



## **Global Citizenship A common compass for transformative education?**

*Timo Holthoff*

*Education gives us a profound understanding  
that we are tied together as citizens of the global community,  
and that our challenges are interconnected.*

*Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General<sup>1</sup>*

Following discourses of global education within Germany and beyond, *Global Citizenship* has become a popular buzzword in defining the normative aspects of an educational agenda that seeks to respond to interconnected challenges in a globalized world. On the one hand, this is based on the fact that the idea of a cosmopolitan worldview and identity (that learners should acquire a sense of belonging and solidarity as equal citizens of a shared world) has always been core to the concept of Global Education. On the other hand, it is due to more recent developments in the international educational agenda, since UNESCO has made 'Global Citizenship Education' (GCE) its approach for "preparing learners for the challenges of the 21st century", seeing it as an umbrella concept that is integrating different educational practices, like peace education, human rights education or Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2013)<sup>2</sup>. It produced a couple of widely followed papers and conferences and, together with civil society lobbyists, succeeded in explicitly integrating the notion of Global Citizenship Education into the UN-Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4.7) in order to give it more value on the political agenda of UN member states (UNESCO 2015). This created a frame of reference for civil society to push value based education in their national contexts: both in promoting the general role that education plays in facilitating societal change and in the particular role of Global (Citizenship) Education within the quest of rendering

education itself more transformative by changing curricula and learning methodologies. UNESCO defines GCE by distinguishing three conceptual dimension of learning:

<b>Cognitive:</b>
To acquire knowledge, understanding and critical thinking about global, regional, national and local issues and the interconnectedness and interdependency of different countries and populations.
<b>Socio-emotional:</b>
To have a sense of belonging to a common humanity, sharing values and responsibilities, empathy, solidarity and respect for differences and diversity.
<b>Behavioural:</b>
To act effectively and responsibly at local, national and global levels for a more peaceful and sustainable world.

(UNESCO 2013, P. 15).

Yet, the notion of Global Citizenship (Education) and its transformative potential remain vague to many. Therefore, in this essay I will elaborate different understandings of Global Citizenship from the past to the present and suggest aspects that it should entail in educational and activist contexts in order to unfold a more transformative, emancipatory, inclusive and empowering impact.

### **The evolvement of the idea of Global Citizenship – from a European point of view**

The notion of Global Citizenship can be traced back to ancient Europe. Greek philosopher Diogenes, one of the founders of the cosmopolitan school of thought, is documented to be the first one

to refer to himself as a Global Citizen in 412 B.C., when he was asked what his origin was (Wikipedia 2018a)<sup>3</sup>. Already at this time the notion comprised of a sense of belonging to a human family, beyond particular national identities, and along with the general understanding of citizenship both rights and responsibilities.

The idea had a revival in the time of European Renaissance and the so called *Enlightenment*: Immanuel Kant in his philosophic oeuvre *Perpetual Peace* proclaimed 'the law of world citizenship', referring to the idea that the planet belongs equally to all people, which should be considered respectfully both in treating foreign visitors and in behaving in foreign countries (Kant 1795)<sup>4</sup>. At this time, together with the evolvement of the concept of Human Rights, the notion of Global Citizenship found its way into (western) judicial philosophy which later informed the formation of the United Nations, with the UN-Charta and Universal Declaration of Human Rights as foundations of international law in the post World War II order. This, of course, remained symbolic in many ways. As the UN regime of law does not warrant equal rights bindingly and enforceable to all people in the world, Global Citizenship in a legal sense – if you aspire it at all – remained and remains a utopia.

It was before this background that in 1948 US-Bomber-Pilot Garry Davis abandoned his US-Citizenship and sought political asylum at the UN in Paris. Convinced that nation states are the root of all evil, he declared himself *World Citizen No 1*. and with



some spectacular public interventions lobbied for a peaceful world government. He founded the *Global Citizens Registry*, which issued symbolic *World Passports* to stateless refugees of war (Wikipedia 2018b)<sup>5</sup>. The concept was pushed by other popular individuals, too. Albert Einstein described himself as a world citizen and supported the idea throughout his life, famously saying '*Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind*' (Wikipedia 2018a).

