

Global Emancipation through Educational Social Networks: Shaping a new dialogue of action through community

Kristen M. Snyder, Ph.d.
Mid Sweden University, Härnösand Sweden
E-Mail: Kristen.snyder@miun.se

Abstract

In this paper three case examples are presented from a five-year international study of educational social networks for global school development. The purpose of the study was to examine the ways in which networks create changes in the teaching and learning environments, and in what ways such changes responded to the current call for 21st century citizenship and learning. The philosophical premise of education for emancipation is used as an analytic lens for examining the potential of the social networks for a broader purpose of education.

Key words: Global citizenship, social networks, collaborative learning.

1. Introduction

Paulo Freire (1970), Maxine Greene (1988), Bell Hooks (1994) and others have promoted the notion that education is about freedom and emancipation. They suggest that giving voice and creating space for students, teachers, and educators to engage in reflection and dialogue about society and social values is a primary task of education. Freire (1970) suggests the need for a pedagogy that empowers the self to move beyond conditions of oppression and control. Accordingly, he argues that together, in reflection and dialogue the oppressed can liberate themselves. He states that “no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others” (p. 53). This message has a double meaning in a global age, for at one level it reminds us the importance of education for self-empowerment and emancipation, and at another level it urges us to engage in community as a way to transform.

Maxine Greene (1988) argues the need to develop education as a public space in which youth give meaning to freedom in order to actively engage in shaping society, rather than accepting external control, demands, and structures as an objective reality. The current political systems of control, both culturally and institutionally have perpetuated a negative effect on freedom whereby we have come to accept such things as accountability and high stakes testing as *the* reality for what is important to education. Greene contends that such a view is “antithetical to....education for freedom” (1988; p. 22). More and more we see that the institution of education is being objectified by government controls, and now additionally with international politics. Educators are spinning by the minute to respond to new rhetoric about the “future citizen” (knowledge worker), and the need to reinvent the curriculum and classroom learning. Unfortunately, the rhetoric and policies are changing so rapidly that educators are forced to bypass pedagogical reflection and planning that is necessary to develop healthy learning environments, in favor of developing responses to the “rhetoric of the month”.

Bell Hooks (1994) talks about “engaged pedagogy” as necessary to emancipate teaching for social action and transformation. Her work communicates the importance of seeing oneself as subject rather than object, thereby empowering self to engage in transformation and to question oppression and injustice. This concept of empowering ourselves to engage in shaping life, rather than accepting the status quo is, I contend, of central importance to education in a global age. It has implications for both teaching and learning, as educators and students engage, together in community to reflect on the global social condition. While Hooks focuses more on the self as teacher, I suggest that her notion of empowerment through the subjectivity of self is an important feature to a larger argument for educational development in a global age that is framed within a metaphor of community. Considering education as

emancipation within a global framework draws added value from the social networks (Stephenson, 2005) and communities of collaboration that are building internationally. These networks are powerful silos for voice and emancipation that can spread the impact of an engaged pedagogy from self to community.

The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence of the importance of social networks for educational development and programming, that impacts teaching and learning. Through educational social networks educators, students, and in some cases local communities, are adapting the curriculum and learning environments in order to be engaged in a global response to social development. Through such learning networks, students are more self-driven, independent, and active in not only shaping their own learning, but also identifying what is important to study; in effect they are shaping the curriculum through their global engagement.

The "flattening of the world" (Friedman, 2005) with developments in digital technologies, gives rise to a new opportunity for educators to develop a pedagogy that engages youth in social learning networks, and uses global trends and conditions as the curriculum. Within this framework, emancipation comes from sharing our own knowledge and perspectives in community with others to shape change. Nelson (1993) states that, "communities are the primary loci—the primary generators, repositories, holders, and acquirers—of knowledge" (p. 124). She suggests that the "agents who generate knowledge are communities and sub-communities, not individuals" (p. 124). Stephenson (2005) further points to the importance of social networks, claiming that "relationships [the heart of social networks] are the true medium of knowledge exchange" (p. 248). Situating engaged pedagogy within a global social network community has the potential to shape a new discourse of humanity through knowledge sharing, which is not dominated by politics and control, but guided by care for one another.

2. Research Methodology

This paper presents findings from a five-year study of schools engaged in the International School Connection, Inc. (ISC) network for global school development. The ISC is a global learning network that provides support systems for professional development and school connections to engage educators and students in shaping learning environments that contribute to making a difference in the global social and economic conditions. The vision of the ISC is "for students to be prepared during their school years as global citizens, and to work with people in other parts of the world on common projects and learning activity" (www.iscweb.org/about_us/mission_vision). Within the ISC network are a number of member schools and school districts from countries around the world, including Spain, Finland, Sweden, Canada, Russia, China, Singapore, the U.S., Columbia, and Norway. Each brings to the ISC a commitment to the vision and mission, as well as experience and knowledge in educational development, which fosters a global community of learning. Individually, the programs in each of the member countries provide important contributions to their local and regional contexts. Collectively, they contribute to a global dialogue for social action.

