

Public Engagement and Educating for Global Citizenship: What do we risk by focusing on “the Empowered Individual”?

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Over the past decade there have been many challenges and changes to the work of public engagement. In Canada, organizations working to educate Canadians about global issues related to poverty have diligently tried to understand the competing ethical and value-laden efforts to garner support for international engagement. These efforts tend to seek to engage Canadians in three areas: 1) responses to humanitarian crisis, 2) in long term projects addressing poverty and socio-economic development, 3) in advocacy to create pro-poor policies from local to global levels. My work as both researcher and educator is concerned with how we conceptualize and practice public engagement in each of these areas and as global citizenship education (See Shultz, 2013;2012; 2011; 2007). Early in the last decade, development education shifted to global citizenship education as a response to changes in public funding for international development and also a significant demand by academics, practitioners, and organizations (many in areas deemed “un-developed”) for changes in how people living in poverty were represented and the discourses of superiority and deficiency that underpinned ideas of “development”. As public funds for educating Canadians was severely cut, organizations became more dependent on fundraising in local communities as a way to continue their work. Even as the critiques of development became louder, organizations often continued to use stereotyped images of starving children (particularly if this child was African) or working children (typical of images of Asian children) to engage Canadians. Such images and their messages of despair demanded pity and an urgent charitable donation. In response, some international cooperation organizations began a significant sector-wide challenge including setting up ethical

standards for the use of images that became embedded in a Code of Conduct (see www.CCIC.ca) and a well researched education campaign (see www.ACIC.ca) pointing out the problem of defining whole continents as filled with desperate, hopeless people. Soon the norms of the sector directed people to shift public engagement away from a focus on helping pitiful victims suffering in deficient countries toward educating Canadians as engaged global citizens.

So what can be bad about that? What has been achieved in this decade of global citizenship education? What can we say about these “engaged global citizens”?

Global citizenship education sits perilously on the fault line of neocolonialism¹ a term used to describe the continuation and reproduction of international relations (political, organizational, and interpersonal) that were set in place through European colonialism. To get a clear picture of what this involves, it is helpful to apprehend Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Catherine Odora Hoppers’ idea of cognitive justice in relation to “north” – “south” relations. de Sousa Santos speaks of the abyssal line of colonialism, a line drawn across the world as European powers roamed the world looking for human and natural resources to power their desire for empire. This line created what is best described as an abyss... a deep chasm that is difficult if not impossible to cross where, due to colonialism, a worldview grew complete with supporting political, economic and social institutions, which saw Western Europeans as knowledgeable and those outside that geographic and cultural location as such deficient beings that they lived without any knowledge or civilization. The abyss framed all relationships and set in motion the historical events that followed including slavery and the pillaging of the natural resources of the non-western world to support the colonial powers. The colonial abyssal line has endured and continues to produce subjects on both sides: the deficient victim in need of all aspects of assistance (intellectual, political, social, cultural, and economic development) and the knowledgeable “Westerner”, imagined as fully endowed with

¹ See for example, writers such as Abdi, 2011 Abdi & Shultz, 2012; Andreotti, 2012; Jefferess, 2012; Odora Hoppers, 2009.

superior development in all these aspects. Until the abyssal line is transformed and a global cognitive justice is allowed to emerge, any attempt at collaboration cannot avoid the influence of the abyss (Andreotti & de Sousa, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2007).

