

Learning in Globalized Crisis: Emancipatory Education, Technology and Diversity

Alan Bruce¹

Universal Learning Systems (Dublin), UOC Open University of Catalonia (Barcelona), National
Changhua University of Education (Taiwan)¹

Abstract

Our era sees its knowledge explosion enmeshed with technologies of breathtaking scale and an expansion of systems of globalized power unparalleled in the human experience. Initial promises made for the digital revolution - that technology would underpin a move towards more equal and democratic futures where human emancipation from burdens of menial labor and differentiated access was imminent – have proven premature, if not false. This paper examines processes and factors shaping globalized learning as it negotiates its way between technology and needs of the diverse individuals and communities who constitute this changing world. Globalization opens up real possibilities for transformative learning, where knowledge exponentially grows without constraints of national curricula or vested self-interest. The contradictory nature of globalization outlines the challenges for education and learning if sense is to be made of the emerging planetary social order. The nature of systemic crisis means that education systems will need to focus ever more intently on providing competence and skills to promote adaptability and creativity, thus turning crisis into a springboard for new directions. Twin processes of degraded levels of participatory citizenship and ever diminishing access to resources and opportunities have actually accelerated. By the early twenty-first century, we have reached a point where the contradictions and inequalities of the prevailing socio-economic order have been exacerbated by an attempted assault on reason itself, scientific method and the conceptualization of inalienable rights that have (at least formally) dominated discourse since the Enlightenment. The risks of increased immiseration for the majority of the world's population, return to reactionary totalitarian political systems, and concentration of wealth, resources and power in ever smaller circles are tangible. Education and learning structures will need increasingly to be shaped by values and vision as to the best way to secure human development in a way than enriches all stakeholders. The interaction between technology and globalization creates new challenges but also new opportunities. The pervasive globalizing process means policy and strategy need to be linked to parallel international analysis on how new forms of cultural diversity impact on learning needs of populations subjected to unprecedented levels of change. The removal of barriers to participation and the enhancement of embedded equality approaches will, at the end of the day, be about asserting strategic policy vision in contexts of rights, global citizenship and SDGs. This paper examines processes and factors shaping globalized learning as it negotiates its way between technology and needs of the diverse individuals and communities who constitute this changing world.

Keywords: Globalization; Change; Inclusion; Open; Digital Learning; Transformed systems;

Introduction

Our era sees knowledge explosion enmeshed with technologies of breathtaking scale and expansion of a system of globalized power unparalleled in the human experience. No human agency is left untouched by the impact of unprecedented change. No subject area or mode of thought is unaffected by pervasive and systematic consolidation of intellectual, technological, political and conceptual hegemony. This ongoing process is both shaped and informed by an almost instantaneous communications system that transmits information and awareness to any corner of the earth. In such a bewildering process of connected transformation and realignment, individuals and communities grapple with the seeming end of all certainty. The parallel brutalities and violence that often accompany these processes produce a series of connected challenges to traditional (and very hard won) achievements in our understanding of rights, participation, equality and meaningful inclusion.

Twin processes - degraded levels of participatory citizenship and ever diminishing access to resources and opportunities - have actually accelerated. By the early twenty-first century, we have reached a point where the contradictions and inequalities of the prevailing socio-economic order have been exacerbated by an assault on reason itself, scientific method and the conceptualization of inalienable

rights that have (at least formally) dominated discourse since the Enlightenment. The risks of increased immiseration for the majority of the world's population, return to reactionary totalitarian political systems, and concentration of wealth, resources and power in ever smaller circles are tangible. This negates initial promises made by and for the digital revolution - that technology would underpin a move towards more equal, open and democratic futures where human emancipation from burdens of menial labor and differentiated access was imminent.

The reality has turned out to be very different than boosters of techno-social governance and the 'end of history' predicted. All this reflects and conditions a transformed world in which technology and values intersect powerfully and symbiotically. In the tsunami of technological advance however, it is critical to remember that social structures continue to play a powerful role in ordering relationships and methods of power transmission between both individuals and groups. People and systems use technologies, not the other way around. This poses significant challenges for social systems to ensure that primary human values around rights, respect and recognition are both maintained and qualitatively enhanced through purposeful human appropriation of technologies to serve meaningful and transformative ends.

Dimensions of Globalized Learning

Globalization and transformation, in such a relatively short time, pose huge challenges for traditional structures and institutions. People now have the means to compare and contrast issues, to debate and assess situations and to have access to diverse approaches and standards instantaneously. The impact for educators is immense. Such an environment masks real difficulties for large sections of the world's population. Such technological resources are not available to all. This means that access to communications and technology – like access to wealth – is highly unequal.

The impact on education and learning of globalization processes is equally contradictory. On the one hand, learning resources (such as course materials, MOOCs, accepted terminology, subject range and internet-based learning) have been criticized for being overwhelmingly centered on US or European models and norms – in particular, by being dominated by exclusively English language orientations. On the other, globalization opens up real possibilities for transformative learning, where knowledge exponentially grows without constraints of national curricula or vested self-interest.

