Global Learning Through Difference: Considerations for Teaching, Learning, and the Internationalization of Higher Education

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Abstract
By clarifying what global learning is and how it is essential to higher education, this article considers what global learning provides for teaching, learning, and internationalization in higher education. It demonstrates how the global nature of knowledge and learning in the 21st century requires a re-definition of classrooms and learning environments that recognizes how knowledge production today is a collective, global, and diverse process. The article suggests a number of foundational principles for global learning, including relational approaches, reflection, contextualized knowledge, perspective shifting, disorientation, responsibility, and an ability to navigate the general and the particular. It concludes by revealing how a global learning framework has benefits beyond teaching and learning and how it can contribute to the deliberate internationalization of higher education.

Keywords
global learning, transformational learning, internationalization, anatomy of perspective, relativism, pedagogy, diversity, organizational change, relational approaches, teaching responsibility, interdisciplinarity

Knowledge is produced collectively in the 21st century. Scholarship no longer emerges from singular and isolated sources of deep knowledge, but from international partnerships, communities of exchange, and interdisciplinary conversations. The image of an

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isolated scholar theorizing alone has been replaced, for example, by the multitudes of scientists from around the world working together on Higgs Boson. Knowledge is no longer envisioned as a limited resource that select few may access but is instead understood as a form that flows rapidly through systems, networks, and borders, and students are expected to acquire skills that allow them to tap into that knowledge flow. Like electricity, knowledge is more desired for what it can do, not necessarily for what it is; alongside the more traditional emphasis on “what” is learned, higher education is increasingly concerned with “how” things are learned. Knowledge production is also an active and applicable process that involves interconnections, plurality, relativity, collaboration, and engagement with the world. Learning has thus become more collaborative and international. Learning, in this case, has gone global (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008; New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2009; Teichler, 2004; Zeszotarski, 2001).

Although the focus of learning has broadened and shifted to the process of learning, institutions of higher education have been slow to respond to this new reality. Disciplinary boundaries, campus organizational units, time-honored governance structures, traditional approaches to studying the world, and anchored identities of educator and learner still lodge many approaches in territorially bounded definitions of scholarship and knowledge production (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Menand, 2010; Van Gyn, Schuerholz-Lehr, Caws, & Preece, 2009). There have been shifts in academia, no doubt, but many of the practices still rest in 20th-century foundations of learning. While multidisciplinary conversations are more common, few produce novel frameworks, and universities and colleges are often missing the connective tissue between offices, roles, and responsibilities to develop new interdisciplinary scholarship and to support student and faculty work across disciplines (Bradbeer, 1999; Lattuca, 2001). Student-centered learning approaches are increasing, though they might inadvertently reify rather than challenge roles of learner and educator. A truly global approach de-centers the teacher and learner and instead emphasizes the processes of learning (VanBalkom, 2010).

Yet, there is no single definition of global learning; designations of global are filtered through social and historical contexts, interconnections between epistemology and power, and the masking of privilege (Andreotti, 2011; Hovland, 2014; Koon, 2011). Even the way in which global learning is discussed in this article, for example, is filtered through the authors’ layered identities and personal and professional experiences. Concepts such as global learning, globalization, and global citizenship are thus signified as specific historical and sociopolitical moments and may not be truly “global” at all. This statement, that global things may not be fundamentally global, is at the core of our argument, which is that global learning demands that students and educators understand the universal through the particular and the particular through the universal. Global learning requires the integration of multiple, and often diverse and conflicting, perspectives, across both macro and micro contexts. In global learning, difference is as much a primary component as is similarity. This is why we suggest that the feature of difference may ironically be one of the few “non-negotiable universals” of global learning (see Andreotti, 2011, p. 393).
Although difference and contextualized knowledge are always part of global understanding, there are a number of other basic principles that will be outlined in this article. It will be argued too that global learning has application beyond curricula and classrooms, that it can be an effective framework for broader institutional practices of internationalization, which are as global as they are not. Accordingly, this article critically explores the meanings and practices of global learning and expands the lessons one can learn from the changing ways in which knowledge is produced and taught through difference in the 21st century.

