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Chapter 11

GLOBAL LEARNING AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO DEMOCRACY EDUCATION

Annette Scheunpflug

In this chapter, the notion of Global Learning for democracy education is outlined. I will first reflect the challenges of democracy learning today (part 1). In the following (part 2), the contribution of Global Learning to democracy learning is presented. I close with some reflections for the practice of Global Learning and for further research (part 3).

Both Global Learning and democracy-related education strengthen the capacity for plurality and diversity, and both have in common the ability to strengthen the common public good. It is therefore worthwhile to take a closer look at the contribution of Global Learning to democracy-related education.

Learning Democracy

Challenged Democracies

In view of the perceptible loss of attractiveness of democratic systems and procedures, the crisis of democracy (Abramowitz 2018; Merkel 2014; Mounk 2018) and democracy education are discussed (Bertelsmann Foundation and Federal Agency for Civic Education 2017; Kenner and Lange 2019). In national and international educational policy spheres, this applies, for example, to the Council of Europe and its declaration 'United around our values' (Council of Europe 2023), and to the European Commission's 2023 evidence-based strategy paper on culture and democracy (European Commission and Hammonds 2023). The Scientific Commission of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education in Germany (Ständige Wissenschaftliche Kommission der Kultusministerkonferenz 2024) made a definitive statement on democracy education. They declared it to be the 'mission of the school' beyond specific subject teaching.

It is widely accepted that democracy must always create its prerequisites anew and thus make itself possible in the first place. Education is undoubtedly key to

solving the challenges, and schools, including extracurricular education, have a vital role to play.

Democracy as a Preconditioned Form of Society and the Political Way to Live Freedom¹

Democracy arose from the conviction that political power requires legitimization and control by the members of a community, and that participation in political decision-making creates a balance of interests. The 'democratic promise' of democracy as a form of government (Möllers 2012) means that people recognize each other as free and equal and thus organize the order of rule necessary to maintain freedom and equality.

This democratic promise is embodied in democratic values, institutions and procedures. Representative democracy is built on the normative foundation of human dignity and human rights, guaranteed by a constitutional and social order. Democracy is thus pluralistic; freedom of expression, while recognizing these values, and the protection of minorities are the imperative basis of this plurality. It makes freedom possible and depends on responsible citizens, a critical public, the formation of opinion and argumentative debate.

Democracy is therefore a form of society based on preconditions. It requires openness, transparency, participation, the ability to form opinions, knowledge and the ability to judge. Democracy is based not only on representative procedures, but also on a democratic ethos, which manifests itself in the form of common action: to seek the best options through discussion, to listen to each other, to treat each other with respect, to seek compromises and not to lie. Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1985: 25) speaks of the need for democracy to be embedded in an ensemble of 'accommodating ways of life' based on the fundamental values of a society.

Arenas of Uncertainty

In the face of the complexity of modern societies, however, many people no longer perceive democracy as an 'accommodating way of life' but as uncertainty and challenge. They feel challenged in several ways (see EKD 2020: 15-18):

(1) *Identity and belonging*: People feel challenged in terms of their identity and belonging. In recent years, migration and immigration have become an important projection screen for the political conflict over questions of identity and belonging. For some, openness to those seeking protection and immigration into professions where there is a shortage are part of the political identity of an open society; for others, they are a perceived threat to their own identity. The challenge is to learn that forms of pluralization are not a menace.

(2) *Affects, emotions and arguments*: People feel emotionally challenged. The Indian essayist and scholar Pankaj Mishra calls the present 'the age of anger' (Mishra 2017). Democracy thrives on the rational exchange of arguments, but it also needs strong and emotional identification. Martha Nussbaum (2013) has pointed out that functioning democracies have neglected to enable positive

emotions. It also seems that, in an era where the personal singularity receives special attention (Reckwitz 2017), society's preference for the rational is losing its appeal and stronger emotions are gaining in importance. The challenge is to evoke emotions that lead to identification with a liberal democracy.

