

## Why ‘global learning’? & thinking about a new DEA

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This thinkpiece responds to the request for contributions to discussion about the DEA’s future priorities and considers the potential of a new distinctive focus on development and the role of education.

We are heading for another one of those significant landmarks in the history of development education. It is symbolised by many things not least the changing DEA and its new strapline, **promoting education for a just and sustainable world.**

There are many initiatives relating to the growing engagement with the global dimensions agenda; there is diversity in approach, strategy and assumptions but together they add up to a significant buzz of activity within the education system. There is now formal curriculum recognition of the importance of the global context. So, how do we take stock of this new situation, talk about how to make the most of it and ask: **what is it, a network like us, should now seek to achieve?**

The differences in approach within the 'dev ed community' are often not articulated and are therefore difficult to debate but the general "global is good" feeling serves us well for now. However, if we are to make the most of this new situation we need to consider things afresh, revisit the pitfalls and debate these differences.

In that context I welcome the question from the DEA: why has Tide~ taken up the term global learning?

## **Tide~ global learning**

Teachers in development education (Tide~), a teacher network that seeks to respond to the educational challenges of global dimensions and development perspectives, has recently renamed itself **Tide~ global learning.**

One of the core aims is "to help shape and establish a recognised entitlement to global learning". Our aspiration fits with our analysis that this will only happen if it grows within the education system and is valued by learners and teachers in those terms. See website for further information (1).

The idea of 'global learning' grew out of thinking about:

- The need to create a **more focused agenda**, but one that can also engage with the complexity of contemporary issues, the knowledge and key concepts as well as the dynamic of change.

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- The need to present **learning and the needs of learners** growing up in an increasingly globalised society as the core challenge ... and support the need for new thinking and work about the implications of this challenge.
  - The need to be **more inclusive** about the nature of our aims and the strategy of building capacity within the education system. The need to respond to learners' needs in an increasingly globalised society is a challenge we have in common with those we work with. We need to further develop our partnership approach.
  - The need to **clarify issues about quality** relating to global dimensions and for this quality to be increasingly self-generated by teachers, curriculum planners and policy makers.
  - The need to **challenge the idea that "global" is seen as if it is some other place**. A key aspect of global learning is that the global is here too, and that if we seek to build better understanding we need to appreciate the commonality of the human experience at a local scale here and elsewhere in the world.

All of these things are important but strategically perhaps the most significant is the opportunity to engage practitioners in the basic question:

### **How are we meeting young people's global learning needs?**

Research by Wolverhampton University (2) demonstrates how staff groups in schools are quickly able to engage with such a question. They can identify many things that they are already doing and in the process begin to generate ideas about how to improve the quality of what they are offering. It is Tide's experience that a similar question can provide a focus at a variety of scales from the classroom through particular curriculum projects, to debates about the curriculum as a whole.

The process has also enabled constructive thinking about potential pitfalls and the nature of a **professional approach** to global learning. The QCA document *The global dimension in action* (3) raises similar debates (page 12) and concludes that:

*"Good global learning involves pupils thinking critically about issues from a variety of perspectives, discussing a range of solutions and building awareness of positive change, how it occurs and how individuals can contribute."*

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## Starting points for a new DEA

Reflecting on the process that has taken DEC (Birmingham) and transformed it into Tide~ global learning (a bit like when NADEC became the DEA) could be useful to thinking about starting points for DEA.

There is much positive work to build on but what are some key concerns?

### Are we clear about basic assumptions?

Exploring basic assumptions is key to asking bigger questions but may not be as easy as it looks. There may be difficult choices to make. Choices that cannot be fudged if we (the DEA) aspire to have clear role in a new context.

**“We the DEA”?** Now there’s an assumption. For me that is how the DEA idea evolved but now I write it I realise I am making an assumption that the term DEA means the whole membership, which needs checking out. It owes more to nostalgia than current analysis. Perhaps it would be useful if the DEA (the organisation with a small staff, not the network) saw itself as working with partners rather than “members”. This would make a strength of what has happened already as well as moving away from the confusions of pretending to represent member views, or that there is one official view. More appropriate models of leadership are called for.

I guess that most DEA members (and potential partners) share assumptions about the obvious pitfalls in development education but it would be interesting to have a clearer picture. It might be useful to use a simple stimulus such as **Global Learning ~ exploring the pitfalls** (4 & see appendix) to explore what consensus there is and to focus debate about core assumptions about the role of development education. This particular stimulus, used in Tide~ work, aims to raise a debate about some of the pitfalls that exist in this area of work. We argue that if we don’t talk about them with those we work with we risk being complacent about the quality of young people’s learning experiences.

