

Global Understanding and Global Citizenship

Keynote Speech for the Closing Ceremony of the International Year of Global Understanding (IYGU)

Carlos Alberto Torres

Introduction

The International Year of Global Understanding¹ was proclaimed by the International Science Councils of the Social (ISSC), Natural (ICSU), and Human Sciences (CIPSH). Why are such important international councils advocating for the IYGU, brought to life by the powerful writings and practical initiatives of Professor Dr. Benno Werlen from Friedrich Schiller University Jena.

We may find some clues to answer this question in the work of cultural critic George Santayana. In his book *The Life of Reason: Introduction and Reason in Common Sense*, Santayana provides us with two useful proverbs. First, and most famously: “Those who cannot remember the past, are condemn to repeat it.” Learning about the past, “in a moving world” will help to change, or what Santayana called “re-adaptation is the prize for longevity”- though he counsels us that not all re-adaptation is progress, “for ideal identity must not be lost”² These two proverbs intimately relate to the question of understanding.

So, why do we need understanding? Any scientist may argue that we produce knowledge, and knowledge implies understanding, because understanding searches for the roots of things, their evolution, and their outcomes. So, it will not be a surprise that key international scientific and humanistic

councils proclaim understanding to be a central principle of science and humanity, and to be crucial for the survival of all of us and our planet, not just for the survival of the fittest.

In this keynote, I want to undertake the question of understanding from an existentialist and very personal perspective, so I will speak first of the fundamental dynamics of human life. In the second part, I will address in the same vein the importance of understanding for the survival of democracy, the planet, and human civilizations on Earth.

A literary interpretation

Having been exiled from Argentina by a dictatorship that annihilated 30,000 of its own citizens and caused an Argentinean diaspora of hundreds of thousands more, I have learned that there are three fundamental dynamics of human life: Love, Death, and Madness, which are each involved in many wonderful as well as perfidious ways with two other dynamics, Memory and Power.

Love is a concept that has fascinated human beings from the beginning of time. Psychoanalysis, and particularly Freud, considered love (and religion) to be an illusion, a pathological romantic idealization. Others from different schools of psychoanalysis or philosophy, like Deleuze, think otherwise: Deleuze explains that, for him, the dialectics of love and desire is the simplest thing in the world. I cannot agree more. Love and desire are part of our inner soul; we love and search for love so that we can be loved. We crave, we want, we long for love. Most religions make love for God, and by implication love for our neighbors, their foundational premises.

Let me move now to the next fundamental dynamic of human life: Death. We all know that we have an expiration date, and yet we do not know when it will come, and of course try to postpone it as much as humanly possible.

The eventual “finishedness” of our lives has invited many existentialist and cultural traditions to remember and even to celebrate death in ways that do not fully acknowledge our limits. This past November 2nd was the Day of the Dead, *Día de los Muertos*, in Mexico. A few days later I was in Mexico City and saw the altars dedicated to the Day of the Dead. It seems that life and death are inextricably linked to each other because one precedes the other in an inexorable march towards the extinction of the self. Finishedness is the inevitable destiny of human life, but as some philosophers like Freire have cautioned us, our inevitable biological finishedness cannot preclude us from preventing our unfinishedness. This is not a play of words. Let me explain.

Freire reminds us in *Pedagogy of Freedom* that we should consider the unfinishedness of our human condition to be an essential condition: “I hold that my own unity and identity, in regard to others and to the world, constitutes my essential and unrepeatable

way of experiencing myself as a cultural, historical, and unfinished being in the world, simultaneously conscious of my unfinishedness.”

There is no paradox here. The inevitable biological finishedness of human beings should be coupled with intellectual unfinishedness. Learning is the way to experience ourselves as cultural and historical beings. Learning is the way to readapt to a moving world, as Santayana recommended.

The third dynamic at the core of human life is Madness. Foucault devoted a great deal of his *oeuvre* to the history of Madness – much of his work examines the history of societies dealing with deviant behavior. Madness is opposed to reason (here we have another paradox of interpretation and understanding), and stands as the end of communication:

“Modern man no longer communicates with the madman ... There is no common language: or rather, it no longer exists; the constitution of madness as mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, bears witness to a rupture in a dialogue, gives the separation as already enacted, and expels from the memory all those imperfect words, of no fixed syntax, spoken falteringly, in which the exchange between madness and reason was carried out. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue by reason *about* madness, could only have come into existence in such a silence.” — Michel Foucault, Preface to the 1961 edition of *History of Madness*.