(3) *Representation and participation*: People tend to feel unnoticed. In a democracy, political parties have the task of representing interests and channelling emotions into the political process. The classical mainstream parties were anchored in their respective social milieus. These milieus have become more differentiated, and the former mainstream parties are losing their cohesive power. In the face of declining voter turnout, there is talk of a 'representation gap' (Merkel 2014). New parties are emerging, sometimes intensifying political rhetoric beyond the boundaries of legitimacy. In part, this is accompanied by a harsh criticism of forms of representation, without constructive new models becoming visible. This rhetoric appeals above all to those who see themselves outside of political participation. The challenge is therefore to enable political participation under these conditions and to organize parties in such a way that they take up and reflect the interests of the population.

(4) *Direct perception and validity*: Democratic opinion-forming depends on political decisions being based, at least to some extent, on a consensual perception and description of the problem. It is important to be able to distinguish between facts and opinions to be able to engage in a constructive exchange of views on the evaluation of facts. In the past, there was a perception – not always true – that facts were provided by science and responsible journalism. Digitalization has made the chorus of positions more confusing, and old forms of establishing validity through forms of intersubjective examination are becoming less effective. On the one hand, the new immediacy is an opportunity for democracy, as it means that everyone has the potential to speak out and make his or her perspective visible. On the other hand, it creates new problems in generating validity or the foundations on which political opinion-forming processes can be meaningfully built. This gives new importance to knowledge about the generation of knowledge. Adapting to these changes in the organization of opinion-forming processes, the public sphere and communication structures is a new challenge.

(5) *The end of the externalization of political problems*: For centuries, social problems have been externalized. Problems of justice have been mitigated by emigration, waste has been exported, air pollution and the hole in the ozone layer have been felt in places on the planet far from the people who caused them. With the climate crisis, it has become clear that the planet can only be perceived as a common one. Tackling this common challenge, however, places new demands on political processes and on citizens' understanding of global issues and willingness to change behaviour.

Digitalization Processes Shape Democracy

Changes in access to the world have increased significantly over the last twenty years, both in terms of the complexity and the pace of social change. As a further

dimension of fundamental changes, digitality also has a fundamental impact on democratic processes, as the ‘digital condition’ (Stalder 2017) changes the understanding of knowledge, proximity and authenticity changes: instead of attributed and responsible authorship, the multitude of users in Wikipedia write the articles together. Algorithms, rather than the independent minds of individuals, decide the dignity of relationships presented as knowledge.

With generative artificial intelligence, supposed knowledge is created based on the probabilities of matching words. References are no longer created by quotations and thus more or less rational contexts, but by emotionally charged ‘likes’. This changes the construction and perception of public opinion. This expansion in the production and evaluation of knowledge, from questions of validity, procedures, citation and expert knowledge to subjective forms of liking, shared swarm intelligence and algorithmicity, poses great challenges to the formation of public opinion and political judgement, especially in the simultaneity of their appearance in digitality.

Democracy Needs Global Learning

In this situation of democracies under pressure, there is therefore a need for digital and transnational democracy education (Culp 2019; 2023; Culp et al. 2023). When people talk about democracy and democracy education, they often refer to systemic-political procedures and ways of life that relate to a nation-state context and the shaping of ‘this society’. This ‘civic education’, which is based on democratic processes organized by the nation-state, gives the impression that problems of social coexistence arise and are solved mainly at the level of the nation-state. Concepts of democracy-related learning must therefore necessarily take the global horizon into account. This is where the importance of Global Learning for democracy education becomes apparent.

What Does Global Learning Mean?

Global Learning or Global Citizenship education is the pedagogical concept used in education to describe this challenge (Oxley and Morris 2013; Pashby et al. 2020; UNESCO 2015). The historical development of this concept can be traced back to the aftermath of the Second World War (Scheunpflug and Seitz 1995; Wegimont and Scheunpflug 2024). In 2023, this concept was specified by the so-called ‘Dublin Declaration’. Inspired by the Global Education Network Europe, a total of 1200 stakeholders from the ministries of the member states of the European Union (ministries of foreign affairs, development or education), from European civil society, including youth representatives, as well as colleagues from all continents of the Global South participated in the formulation of a common self-understanding. It states:

Global Education is education that enables people to reflect critically on the world and their place in it; to open their eyes, hearts, and minds to the reality of the world at local and global level. It empowers people to understand, imagine, hope and act to bring about a world of social and climate justice, peace, solidarity, equity and equality, planetary sustainability, and international understanding. It involves respect for human rights and diversity, inclusion, and a decent life for all, now and into the future.