The Anatomy of Perspective

Global learning mirrors the interconnected world in which one lives and learns and demonstrates how ideas, communities, and practices intersect and cross borders. As such, it recognizes the shifting yet situated nature of identities, whether personal, ethnic, racial, or professional. Whether a Canadian, Australian, Guatemalan, or Uyghur, or a student or professor, global learning requires an individual to step out of one’s established (and too often unquestioned) optics into the perspectives of others. As a global learner, a Brazilian student might strive to see the world as an Iranian student and a British student might see the world through the eyes of Turkish migrants in Hamburg, both recognizing that the lived experience of an individual or community is innately unique and different from one’s own. This shifting of identities extends to roles in our classrooms; faculty can learn to identify as learners and students can learn to see themselves as educators, thus emphasizing the process of learning instead of fixed learners. It also transfers to domestic contexts, where majority and minority people must learn to see through the eyes and experiences of one another. Shifting between identities and angles of understanding can be challenging but it remains an essential global learning competency. And, at a time where stereotypes and misunderstanding seem to be particularly rampant and quickly shared, skills of relativism—of being able to see through others’ eyes—have global ramifications that extend far beyond higher education.

To make sense of our complicated and interconnected world, and to encounter and learn from the plurality of perspectives, a deep exploration of the contexts that give meaning to these various vantage points is required. VanBalkom (2010) calls this the anatomy of perspective, which asks us to step away from imparting truth to deconstructing viewpoints. If students are to understand how a Q’eqchi’ Mayan woman in the lowlands of Guatemala sees her world, they have to dissect the historical, political, gendered, economic, religious, ethnic, cultural, and idiosyncratic trajectories that intersect in and make meaning of her particular viewpoints and actions. The anatomy of perspective, however, requires that students go beyond an academic analysis of the structural anatomy to what it means to be human in a particular time and place. The anatomy of perspective, then, is central to the process of transformative learning.

Seeking the meanings of our experience is part of the human condition. Understanding the significance of our lives requires guided and autonomous thinking and the reconsideration of cognitive structures to challenge basic assumptions (Argyris,
Challenging suppositions often leads to instability and anxiety, which can be a scary and ambiguous experience for students (and faculty alike), who may create alternatives by distorting, denying, and projecting assumptions. For transformative learning to occur, individuals need to shift away from their own conventions and change their frames of reference through critical reflection that leads to new ways of knowing. This is why global learning requires the deliberate design of student learning experiences that deeply explore biases, values, and beliefs.

If we return to the pedagogical example involving the life of a Q’eqchi’ Mayan woman in the lowlands of Guatemala, North American students would need to challenge their existing ideas and values relative to what they believe constitutes the lived experience of a Q’eqchi’ Mayan woman. Students might want to consider their own romanticized notions of indigenous communities, the inequalities embedded in neoliberal approaches, or unchallenged assumptions about development. The anatomy of perspective requires that students examine the structural anatomy of what it means to be human, the complicated context that gives meaning to our lives, and personal and cognitive frameworks. And, though most educators hope all students are able to study abroad, this transformational learning can be accomplished with high-impact pedagogies and encounters with difference without ever leaving home campuses and countries (Braskamp, 2013). Students need not leave a classroom to reshape their worldview, though for students to engage in transformative learning, educators have to rethink what is a classroom.

Global Interconnections: Classrooms, Students, and Campuses

Global classrooms are nodes in a global network; they are interstitial points where phenomena are interconnecting and given meaning. In such classrooms, students become subjects that require inquiry. Not only are the topics (such as the civil wars in Guatemala) opportunities to think far beyond Guatemala to economies, colonialism, and foreign relations that span oceans, but classrooms and students themselves are nodes in this network society. Students too represent intersections where their meanings and perspectives are laden with significance through various histories, experiences, cultural values, and politics, and global learning must offer opportunities for students to consider their own biases and assumptions.

Changing students and classrooms into lightning rods of global connections can be achieved by using pedagogies and resources that advocate the world as relational rather than substantialist (Emirbayer, 1997), where meanings and objects are recognized as being mutually constituted rather than as things unto themselves. Viewing the world as relational applies not only to students and their own constructed identities but also to the academic topics being explored. Global learning requires redefining identities (this includes nations, organizations, and selves) as complex and relational. Relational thinking is part of the movement in higher education that, rather than emphasizing knowledge as a product, defines knowledge as processes and transformations.
Using *relational* perspectives challenges personal assumptions and beliefs about particular phenomena. It may mean that one reconsiders what constitutes ethnicity, nationalism, or a community, or the extent to which geographical spaces are immobile or territorial. Importantly, relational approaches also challenge the notion of a classroom, where walls are no longer impermeable nor does isolated learning occur within the confines of a room. Rather, classrooms provide opportunities to make more visible the interconnections that pass through ideas, knowledge, skills, and learning. Global classrooms are mirrors to the world where students are able to see deeply across the world while reflecting upon themselves. Classrooms are entry points into the world.

