

## COMMENTARY

### Preparing Students for the Flat World

By **Fernando M. Reimers**

The current economic crisis and its relationship to the way in which the American economy has adjusted to the “flat world” provide an opportune context to rethink the purposes of our schools. How do we prepare children to invent a future that enables them to meet their needs, develop, be happy, and continue deepening the work-in-progress that is our democracy?

The most critical challenge before schools in this century will be giving students both the skills and the ethical dispositions to invent a future that enhances human well-being in an age of globalization. The response to this challenge is global education, comprising three objectives and three avenues for action. The objectives are

to develop global values, build foreign-language skills, and create globalization expertise. The avenues for doing this are, first, to make the development of global competence a policy priority for public education; second, to build a knowledge base grounded in scientific research that will help us discern what works well, with what effects, and at what costs; and, third, to continue to develop rigorous curricula, instructional materials, and opportunities for teacher education.

Global competency requires not only knowledge of the world, but also skills that can put that knowledge to use. Equally important are attitudinal and ethical dispositions, which make it possible to interact peacefully, respectfully, and productively with fellow human beings from diverse geographies in addressing global problems. Challenges such as achieving sustainable forms of human-environmental interaction, finding fair and sustainable forms of global trade, dealing with health epidemics, eliminating global poverty, or creating the conditions for lasting peace and security are complex, and the options for addressing them are controversial. Preparing students to deal with such complexity and controversy and educating them to lead on behalf of meaningful global purposes is at the heart of global education.

What educators should realize in teaching for global competency is that it includes three interdependent dimensions:

- A positive disposition toward cultural difference and a framework of global values to engage



difference (the ethical dimension).

- Deep knowledge and understanding of world history and geography, of the global dimensions of topics such as health, climate change, and economics, and of the process of globalization itself (the disciplinary and interdisciplinary dimension).
- An ability to speak foreign languages at advanced levels (the skill dimension).

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Beyond its economic advantages, global competency is also a cornerstone of democratic leadership and citizenship. Because the boundaries between international and domestic problems have become increasingly porous, the very demands of government and citizenship now require knowledge of global affairs. For this reason, global competency cannot remain within the reach of only a few, as has been the case in the past. It is now a necessity for all citizens, and we need to generalize opportunities to develop global competence in K-12 education.

This is a need increasingly recognized by students and parents. In a 2007 survey of voters, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills found that two in five considered “global awareness” a very important skill, yet only 6 percent thought schools were doing an adequate job of developing it. Support is growing among parents for teaching foreign languages and global affairs in K-12 schools.

How this is done is crucial. The multidimensional nature of the subject calls for a process that is both rigorous and multifaceted. Deep global competency cannot be achieved with “globalization lite” in the schools. Here is how a more comprehensive, multidimensional approach might be fashioned:

The ***first dimension*** includes attitudes, values, and skills that reflect an openness to, interest in, and positive disposition toward the variation of human cultural expression reflected internationally (global tolerance and a global-values framework).

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These can be developed in a number of ways: reading books that reflect cosmopolitan views and values; interacting with culturally diverse groups of students; engaging in school-to-school international projects; accessing content about comparative topics, such as comparative literature, world history, or geography; studying artistic creations from different cultures; discussing films focusing on human-rights issues; and participating in global groups such as the world Scouts movement, or in global youth movements, international sports competitions, and global service projects, including (for older students and teachers) the Peace Corps.

Experiential learning can be very effective in developing these competencies by providing students with the opportunity to interact with peers from different cultural backgrounds—whether in culturally diverse schools, through study-abroad programs, or through student collaborations across schools using technology. One example of this is the International Education and Resource Network, or iEARN, a network of K-12 schools that supports school-

to-school collaborative projects. Similarly, the organization Facing History and Ourselves has developed teacher professional development programs to teach about human rights and tolerance.

The **second dimension** covers disciplinary knowledge in comparative fields: comparative history, anthropology, political science, economics and trade, literature, world history. It also includes the ability to integrate across disciplines to think about and solve substantive questions on global topics, such as what the short- and long-term consequences of free trade are in a world with vast inequalities in the costs of labor across countries.

Competency in these areas can be developed in the formal curriculum of instruction, but also in after-school projects, in peer-based projects, or in summer programs. The organization NetAid, for example, provides high school students who want to lead projects to educate their peers about global poverty and international development with the professional development and resources to do it.

These competencies also can be developed, in part, through study-abroad and exchange programs, and in joint research projects in which students collaborate, using technology, across countries. The Global Classrooms program and Model U.N., a project of the United Nations Association of the United States of America, helps students learn about the intricate dynamics of cross-national negotiations and develop the capacity to view these negotiations from the perspectives of different nations and groups.

The **third dimension** encompasses foreign-language skills, which allow communication across cultures. The resources to develop these include skilled teachers of foreign languages and adequate instructional materials, as well as enough time in the curriculum to devote to foreign-language instruction. Study abroad can help here, too, and instruction also can be supported with programs after school and during the summer, perhaps involving speakers of other languages from the communities surrounding each school. Technology is an increasingly important resource to support foreign-language instruction.

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For educators and policymakers, the road ahead is clear: We should make global education a priority, develop a solid knowledge base about how to do it well, and provide more opportunities for teacher preparation in this area and more money for high-quality instructional materials.

There is much good work already under way on which an ambitious reform agenda could build. The challenge is to bring it to scale quickly. And that will depend on whether the deep economic imbalances that have made global education more relevant today can also yield the financial resources needed to equip our students with the academic excellence and depth of character to lead in a flat world.

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*Fernando M. Reimers is the Ford Foundation professor of international education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in Cambridge, Mass.*