Three methods were combined in this study, including ethnography, grounded theory, and case study. This choice was made to address the unique complexities and opportunities of conducting research in virtual settings. As a researcher, I approached my role in the virtual community as an ethnographer "living online" and participating in annual meetings with members of the network community. I chose grounded theory as an epistemological framework to reflect not only the exploratory nature of the research but also to match the emergent nature of social networks and the outcomes that result over time. Case study method was also incorporated since the network only represents cases of schools around the world,

and is thus not generalizable. Together, these three methods combine to create an exploratory study of the emerging phenomenon of international education social networks for global emancipation.

3. Findings

Findings from this five-year study suggest that schools engaged in social networks can extend not only their educational programming, but as well create new learning spaces for youth that address the 21st century challenges of living and work (UNESCO, 2002): independent, proactive, socially responsible, digital literacy, collaborative, sensitive to diversity, communication skills and team orientation. Three cases are provided in this paper to highlight the ways in which schools engaged in the ISC are contributing to global emancipation through an engaged pedagogy. The school programs and projects highlighted in this paper are not unique to world. There are, and have been, many schools around the globe that address multiculturalism, diversity, environmental issues, and democracy challenges. What is unique is their connection within a larger global social network and the potential they have over time for shaping a difference in generations to come.

3.1 Case 1: Ottawa Canada- AY Jackson School

In Ottawa Canada, for example, there has been a focus on cultural diversity for years. Using international languages as a central part of the educational community, curriculum and pedagogy focused on a recognition and respect to the cultural heritage of its students and families, and provided a greater sense of emotional and psychological stability for students. Collectively, recognizing different languages as culture, according to the school board documents, helps to establish an openness to other cultures and bridging of communities. Within the last two years the Ottawa-Carlton School Board has extended the focus on language and multiculturalism to anti-racism and globalization, recognizing the importance of caring about the global human condition and the multi-cultural tapestry of the world (OCDSB, Report # 06-151, 2006). Through a variety of local programs student and faculty ambassadors, curriculum criteria, and faculty training, educators are hoping to contribute to positive change in the social and cultural dynamics of their communities. Further, through international networks and partnership programs, the school board is actively engaged in working with schools in other countries to develop programs addressing anti-racism. The word is spreading, and the dialogue is changing as educators are engaging themselves in self-reflection and awareness about their role in addressing imbalances in human equity and diversity.

In 2006, the AY-Jackson High School was awarded as the first Global Learning Center (GLC) school. According to the GLC application document international studies is a whole-school initiative that promotes cross-cultural understanding and encourages the active participation of students in global community issues. Evidence from the programming shows that the work of the school is changing the curriculum as well as the learning environment. By opening the classroom to the world, youth are engaged in developing knowledge about global phenomena, as well as developing skills for collaborative social development. According to the school leadership, there is a belief that “by helping students understand that they are global citizens, and by teaching them ways to see with a global perspective, classrooms can lay the proper foundation for solid global citizenship education.” (p. 5; 2007). Through participation in the ISC, the AY-Jackson High School and the Ottawa-Carlton School Board provide a benchmark for other schools world-wide regarding how curriculum and global development can be interconnected. And furthermore, how integrating internationalization in the whole school can change the learning environment for youth.

3.2 Case 2: Gripenkolan Sweden

For years, Gripenkolan (Gripen High School) has been engaged in learning projects and teacher exchanges with schools in the Baltic states, through a grant from UNESCO in 1989. Since that time they have developed other projects in Tanzania and Kilimanjaro, which begin with a course at their school in “knowledge about developing countries”. At the 2005 ISC Summit, The principal reported an example of a book they use in their curriculum, called: The Voices that Never Become Silent: Thoughts about Democracy and Other Important Matters. The book is a collection of poems and reflections written by students at the school after visiting one of the Holocaust Concentration Camps during an international project. In 2005, the Principal of Gripen High School was named educational representative of Sweden to the United Nation’s 10 -year program on sustainability. His local and regional efforts have led to an even larger engagement at the global level as a voice for engaging education in caring about the global condition. Through the ISC network, the Principal is serving a key role in helping to engage larger numbers of educators from around the globe in dialogue and programming related to sustainable development. This work is naturally connected to the development work in Ottawa Canada that focused on anti-racism and expands the discourse on educational involvement in global development.

