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ESSAY

The Power of a Global Citizenship Curriculum on College Students

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Abstract

In an era marked by intensified globalization, it is increasingly important for learners to understand global issues and develop as responsible, active global citizens. Educational institutions have begun responding to this need by introducing new pedagogical approaches to global citizenship education. One community college in the north-east United States has created a global citizenship curriculum as a vehicle for educational change in the twenty-first century. The curriculum engages with both neoliberal and critical frameworks: the former emphasizes global competencies that support international mobility and employability, while the latter prioritizes reflexive learning, critical thinking, and social responsibility. Focusing on transnational knowledge exchange and global economic participation, the curriculum also seeks to instill commitments to social equality, justice, and freedom through exposure to diverse cultures and communities. Built around four themes—empathy, active listening, intercultural communication, and globalization—and delivered through faculty instruction, direct experience, and structured reflection, it has strengthened students' knowledge, skills, and values. Survey narratives from a pilot study illustrate its impact and how it has shaped students' personal, academic, and professional identities as global citizens.

Keywords

Global Citizenship; Education; Globalization; Empathy; Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Collaboration

Introduction

The concept of global citizenship represents a shift towards a more inclusive and interconnected worldview, where collaborative actions and interactions are driven by a shared

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sense of identity and human values in order to understand and address the deep societal changes brought about by globalization ([Akkari & Maleq 2019](#)). Although globalization has allowed many regions to access a global market and a continuous flow of products, information, technology, capital, and people across the world, this movement has also resulted in political, economic, environmental, and social challenges. For example, environmental issues and climate change transcend national borders and have global consequences, clearly accentuating global interconnectedness and the need for collective action. Thus, it has become integral for learners to understand global issues and become responsible and active global citizens who are equipped to address them.

Higher education institutions have recognized the need for global citizenship education and have made pedagogical innovations to orient their students around global citizenship values. According to [De Wet, Bacher, Wetzelhuetter & Nnebedum \(2024\)](#), global citizenship education has been dominated by a 'global competitiveness model,' promoting values of 'Achievement and Power,' and a 'global rights and responsibilities' model, promoting the values of 'Benevolence and Universalism.' However, a critical perspective has also emerged that promotes values of open-ended diversity.

In this article, we discuss how one community college in the north-east region of the United States has created and implemented a global citizenship curriculum to instill a combination of these global citizenship values in its students. This undergraduate global citizenship curriculum focuses on developing the 'global competencies' that enable students to become internationally mobile and readily employable in a variety of cultural and national contexts, while 'stressing the need to provide opportunities for reflexive learning and critical thinking, allowing students to become responsible and active citizens' in relation to global issues ([Akkari & Maleq 2019](#): 178; [Aktas et al. 2017](#)).

For over 10 years, this curriculum was used for students in study abroad preparation and leadership courses to increase their global knowledge and skills for international movement and participation, but also to expose them to situations involving different cultures and groups so they can develop both individual and collective responsibility to promote social equality, justice, and freedom for better global relations ([Shultz 2007](#); [Aktas et al. 2017](#); [Boni & Calabuig 2015](#); [Isaacs 2018](#)).

The global citizenship curriculum, which consists of four modules (empathy, active listening, intercultural communication, and globalization) and employs faculty instruction, experiential learning, and focused reflection, has increased student knowledge, developed skills, clarified values, and advanced their capacity to contribute to their global communities. For example, a compilation of recent surveys and testimonials from students who have taken these courses revealed they had learned the important tenets of global citizenship, namely that the world had no real borders, its people were all connected despite their geographical locations, and that all their actions affected one another, as well as how to tackle problems and discuss sensitive topics together. Furthermore, these students wanted to share this knowledge with others and were inspired to pursue careers in which they could become agents of change in communities around the world. With these findings, the global citizenship curriculum demonstrated its power to instill global citizenship values in the personal, academic, and professional lives of its students, and to be an effective instrument for educational change that the 21st-century society is now requiring.

Global Citizenship Curriculum

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP CURRICULUM

The global citizenship curriculum was designed to develop student 'global competencies' as well as 'reflexive learning and critical thinking' competencies required for a critical perspective. The curriculum is based on a conceptual framework developed by Dr. Lampeto Efthymiou to create a student learning experience that facilitates transformation towards a more socially empathic development of global citizen skills

(Efthymiou & Monahan 2021; Efthymiou 2023). This framework integrates three learning theories from Vygotsky (Robbins 2007), Cartwright and Cottrell (Gladstein 1983), and Segal (Shute 2020) to explain how empathy can be developed through cognitive, intercultural communication, and collaborative learning, and why it is needed for global citizenship.

