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7. HOW THE EARTH MOVED

‘Difference’ and Transformative Learning in an Online Course on Global Citizenship

BACKGROUND

In September 2005, we launched a new online course, *Perspectives on Global Citizenship*, at the University of British Columbia. As an educational undertaking, we hoped that it would not only allow students to acquire more ‘information’ about global issues, but also push them to reflect critically on their own assumptions about ‘how the world works’ and on their own social and political roles and responsibilities, locally and globally.

The course explicitly introduces notions of social justice, equity, sustainability and social action, and it directly challenges students to examine their privileged worldview. Because exploration of such themes necessarily involves asking hard questions about whose interests are being advanced over others, and can involve proposing changes to social or political structures “that are already quite congenial to some people in the community…” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 131), some may contend that the course has overtly political aims. We agree! Unless one fully embraces Freire’s (1970) contention that education itself is political, how can one possibly help students make connections between academic knowledge they acquire in their classes, and their roles and responsibilities as members of local and global communities? How else can one engage students personally and professionally with the practical and ethical complexities of global challenges?

The ‘political’ ambitions we have for this course are, in fact, fully in line with ‘Trek 2010’, the Vision and Mission Statement of The University of British Columbia (hereafter, UBC), which articulates the wish that:

...the graduates of UBC will value diversity, work with and for their communities, and be agents for positive change. They will acknowledge their obligations as global citizens, and strive to secure a sustainable and equitable future for all.

Eyler & Giles (1999) note, “politics is about competing interests and controversy” (1999, p. 131). *Perspectives on Global Citizenship* seeks to create a forum for students to engage in debate on the controversial and competing issues of social and ecological justice through critical thought, moral commitment and meaningful engagement in their learning and ‘coming to know’ as global citizens.
Evidence from student feedback and course-based writing suggests that this course is achieving at least some of our educational goals. A student writes:

…this class was different in a big way. Whereas in other classes, you can do readings and assignments, get the 3 credits and that’s it...walk away...I felt like suddenly we’ve identified ourselves not only as students but active participants in what we’re learning through the concept of global citizenship. Global citizens seemed like an abstract idea at first but slowly I think we realized that we were talking about ourselves.

As tutors in this course, we also feel that we regularly experience something extraordinary, taking us beyond what we have experienced in other courses. In this chapter we attempt to explore just how ‘the earth moves’ for learners in this course, and try to capture the nature of the ‘difference’ in learning experience that some of them describe. We investigate elements of course structure and pedagogy that triggered this different learning, in the hope of learning lessons of our own that will reposition our future online endeavours.

DEVELOPMENT OF PERSPECTIVES ON GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

The meaning of global citizenship is hotly debated and poorly defined (see, for example, Dower & Williams, 2002). Developing a course that would introduce this contested concept (Roman, 2003) – one that is so tightly connected to questions of global power, culture and values – was therefore no small undertaking.

As the first course of a new interdisciplinary program collaboratively offered by UBC and a number of its Universitas 21 partner universities (currently Hong Kong (China), Nottingham (England), Melbourne and Queensland (Australia), Lund (Sweden) and Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico)), we recognized that participating students would represent a great diversity of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, necessitating attention in the curriculum development process to cultural assumptions underlying contemporary models of citizenship and worldview. Nor could we assume deep background knowledge in any one topic area. We resolved therefore that topics within the purview of global citizenship would be presented for debate, discussion and critical analysis by each student cohort.

We developed the initial course outline with input from a wide range of local and international colleagues. Topic areas were selected to create a course outline that would represent an introduction to a range of concepts and topics relevant to the discussion of global citizenship (Table 1). Twelve different subject matter experts, located at UBC and elsewhere in the world, drafted content for the modules contained in the course. Perspectives on Global Citizenship now comprises twelve weekly thematic modules, presented via a web-based course management system (WebCT CE4.1 from September 2005–December 2006, and Blackboard Vista from January 2007 – present). Tutors make use of course management system (CMS) communication tools to promote critical thinking and reflection through course readings, facilitated (asynchronous) discussion with tutors and international peers, and regular written work.