

Global Competence

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"This is what you shall do: ...take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families ... re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book...and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body."

-Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass

Diplomacy is an art almost as old as human civilization. As children we are taught the basics of diplomacy with commands like, "share", "be nice", "why don't you try playing what Billy wants to play for a while?" Diplomacy, in turn, is fundamental to Global Competence, one of the hottest buzzwords in contemporary international education. What is Global Competence? What *isn't* it? How can one obtain it? How can educational institutions foster it? Is it really necessary, or is it just another fad following in the footsteps of globalization?

To Be Globally Competent or Not To Be....

Though the word "globalization" is rife with economic and political connotations, there is no denying the fact that the world is getting smaller by the day. For example, when riding on a donkey cart in the middle of a refugee camp on the border between Senegal and Mauritania, the cart driver asked if I was French. When I said I was American, he grinned and gave a thumbs-up and said, "America! Barak Obama!" Also, when I told a group of Palestinian teenagers in Bethlehem that I was from the city of Milwaukee in the USA, they said that they knew it well. How in the world did they know? *That 70's Show*, of course!

Global Competence means more than just knowing about the world. Anyone can memorize the Encyclopedia Britannica. Essentially, Global Competence is adaptability; the ability to be at home anywhere in the world and with anyone from any culture. Drawing from Walt Whitman's description in the preface to his *Leaves of Grass*, individuals with strong Global Competence are able to have substantive interactions with wise old village chiefs, student activists, and children from any cultural background. This skill goes beyond cultural sensitivity and politeness. Global competence is the ability to know *why* one society functions as it does, and *how* other societies can interface with it.

This soft skill is so important these days because employers are looking for employees who will be able to represent their organizations abroad with grace. Employers are looking for those who have international experience, because it is understood that they will hopefully be able to handle diverse situations with more calmness and insight. Despite globalization's best efforts, there is no monoculture, so adaptability is key.

When I moved to Senegal for a year of study and research, I quickly became frustrated by the slow pace of everyday life. How could anything get accomplished if we were spending 3 hours drinking tea every afternoon? How would Africa ever develop if it takes 6 weeks to get one document notarized? How was I supposed to be productive like this!? Then one day, as I was helping a Senegalese friend with his English vocabulary for his American Civilization class (which was required for all English majors), I was struck by one of his vocab words: "American Pragmatism." The phrase was defined as the ability of

Americans to “get stuff done” and not merely talk about plans. I realized then that I had been looking at Senegalese society through the lens of American culture, instead of being willing to put one foot in front of the other at the pace of the society around me. I began to savor the hours spent drinking tea with friends and took “cultural insensitivities” less personally. I had realized my own cultural incompetence, and needless to say, I began to enjoy my time more.

Learning how to adapt to the pace and expectations of another culture requires respect and open-mindedness. You may not agree with some foreign values, but Global Competence is the ability to respect others’ ways of life. For example, as a woman living in a Muslim society, I have come to understand why some women choose to cover themselves for various reasons. Contrary to some Western conceptions, the hijab (headscarf) is not necessarily a misogynistic tool of oppression, neither is it an expression of Islamic radicalism. On the contrary, it can be an expression of both sisterhood and faith, freedom and tradition. In the same vein, it is just as important to spend a day drinking tea and discussing the village’s events as it is to install a development program. In fact, one may lead to another. At the end of the day, Global Competence says that there is nothing more important than humanity.

Insatiable curiosity and enthusiasm for “elsewhere” are some of the most exciting foundations of Global Competence. I was fortunate enough to move around the globe with my family as a child, which is a blessing I only realized in hindsight. Though my quotidian childhood experiences may seem strange to some (filling up socks with volcanic ash to use as clubs on my siblings and riding water buffalo around town) they prepared me to be able to handle strange, uncomfortable, or just plain different situations. The most Globally-Competent individuals are those who never tire of learning and discovery and are always open to instruction. It is those who are staunchly set in their ways and creature comforts who may have the most difficult time being cosmopolitan.

