



## Teacher Education and Teacher Identity in Transition

Fern Snart, University of Alberta

### ABSTRACT

Within current Canadian learning environments, learners bring sophistication in areas such as communication/technology, a wide diversity of learning needs, and often an orientation towards social justice. This commentary refers to the ongoing responsiveness of teacher education programs to these evolving learner attributes, using as exemplars the areas of global citizenship education and technology integration. A backdrop for this discussion is the observation that the knowledge and skills that contribute to successful adult lives are also evolving.

The role and impact of teachers in enhancing the curricular, social, and leadership skills of students, as well as influencing their perspectives in areas such as citizenship, globalization and ethics, is largely undisputed. Each of us can typically and readily acknowledge a handful of special teachers who have provided inspiration, personal attention, and transformational influence as we have taken our own life direction. However, the context of the teacher's role is changing dramatically as learners bring new strengths and complex challenges to the pedagogical relationship and as we experience a subtle but continuing shift in our society as to the attributes necessary for a successful adult life. The ability to provide inspiration and transformational input to students is now related to a teacher's understanding of the sophisticated skills of learners in areas such as technology/communication, the unique learning challenges that accompany students from war-torn countries and culturally diverse backgrounds and the common orientation of many young people toward social justice and equality. Teachers must also possess an understanding of the knowledge that a student will require to

succeed in a world very different than that when the teacher was a young learner. It has been suggested that current students are moving into adult lives of multitasking and multifaceted problem solving, in a diverse, technology-driven, and interconnected world. The implications of these suppositions about learners and teachers for teacher education programs are profound, and indeed many faculties of education within Canadian universities are currently reviewing and revising the curriculum and goals of their programs.

The need and desire to address the evolving mandate(s) of education have been represented more broadly in postsecondary settings over the past decade. University of Alberta President Indira Samarasekera has been instrumental in developing and facilitating a Vision for the University of Alberta that reflects a new orientation and a rather deep paradigm shift in the context of education in North America and beyond. “To inspire the human spirit through outstanding achievements in learning, discovery, and citizenship in a creative community building one of the world’s great universities for the public good” (University of Alberta, Office of the President, 2007) provides a somewhat stark contrast to traditional, historic mission statements from postsecondary institutions that stressed excellence in achievement only, and a competitive edge (we are the “best”). President Samarasekera’s promotion of inspiration and citizenship, within a context of “contribution” and collaboration is responsive to a new generation of students, and a new way of defining success. In his book, *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, Daniel Pink (2005) outlines a similar reflection of this paradigm shift as he suggests that the future of the world will rest in the leadership of persons who are able to think and succeed in creative, artistic, and holistic ways; those who can make meaning of the broad landscape. The notion of reductionist and analytical thinking as the primary foundation for economic and societal/political success is described as outdated. In the author’s words, “the ‘left brain’ capabilities that powered the Information Age – are necessary but no longer sufficient” (p. 3). He argues that professional and personal success in the world of the future will rely much more on right brain qualities, including inventiveness, finding meaning in complexity, and empathy. Pink’s assertions would not refute that teachers retain a level of responsibility to promote and nurture areas of learning that will influence their students’ ability to be economically successful—but he would advocate that these areas must expand into those dominated by “right brain” functions. This suggestion, added to notions of citizenship and the public good that increasingly permeate our educational aspirations, has implications for teacher educators today; we must consider teacher identity and teacher knowledge in an expanded form. Exemplary areas for such considerations are global citizenship education, and education related to the integration of technology.

Global education and global citizenship education are evolving concepts that demand scrutiny as we consider learners with an orientation to social justice and ecological sustainability, in a world made smaller by technology, travel, and especially a more sophisticated understanding of issues such as climate change, health threats, and political and economic interdependence, all of which extend beyond national borders. Despite some continuing tension around a specific definition of global education, there seems little argument that it is beyond a monolithic notion of internationalism, of visiting in a tourist-like manner the world of the “other,” or presuming the dominance of a Western cultural model. Authors such as Ali Abdi and Lynette Shultz (2008) suggest that the “best case” of global citizenship education is the organization of humanity to appropriately address critical issues in the world through just economic, political and social relations. Graham Pike (1996) has stated that

