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Convening the World: True Access and Global, Synchronous Pedagogy in Regis University's Master of Development Practice

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Abstract

This article describes the characteristics of the global classroom in the Master of Development Practice (MDP) at Regis University and the many ways it expresses the Jesuit mission. The MDP program is grounded in the Jesuit ideals of inclusive access, *cura personlis* and social justice. Using Zoom videoconferencing, we synchronously connect with our students around the world. The second half of the article describes the research we are undertaking in our global classroom. Our pedagogy pushes the boundaries of what is possible in development education with a global student body in a synchronous classroom. In this environment, we are investigating classroom power dynamics, sense of community, and how to engage the full student while expanding their global perspective.

Introduction

“Every society is struggling with different types of water issues. Can you tell me what the main water issues are where you live?” the instructor asks her students. After a moment of reflection, three hands go up. Amadi, in Ethiopia, describes the politics of water allocation on the Nile River. Ashley, in Colorado, explains why many rivers in her region no longer reach the ocean, and Kondwani, in Malawi, recalls walking several kilometers a day as a child to collect water from an unprotected well. A student in Ohio contributes a link about Detroit’s experience with lead and environmental racism to the chat box. After hearing several more responses, the instructor assigns the students to breakout groups where they discuss global case studies of water management in greater depth, following prompts on their screens. During the breakout groups, students have on headphones and communicate with their peers around the world.

This is a typical class in the Master of Development Practice (MDP) at Regis University. We use a video-conferenced, synchronous classroom to bring students in Denver, Colorado

into conversation and deep learning with students around the world. The vision of the program is an international student body, fully engaged with each other and the best that academia and contemporary practice have to offer, working toward transformative impact in their own communities and communities around the world. The mission is to prepare our students to be leaders who facilitate holistic development solutions, taking on the world’s most pressing development challenges, from homelessness in Denver to water scarcity in Ouagadougou. For us, development is something that happens locally and globally; within our classroom, we see the global and the local being “co-produced”.¹

Students from 18 countries are enrolled in the program, and most of them are full-time development practitioners working in low-income contexts in their home countries. Approximately half live in the United States. Of the remainder, the majority are from and reside in sub-Saharan Africa, with a few students joining from South Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Given that there are 32 other MDP programs around the world (eight of them in the United States), the Regis MDP might see the Global Association of MDPs

as its obvious home; and certainly, we get value from our membership in that learning community. However, we see a more natural fit in the community of Jesuit colleges and universities, whose core mission includes educational access. Only Regis, among all MDPs, leverages technology to connect students to each other and the world across widely varying economies for their mutual growth in understanding, empathy and professional advancement. Our focus is not training, per se, but profound formation of the development practitioner.