(Global Education Network Europe n.d.)

This declaration has now been translated into twelve European languages and is considered a widely shared concept of Global Learning. This understanding of Global Learning is the basis for the following reflections.

Learning to Deal with Uncertainty

Global Learning understood in this way offers a variety of ways of learning to deal with the challenges of uncertainty mentioned above.

(1) *Identity and belonging*: Global Learning makes it possible to build an individual transnational identity (Scheunpflug 2011) and to develop an understanding of identity that avoids ontologizing attributions. Belonging is made possible through a planetary approach that continues regional and national constructions and broadens the view to the state of the planet and social justice. The experience of plurality is perceived as a broadening of the horizon of possibilities and not as a disturbance.

(2) *Affects, emotions and arguments*: Global Learning trains the perception and expression of one's own emotions and connects individual affect with positive collective feelings of cosmopolitanism and humanity. It is emotionally good to be committed to social justice and to learn that it is worthwhile to stand up for these values. At the same time, the ability to judge the strength of arguments is trained. Global Learning makes it possible to experience the positive emotions associated with compromise, multilateralism and internationality.

(3) *Representation and participation*: Global Learning enables participation in world society in terms of reflection and understanding of global social contexts, in terms of emotional participation in the world, and in terms of participation in civil society activities, youth meetings and school exchanges or experiences of international cooperation.

(4) *Direct perception and validity*: Global Learning enables an understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power, of colonial epistemic orders and their critical reflection. Those who engage in Global Learning get to know Indigenous knowledge systems and learn a change of perspective as well as communicative politeness so as not to hurt anyone. In this way, on the one hand, individual judgement can be formed and, on the other, more abstract forms of validity can be learned.

(5) *The end of the externalization of political problems*: Global Learning makes it possible to recognize the disastrous consequences of externalizing problems and

to realize that climate problems, questions of social injustice or the disposal of one's own waste cannot simply be externalized. Global Learning provides knowledge of solutions and, by learning how to participate in civil society, opens up efforts to establish these solutions.

Learning Globality

As early as the 1970s, Niklas Luhmann began to argue that the development towards a world society does not mean that there is a homogeneous sociality with equal opportunities for participation, but rather that it is necessary to deal with the fact that it is no longer possible to observe one's own life without reference to the world or to others (Luhmann 1971; 1997). Globalization, therefore, means that the 'whole world' has always resonated in the observation of the world. Dealing appropriately with this reference to the world is anything but trivial. It is all too easy for thinking to stop at one's own place of residence, one's own language group or one's own immediate surroundings, and all too easy for this reference to the world to touch on either unreflected fears or unproductive feelings of superiority.

Immanuel Kant reflected critically on the forms of globalization that were already emerging in his time. In his view, people tend to be selfish and socially cold towards people they do not know from their personal environment. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that we have to interact and work together. He therefore speaks of an 'unsociable sociability' of human beings, meaning 'the tendency of human beings to enter into society, which, however, is connected with a constant resistance that constantly threatens to separate this society' (Kant 1784/2009, A 392; see Kleingeld 2012). In modern societies, living together can no longer be organized on the basis of the idea of a small group with emotional closeness or on the model of family togetherness, but requires an understanding of a more abstract social order for living together and developing freedom (Scheunpflug 2019; Wagener 2018).

Global Learning is the pedagogical concept that provides an answer to this challenge. The processes of globalization require learning to balance this sociability and unsociability on the one hand as a personal life experience and on the other hand to translate it into an understanding of society that is able to deal appropriately with the ambivalences involved, the simultaneity of different values and the potential for overwhelm. In addition, school social education focuses primarily on the coexistence of the pupils present in the classroom and less intensively on a social global order of coexistence. Dealing with globality requires competences that deal objectively with the challenges of sustainability, that deal socially with the challenges of 'unsociable sociability', that operate in time with the associated uncertainties, and that can move in 'glocal' spaces (Scheunpflug 2021).