global education, if it is to be education for globalism, needs to pursue models and methods that will enable us -- learners and teachers -- to readily conceptualize the cosmic chaotic character of the place where we live.... all our destinies are intertwined (p. 10)

and that “education must be acknowledged as part of an organic and healthy process of change in which young people play an active and vital role in shaping their own futures” (p. 10). The conversation is a vital one in distinguishing global citizenship from cross-cultural engagement, *per se*. To educate students beyond the superficial, we must engage them in transformational processes and deep thinking such that they understand the Western position of privilege that is often reflected in issues of diversity, power, and justice, and that they move to an internalization of responsibility related to this privilege. There are many encouraging examples that students of today are inspired by such learning opportunities and more than ready to accept responsibility and translate that into action.

Within the Centre for Global Citizenship Education and Research at the University of Alberta, both graduate and undergraduate students work together to gain theoretical and practical knowledge of global education that will inform and enrich their future teaching practices. Students have the opportunity to participate in community-service learning projects, wherein partnerships with community organizations and NGOs involve volunteer work and enriched understanding of issues at a global level, and action at a local level. The student team, with guidance from professors, directs its efforts to issues of equality and human rights, social justice and environmental justice. They participate in conferences and professional symposia, and provide awareness sessions for pre-service and in-service teachers. Students consis-

tently report an experience of growth into a new realm of citizenship and personal priorities.

Even as students of today are more socially conscious and perhaps ethically driven than ever before, the pervasiveness and advancement of technology in their worlds is evident and will influence the way their lives play out. The Internet continues to facilitate a range of communications including those that provide distance alternatives to formal learning and also those that provide for sophisticated forms of social networking. The educational system is under increased pressure to appropriately integrate emerging technologies into teaching and learning such that students can be relevant and succeed in a knowledge-based society. The Internet has established itself as the primary gateway for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner to study and collaborate, expand his or her knowledge and create. Students must be “digitally literate” to gather information and navigate the complexities of learning and living. Such literacy allows them to make use of technology tools for creative problem solving, and it can provide a vehicle to greater cultural literacy and understanding as well, thus finding a fit with the goals of global citizenship education. The integration of technology must be taught as a vehicle for critical thinking and innovation, and one that can support collaboration, and global as well as local communities. Once again, teacher education must respond to the needs of learners in terms of their preferred ways of learning and their skill levels. In a provincial dialogue with Albertans initiated by Minister of Education David Hancock last year, it was suggested that teacher preparation programs must champion the integration of technology and pedagogy to transform education within the province. This challenge rests with postsecondary institutions, and has gained prominence in current program reviews within faculties of education.

One could argue that the preparation of teachers must always be responsive to the politics, science and social realities of global society at any point in time. It is perhaps the rapidity of change in terms of advances in technology and communication and travel within the world that induce a sense of “running to catch up” within teacher education programs to ensure that graduates are provided with a context for deep understanding and transformation in becoming truly global citizens and creative problem solvers who use technology tools as pathways and not as ends in themselves. Toward these ends we continue to strive in developing and sustaining teacher education programs that are catalysts for teachers to identify as committed professionals who will ultimately make the world a better place.

## References

- Abdi, A.A., & Shultz, L. (2008). *Educating for human rights and global citizenship*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Pike, G. (1996). Perceptions of global education in Canada: A passion for internationalism. *Orbit*, 27(2), 7–11.
- Pink, D. (2005). *A whole new mind: Moving from the information age to the conceptual age*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- University of Alberta, Office of the President (2007). Dare to discover: A vision for a great university. Retrieved April 12, 2010, from <http://www.president.ualberta.ca/daretodiscover.cfm>



**Fern Snart** will begin her second term as Dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, in July 2010. Her background includes Clinical Psychology and Educational Psychology (Special Education) and she has held several leadership positions including two Associate Dean portfolios in the Faculty over the past two decades. One area of focus has been the development of a successful Aboriginal Teacher Education program that is delivered in collaboration with several tribal and provincial colleges, to allow students to complete a teaching degree within their home communities. Fern is currently serving as President of the Association of Canadian Deans of Education, and took part in hosting the launch of ACDE's Accord on Indigenous Education at CSSE in Montreal on June 1, 2010.