To socialist ideology the western idea of modern cosmopolitanism (in the capitalist sense of a widely travelled and open-minded individual) was too apolitical and lacked collective identity. *Internationalism* can be seen as a socialist version of Global Citizenship that emphasized solidarity among peoples/classes beyond national borders, however, without neglecting the important role of nation states.

After the end of the Cold War, with an ever-accelerating globalization, dissolving borders and growing (or more consciously recognized) interdependencies science more prominently dealt with the phenomenon of Global Citizenship, especially in describing the facets of increasingly interconnected lives (on political, ecological, economic, social and cultural levels) and how this effects (multiple) identities or brings about contradictions and uncertainties.

For people migrating between countries (both physically and mentally) global citizenship might be a reality and aspect of identity, however, migration renders the political and other inequalities of our world visible at the same time. Also to some members of a global (business) elite, enjoying the privilege of free mobility to all countries, Global Citizenship has become a self-attributed attitude. So, the notion itself does not automatically imply the normative objective of a more just world – and we have to be mindful of power imbalances when we use it and define its values.

### **A eurocentric or a universal concept?**

This derivation tells a rather eurocentric (his)story of Global Citizenship and it would be ignorant to believe that other world regions haven't brought about similar – or even more sophisticated – philosophies or lived practices that are relatable to the idea of Global Citizenship – especially since the European version of it is somewhat a tainted one: it was in the exact same era and by the exact same philosophers of *European Enlightenment* that racial theory (with the idea of white supremacy) was developed and provided a moral justification for the suppression, exploitation and elimination of peoples through

colonialism. This, not in the least, showcases the importance of looking for contributions from non-European schools of thought – and possibly of a revision and extension of what is understood by Global Citizenship, in western dominated international discourse. Below I present some examples that are known to me, which might help in re-defining the narrative of Global Citizenship:

The *Maha Upanishad*, one of the oldest Sanskrit texts that constitutes philosophies of Hinduism, carries a strong relation to Global Citizenship, in describing the idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family):

*One is a relative, the other stranger,  
say the small minded.  
The entire world is a family,  
live the magnanimous.*<sup>6</sup>

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* that comes from southern Africa provides us with some beautiful ideas for reframing Global Citizenship, too. *Ubuntu* means 'humanity' in Nguni language and its core belief is often translated by the catch phrase 'I am because we are'. The concept has gained more attention since both Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu applied it more practically to their political or theological agenda (Wikipedia 2018c)<sup>7</sup>.

A political activist from South Africa once described his understanding of *Ubuntu* to me: 'Ubuntu means that I can feel you breathe through the soles of my feet'. The difference to the catch phrase of European Enlightenment 'I think, therefore I am', which displays the western paradigm of rational thinking and individualism, is obvious. So rather than for a *cognitive* recognition of our interconnectedness *Ubuntu* stands for a deeply felt togetherness, as an essence of what it means to be human. Based on this understanding it would not need a *decision* to act with mindful consideration of other people's rights based on information about the consequences of our own actions (which is a central learning objective of classic GCE). It would be a constituting element of our human self, hence rather a deeply emotional and visceral than a cognitive process.

Many indigenous religions and ontologies (assumption of what and how humans are to be in this world) contain a belief that everything, both physical and metaphysical, is part of one big living organism. A prominent example is the idea of Pachamama/Mother

Earth, pursued by several indigenous groups in Latin America. Such holistic worldviews embody an understanding of interdependence so deep that system theory could hardly achieve it cognitively. They invite for a less anthropocentric and less rational notion of Global Citizenship – which also involves the practical and spiritual interconnectedness with all (non-)living beings and the lands and therefore a dissolution of the separation of both human and nature and mind and body. In such a belief system a destruction of the natural environment feels like cutting your own arm. It means embodied sustainability, having existed long before the eco-crises caused by industrial countries made scientists invent this word. Before this background some folks have suggested to reframe Global Citizenship to *Earth Citizenship*, stressing a more holistic approach.