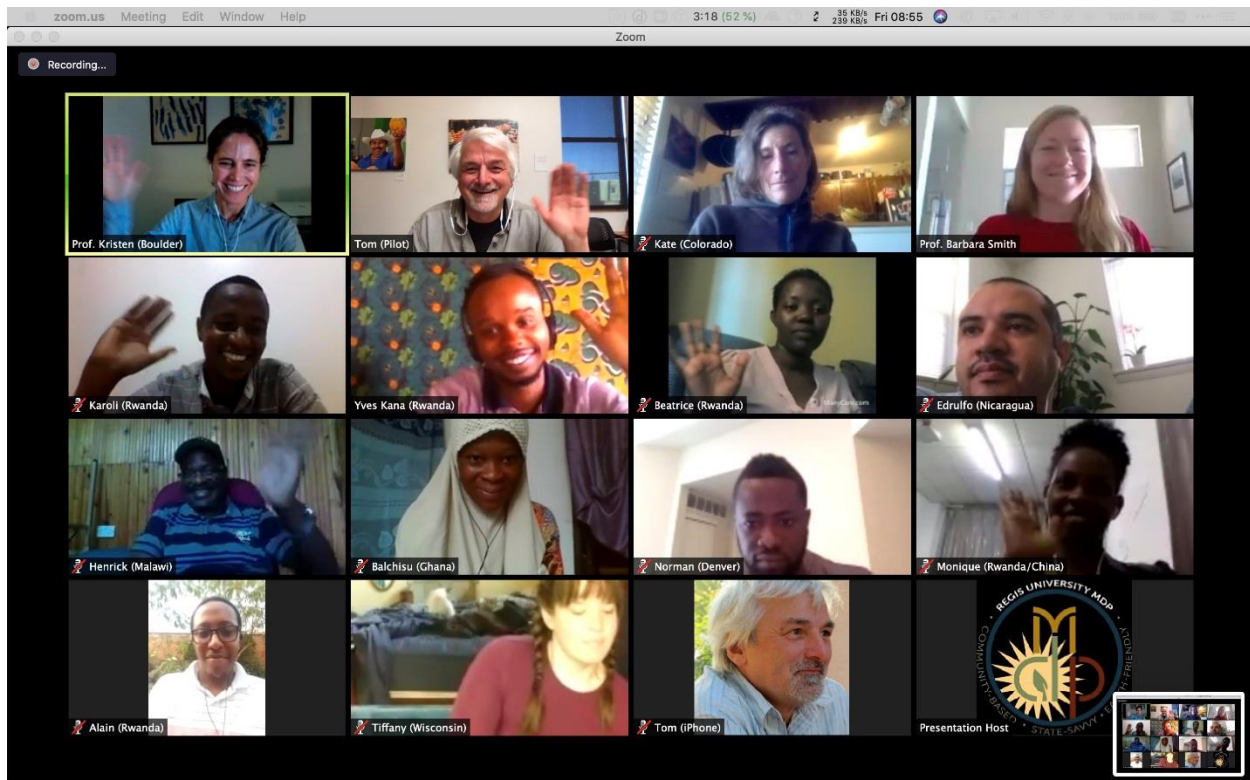
The Regis MDP uses live videoconferencing (the Zoom app—it is as versatile and robust as it is affordable!) for a synchronous classroom, where students join from wherever they are—Malawi, India, or the United States, online or in the classroom in Denver—to engage each other in shared learning. Within the synchronous classroom, we utilize Power Point presentations, interactive whiteboards, application sharing, full group discussion, text chat, video, and small breakout groups. Clear audio is foundational to the interface, and we have a dedicated “pilot” to support the technology environment for optimal sound and video quality, as well as coaching individual students in low-bandwidth regions to maximize their connectivity for full participation.

Importantly, students remain embedded in their home context. Meeting twice a week for two hours at a time enables them to work and stay engaged in their development activities as well as their communities and families. Our classes begin early in Denver, at 7 a.m., allowing students in East Africa, for example, to participate synchronously at 5 p.m. their time, after their

workday is over. In the context of the recent coronavirus pandemic and the closing of borders, the synchronous classroom offers the opportunity to dramatically expand access to students who would otherwise be ‘grounded.’ On average, students are older than most traditional graduate students and nearly all have two or more years of development experience that they bring with them into the classroom. However, there is room for the recent undergrad who is aware of and passionate about social justice and environmental issues—the kind of student Jesuit colleges and universities aim to produce (and indeed, our cohorts have included several graduates of the Regis Peace and Justice as well as Environmental Studies programs).

MDP courses address complex development issues like gender inequalities, climate change, and global poverty from a variety of disciplines. We also use a team-teaching model, usually an academic and a field practitioner, or instructors who move between these roles and come from different disciplines. The curriculum is based on a *transdisciplinary* approach—one of integration, systems thinking, holism, and collaborative problem-solving. This transdisciplinary approach forces development practitioners to move beyond single truths, perspectives and solutions, to acknowledge complex and pluralistic realities.

The three-year master’s degree is composed of twelve seminar courses, three short-term skills courses, a field placement, and a final capstone project. In May of 2020 we concluded the fifth year of our program, and graduated our third cohort of MDP holders.



Gallery view of one class

The MDP Program and the Jesuit Educational Mission

Women & Men With and For Others

The participatory approach we emphasize in our program strongly expresses the Jesuit value of *women and men with and for others*. Through their coursework, development practitioners learn how to partner and collaborate with the local communities they serve, rather than start with technical expertise and predefined plans. This approach is mirrored in the classroom, where together we facilitate learning by creating opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange. Learning “about” builds detachment and distance, whereas learning “from” and “with” initiates a process of being in relation with others.² We encourage dialogue in a variety of forms, but have found that small breakout groups (made possible through Zoom) are the best way to facilitate peer-to-peer dialogue. For some students, small groups may feel less threatening and lead to more meaningful discussion.³ Hence, breakout groups are a consistent feature of this global classroom.

