

# **From Open to Inclusive – Asserting rights-based approaches in globalized learning**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the nature, scale and impact of globalization as applied to advanced learning and education systems. It links this to issues around inclusion and equity of access. The nature of learning is being profoundly transformed by both the technological sophistication of e-learning delivery systems and the nature and extent of globalized economic and social relationships. The process is both interconnected and isolating, as profound inequalities are opening in terms of access and equity. This has specific impact on populations at risk of exclusion (whether gender, disability, ethnic origin, minority status, etc.). This paper considers the demands and perspectives of meaningful inclusion in new learning paradigms in terms of policy, strategy and rights-based frameworks. It investigates methods (e.g. universal design for learning) and policy outcomes (labor market entry) that underline meaningful inclusion. It references the challenges stemming from the impact of the Crisis and the need now to prioritize innovation in learning design and delivery systems.

## **KEY WORDS**

Globalization; e-Learning; Rights-based approaches; Innovation; Social Inclusion; Strategic policy; universal design for learning.

## **1 Introduction**

Globalization has become one of the most used words today when describing economic, social and commercial trends. The impact of ever more sophisticated information and communications technologies means that people can discuss and contact each other over vast distances almost instantaneously. It also means that the reach and scope of such technologies is now available across the planet. Such a transformation, in such a relatively short time, poses huge challenges for traditional structures and institutions. People now have the means to compare and contrast issues, to debate and contrast situations and to have access to examples of diverse approaches and standards practically at the push of a button.

Such an environment, however, masks real difficulties for large sections of the world's population. Such technological resources are not available to all. In fact, research demonstrates that the levels of impoverishment, hunger and marginalization for the populations in the world's developing countries are actually increasing. This means that access to communications and technology – like access to wealth – can be highly unequal.

In addition, globalization has the potential to increase differences, if not geographically then in terms of finance and power. Globalization has been cited as a process that drives down wages and degrades the quality of working conditions. Jobs and processing can be switched with extraordinary speed from one region to another with little concern for local communities or their needs. Finally, globalization has been regarded by many as a process of cultural and social homogenization, where alternative views and points of dissent are drowned out by the pre-eminence of the market and seemingly endless cycles of consumerism, consumption and intellectual sterility.

The impact on education and learning of the globalization process is equally contradictory. On the one hand, learning resources (such as course materials, accepted terminology, subject range and internet-based learning) have been criticized for being overwhelmingly centered on US or European models and norms – and, in particular, by being dominated by exclusively English language

orientations. On the other, globalization opens up real possibilities for transformative learning, where knowledge exponentially grows without constraints of national curricula or vested self-interest.

## 2. Impact of globalization on education and learning

Globalization refers to the totality of processes and relationships that are emerging with a world system of market economics – including production, ownership, movement of capital and movement of labor. It also refers to the instantaneous nature of communications demanded by this system and made possible by the advanced development of information and communications technologies.

The consequences for education and learning are critical in this context. Cohen and Kennedy (2000) cite six issues around globalization that impact directly on education:

- Changing concepts of space and time
- An increasing number of cultural interactions
- Common problems facing the world's inhabitants
- Growing interconnections and interdependence
- Networks of increasingly powerful transnational actors and organization
- Synchronization of all dimensions involved in globalization.

A key issue in this identified discourse is economics. The interdependence of education (and associated schooling systems) and prevailing systems of economic organization has long been acknowledged. In an age of globalization however the connection is immediate, apparent and dominant. Certain forms of education have been identified as ultimately surviving or failing based on their economic rationality rather than technological development or learner relevance. This has been particularly identified in relation to distance learning.

The pioneering work of Rumble (1997) and Hulsmann (2000) showed that the future of distance education and e-learning, for example, would be decided by economic factors. Their focus was not so much on the objective question around *what* benefits and costs of learning methodologies, but *whose* benefits and costs.