### **Expanding the narrative of Global Citizenship – as an educative response to a cultural crisis**

Bayo Akomolafe, a Nigerian psychologist and activist, said: 'the problem is not the system but the culture that built the system'<sup>18</sup>. He refers to the fact that all our (mainstream) solutions to the multiple crises of our world are based on the same paradigms of thinking that caused the problems in the first place – and therefore constantly reproduce them. Modernity has programmed us to think and even feel and interrelate in certain limited ways that have proven unfit to lead us to a wiser future.

In this sense of a predominantly *cultural* crisis, education and activism become a struggle of creating space for silenced voices (inside and among us), of *unlearning* our hidden paradigms, of re-connecting with what and whom we separated from, of re-creating meaning and of experimenting with different possibilities of (non-) human co-existence – ultimately of self-liberation from the tiny boxes that we thought are the limits of what is knowable, tangible and doable. A precondition to that is the acknowledgement that we do not have all the answers, that there is no masterplan for a future worth living. We have to humble ourselves and start posing different questions instead of looking for better answers.

For Global Citizenship Education to be more responsive to this, the notion of Global Citizenship and the implied narratives of change must be opened, diversified and expanded. This means looking for diverse wisdoms and practices from different (especially marginalized) knowledge and belief systems – beyond popular



notions of development, beyond western ontology and rationalism. Some paths to explore were suggested in this essay.

What I already like about the term Global Citizenship, however, is that it entails the emancipatory idea that change can happen from below, that all people can raise their voice and have a capacity to actively involve themselves in reshaping their societies, mindful of living in a shared planet.

Indeed, many political activists and researchers see a *Global Citizens Movement* as a necessary key to realize the great transition to a future worth living, paying respect that we are in fact living in a diverse and entangled planetary civilization and hence need a global social movement for change – across civil societies worldwide and beyond dichotomous North-South-relations. Apart from the challenge of mobilizing so many people from so diverse realities and conceptions of the world, however, it is – unlike other social movements in the past – challenged by the lack of a clear opponent to revolutionize against and short of a clear narrative of an alternative future: because it is not *the system* but it is us, who in unconscious complicity re-build the system on a daily basis, that have to change our dearest truths, habits and beliefs. It is, so to speak, *a revolution against ourselves* without knowing where this will lead us. While this may sound harsh and frightening and adding to the many uncertainties that people face already, I believe that the

path to go on for this revolution is bumpy, twisted and queer, often painful but essentially beautiful and unfolding while we walk it hand in hand together.

### Notes

1. UNESCO 2015: Global Citizenship Education – Topics and Learning Objectives, p. 14, <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002329/232993e.pdf>>, Accessed April 14, 2018.
2. UNESCO 2013: Global Citizenship Education – Preparing Learners for the Challenges of the 21st Century: <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002277/227729e.pdf>>, Accessed April 14, 2018.
3. Wikipedia 2018a: Global Citizenship: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global\\_citizenship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_citizenship)>, Accessed April 14, 2018.
4. Immanuel Kant: Zum Ewigen Frieden, Dritter Definitivartikel. <<http://www.textlog.de/3671.html>> Accessed April 14, 2018.
5. Wikipedia 2018b. <Garry Davis: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garry\\_Davis](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garry_Davis)>, Accessed April 14, 2018.
6. *Maha Upanishad 6.71–75*: quoted on Wikipedia. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maha\\_Upanishad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maha_Upanishad)>, Accessed April 15, 2018.
7. Wikipedia 2018c: Ubuntu Philosophy. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu\\_philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_philosophy)>, Accessed April 15, 2018.
8. See <<http://bayoakomolafe.net/>>.

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He is currently undergoing a major transformation himself: He has become a father and is looking forward to rediscovering himself and the world through the eyes of his daughter.