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How to Be a Global Thinker

Veronica Boix Mansilla

Using these routines, teachers cultivate classroom cultures that nurture global competence.

Read Abstract

When you walk into Nancy's 5th grade classroom, you breathe in an atmosphere of interest in the world. Student-written reflections on issues of global concern, world news articles, and portraits of her students (who come from more than eight different countries) cover the walls, reflecting the rich immigrant community served by this public school in Portland, Maine.

The day begins with students watching the news. Today, they learn about the Syrian families arriving in Greece and a new agreement between the European Union and Turkey intended to ameliorate the refugee crisis. As she often does, Nancy leads a discussion of these events using one of the global thinking routines in her repertoire. Today she is using a routine called *The 3 Ys*, shorthand for "three whys."

"Let's see," Nancy muses. "Why might this new agreement in Europe matter to people around the world? Why might it matter to our people here in Portland? Why might it matter to you, personally? How does it resonate?" Th students know the script; they write notes individually about each question and prepare to discuss them.

The discussion is rich. Students recognize that the whole world is worried about the crisis, but that most people don't know what to do about it. They observe that Portland is a city of solutions, receiving immigrant and refugee families whose children attend their school. One student explains that the story matters to her personally becaus her aunt is fleeing conflict and will be coming here from Greece in a few months. Another student mentions a relative who plans to volunteer with an international aid agency. The conversation is free-flowing; now and again Nancy calls for "another perspective" on the topic, encouraging all students to voice their views and questions. Proactively seeking new and different perspectives is a staple of her classroom discussions.

Classrooms like Nancy's inspire us at a time when educating for global competence is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. As educators, we know that nurturing global competence will require more than adding more continents, rivers, or capitals to our already full K–12 curriculum. It will demand that we revisit two foundational questions: *What kind of learning are we actually after?* and *How can we best nurture such learning?*

Cultivating Global Dispositions

With my colleagues at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I have been conducting ongoing research into global competence and how we can best nurture it in our schools.[1] This research has informed a definition of global competence developed in collaboration with Asia Society and the U.S. Council of Chief State School Officers: *the capacity and disposition to understand and act on issues of global significance* (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). Globally competent students are curious about and engaged in the world. They are increasingly able to investigate the world beyond their immediate surroundings, understand their own and others' cultural perspectives, communicate across differences, and take action to improve conditions.

One way Nancy's students are learning to take different perspectives is by listening to, writing, and publishing stories. Like previous classes, these students learned about the scarcity of available stories from the cultures represented in their classroom, and they are poised to donate their finished books to enrich their school and city libraries.

Akual, one of Nancy's students from a previous year, published a story titled "The Lost Boys of Sudan" in which sh depicts the reunification of her family, drawing on an interview with her Sudanese mother. Rich in content and form, the story explores experiences of migration, cultural encounters, and reunification. This is a story of love, family ties, longing, and opportunity, powerfully written from three distinct perspectives: Akual's uncle, who was one of the lost boys of Sudan; her mother, who looked for him in the United States; and Akual herself. Akual's writing is a powerful model of perspective-taking.

Looking closely at this project and the other learning taking place in Nancy's classroom, we observe that students are doing more than acquiring knowledge and skills. These students are developing what I call *global thinking dispositions.*

What are global thinking dispositions, and why should educators focus on them? We may often view our task as educators as one of helping students acquire rich bodies of knowledge and develop important skills. We are pleased when they perform well in the assignments and assessments we devise. But later, we're sometimes disappointed to find that our students fail to apply what they've learned in a different context. Somehow, the learning becomes inert once the instructional unit is completed.

To nurture more long-lasting forms of learning about the world, my colleagues and I are drawing on and extendi a three-part dispositional theory of *thinking dispositions* developed at Project Zero many years ago. Thinking dispositions include (1) the *ability* to perform certain kinds of thinking, such as close observation, making connections, and reasoning with evidence, (2) the *sensitivity* to recognize occasions for using such ability, and (3) a ongoing *inclination* to do so (Perkins, et al., 2000). Looking at global competence through a thinking dispositions lens, I propose that we cultivate the following global thinking dispositions in students:

- *A disposition to inquire about the world* (for example, engaging with questions of significance, exploring local-global connections, and seeking information beyond familiar environments).
- *A disposition to understand multiple perspectives—others' and their own* (for example, considering cultural contex resisting stereotypes, and valuing our shared human dignity, especially as students interact with others whose paths differ greatly from their own).
- *A disposition toward respectful dialogue* (communicating across differences appropriately, listening generously, and sharing courageously).
- *A disposition toward taking responsible action* (being inclined to see and frame opportunities to improve conditions, collaborating with others, and mobilizing themselves to act).