The empirical research on this topic (Asbrand 2009; Krogull 2018: 201; Wagener 2018: 168; Richter 2018: 18; cf. summary of the empirical research Scheunpflug 2021; emphasis on the implications of educational theory (Scheunpflug 2022)) not only shows that many approaches to Global Learning succeed in empirically translating these requirements into reality. They also identify the conditions for the

success of Global Learning that enable people to deal with globality competently and democratically:

- First, the dimension of abstract sociality must be sufficiently elaborated (Scheunpflug 2021).
- Second, research shows that an understanding of world society consists of four different components, namely the construction of the social counterpart, the mode of differentiation, the question of how complexity is reduced, and the described motives that lead to action. Each of these components is important for an understanding of globalization and therefore needs to be addressed
- Third, it could be shown that people obviously develop different understandings of globality, which are not all equally functional in view of the political challenges: (a) The understanding of globality as a 'short-range orientation' understands the world as an addition of known short-range areas. World society thus appears as islands of the known, added together through reading, travel or education. In this mode, the social counterpart is constructed asymmetrically through authentic personalization. Differentiations are made in a spatial dimension of an imagined 'here' and 'there' or 'near' and 'far'. (b) The understanding of globality as 'community orientation' constitutes the world society through solidarity with communities to which one assigns oneself (such as one's own religion, world football, music, women or the young people of Fridays for Future, depending on which community one appears to belong to). In this way, the social counterpart is constructed through identification, differentiations are set in the form of affiliations, complexity is reduced through identification, and action is motivated by solidarity. (c) The understanding of globality through global social order structures and forms of social order understands the world as structured by an order for which humans are responsible. In this mode, the other is perceived as an equal and complexity is reduced through reflection. Actions are motivated by opportunities to participate. The latter mode is particularly functional for understanding global democracy and world orientation, while the addition of local areas appears to be potentially more challenging for understanding the world.
- Fourth, research has shown that participation experiences and the stimulation of (guided) self-reflection support the perception of global society.

Global Learning Offers Digital Participation and Critical Digital Literacy

The rise of digitalization is accompanied by a major social transformation. As described above, it changes access to democracy and the construction of socially relevant knowledge. Digitality leads to filter bubbles (Pariser 2012) and echo chambers (Sunstein 2017), which significantly facilitate social radicalization and

anti-democratic behaviour, as information is systematically pre-filtered according to one's own search history, the in-group is emphasized and the outside world no longer needs to be perceived. At the same time, many new referential possibilities emerge, overwhelming many people.

The contribution of Global Learning to the understanding of digitality would require its own chapter. In the context of understanding democracy and global social orders, digitally supported activities and the possibilities of global communication offer great opportunities.

From the variety of possibilities, I would like to illustrate one possible field of practice. Many secondary schools have partnerships with schools in other countries (for an overview, see Richter and Scheunpflug 2021). Usually, the primary motivation for these relationships is to actively support language learning. School partnerships can also be developed into learning fields for democracy, globalization and digitalization.

Exchange platforms offer the opportunity to carry out joint lessons and thus, for example, to approach language lessons (e.g. in language tandems), history lessons (on topics such as wars, imperialism, colonialism, etc.), politics lessons (on topics such as elections, multilateralism, etc.) or literature lessons from different perspectives. They make it possible to carry out joint projects on topics of the future, such as climate change, and to exchange experiences. In this way, students and teachers can communicate and learn from each other in real time. E-learning environments provide a structured environment for sharing materials, completing tasks together or giving feedback to each other. The school partnership can be made accessible to many and open up opportunities for participation through a common block on the school network, where students can share photos and exchange experiences.

In addition, students can address and exchange their different worldviews (see for example the experience of a project on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, where pupils from Germany, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other countries formulated and exchanged their 'theses for a better world'; cf. Affolderbach and Plötz 2021). School partnerships can also be used to conduct joint teacher training in the form of webinars, online courses, etc. School twinning draws attention to forms of democracy and social participation in other countries. These experiences can deepen the understanding of democratic values and practices. Critical maturity can be strengthened through discussions and debates between countries.

