

## FORUM

### **Digital media as a reflective tool: creating appropriate spaces for students to become introspective**

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Global citizenship and competency development have become integral parts of political, economic and education discourses. This is particularly true in the USA, where higher education institutions are answering the global citizenship call through the promotion of short-term study abroad. Unfortunately, the ‘just do it’ analogy too often influences the ideology of study abroad, whereby simply providing students with an international experience is perceived to be sufficient in shaping global citizenship. Global citizenship, as an educational outcome, is optimally facilitated when educational experiences are married with appropriate pedagogy, including the shaping of subsequent understandings and actions with critical reflection. We postulate that reflective experiences can be further enhanced by meeting students on the platforms and forums where they live, communicate and already engage. Specifically, this communication, using the context of short-term study abroad programmes, will argue that: (1) critical reflection is an essential step to fostering global citizenship and (2) digital story telling (mobile pedagogy) can be a powerful tool for enriching the critical reflection process.

**Keywords:** global citizenship; digital stories; critical reflection; experiential learning

### **Introducing the vehicle: experiential learning as short-term study abroad**

Global citizenship and competency development are integral parts of political (Durbin 2006; Lincoln Report 2005), economic (AACU 2007) and education (AAAS 2013; Perry, Stoner, and Tarrant 2012) discourses. This is particularly true in the USA, where higher education institutions are heeding

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the call for developing global citizens by promoting international education programmes (Lincoln Report 2005; Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner 2013). In 2006, 40% of colleges included international education as part of their mission statement. This is up from 28% in 2001 (Stearns 2009). In 2012/2013 289,408 US students studied abroad for academic credit, compared to 154,168 in 2000/2001, of which more than 60% participated in short-term programmes (IIE 2014). Unfortunately, the ‘just do it’ analogy, based on the conceptualisation referred to as the ‘first-time effect’, too often influences the ideology of study abroad (McKeown 2009), whereby simply providing students with international experiences is perceived as sufficient in shaping global citizenship.

While short-term study abroad programmes have been criticised for being academically light (McKeown 2009), they can present a unique opportunity for providing action-oriented experiences that encourage reflection, critical analysis and synthesis (Perry, Stoner, and Tarrant 2012). Expanding literature demonstrates that short-term study abroad programmes are capable of fostering global citizenship when aligned with traditional methods of critical reflection (Tarrant and Lyons 2012; Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner 2013). Considering this, it is our postulation that the learning outcomes of short-term study abroad can be enhanced and made more meaningful for the participants by incorporating familiar technological habits and platforms into reflection. Framed within the context of short-term study abroad, the purpose of this article is to suggest that both the critical reflection process and global citizenship learning outcome can be enhanced through digital storytelling (Figure 1).

### **Developing components: why is global citizenship important?**

There have been increasing calls from political and academic arenas to ensure the capacity of US students to think and act globally in order to effectively address political, social, economic and environmental problems on a global scale (Lewin 2009; Stearns 2009). One rationale for this stems from the need for improved national security (Durbin 2006). The bi-partisan Lincoln Commission Report to Congress (Lincoln Report 2005) stated:

Our national security and domestic prosperity depend upon a citizenry that understands America’s place in the world, the security challenges it faces, and opportunities and perils confronting Americans around the world. Responding to these realities requires a massive increase in the global literacy of the typical college graduate. (ix)

Within the academic realm, a report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) identified global civic knowledge and engagement and intercultural knowledge and competence as essential skills required for students to effectively manage the real-world demands of

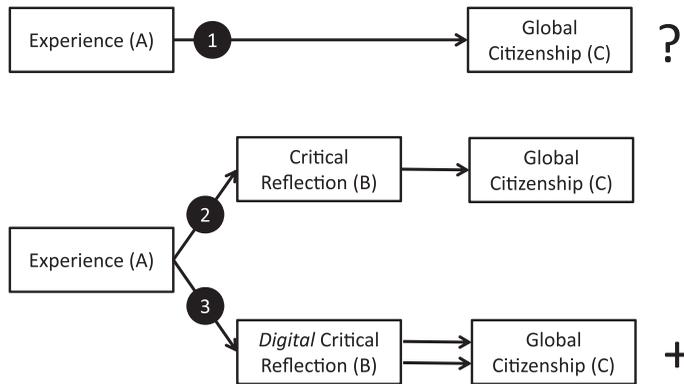


Figure 1. Pathway from experience to global citizenship.