Students work primarily at the grassroots level on issues of social justice. They share a deep concern for helping to improve the lives of the poor and marginalized, and they serve in the full range of development sectors from health and education to gender and energy. Tapping into the students’ diverse backgrounds and experiences, the global classroom provides a forum for collaboration, innovation, and sharing across borders.

Forming Agents of Change

The MDP program operates at the intersection of reflection and action. Its practical approach encourages students to develop critical thought and discernment they then translate into action. Rather than promote a single approach to development, we emphasize that “answers are context dependent: you will need to decide for yourself in ethical and accountable ways and take responsibility for the effects of your actions.”⁴ We encourage reflection on key questions, such as: What should the goals of global development be? What roles should a development worker play? What assumptions and preconceptions do I bring with me into my practice? How does my own

identity shape interactions I have in the development field? What effect do my daily actions and behaviors have on poverty and injustice? These questions are not merely philosophical; continually asking and answering them guides the everyday actions of students and graduates. Without this space for discernment, action in development practice risks “reproducing (indirectly and unintentionally) the systems of belief and practice that harm those they want to support.”⁵ Our program benefits from having students who are positioned to take action and immediately apply in the field what they learn in the classroom—and then bring the results back to the classroom. This quick feedback loop keeps the class grounded and allows collective innovation to overcome challenges students face in their work. The MDP capstone project invites students to bring together the knowledge, theory and skills they have gained into a professional proposal for a new project or program. These proposals typically stem from a student’s long-term engagement with a sector of development. Nearly all of these proposals have been implemented after the students graduate.

Cura Personalis

Higher education poses particular challenges for some non-US students. Beyond the linguistic challenges for second- (or third-, or fourth-) language speakers,⁶ these students may come to the classroom with pedagogical cultures and socio-cultural norms that are very different from the US institutions they enter, leading to anxiety around participating in class.⁷ The MDP students also come from a variety of disciplinary and academic preparations, and may be particularly challenged by graduate level writing, research, and critical reading skills. In our classroom, we are evolving a pedagogy that integrates students’ experience and knowledge into instructional practices and that recognizes inclusive education as an inherently multicultural endeavor. Such a culturally relevant pedagogy allows students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically.⁸ We strive to create an inviting classroom environment where we all know each other’s names and backgrounds, and everyone feels comfortable sharing their experience and asking questions. Although readings are foundational to our curriculum, classroom discussion opens opportunities for

learning to emerge from a “philosophical standpoint emphasizing the union of mind, body and spirit, rather than the separation of these elements.”⁹ In a context where half of the students are learning in their second, third or even fourth language, discussion—as compared to writing—can also be a great leveler. Further, faith is a strong motivator for many of our students and we provide opportunities for students to share their faith journeys and discuss how faith influences their work.

We have developed a range of strategies to support the student body and promote the dignity of the whole person. Before classes begin, all students participate in a two-day workshop where they learn about the program expectations and support services and get to know their classmates. The “pilot” conducts one-to-one visits with all students to improve their sound and audio quality and assist with any technology challenges they may have in the course of the program. The Writing Center at Regis University provides support for students who are writing in a second language. A Regis librarian works closely with students to build their Capstone project on a strong foundation of research. We are also developing additional creative methods to fully engage the diversity of our students and open up ways for them to share their knowledge, culture, and experience (see below).

Inclusive access

Diversity in the context of distance education offers tremendous potential for democratic exchange of information, communication and learning. The explosion of information and communication technologies holds the promise of breaking down barriers of time, space, and privilege; lowering costs; and enabling collaboration and creativity in teaching, learning, and research.¹⁰ Yet, these promises are not always realized. Higher education remains highly unequal, and distance education can reinforce new barriers, with the best-connected, urban-residing, English-speaking, wealthy students in the best position to take advantage of these new opportunities.¹¹ For example, across sub-Saharan Africa only 8 percent of the people in the age cohort are enrolled in higher education, compared to a global mean of 34 percent.¹² Universities in sub-Saharan Africa

struggle with a lack of financing, outdated curriculum that does not align with the labor market, overcrowding, gender disparities and high costs.¹³ *Cura personalis* demands that we strive to make education accessible and affordable, especially for students from marginalized populations striving to improve their own communities. At the same time, we see diversity as our foundation for creative, grounded, and truly global development solutions. To ensure the necessary access to convene a truly global classroom, we know we must bridge the divide between developing world economies and rich-world tuition. Hence, our support for students includes competitive scholarships.