Goran Therbörn (2000) looked at this from a sociological perspective to analyze the impact of globalization on the nature, purpose and structure of education in a rapidly evolving world society. He located changes in higher education under five topical discourses:

- Competition
- Economics
- Socio-critical discourse
- State power (or impotence)
- Cultural and planetary ecology.

Therbörn graphically links globalization to a ruthless system of '*winners*' and '*losers*' and sees this divide having an increasing importance for how we structure and appreciate the importance of learning and education. The winners are those for whom an opened world is an opportunity for action, connection to resourceful friends, improved mobility (geographic and social), access to information and enriched access. For losers, globalization is a closure of opportunities, employment options, chances for decent wages or profits and a cultural invasion that subverts important values. Academics and educators are now, whether consciously aware or not, intimately connected to the need to articulate globalized learning models and reflective practice founded on explicitly international perspectives.

Crisis and Opportunity in Learning

In Europe, this rate of change has had a particular dynamic – reflecting the pressures of globalization within a context of an ambitious social and political experiment of increased integration – the European Union. As a direct result of the development of a free labor market in the European Union,

greater numbers of Europeans can move between different countries to find new jobs or better standards of living. This massive movement of peoples, communities and labor skills within the EU means that contact with new and different cultures is happening at an increasing pace. The rate of immigration into the EU has strongly increased during the last 20 years. This builds on earlier population movements following the Second World War that saw the exponential growth of the 'guest worker' system.

The old notion that knowledge and pedagogy are inextricably linked has been replaced by a new view of knowledge as a *commodity*. According to the OECD (1996) 'knowledge is now recognized as the driver of productivity and economic growth, leading to a new focus on the role of information, technology and learning in economic performance. The term "*knowledge-based economy*" stems from this fuller recognition of the place of knowledge and technology in modern ... economies'. Several writers have extended the concept, arguing that science and research are transforming the whole social structure, creating a knowledge-based society of global proportions. Etzkowitz (2001) provided the concept of the 'triple helix'. This represents the complex interplay between universities, government and industry in the innovation framework (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2001).

In a profoundly unequal world, where divergences in wealth and power are increasing between the North and South, education and learning are not immune from in-built structural inequalities. If learning is about access to knowledge, one has to consider the implications of denial of such access to a significant proportion of the world's population. This differential access has been identified – referred to as a *digital divide*.

Despite dramatic growth in student numbers, many commentators argue that full potential of international educational cooperation and the free flow of ideas is not being fully realized. The contradictions and challenges of a globalized world have produced significant challenges. The systemic socio-economic crisis since the Great Recession of 2008 has escalated many elements to levels of severe threat however. The nature of systemic crisis means that education systems will need to focus ever more intently in providing competence and skills to promote adaptability and creativity in turning crisis into a springboard for new directions. This means new emphases on innovation, research and creativity.

Technology: solution or prison?

The interaction between technology and globalization creates new challenges but also new opportunities. Digitalization connects people, cities, countries and continents in ways that vastly increase both individual and collective potential. At its core, digitalization is a democratizing force. It is now possible to connect and collaborate with anyone. But digitalization also has the ability to concentrate extraordinary power. Digitalization can make the smallest voice heard everywhere but can also quash individuality and cultural uniqueness. Digitalization can be incredibly empowering: the most influential companies that have been created over the past decade all started out with an idea, and they had the product before they had the financial resources and physical infrastructure for delivering that product. But digitalization can also be disempowering, when people abandon their freedom for individual responsibility and critical thought in exchange for convenience and become reliant on the advice and decisions of computers.

Whatever about particular technologies or new methods, the characteristics of human learning remain driven by issues around motivation, skill acquisition, improved understanding and tangible benefit. They also relate critically to power and ability to control one's own environment, needs, expectations, relationships and rewards.

The impact of a globalized work environment and the end of classical hierarchical schooling models has massive implications. The evidence is that learning will ever more be conditioned by an intersection of interests between the world of employment and the world of education. Educational institutions (and learners as individuals) must respond to the paradigm shifts affecting all life and relationships in the 21st century. A recurring theme identified here is the '*productivity of knowledge*'. This productivity of knowledge can be exemplified by indicators that include:

- Communicating the same knowledge to ever larger numbers of learners

- Increased enabling of learners to apply knowledge in their organizations
- Generating additional knowledge through pen and distance learning programs
- Transforming the traditional lecturer into a mentor, guide and facilitator of learning who supports learners at the same time as increasing their knowledge
- Enabling a profound increase in acquisition and generation of new knowledge.

Diversity: Frontiers of Human Meaning

The concept of diversity includes a number of practical issues to remove attitudinal barriers as well as a set of values based on acceptance and respect. It suggests a level of understanding that each individual is unique, while recognizing individual differences. These differences can be along any number of dimensions: 'race', ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political orientation, skin color or ideologies. A systematic approach to diversity entails the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and fostering environment. It is about understanding the Other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diverse difference contained within each individual or group.