Notes: Pathway 1 presents the ‘just do it’ approach, where it is expected that experiential education (A) is sufficient to foster global citizenship (C). Pathway 2 couples experiential education (A) with a traditional critical reflection (e.g., paper-based) (B) approach, an approach demonstrated to lead to global citizenship (C) within the context of international education (Tarrant and Lyons 2012; Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner 2013; Wynveen, Kyle, and Tarrant 2012). Pathway 3 replaces traditional critical reflection with digital critical reflection (C), an opportunity to meet learners on the platforms and forums where they live, communicate, and already engage, and subsequently enhance reflective process.

employment, citizenship and life in a complex, globally connected society. Considering these circumstances, a call for institutions to prioritise the fostering of global citizenship as a university-wide learning outcome for all graduates is being made. It must be stated that global citizenship is a highly contested and multifaceted concept (Schattle 2009) and this paper does not address this complex debate.

### Developing pieces: explaining critical reflection

An integral component of any effective experientially based learning process is critical reflection (Kolb 1984). Critical reflection, as a process, seeks to engage an individual in ‘scratching below the surface’ to be deep and accurate when determining the value of a decision, experience or theory (Alwehaibi 2012). It follows that an experience without critical reflection is just an experience; therefore, it does not provide an individual with the opportunity to shape perspective or make sense of the original experience.

An educative experience should serve as a departure point for learning, not an end-result and should present an opportunity for response or an investigation of ‘why’. An investigation of ‘why’ begins with thought-provoking, informed questions and focuses on empowering learners to pursue their own learning and meaning-making. Whether an experience and subsequent reflection leads to a transformation of self/perspective or

affirmation of self/perspective is not the point; the point is that the process of reflection is imperative for learning to occur (Dewey 1938). This demonstrates the iterative nature of episteme and shapes our goal as educators to facilitate processes for engaging students in obtaining an ever-growing understanding of their world.

The method by which learners navigate the reflective meaning-making process is pivotal to how and what they learn and, subsequently, should influence the way teachers facilitate learning environments. This supports the postulation of Peterson (2002) that while experience is one of the best teachers, it is never as valuable as when combined with critical analysis, reflection, and interpretation. An established and widely accepted approach to critical reflection within experientially based pedagogies is the DEAL Model (Ash and Clayton 2004). This model offers three steps following a student's engagement with an experience:

- (1) Description of experiences objectively;
- (2) Examination of experiences through reflection prompts related to learning goals;
- (3) Articulation of Learning – goals for future action for improved practice and further refinement of learning.

The Description, Examination and Articulation of Learning (DEAL) occur in sequence after an experience has been completed. It can be used throughout a semester and assigned iteratively. For example, if a group of short-term study abroad students are studying environmental sustainability, DEAL could be repeated after each interaction/experience associated with their time abroad. Being used to its fullest potential, DEAL is applicable to experientially based pedagogies.

### **Digital media: integrating technology and reflection**

In this technologically advanced world, communication and presentation of information have been transformed in many ways. Whether students are speaking/writing in 'text-language', poking each other on Facebook or offering opinions via Twitter, the pace has increased and lines have blurred between what is known and how it is communicated. This can have fundamental implications for the classroom, including the approach students bring to their coursework and the perspectives teachers bring to courses. This is specifically relevant when facilitating environments where personal exploration and critical reflection are vanguard.

Digital storytelling, as an alternative to paper-based reflection, is a form of digital media that is primarily focused on presenting the author's voice (Dogan and Robin 2008). This can serve as a robust medium for capturing the essence of a student's perspective and level of understanding. This

reflection technique ‘utilizes multimedia tools to engage individuals in authentic learning experiences that provide real-world relevance and personal-value within a situated context’ (Walters et al. 2011, 42). Within these stories, there are opportunities for critical reflection methods to be intensified by meeting learners on platforms where they already live, communicate and engage.