Research in the Global Classroom

Our vision of research is connected to the other “scholarships” of engagement, interdisciplinarity and teaching.¹⁴ In this way, research bridges traditional divides between academic theory and practice, research and teaching, and higher education and the world’s most pressing problems.¹⁵ Most of the research on development education and global education comes from Europe and is still a small and narrowly conceived field.¹⁶ Our research will contribute to and help to integrate the fields of development education and online/synchronous learning.

Use of online and synchronous classrooms in higher education had been steadily increasing, and recently exploded with COVID-19 imperatives. In the United States alone, more than 6.6 million students took at least one online course during 2017.¹⁷ While online and hybrid learning models are expanding, research on how these models affect learning and social and emotional connections, learning pedagogies, and power dynamics has not kept pace.¹⁸ As the only MDP program using a synchronous classroom to engage students from around the world we have encountered some unique challenges, but also many opportunities to rethink the global classroom, multicultural pedagogies, and the potential of development education. We are not aware of any studies that look at synchronous classroom pedagogies with highly diverse student populations. In order to contribute to these gaps in the field and improve our own program we are

engaging in research that explores four primary sets of questions:

- 1) How can we cultivate a sense of community in our classroom? How are students connecting to the material, to their peers, and to the professor? How do we define social presence and student interaction?
- 2) How can we engage the whole student in class? How can we encourage our students to use their experiences, identities, and cultures as a source of strength, learning and engagement in the classroom? How can the arts, and theater in particular, open up new ways of learning and communicating?
- 3) How is knowledge produced and transmitted in the classroom? What are the dimensions and dynamics of power in classroom? How might creative and participatory pedagogies disrupt dominant power dynamics in development and online learning?
- 4) How do we expand the global perspective of our students? What are the goals of a global perspective and why are these important for development and lifelong learning/ethical ways of being in the world?

During the 2018-2019 school year we conducted our first year of data collection based on these research questions. Our methods included student surveys before and after each course, surveys at the end of each academic year, and structured faculty reflections. These methods continued during the 2019-2020 school year. In the future we hope to expand our data collection strategies to analyze class discussion and conduct focus groups with students and faculty. The following section outlines each of our research questions. A future paper will focus on the data analysis and findings.

Sense of Community

Creating a sense of community for students facilitates their learning and reduces isolation and dropout rates.¹⁹ Previous research also suggests that student interaction is not only useful in

effectively learning the course content, but also increases engagement and accountability.²⁰ An early definition of a sense of community put forth by McMillan and Chavis is, “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together.”²¹ This goal is difficult enough in a traditional classroom, but it is compounded online, where not all students have face-to-face contact, nor many opportunities to informally chat with each other and the teacher before and after class.²² Most of our non-Denver-based students are alone in joining from their particular location, an entry point that could feel isolating.²³

Social presence is an important foundation for community.²⁴ Garrison offers a comprehensive definition of social presence as “the ability of participants to identify with the group or course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of protecting their individual personalities.”²⁵ Social presence can be influenced by the interface used and by the teaching pedagogy.²⁶ It can be challenging in an online environment where online students may have difficulty fully participating due to connectivity issues, low quality technology, an inability to pick up on social cues, body language and emotion.²⁷ With synchronous classrooms, there is the potential that students online and in the physical classroom see their groups as separate, where the online students feel excluded from the social community.²⁸

Nevertheless, some research suggests that online and hybrid programs can replicate concepts of community in a traditional classroom.²⁹ Research about how to effectively engage students in distance learning shows that synchronous classrooms, unlike purely online classrooms, can facilitate the creation of community when they provide students interaction, real time dialog, co-construction team activities, instantaneous feedback, and the ability to see their classmates.³⁰ Factors identified to interfere with a sense of community connection were frustration with class meeting times and technology problems that left distance participants feeling less satisfied and disconnected from their learning environment.³¹