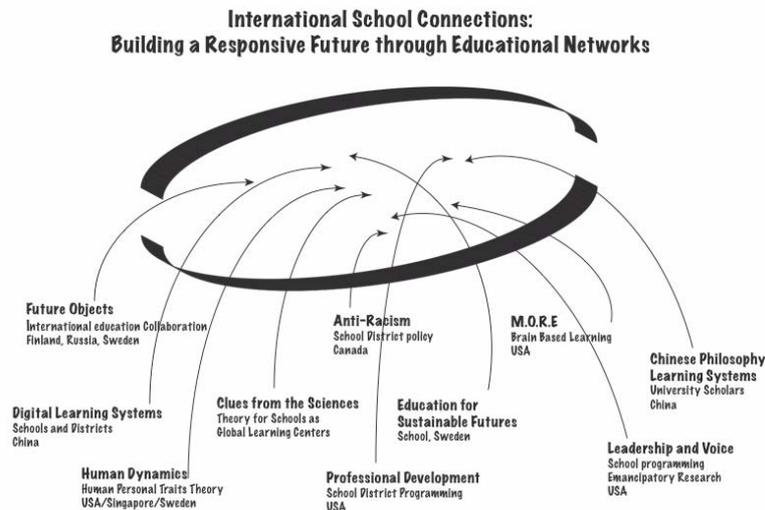
3.3 Case 3: Pasco-Nanjing Global School Connection

In 2006, the Global School Connection was established between Pasco Middle School in Florida, USA, and Nanjing Shuren International Junior High School in Nanjing, China. The program offers children an opportunity to communicate, learn, share, problem solve, and grow with other children around the world. Members of the Pasco Middle School GLC Staff have been communicating face-to-face, via video-conference, and with Skype phone with principals and teachers at the Nanjing, in an effort to establish a relationship to enable our students to learn from one another. In February 2007, the first student led video-conference learning activity took place in which students from the two schools led each other in a class lesson. Students working the program learned not only about the subject matter for teaching, but as well learned about different teaching methods. The students from the two schools meet regularly through technology to share with one another about their lives and to learn together about the general academic subjects. Most recently students were paired in thematic teams to work together across cultures. Among the topics included are: religion and philosophy, the great-wall-of -china, education, family traditions, customs, and agriculture and industry. In a short time, the collaboration has changed the teaching and curriculum in the school, as well as the relationship between teacher and student. Moreover, the students are engaged in global learning communities developing subject knowledge as well as lifelong learning and active citizenship skills.

3.4 Building a responsive future through education networks

The three examples are just several of the ways in which schools connected in global social networks are beginning to forge a new path for the development of youth, education and society. Through social networks, schools are able to share resources with one another that are changing the ways in which students are engaged in their learning, as well as the focus of the learning. An additional finding also emerged from the study that suggests caring about the planet and global community is reflected in the diversity of contributions. Schools engaged in social networks can provide diverse perspectives and responses to a common concern, as well as combine resources for collaboration. The model reflects additional contributions that are made by schools participating in the ISC network. Among the contributions are perspectives and experience in working with democracy, student-driven learning, global environmental issues, brain-based learning, leadership for sustainable school development, and futures

education. The model illustrates the variety of programs present with the schools and school districts among members of the ISC network as of 2005. Many of these participating schools are also engaged in other networks, extending their discourse even farther. As these educators come together in dialogue, they not only share about their own educational programming, they also reinforce a new discourse on education that builds on an ethic of care, and gives agency to educators and students alike to engage in human social development.



In singular, each of these efforts is commendable. In combination they reflect the importance and power of collaboration, as all persons engaged in the network learn from and with one another, impacting changes in their local conditions at a more rapid rate, with far reaching consequences for global action. Educators in the ISC have joined together, along with others, in a global community of practice to share information and shape knowledge collectively about learning and education in the global age. Together, in a community of practice, they give voice to a new discourse on education that has the potential to emancipate the human and environmental conditions on a global scale.

4. Conclusions

In this paper I have provided a few examples of the ways in which schools are expanding the learning environment through social networks. It is beyond the length of this paper to provide more detail. However, the study does show that over time the social networking has created stronger ties between educators, students and their communities. Affected are the perceptions and attitudes of the members about global issues and the importance of civic engagement. Furthermore, teaching models and the learning environment are changing in ways that support the kind of 21st century living that is emerging with globalization, technology and the network society. In addition to the practical pedagogical changes that are occurring in the schools, education social networks are also emerging in ways that help to shape an engaged pedagogy and ultimately create a space for learning for emancipation and freedom.

This study further demonstrates that through the use of global social networks, education has the possibility to be a counterforce to economic globalization by giving voice to a new international discourse. Capra (2002) states that, “in the information age, networking has emerged as a critical form of organization in all sections of society. Dominant social functions are increasingly organized around networks, and participation in these networks is a critical source of power” (p. 149). The current discourse is dominated by capitalism, corporate

control and terrorism. Through programs focused on diversity, social justice, anti-racism, sustainability and the environment, a new discourse can spread that reminds us of the importance to care about humanity and the environment above all else. It is thus conceivable that Freire's concept of liberatory pedagogy will have far reaching consequences for developing global community if schools continue to develop in this direction. It is anticipated that the youth who develop their knowledge and skills within this global context of networking will continue to contribute to a global responsiveness for humanity and the planet, liberating themselves and society.

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Kristen Snyder is a researcher at Mid Sweden University, studying school and leadership development in a global age, including social networks and the digital culture for learning. She is the author of numerous publications, including the co-authored book: *Living on the edge of chaos: Leading schools into the 21st century*.