How does this affect Canadian public engagement? When practitioners began to move away from using the “deficient recipient of development “ as their focus and shifted to “empowering individuals to act”, many organizations/ educators neglected to transform the relationships that formed the foundation of the earlier engagement between victim and saviour. The public engagement continued to be abyssal by perpetuating a relationship where on one side we had the charitable giver from the “developed world” giving to the “needy person/community/country” of the “un-developed” world, the pair separated by the abyssal line. Development assistance continued to be situated as an urgent call for changing the lives of people in other parts of the world with the key actor in this being the good global citizen who was “empowered” to act. It called upon Canadians’ sense of kindness and charity (and who can argue the goodness of this?). For Canadians this was, in many ways, a helpful piece of the wider citizenship education project. However, it came with a very heavy toll on the recipients of this charity. Can we really consider it good if it demands an ongoing humiliation of the recipient through being viewed as lacking agency or full humanity? I work regularly with teachers and students, and I continuously encounter the single story of, for example, Africans as deficient semi-citizens living in squalor. Trying to pry this stereotype from peoples’ minds is tough educational work! The abyssal line continues to wreak its havoc. Through this work I have come to understand how the “engaged global citizen” that sits powerfully on one side of the abyss is not a helpful goal for changing how the majority of the world’s people are viewed. “You can change the world” as the motto of global citizenship engagement will perpetuate the abyssal line if it isn’t firmly embedded in building decolonizing relationships. In shifting our focus to “the empowered individual” and away from the “deficient victim” we haven’t really changed much. The lens has just shifted away from the victim, ignoring the colonial abyss that

separates them. Until we transform this abyss, no amount of sloganeering, ecstatic experience of becoming part of a symbolic “we”, or walking barefoot for a day will change the relationship between the historically colonized and the historically colonizing.

How might we address this?

Decolonizing Relations and Destroying the Abyssal Line

My call for an end to focusing public engagement on the “empowered individual” is not a call for the end of international solidarity or even projects of material redistribution, and certainly not a suggestion that people become less active as citizens. This is a call for a transformed model of global citizenship based on global social justice that is fundamentally about changed relationships. This means working to more justly distribute the benefits and burdens of human life on this planet along with a deep reciprocal recognition of the full humanity of all people. It is a call to transcend the destructive, artificial borders created by “development” and to find ways to decolonize international relations and arrangements. It means fundamentally destroying colonial relations. For people who have learned that they are “the knowers and changers of the world” through their individuality and personal initiative, the shift to being ordinary global citizens – global citizens both needing and contributing to the world - may be difficult. The decolonial project is, according to Walter Mignolo (2012), a project of working outside the colonial “rules of the game”. This is surely the place to locate public engagement if we are to address the issues that face the people of this planet. By practicing global citizenship as transformed/ transformational and decolonizing relationships, we open great possibilities to not only destroy the abyss of colonialism but also transform how we address the very significant global issues of our time.

Educating for an Empowered Partnership : Some first steps for cognitive justice in public engagement

Global citizenship education and public engagement require (re)building relationships to form foundations for practice that close the colonial abyss (and yes, even a penny carnival to raise money for victims of famine can be an enactment of an abyssal relationship). By focusing on building authentic partnerships we can move away from the tokenism, manipulative messages, and hyper individualism of many current practices of public engagement. This relational shift requires a commitment to mutual learning and reciprocity and away from the focus on the empowered individual. Questions that might inform such emerging relations include:

1. Are you willing to do things differently? What will you do with the knowledge that your experience of reality is just one of many very different experiences of reality? How will you acknowledge your location in the histories of the abyssal line? How does this affect your contribution to global citizenship education and public engagement?
2. What is the agenda for the global citizenship activity/ engagement? Whose agenda is it? How does this agenda transform or resist the histories and legacies of colonialism and move toward global social justice (is it an activity done to someone? For someone? With someone?) What needs to be done and why? Who will the activity impact and how? How can we co-construct a partnership around the needs that are expressed?
3. How will partners discuss differing needs? Who is a legitimate knowledge holder and whose knowledge will direct actions and engagements?
4. How will decisions be made? How will decisions reflect cognitive justice? How will partners have equitable power to inform, enact, and reflect on the actions and issues related to the partnership?
5. How will the partnership avoid the pitfalls of “engagement as manipulation” and the historical imbalanced power relations of global engagement? How

will the partnership move toward equitable autonomy and an authentic relationship?

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