One advantage of online programs, including our own, is that students are typically older and have more experience, which can itself be the basis of community if instructors are skilled at drawing out these experiences.³² Another strategy we follow is to create “multi-layered activities with opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and relationship-building” in every course.³³

We have been following recommendations like these and experimenting with our own novel strategies for promoting a sense of community and student interaction. As a starting point, the cohort model we use helps to facilitate social connection. Beginning in the first year the students move through the program together and graduate with each other. As mentioned earlier, the program begins with a two-day introductory workshop where students meet each other and participate in collaborative activities. We build activities into each course that promote team work, relationship building, and sharing life and work experiences. In our program, we make use of small group projects, course conversation pairs, exchange visits, and have an option for collaborative capstone projects. Our students are connected outside of class through a student-initiated WhatsApp group that is used for sharing readings, exchanging personal news, asking questions and getting help on assignments. Our research will evaluate how well we are doing in cultivating a sense of community, what strategies are most effective, and how students are interacting inside and outside of class. We have also developed a rubric to assess social presence that replaces the traditional category of attendance and participation in most traditional classrooms. Worth at least 25% of the students’ final grade, this rubric includes standard criteria such as attendance, coming on time and prepared to class, but also standards for how the students should demonstrate their “social presence”: student has their video turned on during the entire class, student does not engage in multi-tasking that is not related to the course content, student conveys the sense of genuine interest and care for class activities and the community, and student provides their name and location below their video.

Full Student Engagement

Teaching approaches that offer active, creative ways to engage students, such as role-playing, storytelling, or arts-based curriculum have been shown to open new spaces for learning. Some students may face particular challenges participating in dominant learning pedagogies. They might not feel they can adequately express their feelings and ideas through verbal or written communication, which reduces their participation in discussions.³⁴ Our approach draws inspiration from the participatory and active learning methodologies encouraged by the activist educator Paulo Freire³⁵ and theater practitioner and political activist Augusto Boal.³⁶ Their pedagogical approaches call for connecting ideas learned from life experiences to classroom concepts in order to awaken a critical consciousness and engage the whole student. Theater can be one of the most democratic and inclusive art forms and it has a long history in development.³⁷ Theater for development has been used in different contexts all over the world to provide a forum for communities to take control over the development process on their own terms and offer alternatives to the perceived realities in which they live. Combined with other performance mediums such as storytelling, music, and dance, theater opens up spaces for people to share their realities and disseminate knowledge in an entertaining way.

We have started integrating theater approaches into the classroom with our partners at Mirror Image Arts (MIA) (<http://www.mirrorimagearts.org/>), a Denver-based applied theater organization working with youth for social change and community building. For the last two years MIA has been working in our classrooms, leading some classes and also faculty workshops to build the capacity and comfort of our instructors with theater techniques. We have experimented with role plays in several classes to help students approach complex subjects from multiple perspectives, develop empathy for stakeholders, and practice collaborative and participatory development. Role play can be a particularly effective technique to help students understand and apply theoretical concepts by actively engaging them in the learning process.³⁸ Theater is also a method that the

students can take with them as a tool for their own development practice. Other techniques we are using in our classroom help students to connect emotionally and provide alternative ways of communicating outside of verbal and written modalities. Our research explores the potential of active and arts-based methods to increase student participation, confidence, feelings of connectedness, and provide spaces for reflecting and sharing about culture and identity. We have the additional challenge of how to use theater methods in an online environment. Our research will explore how to adapt theater techniques that have been developed around physical movement and emotional, face-to-face interaction to an online setting.

Power

Dominant education models, and global education in particular, have been criticized for their top-down transmission of knowledge and failure to disrupt colonial power dynamics, Eurocentric conceptualizations of modernity, and cultural stereotypes.³⁹ These concerns are amplified in development studies, where students may be directly engaging in low-income communities and the field struggles with a colonial legacy of Western experts deciding what the rest of the world needs. Current theories and practices about development education are primarily created in the West and designed around the assumption of Western students studying about the “other.” This starting point creates an “us” and “them” mentality and a wide disconnect between theory and practice. These issues can be compounded by distance learning pedagogies and interfaces, which have the potential to create new power dynamics between teacher and student.⁴⁰ Online learning and global education models predominantly follow what the activist educator Paulo Freire coined the “banking concept of education,” where the students passively receive information from experts.⁴¹ However, there has been little research about how the synchronous interface affects students’ ability to fully participate, interrupt, ask questions, lead discussions, share content, shut off their video, sanction their peers, disagree with their classmates or teacher, and respond to social cues, especially in the development education field. Therefore, our research focuses on the power dynamics in the synchronous classroom

between in person and online students, international students and domestic students, and between the teacher and students.

