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Global learning – a pedagogical challenge for Austrian NGOs

The globalisation of our ways of life and the rise of a global community pose a tremendous challenge to our learning. We need to understand manifold political, economic, social, ecological and cultural interdependencies to understand the world as a whole. Global learning comprises an enormous range of content. We talk about “the world”, about billions of people, about the interrelationship of all societies, cultures, religions. We ask questions about power and powerlessness, about liberation and resistance, peace and war, relationships between men and women and many other issues.

From global to learning

The knowledge in this world and about this world doubles every five to six years. Not even the most subtle technological support can help to master this speed. The belief that “to pass on information is at the very core of learning” will therefore meet resistance on the side of the victims of such a way of thinking. None can make all existing knowledge their own in one lifespan. Individual learning will always remain behind the knowledge available and individuals will have to select according to their needs and possibilities.

It is worth looking at human beings’ abilities to learn. For some centuries we have been convinced that education not only makes a young person into a better human being, but that through education we create a better society at large. Experience with the “project of modernisation” gives reason for doubt. When looking at the growing gap between rich and poor, the global endangerment of so many species, the various risks of scientific-technological development, the question arises whether the challenge is how to meet progress instead of how to produce it.

The two main aims of global learning are: to find an orientation in an increasingly complex and deregulated political, social, economic and cultural environment and out of that to develop a vision for living in a humane world society. Global learning wants to enable us to comprehend the connection between our very own milieu and the global development. It conveys understanding that events in distant places have effects on our local environment. It can help us to look at “progress” from different cultural angles and to pose questions as for our thinking and acting.

The simple addition of information is not sufficient. NGOs sometimes tend to approach their target-groups in a too linear way. “We tell you and then you will know, then you will be conscious.” Our brains, however do not work this way. If they reacted to external input according to the sender’s wishes, we would soon collapse under the pressure. The fact is that we filter any new information against the background of our experiences and select new inputs accordingly.

The same is true of the often proclaimed aim of NGOs to change the behaviour patterns of their target-groups. Every day we want to change other people – in our partnerships, as colleagues, as politicians, etc. We are convinced that our arguments are water-tight and that the change we work for would be to the very best of that person or group.

However, people live in their own world of imagination and argumentation. The power of language is often over-estimated. I can force people to listen to me physically, but I cannot control the meaning they take from my words. Each offer is processed in an individually very different way. After all, it would be absurd to suppose that people develop independence and the competence to decide after a process of learning which in its aims and content is steered by others.

Projects of global learning should aim less at a “new consciousness” and a “change in action”, but create a climate with manifold possibilities to find one’s own connections to the content at stake. Learning is more likely to take place when people see, feel and understand that it has to do with themselves, that there is some reward for them, that it improves their situation and supports their needs.

Global learning is more than a political recipe book. At its core, it is not piling up knowledge, but the critical explanation and discussion of concerns, interests and experiences. It circumscribes educational processes in our own identity. The biographical histories of everybody involved should therefore be integrated. Learning can then be a dialogical emancipation and a common discussion of realities.

We should accept knowledge and understanding as friends, not as enemies. Who likes the human being, will accept him and her as a learning being – with experiences, claims and visions. Global learning then will also always be an exercise of co-operation and solidarity. It requires our empathy, our creativity, our courage and openness. It promotes learning processes which strengthen our self-confidence. It cannot be reduced to single issues. Subdivided into portions of subject matter, into chapters or weekly lessons, it loses substance. Learning by heart prevents us from wisdom. Global learning requires our full participation and our curiosity. We should rest with people, things and events without feeling that we waste our time.

The grass does not grow faster if we pull it

Today there is often no time for reflection and doubt. All processes are rationalised and intensified. The ends rule the means. Haste drives away thoughts. Striving for the future prevents us from contemplating the here and now.

Too often, a horrific portrayal of globalisation tells us that global development will lead us straight into destruction. However, what is the effect of such scenarios? Do they lead to understanding and care? Should we not be more concerned with our common attitudes than with blaming others? To experience participation in concrete projects will lead to more development than any external strategy however professional or well-meaning.

Again and again we need exploration, reflection and thoughtfulness. Global learning should not follow the credo of any absolutist planning. It should be an open process out of the needs of everybody involved. For decades the Club of Rome has pointed at the importance and necessity of visionary discussions. If the future can be created, there must be spheres of thought and fantasy, which are freed from the pressure of political interest and instrumentalism. Global learning is not primarily a means to create a better world, but it promotes the ability to decide for yourself in a global context.

It is very difficult to recognise the world as a complicated net and to react accordingly. We too often simplify the interdependence and schematise difficult interactions. As long as the social, ecological and cultural environment was stable we could differentiate between the known and unknown on our mental maps. Today, multicultural society is a reality. Scientific and technological development has moved beyond our traditional horizons. The context in which people live today can no longer be explained in simple words. Global problems do not offer a linear cause-effect connection and their complexity does not allow a clear perception with our senses.

Any appeal solely to the very personal responsibility will lose out in such a complex situation. Through language and thinking we can cope with the limits of spontaneous reason. For anybody who develops and carries out projects of global learning it is important to reflect about the processes of learning in general and to show respect for human beings as independent learning individuals living in a complex society.

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