This is not to say that one must be value-less and infinitely tolerant in order to be Globally-Competent. We must also be mindful that Global Competence takes great self-awareness. It is up to each individual to decide which hills they are willing to die on, and some things should never be compromised. Roots (if you have them) need not be forgotten. True Global Competence is the ability to represent yourself and your own culture, holding on to your own values and traditions, while at the same time being flexible and understanding towards another. It is NOT assimilation.

Learning Global Competence by Going and Doing

The best way to learn Global Competence is to get out of your comfort zone. Break free of everything that is familiar and status quo, and *experience* something foreign. Of course, travel is the best teacher. You can read all the Wikipedia articles you want about, say, South American Yerba Mate Tea. However, you will never fully understand the entire culture that circulates around this tea, about its industry, or about local history, until you yourself are sipping Mate’s dusty sweet warmth from a hollowed-out gourd in a place where the stories are told in Spanish.

If traveling is not an option, there are other practical ways to gain Global Competence. Language acquisition opens up doors to diverse cultures. Linguistic debates aside, it is never too late to start learning a language. Informing yourself about world events is also necessary. Keep up with local and international politics, but when you go abroad be prepared to be put to shame by locals about their knowledge of American history and politics. Read as many news sources per day as possible. Try to get at least a basic understanding of global economics and international relations. You never know when it will be useful to discuss “Panda Diplomacy Between China and Taiwan” or “Bhutan’s Gross National

Happiness”, or to debate “Obama’s Use of Alcohol to Improve Race Relations in the US” (all hot topics in the international arena.)

Educational institutions can instill the value of Global Competence through promoting diversity. My alma mater, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, did an excellent job at this, despite a general homogeneity of the student body. It helps to be involved in international-esque activities, and it helps that my university promoted these activities so broadly. There were constantly cultural events taking place somewhere on campus, and hardly a day went by when some international music or dance troupe wasn’t performing on Library Mall. (And I mean this literally. Hearty Wisconsin folk will bellydance, capoeira, and drum-circle their way through the coldest of winters). The ethnic studies requirement is hotly debated, but I do know a few students who never would have left the United States if it weren’t for an Intro to Global Studies course that opened their eyes first semester of freshman year (shout out to Professor Joe Elder). The fact that UW offered such a wide range of classes with international foci was incredibly beneficial and in almost every department, students are able to choose classes that will challenge their thinking and adaptability.

Caitlyn Olson, a Middlebury Alum now doing Fulbright research in Morocco, reflected on her own undergraduate experience that prepared her with Global Competence: “At the end of the day it’s just about interacting with people who are different from you. I took classes that challenged the Western historical narrative, and opened my eyes to the existence of other historical eras and cultures that are just as vibrant and important as my own. Global competence is about taking you out of yourself and your own place in history.”

The Global Competence Aptitude Test

May we never forget that America is an inter-cultural nation. Our own society is constantly pulling elements from all corners of the globe, re-fashioning them into an American framework, and in turn, exporting them as Western values back to where they came from. For a good study in this metamorphosis, see Exhibit A: “Hip Hop”, and Exhibit B: “Democracy”.

Because of this cultural and social dynamism, global competence is a lesson that never ceases to be learned. There will always be more to know about international societies, more to know about interpersonal relations, and always *always* more to know about ourselves. It is not a skill that is attained through any one life experience or class. It is more like an understanding that is constantly deepened. Global competence is learned by *going* and *doing*.

So here is a cheat-sheet for the “Global Competence Aptitude Test”: Know why you should never plan a business meeting between the hours of 12 and 4 on Fridays in the Middle East. Know why you should never complement someone’s baby in West African cultures. Know how many kisses go on each cheek of each gender in each culture. Learn greetings in as many languages as possible...then also learn how to say “but I don’t speak the language well.” Consider how 9/11 changed relations between every single country in the world. Learn to prioritize. Learn how to order wines and when to ask for Coca Cola. Learn to sit still. Learn not to take anything personally and not to take many things too seriously—including yourself. Learn how to take things slow. Patience. Learn how to get things done. Pragmatism. Most of all, learn to be courageous and the world will be yours.