Simpson, of the United Kingdom's Open University, links discussion of such new learning paradigms directly to economic concepts derived from the discourse around the process of globalization:

- Return on investment
- Willing to pay factors
- Resale value of qualifications
- Investment risk.

Goran Therborn has looked at this from the sociological perspective that analyzes the impact of globalization, and globalization concepts, on the nature, purpose and structure of education in a rapidly evolving world society. He locates the changes in higher education under five topical discourses:

- Competition
- Economics
- Socio-critical discourse
- State power (or impotence)

- Cultural and planetary ecology.

Therborn graphically links globalization to a ruthless system of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ and sees this divide having an increasing importance for how we structure and appreciate the importance of learning and education. The winners are those for whom an opened world is an opportunity for action, connection to resourceful friends, improved mobility (geographic and social), access to information and enriched access. For losers, globalization is a closure of opportunities, employment options, chances for decent wages or profits and a cultural invasion that subverts important values.

This stark presentation of the contradictory nature of globalization outlines the challenges for education and learning if sense is to be made of the emerging planetary social order. Old certainties are certainly displaced by a discourse that is ambivalent, amorphous and linked as directly to the ownership of educational institutions as to the subject matter that has traditionally been taught there, ‘neutral’ and ‘value free’.

Globalization has in many ways become an issue about the commodification of knowledge. Knowledge in this sense becomes just another item to be sold and traded. Yet this is all located in a web of vastly increased possibilities and opportunities if only the right and effective balance can be achieved.

### 3. Learning, technology and globalized society

All accept that technology is having an increasing impact on our lives. Information and communications technologies evolve at a rapid pace. They affect the way we live, how we work, how we communicate and how we learn. Globalization is a powerful driving force and takes this process of technological change and how we learn to an entirely unprecedented level of global contexts.

This applies to the world of business as much as to formal education. Corporate business in today’s world increasingly demands a flexible labor force with the ability to adapt to rapid changes in market conditions. Corporations operating at global levels (and even those operating at local level) find that to compete successfully they require attitudes among staff that stress adaptability and innovation. They require from employees generic skills, specialized knowledge, innovation and collaborative problem-solving rather than the mere ability to take instructions and complete routine tasks.

Individuals must be able to make themselves available to a globalized labor market not just once in a lifetime but constantly – because of volatility, ongoing change and what has been termed the process of permanent insecurity. This enhanced emphasis on competitiveness also has a direct bearing on the understanding of the importance of standards and quality. Globalization places constraints not just on individuals. It also constrains companies, groups and national governments to conform to international standards and an unremitting emphasis on quality.

According to Castells (2000), the present technological revolution is characterized not just by the centrality of knowledge and information, in which there is little new. Rather the revolution is characterized by:

*...the application of such knowledge and information to knowledge information and generation processing/communication devices, in a cumulative feedback loop between innovation and the uses of innovation. (p. 31)*

This conceptual framework does not see globalized information technology as a simple tool to be used. Rather it is a process to be developed. Castells sees this new technological paradigm as a material foundation for a new network society. This society will be shaped by five criteria, which will be critical to understand learning in globalized contexts. They are:

- Information will be its raw material
- The effects of new technologies will be pervasive – all processes of individual and collective existence will be directly sped by the new medium

- The networking logic of the system is well adapted to increasing complexity of action and unpredictable patterns of development arising from the creative power of such interaction
- The paradigm will be based on flexibility – not only processes are reversible but organizations and institutions can be modified and even fundamentally re-ordered
- There is a growing convergence of specific technologies into a highly integrated system.

The challenge is to respond to and shape the change by a deeper level of expertise and understanding – as opposed to passively reacting to every current and trend. This process of using the globalization process creatively and in a community centered way will demand extra resources in terms of research, analytical capacity and the theoretical synthesis that enables people to understand their environment rather than accept it meekly. It also raises significant issues around access for all.

#### **4. Globalized educational contexts**

Our current educational institutions emerge from specific historical conditions as influenced by economic considerations in their time as globalization in ours. Technological transformation enables us to look at old questions in new ways. The ICT revolution does, however, enable us to look at the transformation of pedagogy in an international and interdependent context. In this environment students build out from teacher-led models to active learning styles, where learners are responsible for their own learning.