### How do we see the context we now work in?

The new context, that is widely recognised, may be the better starting point than assumptions. There is now much activity in the sector and we have a curriculum policy that recognises the value of global dimensions ... and global learning. We should not take this for granted. It is already being

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questioned. In my view, unless we take the opportunity to bring new rigour and quality to what we advocate it will not be sustained.

This is an opportunity to think afresh and re-evaluate our role but I observe more complacency than I would have expected and a tendency to use the situation simply to legitimise the things we used to do when the agenda was less welcome. We have an opportunity to engage a wide range of actors in thinking through a holistic approach. But we are in a dilemma, it takes a lot more collective confidence to say we know there is something important to do but we are not clear how best to do it. It is all too easy (sometimes essential to funding) to posture about our expertise when what is really needed is some good questions to engage both us and those we seek to work with.

The process of involving others (eg policy makers, Heads, teachers) in thinking things through and going back to basic principles can be very rewarding (for them and us) ... and if done in a professional way increases credibility rather than undermines it.

The DEA has an opportunity to raise questions that can stimulate such engagement. It could, for example, make more of 'formative evaluation' approaches that raise significant challenges in a way that is relevant to people in the jobs they have. The 'evaluation' itself is part of the innovatory process.

### **What kind of expertise?**

Our strategic assumptions could be a starting point ... but it is another difficult one. For example, there is a tendency to institutionalise our experience as some sort of expertise (again sometimes important to funding) giving us a disposition to challenge schools from outside, offer them Awards, "make them" Fair Trade schools, etc. It would be more effective (and more honest) to work in partnership ... to be part of something more durable and evolving.

There are alternative ways of framing our expertise, for example focusing more on enabling the creativity of others to respond to the global/development agenda as part of their work?

### **Long-term aspirations?**

The idea that the world is a place of more certainty than it was 25 years ago is dishonest and clearly manipulative. Yet some well-established organisations continue to see development education as a way of "getting their message" across or simply profiling their work. Such messages

are often presented with such certainty that they may well have the effect of reducing long-term awareness and understanding rather than contributing to it.

There needs to be a stronger (and clearer) sense of the longer-term objectives and aspirations. The DEA has a role in contributing to the lead needed for this. It is in this context that such organisations (possibly including DFID) could begin to explore education in a different role and therefore begin to value it differently.

There is no doubt in my experience that there have been considerable achievements over the last 30 years in terms of general awareness of, and popular concern about, development. Development education has had a significant role in this. Why this has not been valued, or even monitored, by policy makers is for another article. I would suggest a major factor is that, to date, development education has always been seen as a subsidiary objective rather than as a direct contributor to core thinking about international change and development.

Whether or not there has been “impact assessment” by others, the DEA as a self-determining organisation needs a renewed vision based on an assessment of both strengths and weaknesses. A long-term perspective is vital (in my experience) in order to be able to recognise opportunities that are useful and those that are not. So it is vital to debate: What is DEA’s potential? What options does it have? Which will best serve DEA’s long-term aspirations? What is it that development education now seeks to achieve?

## In conclusion

I would like to see the DEA take on debates such as those I have raised in this article ... but in addition I think the DEA is in a unique position to focus such thinking on the fact that all of the above is about the **relationship between education and development** (our own development) in the context of globalisation and change.

Change in communications, international relations, economic power, environmental impact, climate, political context, etc: the educational implications are massive in terms of grappling with the knowledge involved, the skills (individually and collectively) for on-going learning to respond to this dynamic and the need for new ways of thinking (and acting) internationally. We need to be asking better questions.

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There is beginning to be a recognition that internationally we need to be thinking about new ways of learning and of working together, and that there needs to be a discourse about this in the context of thinking about development. Communities all over the world are (or could be) responding to such educational implications. The commonality of the agenda could provide DEA with considerable scope but at the same time offer a sharp focus.

The scope is also considerable in terms of potential partners. The Development Education Commission (5) produced the document ***Essential Learning for Everyone***. It proposed the need to raise debates about learning frameworks. In doing this they were not only discussing schools and other educational institutions but the nature of “a learning organisation”. These matters are also important to business, trade unions, third sector organisations, community groups, the media and the state itself. They are in effect about the relationship between education and development ... education and change.

A renewed DEA has the potential to put education and learning at the centre of the development agenda, to engage the real international nature of the issues and to do this in such a way that it provides a focus for improving the quality and coherence of what ‘DEA partners’ are offering. Such a focus would also provide a particular perspective through which to engage with the broader educational debates that have been highlighted by other ‘thinkpieces’ and recent forum events set up by the DEA.

**A proposition:** I would like to suggest that development education has a contribution to make to a new story about learning ... and that this could contribute to international transformation by transforming the discourse about education and development.

I finish with this quote from Etienne Wenger, because you could read it firstly as if it is addressing the micro scale of the DEA itself ... and then as the context for our future vision.