The MDP program is actively trying to address the persistent colonial power inequalities in development education through our student body, pedagogies, and classroom structure. Our first innovation is creating a global classroom that includes students and teachers from the Global South. While approximately half of our students are online this split does not neatly divide our international and domestic students. We have US students who join class from Mexico, Ghana, and Spain. In our physical classroom in Denver, we have students from Thailand, Burkina Faso, and El Salvador. This mix of students coming together for classes reduces the chance of defaulting to Western perspectives and unintentionally reinforcing colonial power dynamics. We also use pedagogies that aim to disrupt the dominant direction of knowledge transfer from developed countries to the developing countries or from expert to student. Teachers in our program aim to be less “dispensers” of knowledge, and more “facilitators” of discussion, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. We actively engage students as co-owners of the learning. We expect that by encouraging the horizontal exchange of information we will disrupt the existing vertical power dynamics that persist in most development programs. Following Freirean educational models, we aim to draw on the experience of each student and blur the distinctions between the teachers’ and the students’ respective roles, so that teacher also has the capacity to learn with the students. In the classroom we create opportunities for students to reflect on, and discuss colonial power dynamics and the relation between knowledge, power and discourse.⁴² In the students’ first class meeting, we collectively decide what terms we want to use and discuss the history and power relationships embedded in terms like developed vs. developing or first and third world. This sense of self-reflexivity is central to postcolonial global education models, as well as to reciprocity and mutuality in North-South encounters and partnerships.⁴³

Global Perspective

Global education is now a central emphasis for most colleges and universities. Global education, or global citizenship education broadly, is about learning about the wider world and our place within it.⁴⁴ Goals of a global citizenship education include preparing students who can handle complexity, build ethical relationships across (national, linguistic, ideological) boundaries, understand issues from a plurality of perspectives, recognize power and inequality in the world, and reflect on their own knowledge and assumptions.⁴⁵ A postcolonial global citizenship perspective of education equips “learners to engage in dialogue, to see difference as a source of learning and not as a threat and to engage critically with local or global issues.”⁴⁶

The Research Institute for Studies in Education provides a useful definition of global perspective: “A global perspective is the capacity and predisposition for a person to think with complexity taking into account multiple perspectives, to form a unique sense of self that is value based and authentic, and to relate to others with respect and openness especially with those who are not like her.”⁴⁷ To measure global perspective, Braskamp and colleagues created a Global Perspective Inventory (GPI), which is now used by nearly 200 colleges, universities, and educational organizations in the United States and abroad to assess intercultural competence, global learning, and study abroad experiences.⁴⁸ We have incorporated many of the questions from this inventory into our student surveys, and included an open ended question that asked students when they experienced a shift or expansion in their global perspective. Most of the student responses to this question, were related to conversations they had during breakout groups with students from different cultures. Therefore, diversity is central to cultivating a global perspective and conversations across cultures can help students question their frames of reference and rethink what they thought they knew. In the MDP program we also see a global perspective as key to successful development. It allows students to consider development solutions from multiple perspectives, approach problems holistically and draw from evidence and experiences around the world.

Conclusions

The Regis Master in Development Practice (MDP) program is a new program that is breaking ground for what is possible in the classroom. The approach and goals of the program align with the Jesuit mission of promoting social justice, reflective action, care for the whole person, inclusion and equity, and global education. The MDP global classroom could be a model that helps universities achieve three pressing challenges: internationalizing their curriculum to prepare global citizens for the future; increasing

enrollment in the face of declining demographic of college-aged learners; and reaching students when borders close. A curriculum like ours is urgently needed to prepare global citizens to tackle the Sustainable Development Goals. Our research also offers lessons for synchronous degree programs and highly diverse classrooms. While there is ample literature about global education, it does not address teaching development education in diverse synchronous classrooms. We hope our research will help us continue to improve our program and contribute to closing this gap. HJE

Notes

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