While research into the efficacy of digital media as a reflective tool is sparse, research into a parallel field that focuses on authentic forms of reflection – arts-based methods – serves as a salient juxtaposition. Taylor and Ladkin (2009) theorise that trends in arts-based methods in business, the armed forces and academia are primarily ‘informed by different assumptions about art and how it contributes to human development’ (55). This assumption seems to be relevant to the use of technology and the influence it can have on human development.

In this, Taylor and Ladkin (2009) identified two forms of knowing: presentational and propositional. Presentational forms are primarily focused on expressing meaning and significance through aesthetic mediums. Consider this in contrast to propositional forms, which are primarily centred on knowing ‘about’ something, through theory and expressing that knowledge via structured, informative statements. In this, the presentational forms serve as mediums that can illuminate a learner’s tacit experiences so they can draw upon ‘emotional connection[s] to self, others, and our experience’ (56). This process, by its very nature, is reflective, drawing upon emotion-based connections among experiences, the context where they occur and the way they are interpreted and applied.

In line with this theory (Taylor and Ladkin 2009), digital media may serve as a presentational form of reflection. That is, digital media can provide the forum for a learner’s voice to be found and heard. This reflective process’s aesthetic medium can provide the forum for a learner’s voice to be presented and an emotional connection with self and the learning experience to be articulated. Simply, digital media provide the forum and space for students to reflect in a presentational form and, in this, more efficiently address changes in self, perception and/or attitude that may be attributable to their experiences.

Walters et al. (2011) found that reflective digital stories, when compared to traditional reflective journals, were more indicative of the impact that experiences had on students’ learning and competency. They further described it thus: ‘While journals recorded a catalogue of events, the digital stories, even at the lowest-level of reflection, were more indicative of the impact of the experience ... than journals’ (49). While it has been clearly presented that critical reflection methods are imperative for students to make sense of experiences, the use of digital media could be a medium that provides students with familiar space for the presentational form to be developed in an authentic, true-to-self, presentation-based format. Our position is

not one that is anti-paper-based reflection. Our position is one that invites teachers to align reflection methods with creative, presentational forms of knowing.

### **Digital storytelling's unique value**

Within study abroad experiences, exposure to new cultures and learning environments where students' established beliefs are tested may act as the catalyst for transformation. In these environments, exposed to realities outside previous understanding, learners may discover a need to acquire new perspectives to gain a more complete understanding. A deeper understanding of reality is the value in combining experiences with critical reflection (Perry, Stoner, and Tarrant 2012). For example, Discover Abroad at the University of Georgia has demonstrated that short-term, experiential courses serve as catalysts for fostering global citizenship – but only if the experiences and pedagogy are married using critical reflection (Tarrant and Lyons 2012; Wynveen, Kyle, and Tarrant 2012). Traditional forms of critical reflection can and do work in the context of study abroad. Nonetheless, we postulate that reflective experiences can be further enhanced by meeting students within their forums. Drawing on mediums familiar to students, ones which they already use but might not have the vocabulary to describe, specifically in the form of storytelling (e.g., <http://www.rightsproject.info/>; <http://tellingaglobalstory.weebly.com/index.html>), can provide students with a louder, clearer voice, utilising a presentational form to reflectively articulate themselves. Finally, an integral component to be included in further investigation into digital media as a reflective tool is that 'greater connectivity does not necessarily mean greater connection'. In this, an examination of potential constraints rooted in this approach is warranted.

While research into the reflective efficacy of digital media is sparse, this forum article is intended to bring this concept into focus. Digital media, as digital storytelling, can provide students with a voice to truly connect globally by using mediums with which they are familiar. This takes the learning experience beyond the classroom, beyond the interactive teacher–student learning environment fostered by an experientially based approach of teaching, helping students to connect with the global community, and potentially to become truly engaged global citizens, empowered with voices to evoke change.

### **Conclusion**

Fostering global citizenship as a learning outcome requires critical reflection to make meaning from experiences. We postulate that critical reflection can be enhanced by meeting students where they are with regards to communication and technology – through the use of digital storytelling. This may

provide an opportunity for students' reflections to become more robust and valued. By exposing students to the presentational form of knowing, which includes the aesthetic, creative and emotional elements associated with digital storytelling, a clearer connection to learning through critical reflection could be rendered. Ultimately, when these educational stars align, critical reflection can help organise them from clusters of disparate, chaotic energy into a constellation useful for future navigation.

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