

The Making of a Global Citizen

By Mark Hower

Global citizenship would seem a recent concept, but its origins can be traced back to at least 4th century Greece when Diogenes declared himself a cosmopolitan – a citizen of the world. At the time, the earth's shape, the configuration of the vast majority of its surface, and even the existence of its varied peoples and cultures, would have been largely unknown to him – or anyone. The idea of global citizenship, then, emerged even before there was a clear understanding of just what the globe entailed or who populated it. Though the concept of a global citizen dates from antiquity, the full realization of that vision probably remains a dream, even in the present day. This paper will briefly explore how global citizenship might finally emerge, what might characterize a global citizen and, how Civic Engagement offers some of the most effective means for bringing that result to fruition.

At Home in the World

My own introduction to the notion of global citizenship came through service as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Sierra Leone, Africa, where I coordinated a water well construction project. Before becoming a Volunteer, I had been vaguely aware of a Peace Corps recruitment slogan: “You can never go home again.” At the conclusion of my two-year tour, when I returned to the U.S., I found myself reflecting on that catchphrase. I was happy to be back and yet, I found myself strangely disturbed and ill at ease. The disoriented feeling was reminiscent of how I had initially experienced my assignment in a remote corner of the Sierra Leone bush. I had been conscious of my many differences, and I had the feeling that I did not really belong. As time passed, however, my language and cultural competencies increased, and meaningful friendships developed. A sense of deep connection replaced my earlier doubts.

Jack Mezirow (1990) describes how transformative learning begins with a “disorienting dilemma” – through an experience that creates a powerful sense of disequilibrium such that unexplored assumptions and beliefs are ultimately replaced with new perspectives and behaviors. In my own case as a returned Peace Corps Volunteer, the learning had come full circle, and I had experienced the cycle of both being a stranger and of belonging on two separate continents. The bittersweet implications of the slogan now held meaning for me, and I recognized that something profound had indeed changed. My sense of place in the world had both expanded and become inaccessible to me all at once.

Accidental Citizens

Even in the present day, people in much of the world are enculturated to identify themselves primarily in terms of social systems that are far smaller than nation-states, including: family, clan, tribe, community, region, and religion. Such a limited sense of affinity, while understandable in a historic context, does not always correspond with the reality of our contemporary lives. For instance, energy and water shortages, global warming, poverty, and terrorism are but a few examples of the challenges we face as a world community. Moreover, the most economically significant entities on our planet are

increasingly made up of corporations, not nations. The world, then, is becoming more interconnected, and also vastly more complex.

Psychologist Robert Kegan (1995) suggests that many of us are unable to effectively learn from and handle the ambiguity and complexity of modern life. This puts us at the mercy of events, without capacity to move beyond a nagging sense characterized by a feeling of being “in over our heads” as we react to new circumstances with a repertoire of old behaviors and emotions (Kegan, 1995).

In the face of such complexity, we tend to look to familiar answers. It seems especially natural for Americans to assume that technological changes could be the key to bringing about greater awareness of and participation in a global community. Advances in information technology in particular do have the effect of making the world smaller in very real ways. Yet, greater access to information does not on its own lead to greater understanding or deeper relationships. Moreover, the powerful influence of technology has also concentrated the influence of economic and financial factors in our lives. In turn, our role as consumer and worker is emphasized over that of community member or citizen. William Harman, author of *Global Mind Change*, explains that we define behavior by “economic consumption, so much so that citizens, especially in the United States of America, refer to one another as fellow ‘consumers.’” (Harman, 1998, p. 123).

If technology and economic factors do not ultimately develop our capacity to see ourselves as global citizens, some might look to government for inspiration and support. But government at a global level is just barely in its infancy. The United Nations and its short-lived predecessor, the League of Nations, were established as a direct consequence of horrific world wars. Consequently, the U.N. focus is on the affairs of nations and governments. The existence of the U.N. is tremendously important and brings great benefit to the peoples of participating countries, but such relationships do not, as yet, significantly involve direct, widespread, interaction between citizens.

