

A Weapon of Change: Education's Crucial Role in Global Citizenship

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As the sun rose over Johannesburg one July day in 2003, followers of author, activist and former president Nelson Mandela knew this would be no ordinary day. Today, Mandela would deliver a speech to honor the launch of the Mindset Network, a South African health education nonprofit. In his now-famous speech at the esteemed Johannesburg Planetarium, Mandela praised education as “the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.”¹ Mandela, like so many other great leaders, recognized education as crucial to politics and peacebuilding. As he revealed in his speech, Mandela also viewed education as a catalyst for the formation of global citizens. But what exactly *are* global citizens, and how can societies cultivate them?

Global citizens, to put it concisely, see themselves as more than isolated individuals. They envision themselves as members of a worldwide human family and care deeply about issues affecting everyone, even people they have never met. They take action – locally, nationally or internationally – in whatever capacity they can, all while remaining cognizant of the challenges facing humanity as a whole. They live with unbounded intellectual curiosity, always searching for new avenues by which they can gather knowledge, promote social causes or contribute to the international conversation. Sensitive to injustice and eager to speak their minds, global citizens spend their time researching, writing and organizing. They tirelessly expend their energy in pursuit of the common good, and they sacrifice their time and resources for others. Global citizens need not possess fame or riches: their mission requires only persistence, awareness and open-mindedness.

¹ “Lighting Your Way to a Better Future: Speech Delivered by Mr N R Mandela at launch of Mindset Network,” Nelsonmandela.org, accessed March 23, 2018, http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&ItemID=NMS909&txtstr=education%20is%20the%20most%20powerful.

In today's increasingly connected world, societies must embrace the virtue of global citizenship if they hope to achieve success in the commercial arena. More importantly, however, societies must cultivate global citizens for the sake of humanity. Global awareness promotes empathy not just on a personal, but also on an international scale. Even in today's connected world, global awareness remains difficult to cultivate: most people, even those with the best intentions, tend naturally toward self-centeredness. How can nations develop their citizens from well-meaning but inactive individuals into altruistic members of a global consciousness?

The answer, as Mandela so wisely stated, lies in education – a gift that I have been lucky enough to receive throughout my life, and one that I hope to pass on to others someday. My Notre Dame education has changed my outlook on my place in the world and increased my awareness of social and political issues. It has given me the opportunity to meet and befriend students with vastly different backgrounds than my own – students from China, the Philippines, South Sudan, Austria and Brazil, to name just a few of the many nations Notre Dame represents. Notre Dame has allowed me to attend lectures on African politics, the experiences of Guantanamo Bay prisoners, sustainable development and humanity's many scientific and technological achievements. In addition, Notre Dame has expanded my global perspective by encouraging me to practice activism and service on a local scale. Over the past two years, I have participated in Student Government and volunteered with the Center for Social Concerns in Appalachia and South Bend. Notre Dame's support for undergraduate research recently allowed me to join the Architecture, Health and Sustainability Lab, through which I work with fellow students to develop building designs that encourage healthy lifestyle choices.

Notre Dame's ample resources have also allowed me to explore international, as well as local, avenues of involvement. Through ND Study Abroad, I have travelled to South America

and assessed environmental challenges in the Galapagos Islands. Notre Dame's generous support for student organizations allowed me to help found a club, Education Bridge Club ND, that supports peacebuilding education in South Sudan. After college, I hope to further pursue my passion for education through ACE, Notre Dame's teaching program. One day, I aspire to cultivate global citizens in my own classroom.

The road to global citizenship is a difficult one, and one on which I frequently stumble. To gain awareness of the challenges faced by people around the world, one must continuously reassess one's values and lifestyle choices – a process that can take a lifetime, even with access to the proper educational tools. Emotional challenges, as well as intellectual ones, mark the path to global citizenship. One may find that in order to stand in solidarity with the world's poor or displaced, he or she must forgo amenities previously taken for granted. As Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., wrote in 1958, "We in America will sleep uneasily...if we remember that a third of humankind has gone to bed hungry."² Global citizens must honestly and compassionately acknowledge their advantages in life and work to provide others with similar advantages.

Furthermore, a developing global citizen questions the ethical ramifications of her lifestyle, a process which might shake her faith in institutions originally deemed trustworthy. I was shocked to learn that the ethnic conflicts in South Sudan – the nation in which I, an American, am trying to support peacebuilding efforts – actually stem in part from 20th-century American efforts to protect oil interests by funding the oppressive government of northern

² "Hesburgh Quotes," Hesburgh.nd.edu, accessed March 23 2018, <https://hesburgh.nd.edu/fr-teds-life/an-extraordinary-life/in-his-own-words/hesburgh-quotes/>.

Sudan.³ Despite our best efforts to encourage development and peace around the world, we may still find ourselves complicit in economic systems that oppress other countries or even communities within our own nation. Although the complexities of the modern world render this action difficult, global citizens must struggle to extricate themselves from systems that detract from other nations' peace, prosperity and economic development.

But the prospect of global citizenship, despite its many challenges, should inspire rather than terrify. Global citizenship offers a chance to apply ancient, universal values – compassion, humility, tolerance and love for humanity – to a modern world. Global citizenship gives us the chance not only to improve the human condition, but to improve ourselves; not only to teach, but to learn. And this chance – the opportunity to challenge ourselves, expand our empathy and embrace our humanity to the fullest – is one of global citizenship's greatest rewards.

³ Alephonsion Deng, Benson Deng and Benjamin Ajak. *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky: The True Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan*, ed. Judith A. Bernstein (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 321.

Works Cited

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