When we interviewed Akual in 6th grade, nine months after her story was published, she clearly demonstrated a disposition to understand multiple perspectives. "We were learning about perspectives, talking about *perspective* all the time," she recalled, "and I thought, 'maybe I can use this in my story and write it from all these perspectives.'" She continued,

> Taking perspective is important in life. You need to understand how a person thinks, how he feels, looking them in the eye. Like if there is a bully in the school, you need to know how the other person is feeling, how the bully is making him stressed. You can try to walk in somebody else's shoes, follow the person around to see their perspective. You can see … deduce … infer someone's perspective from what they say.

Long after Akual had completed her story, she continued to find opportunities to use what she had learned—and did so frequently, with ease and delight. Her capacity to understand different perspectives had become part of her worldview and shaped her understanding of herself and the world around her. The question is, What kind of teaching cultivates this form of learning?

Enter Global Thinking Routines

Research tells us that dispositions are developed through enculturation (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011; Tishman, Perkins, & Jay, 1993). Students cultivate dispositions not through occasional lessons, units, or annual school events, but through ongoing participation in classroom cultures in which these dispositions are visibly valued and extensively practiced.

To cultivate *global* dispositions, teachers must weave opportunities to inquire about the world, take multiple perspectives, engage in respectful dialog, and take responsible action as a routine and integral part of everyday life in the classroom. To help teachers succeed, we are developing a battery of accessible and powerful Global Thinking Routines.

Global Thinking Routines (those highlighted in this article and more) are carefully designed thinking structures or micro-teaching tools specifically geared to nurturing global dispositions. Meant to be used frequently, across content, and as an integral part of the learning environment, these routines help create a classroom culture of global competence over time.

The 3 Ys

We have already seen *The 3 Ys* in Nancy's classroom. In this routine, students ask

1. Why might this (topic, question) matter to me?
2. Why might it matter to people around me (family, friends, city, nation)?
3. Why might it matter to the world?

The 3 Ys can be applied across grades and disciplines to invite students to ponder why a given topic matters. The routine's simple reflection process sparks students' intrinsic motivation to investigate a topic, make local-global connections, and situate themselves in a global context.

Surprisingly, schools seldom teach students how to determine whether something matters to them and why. Sometimes, a topic's significance is personal (the topic compels the learner emotionally or cognitively). Other times, it is generative (it generates new questions, lines of inquiry, or work); explanatory (it enhances our capacity to explain why something happens); or ethical (it helps us discern the right course of action). Significance is not a fixed quality of knowledge—rather, it is constructed by learners.

Nancy, like other educators with whom we work, uses the *3 Ys* routine extensively to help students engage in a new writing task, give feedback for one another's writing, and make the case for why a story is worth telling. In Nancy's experience, reflecting about global, local, and personal significance has visibly deepened student writing, giving students a purpose worthy of their efforts. She is excited when she sees students using the routine spontaneously in conversations with their peers.

How Else & Why

Another global thinking routine—How Else & Why—seeks to nurture students' disposition toward thoughtful communication, encouraging them to recognize that they have communication choices and to consider how they may interact respectfully across cultures and situations. Such an ability is crucial for global-ready citizens, who wi need to adjust the way they express themselves to deal with complex cultural, social, and linguistic situations.

In this routine, students move through multiple reflective iterations of a particular claim (a comment, story, or question):

1. *What I want to say is ...* (The student makes a statement).
2. *How else can I say this? And why?*
3. *How else can I say this? And why?*

At each turn the same student considers intention, audience, and situation to reframe his or her language, tone, body language, and use of various technologies and media. The question repeats through as many iterations as appropriate, inviting the student to reflect about his or her choices in communication.

