

# Education Sans Frontiers— Yankee Cola or Knowledge Vaccine\*

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## I

The implementation of the Marrakesh Accords—which form the backdrop to the functional rationale behind the World Trade Organization—will lead to enhanced educational offerings across geographical and national frontiers. The conventional methods of curriculum development and course pedagogy by educational institutions have to be updated to keep pace with this reality.

The future challenges will come more from the standpoint of maintaining instructional quality and preserving the integrity of a viable global curriculum dedicated to the enhancement of learning, development of critical thinking skills and enabling better understanding the communication between cultures, than from the technological changes required for borderless education or from active promotion of allegiance to a system of universal absolutes encompassing belief in justice and truth without being mindful of cultural differences and behavioural attitudes/values. The concern that education will become commercialized is genuine. The scenario, however, has to be perceived within the framework of declining governmental and public support for higher education in different countries leading to emphasis on entrepreneurial ways to attract students. In addition, tragic events like the September 11, 2001 terror motivated attacks in New York

\*This is an adapted version of a research monograph which was originally presented at the international convention on Globalization and its Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century held at Hong Kong University, Hong Kong between 26-28 July 2001. It has been updated for presentation at the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Washington Community and Technical College Humanities Association (WCTCHA) held in Olympia, WA on 19-20 October 2001.

and Washington DC—as well as the heavy loss of innocent human lives—normally rally the ignorant to call for the implementation of a framework which promotes the acceptance of simple universal truths and values instead of a holistic approach which, while recognizing cultural differences, also derives its strength from commonly shared ideas and values within society rather than supporting abstract universals whose validity is selective rather than comprehensive in nature. This paper will examine these trends and outline a strategy which will integrate quality pedagogical instruction with the economic and political realities of providing composite course offerings ‘sans frontieres’.

## II. BACKGROUND

The need to improve access to education and raise educational standards has emerged as a central focus of political discourse in the post-Cold War world. In the wake of the Marrakesh Accords and the expansion of the World Trade Organization this has found expression in the desire of politicians and opinion leaders to harness education in order to produce a skilled and globally proficient workforce. American entrepreneurs and educational institutions have moved to meet this desire by offering courses for study accessible to students in these countries. These efforts, however, have been met with apprehension by many in these countries who see them as the farthest thing from global in their motivations. At best they are perceived as an attempt to spread Anglo-American consumerism and debatable Western values; at worst they are seen as the product of an unholy marriage between educational institutions and large private corporations cynically using globalism as a selling point to make money. There is also a genuine concern that this brand of ‘education sans frontieres’ would result in a loss of cultural identity for people living in non-Western nations.

*The New York Times* (11 October 2000) carried an article by Richard Rothstein that sought to address the subject of differences between ethnic groups in subjective cultural terms. Rothstein correctly pointed that a discussion of cultural influences on academic achievement made Americans uncomfortable. However, he erred in not pointing out that the way an individual, within a culture, responds to educational challenges is usually a product of the dominant cultural paradigm within that particular society.

Individualistic cultures, like the United States, do not emphasize context as a variable while analyzing different situations. Subsequently, the emphasis is on outcomes and quantifiable accomplishments wherein compartmentalization of actions is the norm. Collectivistic cultures, like Japan, China and India, emphasize relationships and take a more holistic approach to life and learning. The conflict between these two paradigms manifests itself in differing learning styles and varying emphasis placed on what counts as accomplishment. In addition, the complicated nature of life demands a learning process where a knowledge of history and traditions is imperative to protect a person's cultural identity. The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks have rekindled the debate over universality as a pivotal variable in building individual citizen support in national level crisis situations. The reliance on such norms – that Edward Said rightly terms as 'false universalism'—is fallacious and should be rejected since they retard critical thought and analysis in favour of a short-term view that prizes empty style over the long-term substance of reality.

American education has sought to globalize by expanding their course offerings in areas designated as their strengths—like network technology and the sciences. The dissemination of these offerings usually follows the online format and leaves little room for discourse and discussion. Can such a philosophical framework enhance the relevance of globally sensitive course offerings, especially in collectivistic cultures? The answer is an unequivocal no.

