innovations in good practice with other globally-minded educators can be a powerful and inspiring experience—especially for teachers who have felt isolated in their passions for much of their careers.

Even more powerful, however, are the smaller professional development trips for teachers, such as those offered by World Leadership School, that provide developing-world experiences for teachers that recreate the student service learning paradigm. Instead of research and project-building on the ground, teachers are immersed in homestays, work alongside a small community in their service work, and are led through the same kinds of transformative experiences students have on trips. On-the-ground dialogue about teachers’ epiphanies and how to translate them into classroom experiences allow teachers to apply what they’re learning and plan ways to bring equally transformative experiences into their schoolhouses.

Though physical student travel is ideal, ensuring transformative travel for teachers automatically ensures that authentic global learning will happen inside the classroom as well.

**Why All This Global Stuff Isn’t Fluff**

In the end, this work is about helping students feel empowered to engage the world in increasingly constructive ways, and we can do so more and more powerfully as our schoolhouses develop into engaged, informed, and innovative global communities. As students deepen their understanding of the human condition, teachers are in a remarkable position to arm them with the skills needed to find new solutions to old problems. We don’t need generations of students who see the world the way we do—we need truly innovative young people who can envision the world the way they’d like it to be, and who are actively involved in creating that change.

Certainly, the challenges of global education are many—any time we step outside of the traditional paradigm and let students direct their own learning, we create new challenges for teachers who are unaccustomed to allowing curriculum to develop organically around student choice. And the development of global partnerships between teachers and
students in different countries always requires a great deal of flexibility and patience, as the world never moves as quickly as teachers need it to. But in my opinion, it is worth our time and effort to develop our ability to engage students in global learning—I’ll even hazard the claim that our planet depends on our doing so. Project-based and student-centered global approaches naturally develop innovative young leaders who think for themselves, and the future of humanity depends on the kinds of creative and innovative solutions only globally-savvy, cross-culturally competent young leaders will be able to build.

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