Ideally, global classrooms develop learning communities where all students are involved in a sustained conversation with difference. What this requires is not just a new definition of classrooms but also an entirely new set of pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. There is growing evidence of the benefits of global learning, including the development of a variety of cognitive skills and an increasing motivation to engage in professional development activities (Hovland, 2014; Mestenhauser, 1998). International students also have increased academic success when they have regular encounters with students from other backgrounds (Glass, 2012). Furthermore, domestic students, from both majority and minority populations, have significantly higher college outcomes when they regularly interact with international students (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Campuses and classrooms that are strategically designed as global and inclusive learning communities benefit all students, regardless of whether they situate as majority or minority or whether they are international or domestic.

Similarly, global learning’s contribution to comprehensive inclusivity, engagement, and diversity is increasingly being recognized and supported at institutions of higher education (Kepple, n.d.; Olson, Evans, & Shoenberg, 2007). Although global learning and domestic multiculturalism share numerous commonalities, differences exist, and there remain gaps between these goals at many universities (Cornwell & Stoddard, 1999). At the same time, universities and colleges are increasingly recognizing the synergies and alignments, specifically in classrooms, as both global and multicultural learning outcomes and values extensively overlap (McFadden, Merryfield, & Barron, 1997; Olson, Green, & Hill, 2006). Global and multicultural learning call for basic skills of cross-cultural navigation, social analysis, critical self-reflection, community engagement, and social commitment. Global and multicultural approaches to learning require students to willingly participate in transformational learning and critically view themselves through the process of conscientization (Freire, 1970). In this way, students view the world through the perspective of others, critically understand diversity, challenge stereotypes, confront prejudice, recognize their own identities and biases, and ultimately negotiate relationships that lead to action. Pedagogies and classroom environments that support this type of learning are thus similar (Morey, 2000). Global learning’s contribution to institutional missions prioritizing diversity, inclusivity, and community engagement is clear. After all, students from all backgrounds need to know how to understand and effectively navigate the complex interconnected worlds in which they live and learn. It is no coincidence that the concept of Internationalization at Home (IaH) was introduced at Malmö University in Sweden in
the 1990s to meet the lack of study abroad opportunities and the significant growth of the immigrant population and other demands of globalization (Nilsson, 2003; Wächter, 2003). The IaH strategy provided extraordinary global learning opportunities for students and scholars who remained “at home.” Global and multicultural learning, whether supported at home or internationally, use similar concepts, pedagogies, and practices to navigate difference and challenge assumptions.

Global Commitment: The General and the Particular

A few of the key foundations of global learning have already been mentioned: an emphasis on the processes of learning, the importance of digging deep into the complexity of the subject matter, thinking about the world relationally through plurality and multiplicity, and the significant roles of self-reflection and recognition of interconnected lives. With these foundations in mind, global learning can be viewed as an elementary foundation of liberal or overall general education. Yet, there is a pillar that is specifically required in global learning: the need to bridge the general and the particular (Harvey, 2014). Global learning requires that students know how broad universal concepts and phenomena are put into practice and given meaning in specific and relative contexts (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008). For example, it is increasingly important for students to understand that transnational standards, rights, ideas, technologies, and politics are co-produced alongside particular values, ideas, emotions, and everyday practices (Kahn, 2014). Seemingly opposing dichotomies like global and local are therefore incongruent to global learning, which requires a systemic and dialectic way to think about the world as interconnecting and shifting continuously across borders. Relational thinking is mandatory to move between scales that are very broad and potentially transnational and those that appear very idiosyncratic, deeply anchored, and contextually defined. Students will benefit from understanding the mutual constitution and shifting optics between broader global issues like human rights and global health to the interplay of AIDS, society, sexuality, and emotion in an intimate family setting in Harare, Zimbabwe, for example.

Many scholars and philosophers have been struggling with the back-and-forth between relativism and the more universal. Socrates, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, Bruno Latour, Satya Mohanty, Anthony Kwame Appiah, William Perry, and Martha Nussbaum only begin the extensive list. Yet, this concern about relativism typically stays with theory or philosophy and rarely enters into pedagogy. The ever increasing interconnectedness and interdependency that we experience regularly in the 21st century requires that we situate relativism and universalism in learning activities and approaches.

