



Educating for a Cosmopolitan Ethos in Education: Adapting Expectations to Reality

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Article abstract

Cosmopolitanism is an ancient Greek notion which in modern times has found its way into educational practice. It expresses a moral responsibility toward everyone irrespective of cultural background, looks or ability. However, it is an ideology difficult to operationalise and convey in education if the objective is to change learners' attitudes for the future benefit of mankind. There are several obstacles standing in the way such as concurrent but incompatible value systems, the rise of individual empowerment for global economic growth and most important perhaps, the evolutionary basis of human nature. It is, for example, not possible to encourage competitive behaviour and simultaneously aim at imparting moral values. It is difficult to effectively teach a cosmopolitan mindset, but this is not to say that we should not try. Drawing from the research of multiple disciplines the conclusion of this article is inevitably paradoxical. While the effort to strive for moral cosmopolitanism is a good one, it is also not a one that is entirely possible. We must adjust expectations rather than trying to find miraculous methods by which to enable a better World through general tolerance and acceptance everywhere. Sadly, the latter is not possible. We can at best expect to have a local impact made possible by dialogue.



Educating for a Cosmopolitan Ethos in Education: Adapting Expectations to Reality

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Abstract

Cosmopolitanism is an ancient Greek notion which in modern times has found its way into educational practice. It expresses a moral responsibility toward everyone irrespective of cultural background, looks or ability. However, it is an ideology difficult to operationalise and convey in education if the objective is to change learners' attitudes for the future benefit of mankind. There are several obstacles standing in the way such as concurrent but incompatible value systems, the rise of individual empowerment for global economic growth and most important perhaps, the evolutionary basis of human nature. It is, for example, not possible to encourage competitive behaviour and simultaneously aim at imparting moral values. It is difficult to effectively teach a cosmopolitan mindset, but this is not to say that we should not try. Drawing from the research of multiple disciplines the conclusion of this article is inevitably paradoxical. While the effort to strive for moral cosmopolitanism is a good one, it is also not a one that is entirely possible. We must adjust expectations rather than trying to find miraculous methods by which to enable a better World through general tolerance and acceptance everywhere. Sadly, the latter is not possible. We can at best expect to have a local impact made possible by dialogue.

Keywords: Education; Cosmopolitanism; Evolution; Knowledge Economy; Individualism; Collectivism; Human Nature.

Introduction

Cosmopolitanism, or cosmopolitan sociability has been defined as, for example, consisting of forms of competence and communication skills that are based on the human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world. As such cosmopolitan sociability is an ability to find aspects of the shared human experience including aspirations for a better world within or despite what would seem to be divides of culture and belief. (Glick Schiller, Darieva & Gruner-Domic, 2011; pp. 402-403).

It is difficult to disagree with the sentiment of such a definition. The World would indeed be a place of wonder if social inclusion and openness characterised societies globally on all level considering that in time of writing this there are currently 27 on-going conflicts in the world where reasons for contention range from territorial disputes to terrorism (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). There is good reason to argue that cosmopolitan sentiments as defined above are difficult to put into practice. The reasons for this are many and, at least in my experience, not well known among educators or policymakers. The strive for inclusive education for example, while certainly desirable, is by no means easy to achieve either and largely for the same reason (DeVries, Voß, & Gebhart, 2018; Kauffman & Badar, 2014; Ring & Travers, 2005; van Hooft & Vanderkerckhove, 2010).

The objective of this article therefore is to discuss cosmopolitan ideals comparing them to a wider interdisciplinary context and, on this basis, focus on the significance of conflicting value systems, the dynamics of our usually unaware human nature and, in conclusion, also endeavour to answer the question whether imparting a cosmopolitan mindset to pupils is at all possible if expecting to make the World—to use a cliché—into a better place (cf., Hayden, 2019).