Globalization posits another approach where students will join a knowledge generating community and increasingly focus on collaborative problem solving. In such a socio-cultural dynamic, learning is still about academic rigor, but equally grounded in generic skills of:

- Synergistic collaboration
- Socialization
- Research methodology
- Dialectical discourse via networked learning communities
- Communication
- Negotiation of meaning.

In European contexts, the Bologna Agreement attempts to promote educational coordination, exchange and the mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications. Even prior to Bologna, transnational cooperation within the European educational sector had been quite extensive through programs like Erasmus and Socrates. These programs have promoted much exchange and shared learning. Many universities have developed shared teaching courses, language proficiency training and graduate student placements. There is also an economic rationale for this – the European Union attempts to promote free movement of labor and educational harmonization is seen as an important element in this process. For better or worse, education and economics are intimately connected. Globalization merely serves to copper-fasten this dynamic on an international level. An aspect of this debate is the issue of quality and standards and whether human knowledge can serve other than purely utilitarian ends.

Globalization also can serve a progressive agenda from a learning perspective. This may be regarded under the following headings:

- International interdependence
- Technological innovation
- Improved access
- Innovative creativity.

Globalization is not a one way street. While it is a powerful force shaping all our lives, it is a process that also offers unparalleled opportunities if a strategic purpose and sense of vision around the primacy of human perspectives is present. The planet faces extraordinary challenges in terms of equality of opportunity, exploitation, ecological crises and conflict. For these reasons alone, an international perspective on learning is critical.

While learning is about more than market forces, it is nonetheless shaped powerfully by them. There is a risk that educational knowledge and techniques could be reduced to goods to be sold in a purely competitive and utilitarian way. There is an equal risk that the standards and quality systems demanded through the globalization process could leave a cloistered academic world untouched.

Creative synergy demands that innovation be constantly applied to the world of learning. The technologies that drive globalized learning can also open profound opportunities and new levels of access for those traditionally excluded by reason of geography, social class or marginalization. Workers employed in peripheral jobs are vulnerable to redundancy, lack promotional outlets and suffer great educational disadvantages. If globalization is about global markets it is equally about global learning and this simply cannot be achieved without maximizing access, learning and human development. This raises the question of meaningful inclusion.

## 5. Envisaging Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is not about halting the irreversible. It is about ensuring that alternative aspects of the human experience are fostered and vindicated. This in itself calls for communities of the marginalized to better define their needs and their potential contribution to the wider societies and communities of which they are part. Rather they should be seen as integral components of a global effort to ensure that the world passed on to subsequent generations is not a uniform, suburbanized market place but a living and diverse collection of richly different communities.

Social inclusion can be therefore seen as an integral element of a reassertion of the primacy of human values in teaching, research and best practice. Overcoming exclusion and marginalization means equipping students and educational stakeholders alike not simply with the mechanisms to understand social challenges - but also, and more fundamentally, to be able to do something about them. Social exclusion implies both a *structure* and a *process* in the ordering of human relations. As a structure, social exclusion relates to unequal levels of ownership of resources, unequal levels of opportunity and unequal levels of privilege and status in accessing goods, services or information. As a process, social exclusion is concerned with categories that historically may vary but are, in whatever form, denied full participation and equality. As a process, it is also further concerned with the forces and groups that, for whatever reason, implement and maintain exclusion.

Social exclusion concerns itself therefore with:

- Groups that can be defined as excluded
- The nature of the exclusion experienced
- The attitudes of those who maintain exclusionary practices
- The knowledge, skills and attitudes of officials in developing policies in these areas
- The body of knowledge and practice regarding equality legislation and practice.

