

The Globalization of education:

Paul Cappon

FACING NEW REALITIES

The past year has been a difficult one for proponents of globalization. Since the end of the Cold War, numerous individuals – and entire countries – have celebrated the promise of a new era in world affairs: one in which not only goods and services, but also ideas, could be exchanged freely and instantaneously between every corner of the globe. Unfortunately, reality has failed to produce the utopia that so many envisioned. Over the last few months, instead of global dialogue, we have had violent conflict at international conferences in Québec City and Genoa, Italy. Instead of increased prosperity, we have had the threat of a global recession, and now the reality of an international war. We are again reminded of an age-old truism: *whenever there is human suffering, all is not right with the world.*

If we are in fact to redeem the idea of globalization, then in my opinion we must transform perceptions that hold globalization as a force working only for the rich and powerful, and irrelevant (or harmful) to the great masses of the world. Yet the question remains: if governments have so far been unable to direct the forces of globalization for the benefit of all, who from civil society can take up the challenge?

Arguably, educators hold the key, for they can claim at least partial parentage of the idea that globalization ought to benefit everyone. Ever since the right to education was declared a universal human right by the United Nations in 1948, the world education community has taken important steps to ensure that the benefits of knowledge are shared everywhere and by everyone – a covenant for learning that preceded the term “globalization” by decades.

Under this covenant, there have been magnificent gains, principally in basic literacy. The most recent UNESCO education report reported that, in the more than 50 years since the universal right to education was first affirmed, adult illiteracy rates have fallen in every part of the world. The effects of such gains are real and well documented. Many of the national success stories highlighted in recent years – countries that have reaped the apparent economic benefits of globalization – have in fact invested considerable amounts in education. Ireland, Turkey, Mexico, and many of the “Asian Tigers” have all enjoyed rapid rates of economic growth, both in real and per-capita GDP. They have gained the respect of the international community, and they have acquired this respect in large part because of the success of their commitment to education. For those who are critics of these successes, I should point out that a commitment to education does not necessarily translate into acceptance of the values of global capitalism. Cuba, which has spent the last forty years isolated from its American neighbour as a result of fundamental differences, nonetheless has been able to provide for a number of the basic needs of its population despite the country’s economic isolation. And the relative successes of Cuba can in large part be attributed to its commitment to education.





The lesson here is clear: education for all opens new worlds, while education for the few (or none) ensures little more than despair.

Obviously, then, education has the ability to transform the various meanings of globalization. But in promoting education in the era of globalization, it is critical that old points of view – East versus West, North versus South, developed versus developing – are left behind, and more truly universal values (such as the unalienable right to education) are the reference points for our discussion. A critical area in need of these reference points is the current debate over education in WTO negotiations: a number of governments are now proposing that education be treated as a service, to be exchanged for profit between governments. This, of course, can be a very dangerous proposition and threatens the right of all of us to have access to basic education, as well as an opportunity to explore learning opportunities on an equitable basis throughout our lives. (For a full discussion of this issue, see the article by Noel Schacter on page 24.)

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So far, Canada's position at the negotiating table has been a cautious one, as the federal government has affirmed that Canada's "public education" is not to be bargained with, while at the same time seeking opportunities in which Canada's educational providers can export their services. The contradictions within this position are well known and will likely be challenged by other governments as negotiations accelerate. This is why it is critical for Canadian educators – along with colleagues from the world education community – to voice their opinions now and ensure that their values are

well represented in any final agreement. The right to learn is itself at stake, and it is up to the world's educators to maintain the supremacy of this universal right in relation to any new international trade laws.

Trade treaties aside, the driving force behind much of what we call globalization is the communications revolution; the present ability to exchange ideas electronically (and instantaneously) around the globe is changing the way we live. Already, the effects of new information technologies are being felt by the education community. Within Canada, knowledge sources such as the Canadian Encyclopedia are now available entirely on-line, and can be used in classrooms throughout the land. These sorts of innovations have the potential to free up previously untapped resources, and should be introduced widely. However, our rush to embrace new technologies must

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Si les gouvernements se sont montrés incapables d'harnacher les forces de la mondialisation pour le bénéfice de tous, qui donc peut relever le défi ? Les éducateurs, pourquoi pas ? L'expérience nous apprend que l'éducation pour tous ouvre de nouveaux univers, tandis que l'éducation pour quelques-uns ne fait qu'entretenir le désespoir. La connaissance n'est pas seulement une marchandise dont l'avènement de la mondialisation a accentué la valeur, mais un avantage dont l'importance croît à mesure qu'on le partage et un agent de renforcement de la société civile elle-même. Notre tâche est donc d'utiliser l'éducation d'une manière qui assure la marche continue du progrès humain et ainsi façonner la mondialisation avec des mains humaines, plutôt que de permettre à des forces impersonnelles de déterminer le cours de nos vies.

take into account not only the current digital divide separating too many people in the world, but also the much more troubling knowledge divide, which will only accelerate unless governments – and educators – share what they have learned.

It has been the digital divide that has received the most attention of educators everywhere in recent months. Clearly, the Internet and other digital technologies have the ability to transform the classroom; any efforts to ensure that the communications revolution is shared by schools in every country of the world merit our support. Yet the learning divide is another issue in need of our attention, for we must take greater efforts to improve the learning capacity of students of every age, gender, class and nationality. The computer, after all, is simply another potential tool for learning, not unlike a pencil, or a chalk board. The student who uses the computer is the real source of innovation, productivity and development, and the potential of that student should remain the primary focus of educators everywhere.

In essence, what educators need to affirm is that information – basic, and in many cases, applied knowledge – is not simply another commodity with its value enhanced by globalization, but instead something whose benefit increases proportionately with the degree to which it is shared. To this point in time, learning, and education policy, have been seen as competitive advantages for those countries at the forefront of globalization: statistics about literacy rates and the number of



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university degrees per capita are interchanged with corporate taxation policy in the effort to seek out globalization's financial benefits for the fortunate few. This pattern, while producing short-term gains for some economies, may in fact be detrimental to the goal of including more citizens - and entire continents - in the global winner's circle. Education, like information, should be shared, and not be the basis of undue competition. Organizations like the World Bank help develop the physical infrastructure of developing countries to help bridge any economic divide; the learning infrastructure of these nations merits similar attention. There should be a new ethos of global co-operation in education and in the newest experiments in learning theory, so that the learning covenant can truly extend to every corner of the globe.

Re-affirming (and re-investing in) both basic and applied education has another benefit distinct from economic development: the strengthening of civil society itself. Education has, in the past, been the nation-state's principal instrument of developing community; concepts of citizenship and the public good have been instilled in elementary classrooms throughout the world. These are concepts that are perhaps of greater importance today than in any other time in world history, as new realities are challenging the very idea of globalization.

These new realities are hardly neutral, and they are affecting the lives of individuals and populations in dramatically different ways. But they are also malleable. Our task, then, is to face these realities and use education as our principal tool to ensure the continued march of human progress. Once we do this, we can shape globalization with human hands, rather than allow the impersonal forces impelling it to determine our lives. 🌐

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