

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Issue paper n°6



How can Global Citizenship Education foster engagement?

(1) Engaging with complexity

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Global Citizenship Education Centre of expertise

In the [previous issue paper](#) published by Enabel's GCE Centre of Expertise, I discussed the relationship between Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and engagement. I argued that providing knowledge about 'GCE-labelled' topics was not in itself sufficient to create engagement or to push young people into action, but that other practices should also be encouraged, including attention to the complex nature of the issues put forward by GCE, the development of self-efficacy, the provision of enabling environments, and the networking of trained young people. This year, I propose to explore each of these factors that can make GCE better equipped to foster engagement and to reflect on how they can be better designed and implemented, starting with the issue of complexity.

It seems to me that this first question – that of complexity – has been widely taken up by the GCE sector in recent years, mainly from this angle: **How can GCE account for and experience the complexity of the global issues it addresses?** After all, issues of poverty, inequality, North-South relations, etc. are incredibly complex and it is crucial to find simple ways of bringing this complexity to learners.

However, there is also, I believe, a second way of thinking about complexity in GCE and that is **how to make GCE itself more complex in order to make it more effective and more focused on its engagement purpose.** While the first approach refers us to the question of how to integrate complexity into GCE sequences, animations, projects, the second approach asks us about the form, timing and purpose of GCE itself.

1) Incorporating complexity into GCE sequences

With the shift from development education to Global Citizenship Education, the sector is no longer content to present or raise awareness of global or development issues. GCE now wants to resolutely engage learners in the complexity of the world, to enable them to understand the ins and outs of the problems, to commit them to imagine and to create a fairer and more sustainable world.

Doing so, several trends have emerged in recent years, based on several certainties:

1) Global issues can be better understood when they are explored from the learners' daily experience: Although this has always been a concern of GCE practitioners, who are inspired by lifelong learning, complexity is increasingly approached from concrete situations experienced daily by the learners, which serve as a starting point to broaden their horizons by showing how these situations are part of a complex and interconnected global system.

2) There are no simple and easy solutions to global challenges: complexity requires a shift away from superficial solutions to global problems to deeper thinking. There are no magic solutions to complex problems, no superheroes to save the day. GCE does not aim to develop new generations of heroes, but rather to encourage in learners a posture of 'realistic hope' (Bourn 2021), i.e. the ability to move forward, to create, to imagine future possibilities, while entering that future without illusions, with courage and pragmatism.

3) There is a diversity of positions and views on global issues: complexity must allow multi-perspective approaches. It is a question of bringing to light all voices and points of view on the world and it is a question of dialogue. It is no longer a question of proposing a model of a 'good life' or a 'good society', but rather of encouraging questioning, imagination (what should a 'just and sustainable world' look like?) and exchange and giving learners the opportunity to position themselves and to imagine the kind of actions they deem necessary to make these imagined futures happen.

GCE must therefore develop a **pedagogy of complexity**, i.e. methods capable of accounting for the complexity of global issues without extinguishing the flame of hope, without which any desire to take action would disappear.

To address the three aspects mentioned above, there is now a series of tools and pedagogical practices available to GCE practitioners: To start from the learners' experience, we can mention the reel game and all its variations, the learning tools exploring issues behind the life of a telephone, a pair of jeans, a chocolate bar, etc.

To avoid simplifying problems and encourage learners to ask questions, make connections and consider the diversity of possible approaches, there are guides such as [Teaching for sustainable development through ethical global issues pedagogy](#); [Learning to read the world through other eyes](#), or [GCE otherwise](#) to link global challenges to the deeper roots of the issues. In Flanders, you can find many good examples on the [Education map of 11.11.11](#).

These tools are inspired by innovative methods that also keep away from the traditional GCE (concept-skills-attitudes) learning continuum to make complex experiences from which to open learners to the world: the flipped classroom model (this is the case, for example, of [Oxfam-Magasins du monde's projects in schools](#)); service-learning (understood from a critical point of view, see Bruce 2013); enquiry-based learning (see for instance [LORET](#)); or cooperative-learning.

2) Incorporating complexity into GCE formats

However, these different ways of approaching complexity are always in line with the idea that GCE is 'content-based' and aims to offer learners the opportunity to open up to the world through issues identified as global challenges, starting from which they are taught to reflect, to trace the ins and outs and to imagine alternatives. As a result, GCE is often practised in the form of sequences or workshops to which precise time frames are allocated. One hour is spent on a GCE project or intervention, like one hour is spent on mathematics in a school day, for instance. **However, there are different ways of practising GCE, some of which explore GCE in a much more transversal way.** I can think of at least four:

1) Thematic approach to GCE: This is the most common form of GCE practice, often in the form of a workshop or sequence on a specific theme identified as relevant to GCE (climate change, gender, the food system, peace, migration) and most often requiring the intervention of an association or NGO on learning premises. These thematic workshops are usually organised around a game or a playful way of addressing the chosen issue, followed by a debriefing. They can also be projects with a longer time frame (school exchanges, ecological projects, etc.). Here, GCE is seen as 'content' education within a well-defined time frame.