In short, governments may eventually confer citizenship at a global level, or technology may eventually join us in a deeper form of world community, but both possibilities share basic assumptions: that change happens to us and that others (mostly above us) must do that work. But citizenship surely requires more from us than the role of passive consumer, isolated internet surfer or affiliate of a distant international body. Citizenship requires a capacity to think beyond one’s own needs and experiences, and it requires taking responsibility for oneself AND others. Influential system theorist, Peter Senge (1996), asks: “Why do we cling to the view that only the top can initiate significant change? Is it just our unwillingness to give up a familiar mental model? Is it the fear of stepping out of line without the imprimatur of the hierarchy? Perhaps, also, there is... the comfort of being able to hold someone else... responsible...” (Senge, 1996, p.42).

Making the Road Together

When knowledge of the world is primarily mediated, observed rather than experienced directly and personally, complexity tends to be interpreted in terms of competition, separateness and even danger. But this can be dangerous thinking in an increasingly

interconnected world. Global Citizens, then, are inherently engaged citizens. Margaret Wheatley (1999), another prominent systems thinker, observes that when systems are fragmented and distressed (as our worldwide human system surely is), the essential strategy for healing is to create more connections, to increase the system's knowledge of and relationship with itself. For any human system, Wheatley emphasizes the critical importance of creating and nurturing relationships as the way toward greater understanding and meaning – and ultimately, wholeness.

It is in this way then, that Civic Engagement becomes critical for the development of our students and future global citizens. Engagement provides the opportunity to learn the skills and perspectives to literally engage with a variety of communities, to learn to trust the humanity and capabilities of those who are, at first appearance, different, even strange. Engagement provides an opportunity to work directly on the challenges of our time, and in the process, to actively construct new relationships, connection, sensibilities, commitments and affinities. Gandhi's oft-repeated notion that we can participate in the change we hope to see in the world, to literally be that change, is a philosophical and deeply moral position. It is also a practical reminder that change and action are inevitably linked. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian scholar paraphrased the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado by observing: "...[W]e make the road by walking" (p. 6).

Senge, adds to this constructivist sentiment, explaining: "People often believe that you need to know how to do something before you can do it. If this were literally true, there would be little genuine innovation. An alternative view is that the creative process is actually a learning process, and the best we can possibly have at the outset is a hypothesis or tentative idea about what will be required to succeed. Robert Fritz characterizes the essence of the creative process as 'create and adjust.' We learn how to do something truly new only through doing it, then adjusting" (Senge, et al., 2004, p. 153).

The notion that we can and do create our own reality is a central tenet and rationale for encouraging Civic Engagement opportunities in our institutions of higher learning. Engagement in the lives of our fellow citizens, in the workings of our governments and institutions then, provides the opportunity to help directly, and to more deeply learn about them, to influence the course of events (and be influenced by them) and to literally construct a different future.

Principles for the Emerging Global Citizen

It seems, then, that being a global citizen is a choice, a state of mind and being each of us is capable of manifesting in our own lives. At this time in our history, it is not an inherent condition and is not conferred in some official, formal way. But it can be realized through action and reflection. What then might be some of the key elements that characterize the global citizen? At least eight principles seem to be essential for any would-be global citizen. These are:

- Holistic and collaborative approaches win
- Change is not loss
- Relationships deepen humanity
- Difficult problems require collective action

Respect for others is golden
Contribute where you live
Find comfort with ambiguity
Take responsibility

These principles are the most obvious to me, and I imagine others leap to mind for the interested reader. In order to reveal my own thoughts a bit more fully, I will discuss each of the eight principles briefly below.

Holistic and collaborative approaches win

First, the global citizen must be able to see and experience life holistically, in something other than zero sum terms. Mary Parker Follett (Graham, 1995) spoke of the profound transformation that can be achieved when dominant mental models concerning “power over” others shift toward an aspiration to have “power with” others. A holistic perspective embraces the understanding that ultimate success is achieved primarily through collaboration and never when there are winners and losers.