Contextualized and committed relativism, the ability to navigate both the general and the particular, also allows students to make informed judgments as they become increasingly knowledgeable about a particular topic or phenomenon, in a variety of macro and more localized scales (Perry, 1968). When students can see and make visible the interconnections that give various practices and perceptions meaning, that is, when they have thoroughly dissected a topic from a variety of diverse perspectives
(including their own assumptions), they then are positioned to make informed judgments. They will be able to act on commitments and responsibilities, which typically requires students to take a stand.

Global learning has the capacity to help students find their commitments, advocate for their position, and develop compassion and convictions within and beyond their immediate world. Fostering commitment requires the relational thinking that transforms students, topics, and classrooms into global nodes of interaction. When students begin to see themselves and the world as points of intersectedness, it can lead to an altered mapping of individualism as more boundless and not so easily constrained by geography or physical, political, religious, or academic borders. The “unbounding of individualism” becomes an important step to caring about the world (Massey, 2004) and can ultimately lead to commitment and a sense of global responsibility.

There are challenges to getting students to see themselves within global networks and relations, of which student preparation, faculty training, and ideologies are only a few. Another is the popularized understanding of what is globalization. Globalization is often understood through an impact model (Hart, 2002) in which cultures and individuals are victims of the all-encompassing and omnipotent global integration of market economies and technologies. It is conceptualized through dichotomies, such as self and other, local and global, economic or cultural, national or global governance, those with power or those without power, or similarity and difference. These binary ways of thinking about the world can be harmful and could prevent the type of engagement and commitment that is integral to global learning outcomes, which are no longer only about what you know and whether you know how to do something. More and more, global learning outcomes include social action and responsibility (Chickering & Braskamp, 2009), and thinking about the world in dichotomies can prevent oneself from seeing and acting on their connections to the world.

**Global Learning Communities**

Not all coursework needs to include global learning outcomes, but it is increasingly understood that all courses can be internationalized, including the hard sciences (Agnew, 2012; Agnew & Kahn, 2015; Clifford, 2009; Leask, 2013). In these latter cases, educators might demonstrate to students how histories and world issues have influenced the development of the disciplines and professions and how they are taught and practiced differently across the world. Basic science concepts can be integrated into discussions of global and international challenges (such as using chemistry to solve global hunger). All classes can use global resources, international case studies, or become global learning communities that learn collectively and collaboratively.

Global learning classrooms provide a form of practiced mimicry, where students incorporate perspectives, overcome challenges, transcend differences, and seek answers collaboratively. Collective work puts knowledge into practice, transforms students into educators, and allows learners to see themselves as nodes within global learning communities. Problem solving that pursues social change or strategic planning encourages students to take a stand and pursue commitment through education.
Activities aimed at social action also provide opportunities to bridge the general and the particular (e.g., students learn how human rights are situational and universal), and they allow students to discern and act on the interconnections that they can now trace through their lives and ideas. Group work, whether in a classroom or in a co-curricular setting, integrates multiple perspectives and allows students to realize the value and utility of various angles of interpretation, even when one does not necessarily agree with them.

Disagreement and discomfort are clearly part of global learning, and educators may design learning activities that pull students out of their academic and cultural comfort zones. These disorientating dilemmas are also at the core of why culture shock can be such a powerful learning process (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 1994). Disorientation can be done in many ways and can be as simple as having students integrate multiple points of view, do community service, work in groups, learn world languages, or use non-traditional forms of representation, such as art or multi-sensory modalities. Student participation in study abroad or community service in unfamiliar local contexts can be extremely effective in providing pedagogy for critical dissonance and reflection. Of course, utilizing interactive technologies to engage in conversations with scholars, activists, citizens, and students around the world can also lead to forms of culture shock, especially when group work extends beyond national borders. Requiring students to do research or develop a presentation with students overseas, especially if conducted in non-native languages, becomes a true global learning community in which students encounter and must overcome difference. Whether having students learn in a community or in a virtual classroom, or dislodging them temporarily from their comfort zones, a global learning goal should be to shift students out of their seats or positions, even if they never actually stand up during class. This requires pedagogies that engage, incite, make connections, and ensure learning continues far beyond classrooms. Informal, co-curricular, and residential programs are always opportunities for enhancing and complementing the global learning that occurs in the formal curriculum. A campus is an extended global classroom.