2) Approaching GCE following opportunities: It is a question of seizing opportunities that arise in the everyday life of learners, whether at school or outside school, to provide them with knowledge about the world and global issues. For example, a geography teacher might address North-South relations, or an economics teacher the issue of inequality.

In non-formal learning settings, a debate could be launched on the occasion of a current event. Enabel's [Questions Vives](#) project is a good example of this way of practising GCE as is the [www.klascement.be/wereldburgerschapeducatie](#) website where materials related to current events can be found. Here GCE is understood as a series of themes that can be tackled occasionally when the opportunity arises. And so, GCE is always seen as 'content' education within a defined time frame.

3) Formal approach to GCE: Here, GCE is used to develop a set of skills in learners – guided by values – which should be exercised in real life. Examples are the creation of open and multicultural atmospheres in schools, the mixing of pupils in classes (pupils with special needs with pupils without special needs), the strengthening of democratic life in the organisation of decision-making structures (setting up a pupil's parliament), making the canteen organic, seasonal, vegetarian, etc. All these initiatives aim to standardise ways of being and doing, so that learners internalise them through practice and habit. Democratic schools and label schools ([UNESCO](#) or [eco-schools](#)) are good examples of this way of practising GCE, which requires a longer time and must be incorporated into the structure of the learning environments themselves. GCE is seen here as 'content' education, as it is about well-defined values and practices, but it is much more transversal. It is not a matter of allocating predetermined time slots, but rather, of immersing its objectives and concerns into the life of organisations.

4) Approaching GCE from the bottom up: Finally, there is a fourth way of practising GCE, which no longer conceives of GCE as thematic education, nor as education in values, but as a pedagogical practice that must aim at the emancipation of learners. Inspired by the thinking of authors such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux or Francisco Gutierrez, GCE is understood here as an attitude, a way of reading the world and engaging with it, all of which imply the development of transversal competences such as the ability to reflect, to make connections, to think critically, to exchange points of view, to dialogue, to construct one's identity and one's relationship to the world.

In this case, GCE is experienced in the long term and must influence the very way educators understand their role, the purpose of the education they provide, their attitude towards learners, and their teaching practices. Philosophical practice (e.g. the [Philocité](#) project), theatre of the oppressed, the Iteco project (in Wallonia) or [Labo vzw](#) in Flanders, or the Enabel project on [critical pedagogies](#) are good examples of this way of practising GCE.

Here, GCE is neither a thematic education, nor is it limited in time. It is much more a question of developing an attitude in educators as well as in students, a way of perceiving the world, one's place in the world, the ways of relating and the purpose of education, which invites itself into all aspects of school life or the life of organisations.

By exploring different formats and time frames, these last two ways of practising GCE also enrich the purpose of GCE, to make it an education not so much attached to making people aware of the problems of the contemporary world, but above all to developing in learners, and over time, capacities for empowerment, critical reflection and dialogue, thus equipping them to face the complex changes characteristic of our world, and to imagine collectively different futures for which to commit themselves.

Implications for practice

The issue of complexity can thus be approached in at least two ways in the field of GCE: First, as a call to the GCE sector to engage in the development of a pedagogy of complexity that can account for the complexity of the issues identified as forming the content of GCE so as to develop in learners a systemic view of problems, an understanding of their role and possibilities, and a refusal of simplistic solutions. Secondly, as an invitation to innovate and make the formats of GCE more complex, to see it as a long and transversal process capable of forming emancipated individuals, who are equipped and able to adapt to the complexity of the world; and who are courageously ready to engage with the world and meet the challenges of tomorrow. When 'whole school approaches' are well understood, for example, they offer a good way to develop such more complex GCE practices in the school environment. This increase in the complexity of GCE formats is necessary, but difficult. Today, most GCE interventions in Belgium take the form of involvement of external speakers, NGOs to which a few hours of school time are allocated. Perhaps there is a need to work more on partnerships with schools and organisations, to strengthen relations with educators who are in contact with learners for a longer period of time, in order to renew GCE forms and time frames and enable more effective participation in the training of new generations of conscious, reflective individuals who wish to put their skills at the service of a desirable future.

References

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