Change is not loss

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky observe: “People do not resist change, per se. People resist loss” (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, p.11.). It is an important insight, as it helps explain a central challenge to realizing the notion of the global citizen: we must believe that the opportunity ultimately adds to who we are, rather than erasing or making our current identity irrelevant. This is true at all levels, from our personal self-concept, to our sense of membership in a community or society.

Relationships deepen humanity

A global citizen will intuitively understand the power of relationships, that they can move each of us closer to our common humanity without taking us farther away from our personal or cultural identity. Wheatley explains: “The participatory nature of reality has required scientists to focus their attention on relationships. No one can contemplate a system’s view of life without becoming engrossed in relational dynamics. Nothing exists independent of its relationships, whether looking at subatomic particles or human affairs....” (Wheatley, 1999, p.163).

Difficult problems require collective action

Persistent, intractable problems are only solved through collective action. For Ronald Heifetz (1994, 2002) such “adaptive challenges” may not even be recognized as problems and therefore solutions will not have been developed. In such circumstances, no single person has sufficient insight into the problem, much less the creativity to image the full solution. Thus, adaptive challenges require both a collective and constructivist response. Paul Loeb, who understands a great deal about citizenship, adds: “...our most serious problems, both the public ones and those that seem most personal, are in large part common problems, which can be solved only through common efforts. The dream of private sanctuary is an illusion. It erodes our souls by eroding our sense of larger connection: (Loeb, 1999, p. 7).

Respect for others is golden

Effectual participation in a world community surely requires an appreciation for the essential value of what is often called the “golden rule,” a common principle of diverse societies over time. Loeb describes it as a kind of “mutual respect.” He refers to Rabbi Hillel, who over two thousand years ago stated clearly and simply: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary” (Loeb, 1999, p. 284).

Contribute where you live

Even a global society is mostly experienced at the local level. Global citizens will feel a deep commitment to and responsibility for the civic life of their own community – whatever its size – knowing how this effort contributes to the greater good. The environmental maxim to “Think globally, act locally” reminds us that we are part of a larger system, and that we must consider large and long-term consequences while being actively engaged and aware of the daily choices we make. Systems scholars, like Wheatley (1999), simply point out that systems are “nested” and so a change at one level invariably has an impact on other, even higher levels.

Find comfort with ambiguity

A global citizen will be comfortable with ambiguity and demonstrate a spirit of experimentation. Such a flexible approach is congruent with the emerging paradigm in which our world is a mutually constructed and change and modification are inherent and ongoing. Paulo Freire declares: “... [I]n order for us to create something, we have to start creating.... If you don’t have any kind of dream I am sure that it’s impossible to create something” (Horton and Freire, 1990, p. 56). Freire further adds: “...*without practice there’s no knowledge*; at least it’s difficult to know without practice” (Horton, M., and Freire, P., 1990, p. 98).

Take responsibility

Article 25 of U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that: “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for ... health and well-being ... including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond [one’s] control” (Chomsky, 2006, p. 231). These principles are incomplete and untenable unless we take responsibility – as fellow human beings and citizens of the world – to ensure that they are fully manifest. We are often said to have inherent rights as human beings. It is our commitment to take responsibility for ourselves and others that may most definitively characterize us as citizens.

Conclusion

This last point clearly links Civic Engagement with the principles of global citizenship. Students learn all eight principles (and probably many more) when they actively participate in their communities, in making the lives of their fellow citizens better and more meaningful. In turn, they are molded and even transformed by the experience, remade as they help remake the world. And this journey of discovery begins only when we and our students understand that we are responsible.

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Global citizenship would seem a recent phenomenon, but its conceptual origins can be traced back to at least 4th century Greece when Diogenes declared himself a cosmopolitan – a citizen of the world. Though the concept dates from antiquity, it is the present day that it is possible to fully realize what it means to participate and contribute to the greater human society extending beyond borders of nation-states. Civic Engagement offers some of the most effective means for bringing that result and awareness to fruition.

Energy and water shortages, global warming, and terrorism are but a few examples of the challenges we face as a world community. Moreover, the most economically significant entities on our planet are increasingly made up of corporations, not nations. The world, then, is becoming more interconnected, and also vastly more complex.

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