

Global Learning ~ exploring the pitfalls ...

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Tide~ global learning

One of the difficulties I experience in engaging with discussion about global learning is the move from the big ideas and debates to classroom / school reality.

Most of us on reading curriculum documentation that argues for participation, valuing of diversity, awareness of global issues etc will agree and say that we want this. Those of us working in schools will also quickly argue that much of what we are already doing contributes to global learning. This is all true and useful but still leaves a lot to do if we are to really enable 'quality global learning' in day to day practice.

I personally find it helpful to turn the debate around for a while and start to think about the problems and difficulties ... what are the pitfalls that we are trying to avoid? This might help by way of clarifying what we mean by the phrase 'global learning', the challenges involved and what kind of learning we are really striving to achieve.

Possible pitfalls:

◆ *'Doing good' ... that avoids thinking?*

A desire to participate and address issues in a global context can often lead quickly to 'fund-raising' style activities that are about immediate responses. There must be a place for this response, but if it is over-used and the main experience of 'global learning' for young people, there is a danger of leading to 'us and them' attitudes and a possible sense of superiority. It also promotes a simplified analysis of the need to throw money at problems.

Challenge → *to move towards activities and approaches that are reflective and promote critical thinking*

◆ *Manipulative activity leading to 'right answers'?*

A desire to want supposed 'right answers' or responses eg 'we should recycle more' / 'buy fairtrade goods' etc can lead to prescriptive approaches or activities that are overly contrived. Young people are often quick to learn the 'right answer rules' and these exercises can quickly have less to do with thinking than about keeping the teacher happy.

Challenge → *to identify issues and stimulus material that provokes debate - challenges assumptions and raises questions.*

◆ *Failing to acknowledge our own perceptions and bias?*

For example, in dealing with images of a place we might respond with more positive language to images of trees and green spaces and more negatively to those of crowded streets or a built environment. Understanding that others might respond differently, [that the images can be viewed from a variety of perspectives] and that there may be reasons that we have responded in this particular way are important for our own learning.

Challenge → *to use open-ended activities to enable perceptions and assumptions to be shared and discussed at the outset*

◆ *It's all doom and gloom?*

Floods, earthquakes, wars, climate change ... it can be a long and depressing list. There is a real danger that learning about other places and particularly the 'developing world' can be equated to learning about disasters and problems. How do we avoid over-burdening young people and fostering a sense of helplessness?

Challenge → *to include some of the positives and to build a futures approach that builds awareness of processes of change and how individuals and societies can contribute.*

◆ *Global is about somewhere else?*

The general perception that global is elsewhere runs fairly deep and leads quickly to the feeling that 'global learning' is really the job of the Geography department. The nature of our 21st century, inter-connected and global society requires that we challenge this separate 'here and there' outlook and begin to look afresh at how we explore global dimensions and perspectives of our own lives as well as those in other places.

Challenge → *to enable all learning to be approached in a global context ... to enable connections to be identified and explored*

In conclusion

This list could clearly be added to ... there are many potential pitfalls for those of us engaged in supporting global learning as it is neither straightforward nor obvious. There is a danger that 'poor global teaching' could do more harm than good by reinforcing stereotypes and reducing thinking opportunities for young people.

If we are to go any way to developing 'global learning' as a key learning area for the 21st century curriculum I would argue that we need to question some of the real difficulties and confusions involved in this area of work and engage with the educational challenges involved. We are moving now beyond the initial success of simply including some global issues and themes in our teaching to wanting to develop global learners who are critical thinkers and active participants in society. This is an ambitious challenge but one that it is worth striving for and talking about.