In brief, we search for love, avoid death to the greatest extent possible, and try not to fall into madness. Love, death, and madness are three dynamics representing the core of human interests, and they should be central themes in our quest for knowledge and understanding that we celebrate today.

Yet I do not believe we are done exploring these core elements of social action and the unfinishedness of human beings. Two other elements require careful attention, but this is not the place to do a scientific analysis of them, only a literary analysis. I am speaking of Memory and Power.

The rock band Evanescence³ puts the relationships between understanding and memory in the right light:

You hold the answers deep within your own mind
Consciously, you've forgotten them
That's the way the human mind works
Whenever something is too unpleasant
Or too shameful for us to entertain
We reject it
We erase it from our memory
But the imprint is always there.

Losing our memory is part of the modern condition of madness, resulting from accidents, illness, senility, or simply our inability to always remember much of the past, or even just the past hour. I would be remiss if I did not mention here the celebrated short story by Jorge Luis Borges, *Funes: the Memorious*. “Funes remembers everything in excruciatingly particular detail but is incapable of abstraction.” The rest of us are left largely only with abstraction, without the blessing and curse of complete and precise memories of everything.

We use all sort of tricks to preserve our memory. We use mnemonics and acronyms to help us remember some data, date, name, or specific task to be accomplished. Calendars remind us of appointments or celebrations like our significant others’ birthdays or a meeting at the office. Memory helps us retrieve skills that we have learned—like riding a bike years after we learned the skills as children.

In neuroscience, there have been many studies of the different types of memory, how we access them, and how they contribute to our sense of self. But once again, when we move from individual to collective experience, the retrieval of collective memories that were suppressed – for instance, by a dictatorship destroying the lives of people in a given society, or by forced silence about harassment that women suffered from men even many years ago – is another instance of the call for knowledge and understanding.

Bringing back memories to prevent human rights abuses that otherwise go unanswered is what we seek when we look at acts of genocide and try to identify witnesses to testify, from their own memories, about what has exactly happened, and who did what, how, and when.

In analytical psychoanalysis, memory is considered an archetype, perhaps even a myth, connected to the Collective Unconscious. For other fields, particularly the Law – which is a system of rules regulating social actions – memory is a powerful weapon in the struggle for testimony towards a better life and for decency and transparency in the social pact that regulates social and individual interest.

To conclude this analytical yet literary presentation, power is everywhere. It is in our actions, in our systems, in the dialectics between agency and structures, in our dreams, in our ability to love and be loved, in the act of living or dying, in the decision to lock others away as madmen or madwomen, and in the repression of memories to prevent witnesses to the truth from challenging the powers that be.

Global understanding plays a formidable role in these five core elements of social action: love, death, madness, memory, and power. Just to mention one example, there is a fundamental role for global understanding toward the prevention of war, and the development of a culture of peace should be a natural outcome of global understanding among nations.

Let me now move to the second part of my presentation: Global Citizenship Education, and how it relates to Global Understanding.

A Scientific Interpretation

The attacks of September 11, 2001, changed my life. Watching on television the Twin Towers on fire while working in Finland, I sensed it was a time of trial and tribulation for our civilizations. With my oldest son living only a few blocks from the World Trade Center, this global event also became very personal.

As a cathartic way of attempting to grasp the events that transpired, I wrote a letter to my loved ones to say that I have been thinking about and seeking in my own heart the answers to the existential dilemmas that I face. I told them that I was prepared to bet on life, love, and peace. I decided to continue, with renewed energy, enthusiasm, and effort, my academic work. In these exceptional times, like all times, we need to remember the Latin adage, *ad fontes*. We need to go back to the sources of our own principles and desires. I concluded my letter saying: “I have decided to live close to the Earth, seeking peace and happiness, and to build things with my bare hands, instead of only with my mind.”

Not only did I increase my commitment to promoting understanding, sustainability, and global citizenship education, but I also wanted to be an example by living closer to nature and celebrating life. I wanted to find ways to defend the planet, peace, and people. I moved to a remote property in the mountains of Topanga, where I built a cabin with my own hands. I studied fine woodworking at a community college and built furniture. I planted olive trees and grapevines to make olive oil and wine. I planted organic gardens to grow fresh vegetables. I even kept honey bees to harvest honey.

