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# TAKING THE LEAD FROM STUDENTS

*How can we connect our academic practice to raise students' awareness of complex global issues?*

**S**tudying in a world seemingly off its axis. Shattering recent events like the Bastille Day in Nice, Paris in January 2015, Brussels in March 2016, Istanbul and Orlando attacks in June, the violence of ISIS, the referendum on Britain leaving Europe, and the migration of thousands of refugees fleeing war, call into question the role of academic practice in universities. In this context, reflecting on learning theories that promote engagement can help us understand how students can become inspired as active citizens of the world.

September 2015 heralded a barrage of troubling world events and issues. The world appeared to have shifted off its axis. Beginning in September, the Syrian Civil War took a dangerous turn when Russia began air strikes from its bases in Syria, raising the global temperature with superpower involvement in war. Throughout the autumn, Europe faced a wave of nearly a million refugees seeking escape from the Syrian Civil War or similar instability and violence elsewhere.

The so-called Islamic State, meanwhile, took its fight beyond the Middle East and on October 10, killed more than 100 people at a peace rally in Ankara, Turkey. Just two weeks later, a bomb brought down a Russian passenger airliner over the Sinai Peninsula, killing all on board. In just two more weeks, 130 people were killed during ISIS attacks at four locations across Paris. The year ended in December when a couple loyal to the self-described Islamic State killed 14 people in a shooting in San Bernardino, California. These attacks prompted fresh Western air strikes against the Islamic State and sharpened domestic politics in France and the U.S. Yet 2016 began with fresh tragedies and an uncertain future for the UK and the European Union from the June Brexit referendum result.

This whirlwind of complex global issues makes us question the obligations of university educators. How do shattering events like the Paris attacks, the violence of ISIS and migration of thousands of refugees to Europe fleeing war affect university students? This is particularly relevant as University of West London students – like all students in London universities – live in an international capital; some are from Europe, others are British citizens; and most have some connection with Europe. How can we work with students so that they feel empowered to not only



## *The whirlwind of complex global issues makes us question the obligations of university educators. How do shattering events like the Paris attacks, the violence of ISIS and migration of thousands of refugees to Europe fleeing war affect university students?*

discuss but work to resolve these issues? Can our pedagogical approaches catalyse students' interest and their drive to act towards positive world change?

### **Using constructivist theories to challenge academic practice**

Two learning theories, both within the constructivist framework, help us understand how lecturers can build academic practices that help students confront complex world issues. Guiding this discussion are social constructivist theorist Lev Vygotsky and Paolo Freire's humanistic theory, which emphasises a commitment to raising the consciousness of individuals.

In this article, I will use questioning as a reflective compass to analyse these learning theories and explore how they can help embed issues of social justice and awareness into universities' classrooms. Importantly, examining these learning theories provides a platform to consider shifting academic practices so that they recognise and inspire students as active citizens of the world.

### **Shaping and questioning academic practice using social development theory**

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's social development theory is based on the assumption that social interaction is essential to develop awareness in children. According to Vygotsky, cultural development occurs first between people at the social level, and then inside the child at the individual level. Higher functions, he argued, begin at the level of relationships between people (Vygotsky, 1978: 57). His theoretical approach focuses on the concrete details of a child's engagement with others and with the world (Bakurst, 2015).

This approach, when translated from its application to children to include all learners, can guide academic practice to expand global consciousness among students. Above all, this theory sets the stage for how classrooms, as part of the broader university community, can play a vital role in how students view the world. For example, classrooms can become spaces where students analyse world issues by discussing the similarities and differences that exist in different regions of the world and thus engage in comprehensive, global conversations about urgent societal issues.

The second aspect of Vygotsky's social development theory is that the potential for cognitive development depends on the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978: 85). In this zone, students develop greater skills with instructor or peer collaboration than through learning alone. Key to the zone of proximal development is the instructional technique of 'scaffolding' (McKenzie, 2000). Students build on their current knowledge to learn new information in this scaffolding environment. As parts of the scaffold fall away, students come to new levels of awareness, success and independence.

In academic practice, we can imagine the zone of proximal development related to active global citizenship. Recognising this 'zone' complements the view that affecting the world is a lofty and daunting prospect. Figure 1 (overleaf) adapts Vygotsky's zone of proximal development to provide a pathway for global citizenship development.

From this diagram, it is possible to imagine how educators can contextualize learning. Students in the centre circle may have varying current levels of global awareness. With help and structured activities on this theme in the classrooms, in the zone of proximal development, students can better see how they can affect the world's issues through their actions. The outer circle shows students and educators where they can least affect change. This adaptation of Vygotsky's model identifies a place or 'zone' where resides the greatest potential for transforming world issues.

Given Vygotsky's perspective that emphasises the significant role of social interaction, how can lecturers encourage students to further their social development? Assessments would need to be structured to include, for example, community service components, working with community members to improve non-profit services, volunteer activities or work experience. This approach recognises that students can reach their highest potential when they can see the positive effects of their actions. In this case, individual student development will build on their prior social interactions to include the social and cultural context of the communities included in their academic work. Students could then see the difference they can make in the world through their chosen academic and future career and the specificities of their chosen discipline.

### Raising consciousness using Freire's humanistic theory

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, in the 30th anniversary edition released in 2000 of his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, guides educators to imbue their teaching with social justice. Freire presents a theory of humanistic learning in the context of revolutionary struggle between the oppressed and oppressors. A central idea is that the oppressed must free themselves to become people 'in the process of liberation' so that they may, in turn, free their oppressors (Freire, 2000: 56). Freire urges educators to help students understand oppression as a starting place for action towards freedom.