Lisa's 7th grade class in a public school in Virginia is studying immigration, a topic of contention among the divers students in her class. To prevent the budding heated discussion from hurting feelings, she turns to "How Else and Why." Her goal is to cultivate her students' disposition toward respectful dialogue, especially when differences in perspective are to be expected. "In one sentence, what do you want to say at this point in the discussion? Write it down!" Lisa says. Then she adds, "Now consider how else you might say this, and why? Keep in mind the many ric cultures and points of view we have in our classroom. You can rewrite your sentence several times, thinking abou how else you could say this, and why. Remember—our goal is not to vent, but to learn through dialogue with others."

One student was going to say that the government should reinforce border security to prevent "illegal aliens" fro coming into the United States, but he chose to change the expression because another student had insisted it wa offensive. "I'll say 'undocumented people.' But I still think we should have more police at the border," he clarifies. Another student moved from accusing this boy of being racist to asking him if he had ever met someone who ha crossed the Mexican border.

Slowing down the discussion opened a window into students' thinking, empowering them to be more deliberate their communication choices. Perhaps most important, it helped students understand that each communicative expressions (verbal, body, visual, and so on) carries an intended or unintended message about oneself.

Beauty and Truth

This routine addresses the need to help students navigate the overwhelming quantities of accessible information they encounter in an increasingly visually informed world. It invites students to engage in broad, deep conversations about a news photograph, picture, or textual work of art. It sets the stage for students to think about the nature of beauty and truth, as well as how journalists and artists comment on and communicate ideas about the world. Students respond to the following prompts:

1. Can you find *beauty* in this story/image/photograph?
2. Can you find *truth* in it?
3. How might beauty *reveal* truth?
4. How might beauty *conceal* truth?

John teaches a grade 11–12 political science class in a public school in Washington, D.C. Today, his students are examining photojournalist Micah Albert's image of a woman sitting on bags of waste she has salvaged at the

Dandora municipal dump outside Nairobi, Kenya. One million people live in or around Dandora, which has become a symbol of government inaction and neglect. The class is examining the role of journalism in helping us understand the world.

"Can you find beauty in this image?" John asks. Most students say yes, pointing to the beautiful composition and quiet mood created by the woman at the center of the picture, who has paused amidst large bags of collected garbage to flip quietly through the pages of a book. There is something profoundly human and calm about this moment, despite the dark grey clouds looming in the back, they observe. One student objects that she cannot fin beauty in a picture of destitution.

"Can you find truth?" John asks, "How might the beauty of this image reveal the truth of Dandora? How might it conceal such truth?" These questions spark a rich discussion about the role of photojournalists in engaging readers' attention to consider pressing issues of our time, how beauty and common human experiences can help us bridge cultures and contexts, and the importance of critical consumption of world news.

A Path to Global Competence

Global Thinking Routines capture key forms of thinking embodied in global competence. They are open-ended, assuming no right or wrong answers. They are simple in design, which makes them useful for teachers of varied levels of expertise, yet cognitively sophisticated, providing extensive room for growth and refinement. When teachers make these routines habitual practices—part of "the way we do things here"—they pave the way for the kind of learning we need to prepare our youth for our interdependent world.

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More Thinking Routines

A Disposition to Understand Perspectives

STEP-IN STEP-OUT STEP-BACK

This activity invites learners to take other people's perspectives (religious, cultural, generational, and so on) and recognize that understanding others is often an uncertain proces to which one brings one's own lenses and experiences. The routine invites learners to take not of their own biases and preferences as playing an important role in their efforts to understand others.

Choose. Identify a person or agent in the situation.

Step-in. Given what you see and know at this time, what do you think this person might experience, feel, believe, or know?

Step-out. What else would you like (or need) to learn in order to understand this person's perspective better?

Step-back. Given your exploration of this perspective so far, what do you notice about your own perspective and what it takes to take somebody else's?

A Disposition Toward Taking Responsible Action

CIRCLES OF ACTION

This routine raises students' sensitivity toward opportunities to act in their everyday lives. It invites students to recognize multiple spheres of influence at the personal, local, and global level. Teachers may use the news, science reports, or a school conflict as a provocation and invite students to put their ideas in concentric circles to make their thinking visible.

What can I do to contribute?

1. In my inner circle?
2. In my local community?
3. Beyond my community?

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Endnote

[1] Learn more about Project Zero's work in the areas of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global education at IDGlobal.

Veronica Boix Mansilla is principal investigator and lecturer in education, Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School o Education.

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