The first learning theory is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which suggests that social interactions lead to continuous changes in thought and behavior that can vary greatly from culture to culture (Woolfolk 1998). Vygotsky states that cognitive development in intercultural learning depends on interactions with people, and that the tools that cultures provide (i.e. language) help individuals form their personal views of the world (Zhou & Brown 2015). Cultural knowledge can be passed from one individual to another through collaborative learning (Tomasello et al. 1993), allowing students to co-construct knowledge through social interaction when they engage with diverse cultures (Tudge & Winterhoff 1993).

The second learning theory is Cartwright and Cottrell's interpersonal empathy theory, which suggests that intercultural learning develops through interpersonal connections made via intrapersonal empathy (Lanzoni 2015). According to Bošnjaković and Radionov (2018), people are social beings who form their lives through social relationships, and whose social interactions depend on an understanding of another person's mental state, defined by their emotions, desires, wishes, thoughts, behaviors, and intentions. Students who become aware of other people's perspectives can make stronger interpersonal relationships. These students can regulate their own emotions to provide affective responses and predict behavior for successful interactions.

The third learning theory is Elizabeth Segal's social empathy theory, which suggests that interpersonal empathy is more than an innate characteristic, but rather a learned social skill with continuing opportunities for development and growth (Gerdes et al. 2011). According to Segal, interpersonal empathy has the potential to translate into something greater, called social empathy, which she defines as the ability to genuinely understand people from different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds (Segal et al. 2012). Students who develop empathy and learn about the systemic conditions and historical backgrounds of diverse groups can explore experiences they are not familiar with and discuss complexities grounded in diverse backgrounds. This research suggests that empathy is a driver of positive social behavior and that these students will feel socially responsible or have the moral obligation to make decisions, take actions, and improve relationships to benefit society (Decety et al. 2015; Jiang et al. 2021).

The conceptual framework developed for the global citizenship curriculum demonstrates the potentially transformative process that leads from individual empathy to social empathy through deliberate educational instruction and practice.

The curriculum developed employs the fundamentals of intercultural communication and collaborative learning, which facilitate the development of intrapersonal processes (i.e. emotion regulation, self-other awareness, and affective reaction) and interpersonal attributes (i.e. perspective-taking, contextual understanding, and social responsibility), both necessary for building empathy. Empathy enables individuals to understand multiple perspectives and discern socially responsible actions to improve relationships in the world around them. When this transformation takes place, students gain the knowledge and skills they need to become globally competent, build solidarity across marginalized groups, and feel individually responsible for positive societal change.

Four Modules of Global Citizenship

The curriculum is designed with four modules to develop student skills in: 1) empathy (to learn to share the thoughts and emotions of others), 2) intercultural communication (to better understand people from other cultures and improve interpersonal relationships), 3) active listening (to develop the capacity to better understand and respond to what is said), and 4) globalization (to shift empathy to global action