This commitment to planetary citizenship dovetails with the principles and practices I've held since I was a university student. Since my formative years in my native country Argentina, through my time now as a UCLA professor, I have always struggled to build innovations of theory, policy, and practice in social justice education. The implementation of the Global Education First Initiative (GEFI) in 2012 by UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon opened a new chapter in my own struggle for a better world – a world, in the words of Freire, in which it will be easier to love.

The GEFI program identifies global citizenship education (GCE) as a central component of social transformation. GCE is a resource to enhance education for all and to emphasize quality of education, global peace, sustainability of the planet, and the defense of global commons. I am convinced that GCE as a pillar of sustainable development is one of the answers to the challenges affecting global peace, such as growing inequality, global poverty, neoliberal globalization, authoritarian education, and predatory cultures destroying the environment and our planet.

In an era of global interconnectedness, the world faces immense challenges as well as opportunities that demand a new education. Do current educational experiences provide the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to fundamentally understand what is happening in the world? Is education teaching us how global problems impact our lives as well as the lives of communities, nations, and our planet?

September 11, 2001 forced me to seek an innovation grounded in a new ethics. This is the background for the creation of the UNESCO Chair on Global Learning and Global Citizenship Education that I have the honor to occupy at UCLA, the first UNESCO Chair in the University of California system. This direction dovetails nicely with my academic career where I have endeavored to refocus education towards sustainability and global citizenship, in addition to creating forms of education indispensable to foster mindsets and skills, inspired by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, that can respond to the world's problems. The work of the UNESCO-UCLA Chair focuses on nurturing teaching practices, research, theories, and policies that support humanity's struggle for the global commons, human rights, and democracy.

I have argued that global citizenship should add value to national citizenship and to the global commons. But what is the global commons?

The global commons is defined by three basic propositions. The first proposition is that our planet is our only home, and we have to protect it through a global citizenship sustainable development education, moving from diagnosis and denunciation into action and policy implementation. Second, the concept of a global commons is predicated on the idea that global peace is an intangible cultural good and a treasure of humanity with immaterial value. Third, the global commons is predicated on the need to find ways that people who are all equal can manage to live together democratically in an ever-growing and increasingly diverse world, seeking to fulfill their individual and cultural interests, void of corruptions, and exercising their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The great question about peace is how we can cultivate the spirit of solidarity across the lines of difference.

Global citizenship may help our planet, global peace, and people through its contribution to civic engagement, in its classical dimensions of knowledge, skills, and values. There is a cosmopolitan imperative of economic equality, welfare, and cultural diversity that may produce individuals who may admire others more for their differences than for their similarities.

Conclusion

The innovations that I have been committed to throughout my career dovetail nicely with the International Year of Global Understanding and the growing interest by the United Nations and particularly UNESCO to integrate sustainability with global

citizenship education in school curricula. We realize how important the idea of understanding is to endorse, promote, and support global citizenship innovation, which may change the future for the new generations in many countries of the world: generations with greater abilities with new technologies, and by implication a greater potential to grow into a new model of world consciousness and a culture of peace and solidarity.

Recently when I was lecturing in Vietnam, a child asked me in perfect English, “I am eleven years old; how can I become a world citizen?” Questions from children like that eleven-year-old are the reason we are working to implement new models of teaching and learning and to include GCE in the curriculum towards the development of a culture of peace, and into a new ethics in the world system. Global Citizenship Education interwoven with global competencies in the education of children and youth may help to prevent another September 11th in the United States or a global nuclear hecatomb.

Global Citizenship Education and the International Year of Global Understanding, which I hope will become the International Decade of Global Understanding, are tools of soft power for policy makers to prevent violent extremism through education, enhance global competencies, and hopefully impact world peace, reconciliation, and conflict resolution. Therefore, we need to enhance the visibility of our work to a worldwide audience for innovation-seeking improvements in the global system through civic engagement for diversity and multicultural understanding, sustainability, a culture of peace, and world solidarity.

Notas

¹ November 21, 2017 at the Aula Magna of the Friedrich Schiller University Jena.

² George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Introduction and Reason in Common Sense* MIT Press, p.172

³ An American rock band founded in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1995 by singer/pianist Amy Lee and guitarist Ben Moody.

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Carlos Alberto Torres

Distinguished Professor and UNESCO Chair on Global Learning and Global Citizenship Education, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA),
Chair Professor and International Director,
National Chiao Tung University Center for Global Citizenship.