Contemporary academic practice should aim to raise student awareness and encourage action as global citizens; thus it relates to Freire's pedagogy in several ways. First, foundational to academic practice must be the notion of partnership with students to discuss and define global issues of oppression. By defining the fear evoked from terrorism as oppression, for example, students will more clearly see the options for liberators. Students could thus rebalance the idea of violence as coming from a place of oppression and position themselves as active participants in rejecting this course of action.

Next, as Freire tells us, educators must first question their own social identity so that they may be fully and completely available to students. Simultaneous to raising consciousness, educators recognise that students come to university with their own life history, informed and developed by their background and experiences. These students are confronting enormous change as they develop emotionally, socially and intellectually. Thus, teachers' and students' identities are tied to one another in an interlocked relationship (Rozas, 2007) that generates development and perspective-changing. In the case of global citizenship, instructors and students can enter a path of learning together about world issues.

Global issues today certainly involve oppression. Let's consider, for example, terrorist acts. They leave communities feeling fearful even as people go about their everyday lives, sitting in coffee shops and attending concerts. Similarly, we identify with the human despair of the enormous refugee migration across Europe. In much the same fashion, students understand how such global issues affect their identities. Academic practices that engage in this kind of reflection can encourage student discussions about how these issues make them feel; and how these issues impact students, and their families and friends. This dialogue can bring to light the struggle experienced by students who confront these issues. It constitutes an act of humanity as opposed to the inhumanity that lies, as Freire tells us, at the heart of the oppressor's violence. This conversation can unearth students' relationships with the world, their perception of these issues, and bring these themes down to the level of personal impact. Student self-awareness will then become a catalyst



FIGURE 1 Academic Practice for Global Citizenship: Zone of Proximal Development

*Contemporary academic practice should aim to raise student awareness and encourage action as global citizens*

for learning (Freire, 2000: 107). The task of the educator, then, is to show students that their perceptions matter and that they connect to the reality of the larger issues.

Freire encourages academic practices that engage students as citizens who believe they can play a part in understanding and contribute to solving some of the most vexing problems of the 21st century. Rather than seeing these issues as too big, insurmountable, or simply perplexing, educators can encourage students to confront these tragedies. Students, as part of this practice, will be encouraged to bring their knowledge of the world to the conversation. This approach sends a message to students that no problem is too complicated or too complex for their involvement and discussion.

However, working with students to identify oppression and its effects is not enough. Educators, (or a 'revolutionary educator' as described by Freire, 2000: 75) must ensure that their academic practice is infused with a profound trust in students. Instructors are not simply transferring information to students about global issues, or imposing on them a sense of hopelessness. Instead, educators practice, as Freire terms, 'liberating education,' or 'problem-posing education' that overcomes the traditional roles of teacher and student (Freire, 2000: 79). This style of teaching recognises that the educator joins in learning, and in being responsible for that learning, with students, through dialogue.

What would classrooms look like in this problem-posing model? Students are no longer

listeners but 'critical co-investigators' in discussion with each other and the teacher (Freire, 2000: 81). Instead of simply representing facts of these global issues as a lecture, under this model, lecturers represent these issues as problems in need of conversation. This style of education allows students to see the ways they exist in the world and they 'come to see the world not as static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation' (Freire, 2000: 83). Indispensable to problem-posing education is students bringing their own history and experiences to discover the perspectives of others. Freire notes that this approach 'affirms people as beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality' (Freire, 2000: 84). As students participate in these discussions, they will expand their understandings of complex issues. In these moments of self-awareness, students will be open to the possibilities to create change.

How can academic practice help move students from the abstract to the concrete in this dialogue? A leading response to this question is in creating a structure that encourages action. For example, groups of students could discuss the impact of terrorism on their lives, report back and then engage in a full classroom discussion to develop a vigorous analysis. Students can break down themes, seeking projects that tackle these issues. Classrooms become places where students watch interviews of specialists in cultural diversity and radical fundamentalism and where tutors post magazine and newspaper articles for discussion. Students can also be encouraged to





discuss how different media cover these issues and question, for example, why different newspapers have certain interpretations of the same facts. This approach would encourage students to view public information not as passive readers but with questions and criticism. In this model, students will own the ideas and themes as much as they do their actions so that 'the important thing... is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest' (Freire, 2000: 124) in their own suggestions and those of their classmates.

### Next steps

University lecturers can learn a great deal about academic practice involving active global citizenship through the constructivist learning theories of social constructivism and humanism. These theories can be applied in academic practice in my field, public relations and advertising, and could be considered for use across all fields of study.

Vygotsky's social development theory is grounded in a learner's engagement with the world and others. I have shown how it is possible to reimagine his 'zone of proximal development' model as a way of describing and enacting individual awareness about students' impact on the world. One result of the use of this model would be bringing into the classroom an increased cultural, historical and community awareness of groups and individuals, a practice vital to the education of future generations.

The humanistic theory put forth by Freire, when applied to academic practice, involves students understanding the concepts of oppression through a 'problem-posing' learning style. Here, classrooms are sites of co-investigation where students and tutors discuss the broader impacts of world issues such as terrorism, climate change, or mass migration. At the same time, educators can devote themselves to taking action through individual and group projects that raise their awareness and commitment to world change.

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