Two issues emerge strongly from this. One is the question of *equality of opportunity*. Embedded firmly in the thinking and values of the French Revolution, equality as a concept has been a highly contentious issue in Europe ever since. From Napoleon to Thatcher, equality has been often derided and demeaned as a concept. From securing the franchise to ensuring a documented Bill of Rights in Northern Ireland, equality has been at the coalface of resistance and opposition from vested social interests. In the United States there is a richer tradition of the acceptance and assertion of rights but a corresponding marginalization of the need to accept any underlying a priori equal status between

human beings, except in the context of the obligations of citizenship. Equality should not be seen therefore as axiomatic and widely accepted in all western societies.

Second is the question of the *norm* against which exclusion is judged. In charting the poor levels of access for those experiencing social exclusion the literature of the European Union refers constantly to 'average' persons. In a context where the average is never defined or the normal spelled out, it is difficult to see social exclusion as anything other than that which is variably defined at any one time by individuals and structures which envisage themselves as average or normal. Clearly this value-ridden concept is less than useful. The norm clearly does not refer to a statistical average. Nor does it refer to a historical constant. Its very use excludes. Its very use contains the bias against which equality approaches must engage.

What is important is that conceptual clarity be employed from the outset in approaching issues around social exclusion. What is important is that a rigorous analysis of the existing conditions and characteristics of the presenting society be employed to make sense of the discrimination in practice and attitude that undoubtedly exists.

The issue of social exclusion has been addressed in two broad ways in Europe. One is the approach of the British government since 1997. The other is the approach of the European Union. Within the latter, there are significant degrees of national difference and application, but with a common understanding of a linkage to employment creation and legal redress in which it is accepted that host societies have to themselves change. Great emphasis is placed on transnational actions. Inclusion is seen as diversity. The British approach has centred more on a problem-based focus where research, best practice and standards will produce a British integration for all. Little if any emphasis is placed on transnational actions. Inclusion is seen as integration.

## **6. Open Learning, Access and Inclusion**

Grave problems persist throughout the European Union, despite financial harmonization and freer movement of goods and labour. Unemployment remains disturbingly high. Social and economic inequality has increased with wide variations in access to income. Racism and discrimination have increased. Most importantly, the grim instability of violence has re-appeared with shocking intensity in the Balkan wars and genocide. Above all, the shock of the crisis since the banking collapse of 2008, has now seen a ruthless focus on neo-liberal responses based on austerity and deconstruction of social welfare systems established over the last 60 years.

Central to European growth and development strategy has been the whole concept of *employment*. The ability to find and retain work is viewed as fundamental to human development. Employment is more than simply being able to earn money for a task performed. It is seen as central to human identity and development and is an essential constituent of personal identity.

In a situation where the fundamental characteristics of work and employment have been transformed by the pace of change it still remains true that work, however constituted, is central to the participation and development of human beings in society. It is for this reason that European employment strategies and interventions have been the foundation of wider social and community approaches. Employment therefore is seen as the key bridge in the movement to enhanced social inclusion.

The glue holding this all together is the concept of *lifelong learning*. This is of fundamental importance in understanding the significant shift away from skill specific training towards training and education that is focused on process, problem solving, adaptability and innovation.

Nothing reflects the pace and rate of change in contemporary European societies than this concept. The move away from school-based (or location based) education and training to more complex and flexible forms of learning design and delivery is changing the nature of our understanding of learning. The change of understanding in moving from time-limited curricula to self-study, open-learning and on-line learning (often in work contexts) alters profoundly the traditional understanding of traditional training and educational approaches and methodologies. The stated reference of education and

training to actually existing social and economic characteristics of the labour market drives learning in the direction of applicability and relevance rather than mere accumulation of formal knowledge.

Of all the priorities advanced by the EU in the context of unprecedented levels of social change and economic transformation, the concept of lifelong learning holds out most promise as the way to view best practice in education, training and development particularly in relation to the process of social inclusion. Its ethos and methodology will influence most strongly the characteristics of training provision and occupational guidance in the years ahead. It is well therefore that professionals and administrators working with social exclusion have as thorough an understanding as possible of the principles involved.