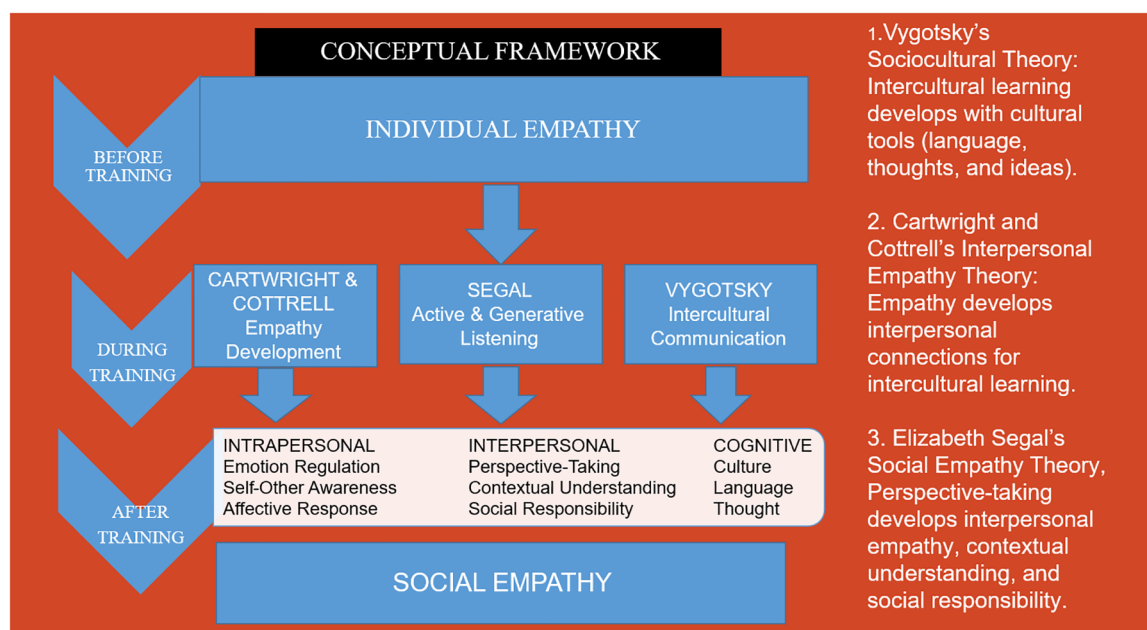


Figure 1. This framework shows how three learning theories shape the progression from individual empathy to social empathy (Efthymiou and Monahan 2021)

with cultural intelligence). All four modules help cultivate the global competencies required for global citizenship.

Curriculum Integration and Course Structure

The global citizenship curriculum was integrated into a study abroad preparation and leadership course available to diverse cohorts of associate degree undergraduates. The course commenced with an informational session where students introduced themselves with their name, ethnicity, residence, academic year, professional goal, interests, and why they had registered for the course. The session included group discussions on globalization, how it currently affects them in their local communities, and how they can embrace globalization while preserving their own identity.

The second session introduced active listening through lecture, video, and small group discussions. Students were shown how the listening process works at the cognitive level, the difference between active, critical, and empathic listening, practised active listening to a message, and evaluated how the listening process is affected by cultural differences.

The third session covered intercultural communication and consisted of a lecture, video, and group discussions. Various communication styles were introduced, and differences in communication patterns were demonstrated with their potential to affect behaviour. Groups worked to analyze the impact of different communication patterns in various hypothetical situations.

The fourth session covered transformational empathy, which is a term developed in Monahan (2017). This session consisted of a lecture, quiz, and small group discussions. Students were introduced to developmental levels of empathy, made connections between empathy and multiple perspectives, and applied their own learning and experiences to developing a transformational empathy perspective.

The fifth session covered globalization and consisted of a lecture and small group discussions on two globalization articles. Groups worked to define globalization, identify globalization impacts, debate its pros and cons, and examine how globalization impacted their own lives and their fields of study.

In the sixth and seventh sessions, students collaborated in groups to make presentations on the future of globalization in their respective disciplines. Students discussed how a global issue in their personal experience had been affected by globalization, how this global issue related to their current program of study, and how they would like to see the issue resolved. By collaborating with students from different programs of study, they were able to find connections between issues across their disciplines.

Assessment Findings

The curriculum was assessed in a pilot study with two cohorts of students. Each cohort consisted of 17 students who came from different ethnic backgrounds, ages, programs of study, and semesters completed at the community college. Surveys were disseminated at the end of the course to both cohorts. The survey assessed how students perceived the course, its curricular components, and their development of career readiness competencies identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, which are as follows: Communication, Teamwork & Collaboration, Global & Interpersonal Fluency, Critical Thinking & Problem Solving, Leadership, Professionalism & Work Ethic, and Career Management ([NACE 2022](#)).

Program Content, Lectures, and Group Work

All respondents reported that the program content, lectures, and group work of the course were moderately useful or extremely useful. More than half the respondents reported that the program had just the right amount of group work, and that there should have been more time in the program. What is important to note here is that the respondents found all aspects of the program to be useful. The lectures were seen as the most useful, as they had the most ratings of 'extremely useful' and no ratings below 'very useful'. Group work was appreciated, as none indicated that there should have been less group work, and almost a third would have preferred more group work.

NACE Competencies

Most respondents reported that they developed NACE competencies and had widespread positive feelings about developing these competencies. These competencies include Communication, Teamwork & Collaboration, Global & Interpersonal Fluency, Critical Thinking & Problem Solving, Leadership, Professionalism & Work Ethic, and Career Management. However, it is important to note that these findings are self-reported feelings. As students tend to see themselves as more proficient than employers do in most of these competencies, future research should assess competency development by collecting evidence of the successful application of knowledge and skills ([NACE 2022](#)).

