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## Thematic Notes No.5

*Curriculum On The Move*

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### Global Citizenship: Lessons from the Ancients

by Conrad Hughes



## INTRODUCTION

Right at the centre of the mission statement of many schools, universities and organisations is the phrase “global citizen”. But what does it mean to be a global citizen?

## INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Clearly, globalised communications channels have made the world much smaller in one sense, and it becomes difficult not to see events within the broader context of what is happening across the planet. In this manner, it is almost impossible *not* to be a global citizen. We are citizens of countries, of course, but every country is inextricably linked to one other country in a matrix. The idea of interrelationships is embedded in 21st century epistemologies: themes such as migration, climate change and trade touch everybody on the planet, either directly, or through indirect ricochets of cause and effect. The UN's [sustainable development goals](#) speak to a series of challenges that do not divide us, they link us. A war in one country sends refugees to another; a drop in value of one company's shares or one currency can destabilise the whole stock market.

[The world is flat](#), as Thomas Friedman argued in his 2005 book, but the interconnectedness of the economy does not create one type of global citizen alone, it creates several different types. This is because one can respond in different ways to the interdependence of environmental, political and economic realities. For [Akkari & Mallek](#) (2020), one can be a neoliberal, critical or radical global citizen, ranging from a wealthy tourist with offshore accounts and stocks in company shares from across the world to someone marching in the streets for the environment or social justice in their own country, or in other countries.

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## PROFIT OR MISERY

Our globalised world casts the die in such a manner that some benefit whereas others suffer because of it. Such an idea is as old as the hills. In a memorable reflection on war, the 5th Century BCE Persian philosopher Heraclitus reflected on the interconnectedness of all things in his beautiful [Cosmic Fragments](#). Heraclitus realised that fortunes would be cast awry when the wheel of history turns:

*“War is the father of all and king of all.*

*Some he shows as gods, others as men.*

*Some he makes slaves, and others free.”*

The old idea remains: one person's misfortune remains another's advantage. With a surge in food prices because of the war in Ukraine, some will starve, others will make a fortune, having invested in [food stocks](#). When the 2008 crash tore through Wall Street, many made astronomical amounts of money through [insider trading](#). Externalities bring misery to some, and others surf on that misery. Similarly, whereas some people and organisations will do what they can to preserve the environment, many companies still make their profit by depleting the planet's resources. There are, clearly, different types of global citizen, those that give, and those that take. Perhaps we are all inhabited, according to circumstance, by both.

## DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS

There are different definitions of global citizenship: by [Oxfam](#), [UNESCO](#) and [the United Nations](#) for example. Some emphasise the environment, others social justice, they all describe moral and intellectual positions that should be taken.

However, reading through these definitions means wading through fairly long lists. For example, Oxfam defines these qualities: “build [...] understanding of world events; think about their values and what's important to them; take learning into the real world; challenge ignorance and intolerance; get involved in their local, national and global communities; develop an argument and voice their opinions; see that they have power to act and influence the world around them”. A [Wikipedia](#) search tells us that the term is interchangeable with “world citizen” or “cosmopolitan” and that it involves the idea that “one's identity transcends geography or political borders and that responsibilities or rights are derived from membership in a broader class: 'humanity'. This does not mean that such a person denounces or waives their nationality or other, more local identities, but that such identities are given 'second place' to their membership in a global community”.

Which taxonomy to use, which definition?

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### THE ANCIENTS

This is where, again, it sometimes helps to turn to the ancients. It seems, often, that the further back one goes, the clearer things become.

The Greek philosopher [Diogenes of Sinope](#) (c. 390–323 BCE) called himself a *kosmopolites*, meaning, a citizen of the cosmos, a citizen of something greater and more universal than Athens. He was appalled by the xenophobia and parochial

insularity of the Athenians (who called anyone who was not Greek *barbaroi*, the root of the word “barbarian”). Diogenes thought that Athenians had become corrupt by their inward-looking arrogance and he therefore famously walked through the city looking for just one honest man. The task was so difficult that he needed an oil lamp to find one. Realising that honesty was this sparse, he decided to call himself *kynikos*, the origin of the word cynical, which meant in Ancient Greek “like a dog”.

It might be surprising to connect the concept of the cynic with that of global citizenship and even less so with that of a dog! So what did Diogenes mean?

Diogenes would argue that the simple virtues of the dog are in many ways purer and deeper than the egotistical pursuits of adults. And what are these virtues? Courage, fortitude, patience and trustworthiness. “Dog is Man's best friend”, the saying goes, and through time humans have built deep rapport with dogs, recognising their virtues, as Roman epitaphs on [dog tombstones](#) show.

It is true that in the modern sense of the word, to be a cynic is not to believe in, or trust, human nature. It's a word we associate with negativity. However, what Diogenes meant by *kynikos* was to have some integrity; a pure heart, at least an effort to try to have one. The *kynikos*, the *kosmopolites*, would feel linked to much more than wealthy and important Athenian statesmen, (s)he would feel linked to the night sky, to the endless expanse of the wine dark sea, the universally life-giving energy of the sun. In fact, legend has it that when Alexander the Great offered Diogenes anything he wanted, Diogenes simply asked that he might [move out of the way](#), for him to enjoy the rays of the sun on his visage.

The *kosmopolites*, for Diogenes, seeks a mindful happiness in the simple things in life.



Therefore, perhaps less than lists of detailed lower order moral imperatives that seem to describe the actions of a global citizen: standing by such and such a cause, holding a determined view on identity and evoking specific references; we should fall back on fewer, higher order moral imperatives. What might these be? Perhaps [compassion guided by wisdom](#). The global citizen does not only feel connected to the earth, but to other people. The Roman playwright [Terence](#), who was a freed slave, famously said "I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me." These words get to the core of what it means to be a human being who is aware of those around him/her or them.

Global Citizenship education should not be a laundry list of do's and don'ts, a set of skills (creativity, critical thinking, plurilingualism, etc) but rather an approach to life whereby other people and the world around us deserve our attention and respect: in this way we might learn to be more culturally sensitive, morally compassionate and wise.

The traditional Nguni belief system called [Ubuntu](#) also speaks of this coextensive humanity that is shared by many and constitutes a source of wisdom.

If we turn to ancient Buddhist literature, we see that the road to compassion, and to wisdom, is [patience](#). It is only through direct experience of life's trials and tribulations, and a steady patient growth through this, that we will be able to understand, deeply and wisely, the experiences of others so as to build a bridge toward them and see our humanity as coextensive. So, like so many things in life, to have a deep understanding of something, it helps to have had some personal experience in a similar vein, to have walked down the path of life itself. So global citizenship is more than theory, it is something that we actually live.

So much is written about how the world has been radically transformed by globalisation

and technology, but at the end of the day, the inner struggles humans face have not really changed all that much through time. The ancients have known what is important for thousands of years, reminding us that in matters of human behaviour there is, as stated in the Book of Ecclesiastes, nothing new under the sun. In this case, schools, institutions and educational groups need not design technical lists of competences to describe the global citizen, but look back in time to the simple traits that define what it means to be a good person.

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