The term 'global village' has somehow become synonymous with the move away from ethnocentrism. However, the 'education sans frontieres' model described previously is guilty of promoting ethnocentrism in the name of globalization. In the absence of a truly global curriculum, which takes into account cultural differences, histories and differing learning styles, whatever goes out from America will inherently reflect the dominant cultural paradigm of eurocentrism that pervades American education. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, there has been a desire on the part of most American entities, be they private entrepreneurs dabbling in web education or colleges and universities, to globalize by honing in on a few select areas in which America is perceived to have an advantage, as opposed to developing a holistic global curriculum. From that standpoint, it would not be amiss to say that this brand of 'education sans frontieres' belongs more to the

principle of export, as per David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, than the idea of an inclusive and mutually supportive global village.

The subsequent sections will discuss how this state of affairs can be changed and outline measures to help in the transition.

## II. GLOBALISM VERSUS INTERNATIONALISM: SHOULD WE DEBUNK THE PARADIGM?

The differentiation between global education and international education needs to be emphasized in any discussion of this nature. These two terms are often used synonymously. However, in terms of content and audience, there is an important distinction between the two (Alger and Harf, 1984).

International education came of age in the twentieth century and has been in existence longer than global education. However, it has mainly operated at the macro level, with its concentration resting on the study of nation states, geographic areas, international organizations, culture and diplomacy among others. On the contrary, the global education paradigm is of recent vintage and, while including similar studies, also incorporates social change and global problem solving. Global education can be defined as 'the lifelong growth in understanding, through study and participation, of the world community and the interdependency of its peoples and systems—ecological, social, economic and technological' (Sny, 1980). Leestma (1979) contends that global education prides itself on its association with the improvement in the quality of life of each individual at the micro level and with the survival of the human species at the macro level.

This framework of analysis, however, remains flawed and empirically invalid. For global education to be truly global it must also study the basis and structure of relationships that guide the decision-making process in collectivistic societies, besides sensitizing students in individualistic cultures to ongoing problems in communication and understanding. Global education may mean international education to a student in China or India, whose goals from a US based education would differ from others within the same pedagogical and geographic setting. Boaz (1985) pointed out three advantages for American students participating in such interactive programmes:

- (i) increase in awareness of the need for interdependence



among nations,

- (ii) development of understanding of other cultures through learning a culture's language, literature, history, economics and politics,
- (iii) improvement in communication skills through the knowledge of another language.

Instead the advantages of an internationally oriented education which accrue to individual students is dependent on their own motivations, cultural influences and value systems. In addition to the improvement in verbal communication and achievement of sensitivity to non linear word usage, as stated in (c), global education can also enhance communication skills of American students through knowledge of another culture's mode of nonverbal communication. Furthermore, global education can serve as the vehicle to acquaint students with common problems, such as poverty, disease and overpopulation, which exist across national frontiers.

At this point in time, neither global education nor international education, as practices in the United States, is in possession of a broad-based curriculum that would prepare students to interact in other cultures with dignity and panache. On the contrary, the American curriculum draws heavily from liberal egalitarian values that are generally espoused within contemporary American society to the exclusion of cultural and religious imperatives that motivate and guide people in non-Western cultures. Therefore, while recognizing diversity, it, nevertheless, also emphasizes the dominant cultural values associated with American education. Thus, its utility as a universal curriculum to be used as such in other parts of the worlds is marginal since it fails to impart a semblance of impartiality in the mind of the user.

### III. THE UNIVERSAL GLOBAL CURRICULUM: CAN IT WORK?

*Forbes* (11 September 2000) carried an article by Danielle Svetcov that pointed out how big web education is becoming as an industry: 'Conservative figures from analysts at Thomas Weisel Partners, a merchant bank in San Francisco, estimate a 10 billion dollars virtual higher market by 2003 and an 11 billion dollars corporate learning market by the same year' (Svetcov, 2000).

It is true that the technology revolution sweeping the world

has made the transmission of information via the Internet practicable and convenient. And the rapid proliferation of Internet hook-ups all over the world have allowed educational institutions to internationalize their offerings. Given the quick and relatively inexpensive nature of the technology, it is not surprising that online courses have become the hottest thing in the field of education. In fact they are so hot that everyone from ex-junk bond magnate Michael Milken, who along with this brother Lowell and Oracle's Larry Ellison runs Knowledge Universe, to the Washington Post Company, whose educational ventures include Kaplan College.com, have jumped on to the bandwagon. However, all of that does not change the fact that web education has yet to solve its greatest riddle; how to create online courses that promote learning without personal contact with teachers as much as learning in classroom settings.