Open-ended Questions

The respondents were also given open-ended questions to report on: 1) what they learned from the course, 2) the part of the course they liked the most, and 3) how the course could be improved. First, all components of the course were mentioned, as well as the diversity of the participants, group work, and student presentations. Second, students reported that they liked their interactions with other students, group discussions, and the freedom of topic choice for their presentations. Third, all students expressed their desire for more time in the program.

Student Testimonials

Student responses to open-ended questions revealed some intimate thoughts they had about the course and provided examples of how they achieved 'global competencies' for global citizenship. For example,

one student shared that the course showed her how much she did not know and made her learn to think differently. She reflected on the concept of empathy and the strategies to develop it. She learned to question her own thoughts and asked herself whether she could view a scenario or issue from another person's perspective by putting herself in their shoes. She noted that empathy was extremely important to her company's culture, and she was grateful to have the skills to be empathetic towards her customers, stakeholders, and colleagues in the United States and abroad.

Another student reported how the course taught her the reflexive learning and critical thinking required for global citizenship. She stated that the course improved her communication and listening skills, which she then utilized in a group project while working with diverse students from different schools. She recalled that the group did not get along with her at first. Some members assumed that she had privileges they did not have because she came from a certain neighborhood, school, or area. However, the student exercised patience and did not prejudge the others. Instead, she showed interest in learning about them and asked them questions. In their conversations, she slowly revealed to the group that she had more in common with them than they had originally thought. Shortly thereafter, the other group members felt more comfortable around her, and they began to communicate and work on the group project together.

Lastly, a student reported that the course taught her how to be a responsible and active global citizen. She explained that she used what she had learned in the course when she intervened in an argument between two women at a coffee shop. One woman did not understand or speak English very well. Another woman, who had a better command of the language, accused the non-English-speaking woman of being rude when she did not hold the door for her. The English-speaking woman became irate because she did not receive any response from the non-English-speaking woman, who simply looked startled. The student who walked into this situation did not avoid them, as most people might do. She did not take sides and asked both women if they were okay. She validated both women and understood that each should have an opportunity to explain their side of the story. The student discovered that the non-English-speaking woman had not understood what had transpired and explained to the English-speaking woman that the other woman should not be criticized for her lack of understanding. This de-escalated the situation, and the English-speaking woman calmed down. She later revealed that she had been having a very difficult day before the incident. What is important here is that the student, drawing on empathy, listening, and intercultural communication skills, learned not to prejudge people who are different, and showed interest in them in order to gain their trust and respect for better communication and relations.

Discussion

Overall, the students who took the global citizenship course are perceived to have increased their capacity and disposition to understand diverse people and address issues of global significance. They learned the importance of putting themselves in someone else's shoes before judging them and of increasing their knowledge of both sides of an issue before taking a position on it. This course can be considered a high-impact practice that increases student engagement and learning and facilitates the development of the skills they need to become successful professionals, responsible citizens, and effective leaders in their communities.

Implications

One of the many aspects of global citizenship learning is for students to become successful problem-solvers as they are exposed to global struggles and aspirations, and to actively involve themselves in working towards positive solutions and reaching compromises and resolutions. The objective of this program is to help support generations of productive, empathetic leaders with a sense of shared responsibility who recognize obstacles and challenges and work hand in hand with others to promote equality, justice, and peace in the world. Students reported a development of their understanding and capacity for empathy. They

also improved their awareness of multiple perspectives, which helped them see themselves as part of a larger whole, and they came to understand that the world extends beyond county, state, regional, and national boundaries. Students will greatly benefit from this curriculum, whether it is taught as a stand-alone course or integrated into courses in other academic disciplines.

Conclusion

The global citizenship curriculum contributes to students' academic, personal, social, and professional development. The curriculum's focus on empathy, intercultural communication, active listening, and globalization helps students achieve higher intercultural learning in globally diverse environments. As this curriculum can be taught as a stand-alone course or integrated into courses in other academic disciplines that are available to all students, it can be an accessible and cost-effective way for students to develop global awareness early in their academic careers so they can interact more effectively with their peers and faculty on campus, as well as with colleagues in their professional lives. Most important, the curriculum educates students on the common global welfare and their role in creating a more peaceful, sustainable, and fair-minded world through their academic and professional capacities.

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