The massive movement of peoples, communities and labor skills within the EU means that contact with new and different cultures is happening at an increasing pace. In addition, the impact of the wars and killing fields in the Middle East and Africa since the US led Iraqi invasion of 2003 has produced a huge increase in refugees and asylum seekers. The recognition of permanent difference and dislocation in the European metropolitan regions is a difficult and complex process. In a similar manner, the changing nature of families, the embedded discrimination against women, the exclusion of citizens with disabilities the emergence of new forms of overt fascism and discrimination all point to the need to re-define and assert the importance of social inclusion and varied diversity as foundations of democracy itself. The need to develop relevant and practical techniques and methods and learning frameworks for learners and practitioners at the interface of cultural, ethnic, economic, social and religious difference is a key driver for innovative diversity competence development.

From Margin to Empowerment: Inclusive Futures

Developing innovative and creative learning and application paradigms is critical for a number of reasons. This develops the discourse by a focus on several connected themes:

- Intercultural communications
- Learning policy in contexts of diversity and change
- Conflict transformation initiatives
- Human rights frameworks for educational access
- Innovation in work and labor market transformation around diversity
- Hegelian conceptualizations of the Other
- Transformational learning in social change
- Permanent migration – developing multicultural responses
- From digital divide to universal access – Universal Design for Learning
- Implications for policy, research and innovation
- Elephants in the room - war, violence and the costs of exclusion.

Overcoming exclusion and marginalization means equipping students and educational stakeholders alike not simply with the mechanisms to understand social challenges but to be able to do something about them. Social exclusion implies both a *structure* and a *process* in the ordering of human relations.

Inclusion is about ensuring that alternative aspects of the human experience are fostered and vindicated. This in itself calls for communities of the marginalized to better define their needs and their potential contribution to the wider society and communities of which they are part. Inclusion is a critical component of global learning, ensuring that the world passed on to subsequent generations is not a uniform, suburbanized market place but a living and diverse collection of richly different communities. Inclusion and diversity are integral elements of values in teaching, research and best practice in global learning.

Globalization gives a new and enhanced importance to this process of educational change. Such a shift raises questions regarding structures of learning, working and production and how they might promote innovation and creativity. From being an aspiration to add interest to academic inquiry and student development, global learning has evolved to be a critical tool in preparing individuals and societies to understand, engage with and potentially transform a globalized socio-economic environment.

Competition amongst nations for the control and productive use of knowledge is increasing. The power to shape and influence the direction of internationalization in higher education clearly rests with the larger and more powerful institutions and systems of the advanced countries. These countries do not present a united front; they compete amongst themselves for foreign students, control of knowledge and influence in the international higher education arena. Developing countries are not powerless in this relationship, but the balance is tipped towards the more advanced industrialized nations.

The changes produced in both the human and technical aspects of the globalization process shape how global education may now include various learning communities previously excluded by reason of prejudice, discrimination or remoteness. We need to support learners across the globe to transcend barriers and address conflict and persistent discrimination by means of skillful application of potent technological tools in the metamorphosis of traditional educational systems to meet unprecedented levels of socio-economic transformation.

Educators are challenged to examine rights based approaches to inclusion, valued diversity and innovative models of equity in a globalized planet. In that direction, the potential of emancipatory learning can be recognized and the re-appropriation of human rights in the learning paradigm be asserted.

References

- [1] Altbach, P. G. "Perspectives on internationalization in Higher Education (Resource Review)." *International Higher Education* (The Boston College Center for International Higher Education) 27(Spring) (2002).
- [2] Bell, Daniel. *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. London: Heinemann, 1974.
- [3] Blass, E. and Hayward, P. (2014) 'Innovation in higher education: will there be a role for the "academe/university" in 2025?' in *European Journal Futures Research* 2:41.
- [4] Bruce, A. (2009). *Beyond Barriers: Intercultural Learning and Inclusion in Globalized Paradigms*, in Szucs, A. (et al) *Distance and E-Learning in transition*, London and Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- [5] Castells, M. (2001) *Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- [6] Cohen, R. and Kennedy, M. (2000) *Global Sociology*, New York: New York University Press.
- [7] Etzkowitz, Henry and Loet Leydesdorff. *Universities and the Global Knowledge Economy*. London: Continuum, 2001.
- [8] Hulsman, T. (2000) *Costs of Open Learning: a handbook*, Oldenburg: Verlag Carl von Ossietzky Universität.
- [9] Knight, J. "Internationalization of Higher Education." In J. Knight and H. de Wit (Eds.) *Quality and Internationalization in Higher Education*. Paris: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1999, 13-28.
- [10] Lyotard, J-F. (1984) *The Post-modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- [11] Miller, R.; Shapiro, H. and Hilding-Haman, K. (2008) *School's Over: Learning Spaces in Europe in 2020: An Imagining Exercise on the Future of Learning*. Joint Research Centre. Scientific and Technical Report. European Commission.
- [12] OECD (1998) *Human Capital Investment: An International Comparison*. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
- [13] OECD (2002). *Education at a Glance 2002*. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
- [14] Roberts, P. "Rereading Lyotard: Knowledge, Commodification and Higher Education." *Electronic Journal of Sociology* 3.3, 1998,
- [15] Rumble, G (1997) *The Costs and Economics of Distance Education*, London: Kogan Page.
- [16] Therborn, G. (2000), Introduction, *International Sociology*, June 2000.