*“We cannot address today’s challenges with yesterday’s perspectives. We need new visions of what is possible. We need new models to learn how to learn at multiple levels of scale, from the personal to the global. Increasing our capacity to learn (individually and collectively) is taking on a special urgency if we see ourselves caught, as I believe we are, in a race between learning and the possibility of self-destruction.” (6)*

## References

1. Tide~ global learning: [www.tidegloballearning.net](http://www.tidegloballearning.net).
2. Wolverhampton University, School of Education. Research by J Serf due to be published. See paper ***Bringing it together*** on Tide~ website.
3. QCA document ***The global dimension in action***. Available as download at: [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk).
4. ***Global learning ~ exploring the pitfalls***. Elaine Miskell, Tide~. Appendix to this article.
5. ***Essential learning for everyone - raising the debate about civil society, world citizenship and the role of education***. DEC (Birmingham) & 80:20 Educating and Acting for a better world (Ireland). Also on: [www.tidegloballearning.net](http://www.tidegloballearning.net).
6. ***Learning for a small planet: a research agenda***. Etienne Wenger. Website: [www.ewenger.com](http://www.ewenger.com).



## Global Learning ~ exploring the pitfalls ...

Elaine Miskell, Tide~ global learning

One of the difficulties I experience in engaging with discussion about global learning is the move from the big ideas and debates to classroom / school reality.

Most of us on reading curriculum documentation that argues for participation, valuing of diversity, awareness of global issues etc will agree and say that we want this. Those of us working in schools will also quickly argue that much of what we are already doing contributes to global learning. This is all true and useful but still leaves a lot to do if we are to really enable 'quality global learning' in day to day practice.

I personally find it helpful to turn the debate around for a while and start to think about the problems and difficulties ... what are the pitfalls that we are trying to avoid? This might help by way of clarifying what we mean by the phrase 'global learning', the challenges involved and what kind of learning we are really striving to achieve.

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### Possible pitfalls:

#### ◆ *'Doing good' ... that avoids thinking?*

A desire to participate and address issues in a global context can often lead quickly to 'fund-raising' style activities that are about immediate responses. There must be a place for this response, but if it is over-used and the main experience of 'global learning' for young people, there is a danger of leading to 'us and them' attitudes and a possible sense of superiority. It also promotes a simplified analysis of the need to throw money at problems.

**Challenge** → *to move towards activities and approaches that are reflective and promote critical thinking*

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#### ◆ *Manipulative activity leading to 'right answers'?*

A desire to want supposed 'right answers' or responses eg 'we should recycle more' / 'buy fairtrade goods' etc can lead to prescriptive approaches or activities that are overly contrived. Young people are often quick to learn the 'right answer rules' and these exercises can quickly have less to do with thinking than about keeping the teacher happy.

**Challenge** → *to identify issues and stimulus material that provokes debate - challenges assumptions and raises questions.*

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### ◆ *Failing to acknowledge our own perceptions and bias?*

For example, in dealing with images of a place we might respond with more positive language to images of trees and green spaces and more negatively to those of crowded streets or a built environment. Understanding that others might respond differently, [that the images can be viewed from a variety of perspectives] and that there may be reasons that we have responded in this particular way are important for our own learning.

**Challenge** → *to use open-ended activities to enable perceptions and assumptions to be shared and discussed at the outset*

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### ◆ *It's all doom and gloom?*

Floods, earthquakes, wars, climate change ... it can be a long and depressing list. There is a real danger that learning about other places and particularly the 'developing world' can be equated to learning about disasters and problems. How do we avoid over-burdening young people and fostering a sense of helplessness?

**Challenge** → *to include some of the positives and to build a futures approach that builds awareness of processes of change and how individuals and societies can contribute.*

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### ◆ *Global is about somewhere else?*

The general perception that global is elsewhere runs fairly deep and leads quickly to the feeling that 'global learning' is really the job of the Geography department. The nature of our 21st century, interconnected and global society requires that we challenge this separate 'here and there' outlook and begin to look afresh at how we explore global dimensions and perspectives of our own lives as well as those in other places.

**Challenge** → *to enable all learning to be approached in a global context ... to enable connections to be identified and explored*

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## **In conclusion**

This list could clearly be added to ... there are many potential pitfalls for those of us engaged in supporting global learning as it is neither straightforward nor obvious. There is a danger that 'poor global teaching' could do more harm than good by reinforcing stereotypes and reducing thinking opportunities for young people.

If we are to go any way to developing 'global learning' as a key learning area for the 21st century curriculum I would argue that we need to question some of the real difficulties and confusions involved in this area of work and engage with the educational challenges involved. We are moving now beyond the initial success of simply including some global issues and themes in our teaching to wanting to develop global learners who are critical thinkers and active participants in society. This is an ambitious challenge but one that it is worth striving for and talking about.