Because global learning demands relational perspective taking, students learn more efficiently when instruction involves collaborative teaching across disciplines or when two instructors from different disciplines actually co-teach and discuss and debate problems in class (Luckie, Bellon, & Sweeder, 2012). Co-teaching can be challenging, however, especially when academic silos and fiscal responsibilities encourage faculty to look inward and stay in their respective academic tribes and professional territories. Yet, global learning allows students to witness how knowledge is developed in the 21st century when, for example, two faculty members from different disciplines engage in conversation, debate various angles of interpretation, and question methodological approaches.

With global learning’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity, it is no surprise that a multitude of theories and disciplinary perspectives underpin the practices suggested in this article. Global learning relies on analytic frameworks from sociology, network theory, education, organizational change theory, cultural geography, anthropology, comparative literature, religion, and philosophy. It also relies on methods and pedagogies that
span regions, disciplines, and professions. Utilizing a breadth of theories to contextualize and give meaning to best practices is itself global. This means, of course, that it is not only students who need to transform their approaches to learning. Administrators and faculty too can work on designing collaborative international learning communities in classrooms and across our institutions. After all, in the 21st century, this is the way we learn, live, and give meaning to all our worlds.

Some basic foundations of global learning through difference:

1. an emphasis on the processes of learning
2. the importance of digging deep into the complexity of subject matter
3. thinking about the world relationally and through plurality and multiplicity
4. the significant roles of critical self-reflection and recognition of interconnected and interdependent lives
5. the ability to navigate between the general and the particular and undo binary thinking
6. the pursuit of understanding through collaboration and collective knowledge production
7. an emphasis on fostering responsibility and taking action
8. recognizing a role for disagreement and disorientation

**Global Learning and Higher Education**

It is important that higher education leadership creates institutional cultures that are responsive to global forces and provides the diverse learning experiences needed for today’s workforce and civic life. Global learning requires strategies and pedagogies built around collaborations, plurality, interconnections, networks, and engagement with the world. Many institutions of higher education, however, are still situated in bureaucracies and epistemologies that practice foundations of 20th-century learning. Global learning requires a shift in how faculty, students, and administrators think about knowledge, its changing meaning, and its value to society.

It is widely accepted today that higher education is slow to respond to global forces, in part due to its historical organizational design and traditional cultures. Contradictory goals and ideologies, which are driven from differing motivations and emerge from diverse contexts, can derail the very best internationalization efforts (Agnew, 2012). However, like global learning, the internationalization of higher education need not be stalled due to conflicting goals, idiosyncratic values, or legacies of tradition. Rather, internationalization would benefit from an approach that recognizes the many meanings and motivations and builds bridges to work through the gaps between them. Although academic disciplinary silos that form “tribes and territories” (Becher & Trowler, 2001) may limit interdisciplinary pedagogies and practices, it is also the case that institutional change does not require strict comprehensive alignment. What it needs, rather, is a model that is in alliance with the broad institution as much as it is with the multiple meaning gaps and the sociocultural and political contexts in which the institution exists (Agnew & VanBalkom, 2009; Turner & Krizek, 2006). Academic
silos are not soon to disappear anyway. The tenure and promotion system that fixates faculty on very specific goals within their departments will not change overnight, nor will the often archaic and inflexible funding structures that maintain boundaries. Global learning and interdisciplinarity call for a reframing of academic work to create more adaptability and innovation, but disciplinary thinking, specific contextualized motivations, and idiosyncratic cultures are securely part of academe (and academic freedom).

An increasing number of universities specifically pursue global learning as a component of their internationalization plans. However, if global learning is a strategic priority for institutions of higher education, then a new way of doing academic work must evolve. Just as a global classroom builds knowledge around encounters with difference, so too should an institution develop its approach to internationalization. It will be through broader alignment and the recognition of the misalignments that institutions of higher education transform norms and practices and more effectively internationalize. Approaches to internationalization should make sense of the differences across the many scales, from the particularities of disciplines and personalities to the more general missions, institutional goals, and regional and global trends. In this case, the internationalization of higher education might want to apply some of the basic pillars of global learning through difference, especially if solving the world’s most pressing problems remains the central mission of a university.

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