Although there has been a considerable increase in participation rates and schooling during the last ten years or so, many young people still leave school without the requisite qualifications, knowledge or skills for open, competitive employment. In addition they often do not have that love of learning and motivation to learn that is essential for further learning and growth in the rest of their lives.

Throughout all Member States of the EU - and indeed in countries all around the world - there is growing concern about the capacity of traditional schools and education systems to change, adapt and provide an appropriate foundation for lifelong learning. It has become urgent for governments to review the ways in which schools are organized, the content of curricula, modes of delivery, design and location of places of learning and the integration of advanced information technologies into the overall educational structure. In such an environment it is important to evaluate and re-assess the role and function of schools in our society and the relationship between education and families, employment, business, enterprise, culture and community.

The OECD thinking on lifelong learning has produced a wide-ranging debate on the type of society we are presently constructing and wish to leave after us. Education and training are not just some abstract themes to be tacked on to the real business of making money. They are at the heart of what it means to grow and develop - both as individuals and as communities. That sense of community which is most threatened by the growth of social dysfunction, racism, violence and despair is best preserved in a context where people are allowed to learn and develop at their own pace with the satisfaction of knowing that their development feeds into processes of creativity and innovation for all.

Lifelong learning requires more than vision. It requires investment. It is for that reason that it has been closely associated with the idea of equality from the outset. The emphasis on equality underlines the key role that learning plays in sustaining economic, social, cultural and political well-being. The emphasis on learning for all recognizes that education and training are prerequisites for not simply employment (or, even more rudimentary, a 'job') but for equitable participation in society.

This is why the principles and methods of lifelong learning have had such a resonance in the disability community - especially in the United States among the independent living movement. Concepts of empowerment, autonomy, ease of access, flexibility and innovation are central to lifelong learning and fit well with the structures and objectives of the disability consumer movement.

These issues are pointers to strategies and policies which will be central in the forthcoming approach to education and training for social inclusion.

This new open and competitive environment means that the emphasis on quality and transparency becomes more important than ever. It is incumbent on professionals and agencies to understand the structures, objectives and terminology. It is also important to have a strategic sense of the wider environment of social exclusion. Individual sectors experiencing exclusion will more and more have to engage with other sectors and groups marginalized by the attitudes and prejudices of "mainstream" society to develop networks and generic models of best practice.

## 7. Conclusions

Social exclusion is a term that is now central to the debate about the direction of social policy. It is clear from what we have discussed that it does not have a distinct definition – or that its definitions can vary from setting to setting. As a result, there is confusion about its exact meaning.

Some are dismissive, suggesting that it is simply old-fashioned concern about the poor dressed up in fancy garb. In one sense, they are right: social exclusion is tied to the past. To suggest otherwise would be to devalue the commitment of previous generations to reducing poverty and inequality as well as expanding democracy.

At the same time, it would be misleading to view it as simply a new veneer on old problems. 'Social exclusion' is also contemporary, even forward-looking, as it is used to emphasise that changes in economic and social life have rendered old remedies to social problems less effective, if not obsolete. New times have brought different forms of poverty and inequality, requiring modern solutions. It places equal emphasis – as we have seen – on the dynamic or rationale of the 'excluder' as much as the conditions of the 'excluded'.

By social inclusion we mean not just a static snapshot of inequality. As stated earlier, it is a set of *processes*, within the labour market, educational structure and welfare systems, by which individuals, households, communities or even whole social groups are pushed towards or kept within the margins of society. It encompasses not only material deprivation but more broadly the denial of opportunities to participate fully in social life. It is associated with stigmatisation and stereotyping. At first sight, paradoxically, some of those who experience exclusion even develop survival strategies, which are premised upon its continuance.

Finally, it highlights the primary responsibility of the wider society for the condition of its marginal members, of the need for all to share equally in the fruits of citizenship.

Whatever definition is employed, the process of social inclusion is intimately linked to three themes:

- Equality
- Lifelong learning
- Democracy.

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