I feel the identification of a holistic global curriculum is a vital first step towards correcting this situation. Such a curriculum, in order to be effective, faces the challenge of making students of different backgrounds understand and appreciate the reasons for underdevelopment, the steps involved in the developmental process and the strategy for introducing a new international and economic order. Necessarily, the subjects incorporated should fall into the following three categories:

A. *Area specific (history, language, culture etc.)*

It is my contention that the *area specific* component of the global curriculum will need to parallel the *elective* in the traditional education parlance. A menu of offerings in this category, mirroring the culture and history of the society in question, should be made available on demand.

B. *Concept specific (philosophy and rationale for globalism)*

The *concept specific* component of the curriculum has to be developed with input from individual educators from different participating nations and should logically include the following attributes:

1. A study of human values wherein global education takes a proactive stance to be inclusive and emphasizes the affirmation of justice and equality of all while accepting the relevance of differences in attitudes and perceptions

guiding human behaviour.

2. Exposure to the prevalent economic, political, ecological and technological systems in vogue so that they can develop strategies that would enable one to survive and prosper in such settings.
3. Exposure to the causes, effects and solutions to global issues and problems. Kniep (1986) contends that such issues and problems have the following attributes:
  - a. they should be transnational,
  - b. they should be problems that cannot be solved by one state alone,
  - c. they should be problems wherein conflict and discord is inherent,
  - d. they should be problems that are linked to one another and do not afford any easy solutions, because the issues underlying them have developed over time.
4. The identification of safeguards to ensure that globalization and international education are not appropriated by ideologically-driven entities who seek to discourage honest debate and conflict in the oft-repeated goal of universal unity and nationalist feeling when confronted with complex national challenges.

It is evident to us that analysis within this particular framework should be undertaken by the student body, while keeping matters of content in mind. An example of a universal issue of interest and relevance to students across cultures would be the situation in the Middle East—also termed as West Asia—with specific reference to the dispute between the Palestinians and the Jews, Iran and Iraq and modern Turkey and the Kurds among others. Similar issues should be added after a review and peer approval process which adds both legitimacy and value to the outcome.

### *C. Relationship specific (framework of contacts between nations and their peoples)*

It is our contention that the *relationship specific* component be more broad-based and interdisciplinary, as compared to the other two variables, as the need to develop a holistic historical perspective of today's world forms a part of the educational culture adopted in the global setting. This should be clear and cogent and enable the rejection of false universals born out of both fear and ignorance.

## IV. CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The ambiguities associated with global education bring it into disrepute whenever an intensive programme crossing cultural boundaries needs to evolve. The creation of a globally conscious and competent citizen—whether in China, India, or the U.S.A.—is taken seriously by involved researchers and scholars. However, a global curriculum demands not only a commitment to academic excellence. It is also severely dependent on the evolution of culture-neutral instruments of analysis. The post-testing creation of such instruments will, in the ultimate analysis, be an effective method of ascertaining whether the three-track global curriculum is functionally workable and doable. The challenge of making it work rests with those with a global perspective, as opposed to those with an insular attitude devoid of a global philosophy. The fear that events like 11 September 2001 tragedy will retard this process by encouraging revanchism and aggressive nationalism at the cost of honest and analytical thinking is genuine and needs to be strongly rebutted. The responsibility of making it work falls on the conscious and competent global citizen who, in essence, needs to be the point person in this exercise.

In conclusion, the development of a universal global curriculum is required and timely—continually making it happen becomes a test of individual responsibility and ingenuity. Let us hope that the diminution of emphasis on purely Eurocentric Western values and strategies will be replaced by a curriculum that is harmonious, respectful and inclusive. Only then will the *concept specific* component reassert itself by illuminating problems that divide and fostering solutions that inform and unify on the basis of convictions which have stood the twin tests of time and legitimacy. In the words of former U.S. Secretary of State William Rogers on 1 May 1972, 'the world of the future will not flourish behind walls, no matter who builds them and no matter what their purpose'. The end of the Cold War in 1989 presented society with a fresh set of challenges and possibilities in the sphere of expanding global education. But this has to be done with discretion. As Theodore Roosevelt articulated, 'To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.' Hence the need for inclusion and flexibility rather than a cast-iron philosophy proceeding on the principles of financially relevant cost benefit norms is the need of the hour.



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