This potential is also seen on the side of potential school partners: Our study on the expectations of schools in the Global South from school partnerships (Scheunpflug and Timm 2025; Timm and Scheunpflug 2025) shows that, regardless of the specific challenges posed by local conditions, partner schools in Europe in particular are associated with positive expectations of democracy learning. In these contexts, freedom of opinion and expression could be learned. Democracy is seen as a prerequisite for a better life for all, as an anti-elitist vision beyond traditional obligations and family communities. The schools surveyed see

themselves as a natural part of a global society and place a high value on learning with others.

Digitalization is also seen as a way of participating in the world beyond the classroom context. In addition, active participation is seen as important in terms of their own visibility on the Internet – it ensures that they are better connected to the world. For this reason, school twinning is also associated with the hope of becoming more visible and participating in the digital opportunities of partner schools.

Democracy Needs Global Learning, and Global Learning Needs Open Spaces and Democratic Experiences

With the above explanations, Global Learning contributes to democracy-related learning and thus promotes democracy. Critically, it can also be concluded that anti-democratic tendencies can also point to a lack of Global Learning.

At the same time, however, the dependence of critical Global Learning on open spaces and democracy-related experiences must also be emphasized. In order to develop into a free human being with a global world horizon, to be able to judge and act autonomously, it is necessary to have free spaces in which autonomous judgements can be formed and expressed (in protected spaces), in which one can be heard and can act oneself. Global Learning needs opportunities for development, freedom and experimental workshops. It depends on encouragement and trust.

These spaces of practice are important in the school context, they require independent youth work and cultural education. Participation spaces and opportunities in schools, in youth associations, in universities, in vocational training or further education, in communities or religious communities are of great importance. In this respect, Global Learning requires the full development of democratically shaped open spaces. Especially in societies that are developing democracy, it is therefore important to enable international contacts and encounters and to use possible spaces for experiences of Global Learning.

Global Learning as 'Self-Assignment Support in the World Society'

The challenges to participation in democracy described above indirectly refer to the 'self-assignment performance' (Scheunpflug 2019) that each individual must perform in today's society. Political engagement requires a basic understanding of democracy and social behaviour that enables one to find a role in an abstract social society and to accept the negotiation processes involved. In order to make this possible, however, belonging, rational discourse and the feeling of being recognized are fundamental. This puts us in a paradoxical situation, because political participation requires these prerequisites, which have not been learned, especially in the absence of participation.

Perspectives

In view of the challenges of democracy and the growing importance of democracy-related education, Global Learning therefore has a significant contribution to play. This must be taken into account more explicitly in terms of educational policy and practice. It is vital to sharpen both practical didactic work and research.

Perspectives for Didactics

For the didactics of Global Learning, awareness of its democracy-promoting side is an essential first step to be strengthened. It is crucial to consider references to multilateralism, the promotion of an understanding of global order, solidarity with unknown others, the understanding of interdependencies and the common future on the one planet. Participation and self-reflection are to be encouraged. However, it is important to note that approaches that support exoticization (e.g. 'cooking as in ...') or create islands of short-range additions (e.g. via the addition of information about geography or travel) are potentially not compatible with attitudes that promote democracy. It is vital that this knowledge is also used to train multipliers.

Perspectives for Further Research

Further research is required in this field. It is vital to clearly demonstrate the contribution of Global Learning to democracy education in the coming years. In a second step, the costs of Global Learning in terms of the contribution to democracy may be quantified. This is linked to the hypothesis that it is precisely in this preventive school sector that much more can be achieved at lower costs than in the conviction of people who have already turned away from democracy or represent radical positions.

Secondly, more research is needed that considers the interventions that reliably lead to a cosmopolitan attitude. The development of these beneficial attitudes remains unclear. The above-mentioned empirical findings have already provided the needed clues highlighting the different forms that Global Learning can take. Now it is the time to investigate the educational conditions that will enable these attitudes to flourish.

Note

- 1 This paragraph is a reworked version of some reflections published from a group led by the author in German (EKD 2017).

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