

# Critical thinking in the context of global learning

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Hetan Shah, Chief Executive of the DEA, uses the term 'global learning' to describe education that puts learning into a global context. This means developing critical and creative thinking about how we can create a more just and sustainable world. The term 'critical thinking', and associated notions of 'critical pedagogy', are much contested. In this article, Hetan examines these contested areas and proposes six elements of critical global thinking.

DEA is an education charity that promotes global learning. At DEA we work to ensure that people in the United Kingdom learn about global issues, such as poverty and climate change, and develop an open-minded, global outlook.



*We need to understand the relationship between consumption and the environment.  
Photo: Bryan Ledgard.*

## Making connections within and between systems

The 17th century philosopher René Descartes, a dominant influence on Western thinking, believed that the best way to understand something was to break it down into its component parts. This powerful thinking process paved the way for most of our scientific advances, such as the discovery of the atom.

But understanding the constituent parts of a given system is not enough; it is vitally important to understand how they are connected. For example, the British Financial Services Authority has admitted that their failure to fully explore how individual risks can compound with each other meant that they underestimated the overall risks present in the UK's financial system. This played an important role in the recent economic crisis.

Issues such as climate change require us to think systemically. For example, we need to understand the relationship between our consumption and the environment. We tend to see economics and the environment as separate areas of concern, but as WWF

research shows, if everybody consumed at the rate of the UK, we would need three planets to support us.

We can only really start to understand global challenges and issues when we make connections within and between systems.

## Awareness of how much is contested

Global learning's major concepts are contested. Abstract nouns such as 'sustainability', 'global citizenship' and 'development' are not the names of real, clearly defined objects. What is 'sustainability'? Is it mainly environmental, or is it also about social justice? What makes someone a global citizen? Is this a useful concept? What does being a 'developed country' mean? There is no consensus.

In describing why he would not want his children to be educated for sustainable development, Jickling (1992) warns against conditioning young people 'to believe that

"sustainable development" constitutes a constellation of correct environmental views'. Instead, he argues, we should debate, evaluate and judge for ourselves the relative merits of contested positions.

## Responding to complexity and change

Since the world is complex and changing, individuals need to constantly question and update their own models of the world. Some teachers use a model rooted in 1950s dependency theory that distinguishes sharply between poor and rich countries. But where does China fit in? How do we rationalise the fact that India's middle class now stands at 100 million people (possibly larger than the middle class of the whole of Europe)? What do we make of the statistic that 1 in 3 UK children live in relative poverty? Newer development models are needed, models that locate deprivation and wealth within as well as across nations.

Everybody is now 'for' sustainability: debate must move to the next level. Critical global thinkers need to explore the very real trade-offs needed to create a fairer and more sustainable world. How would higher energy prices impact on the very poorest in society? What does 'local food' mean in the context of poorer countries' trade? Like the questions, the answers will be complex.

## Understanding the significance of power relationships

Global learning, like all education, has ideological and political underpinnings, shaped by patterns of power distribution. Following the Freirean tradition, critical reflection on the way in which reality is shaped can be instrumental in moving individuals to change their reality. This link between awareness and action is not transparent, but viewing the world through a political lens is nonetheless revealing: it can help us move from a benevolent charitable view of other countries to engaging with the structural issues that shape global challenges and influence the ways we see them.

Global learning is more than a set of agendas about individual change and moral refrains ('be responsible; give to charity; feel bad when you fly'). A systemic analysis recognises that change is political and that we need an analysis of the roles of all the different actors – government, business, NGOs and individuals. A systemic analysis also seeks to understand the incentives within the system. Why do people act as they do? What systemic changes will help change behaviour? For example, moral exhortation and charitable



Photo: Shaun Flannery.

giving may have a relatively insignificant effect on international poverty in comparison to changes in UK tariffs policy, or consumers' behaviour.

The political nature of global learning also means that critical global learners need to be circumspect: recognise that NGOs, government, business and academics have their own agendas, and consider: Who has power? Who is voiceless? Who benefits?

## Self-reflectiveness

The global is not 'somewhere out there' – we are part of it. We are key contributors, collectively and individually, to the problems of environmental sustainability and climate change. Critical global thinking means situating ourselves in the global: this involves making connections between the global and the local, between global processes and systems and ourselves as individuals. Similarly, with relative poverty in the UK, we need to consider our own 'development trajectory' as much as that of other nations.

Self-reflection means exploring our deeper prejudices and stereotypes about poorer countries. When children are asked to draw 'What is in Africa?' very poor communities and mud huts usually predominate. There is little recognition of the variety of life and living conditions in this huge continent, or an understanding that poverty in Africa is not universal. Critical global thinking means challenging ourselves to remain open-minded and aware that change for a fairer and more sustainable world may well involve changing ourselves.

## Values literacy

All societies have understandings about what constitutes a good life which go to the heart of our values. Global learning needs to grapple with this, going deeper than learning outcomes predicated on knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Increased material affluence has not necessarily made us happier. The UK economy has trebled in size over the last 50 years but happiness indicators have remained relatively flat, suggesting that we adapt quickly to material gains (Layard 2005). Lottery winners experience a surge of happiness and then return to their previous levels of well-being. There are, of course, more societal goals than well-being; values such as freedom, or participation. Young people should be given the space to explore their values: where they come from, and where they might clash. How do their environmental values sit with their desire to fly and travel? There may be no easy answers, but critical thinking requires us to begin by identifying the contradictions in our values and challenging them.

So often statements about values are made as though they are statements of fact. In becoming more conversant with their own values, critical global thinkers may be better able to identify the values implicit in what they see, hear and read.

## References

- Jickling, B. (1992) 'Why I don't want my children educated for sustainable development', *Journal of Environmental Education*, 23 (4), pp.5–8.
- Layard, R. (2005) *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. London: Penguin Books.



Hetan Shah is the Chief Executive of DEA (hetan.shah@dea.org.uk). Hetan is presenting a lecture on Friday 9 April at the GA's Annual Conference in Derby on the 'The challenges of global learning' – see [www.geography.org.uk/download/GA\\_Conf10FullProgB.pdf](http://www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_Conf10FullProgB.pdf) for more information.



Kate Brown, the Schools Programme Manager at DEA, offers some pragmatic suggestions for how critical thinking can be applied in the classroom – you can download them from [www.geography.org.uk/pg](http://www.geography.org.uk/pg).

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