The origin of an ideal

It is reasonable to argue that the world has always been cosmopolitan in the sense that trade and travel between nations and cultures have been part of human history for a very long time

(Bernstein, 2008). Trade has forced social interaction for mutual benefit. During Antiquity, however, cosmopolitanism emerged as a distinct notion and a social ideal separate from trade. The Greek philosopher Diogenes professed that he and his followers were all “cosmopolitan” (i.e., κοσμοπολίτης) by which he meant that he was a citizen of the World. He had moral obligations not only to his own society, but rather to the entire World community, which at the time consisted of the countries and cultures surrounding the Mediterranean (Hansen, 2008). This ideal has stood the test of time and continues to be a subject for discussion and philosophising. It has found its way also into modern educational practice (e.g., Roxas, Cho, Rios, *et al.*, 2015; Stråht, 2012). As such it aims at enabling pupils to participate *morally* in the world community by “... acceptance of the shared humanity of all persons as a fact of human existence and [serving] as a motivating guide for human interaction ... [requiring] democratic inclusion in deliberations of the governance of those interactions, including morality” (Hayden, 2017, p. 248).

In our own century, however, the cosmopolitan ideal has developed further and perhaps also unexpectedly. It has become entirely *utilitarian* without including any moral obligations. In contemporary business, finance and politics, a cosmopolitan mindset is not promoted to hone the moral and ethical stance of humanity for reasonably peaceful co-existence. It is an instrument of influence to persuade, influence and to achieve economic growth and increased profits (e.g., Baumer, 2002; Ear, Moran & Ward-Perkins, 2017; Jackson, 2002; Nussbaum, 2010; Todd, 2009). This arrival of utilitarianism has generated unanticipated problems.

When value systems collide

Diogenes could not have foreseen that a global economy would emerge and that it would generate its own universal culture independent of ethnic diversity and differing cultural values. While culture as an evolutionary function serves to create and maintain social cohesion by establishing common values tied to procreation, child rearing, altruism, status, societal structure and so on, the engineered culture of the global economy is based entirely on *transactional* values and objectives. Its value system only serves the dynamics of economy without any consideration to individual differences, human needs or to the values of individual cultures. Furthermore, this value system has been increasingly *imposed* on cultural diversity worldwide since the emergence of the largely neoliberal global knowledge economy (Hamm & Smandyovich, 2005; Power, 1997). It is forcing nations globally to embrace values that they do not always share (cf. Powell & Snellman, 2004). Imposing such an engineered culture devoid of variation, natural social dynamics and insensitive to uniqueness but amplified emphasis on individualism is, however, not surprising. The global economy largely rests on American cultural values emphasising the importance of the empowered individual (Kohse, Lakatos, Ohsorge, *et al.*, 2017) while most existing cultures are in various ways collective. Homo sapiens is a social animal and the social collective, albeit in different shapes and forms, constitutes the foundation for *every* aspect of human existence and function (e.g., Bourke, 2011; Boyd & Richerson, 2005). Demanding that the World must focus on the individual and individualism has proven more profitable than structuring economy and production based on collectives. To most visionaries of the globalised economy, securing economic growth by predictable control is paramount, hence also the attraction of imposing the notion of American individualism onto a world of collective societies largely disregarding that such a focus is completely foreign to collective cultures (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2011; Persson, 2012; Weil, 2008). As wealth increases in collective societies, they also tend to become more individualist (or Americanised) and, as a result, the psychological problems generated by individually performance-managed human capital increase considerably (e.g., Culbert & Rout, 2010; Patel, Saxena, Lund, *et al.*, 2018; Pega, Náfrádi, Momen, *et al.*, 2021; Santos, Varnum & Grossman, 2017).

Education as a transactional instrument

Education construed as the intrinsic value of learning no matter what you learn no longer exists. Education constitutes the foundation of the global knowledge economy with little interest in individual pupils, their interests, and their quirks (Hargreaves, 2003). Pupils’ knowledge and skills are to serve society by economic growth which, it is envisioned, will be made possible mainly through skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Measuring schools’ efficiency serve as a political indicator of potential future business investments (Lundgren, 2011). Since education is widely

understood as a utilitarian tool, the most important tool follows also the fostering a cosmopolitan mindset to facilitate future global enterprising (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2010; Schecter & James, 2022). For this reason, formal education systems tasked with fostering the prerequisites for economic growth have been unwittingly forced into a dilemma. While the value system driving the global economy is entirely transactional, the educators in this context are viewed as instruments in making the global knowledge economy possible tend to be motivated by non-transactional ideals. The self-direction and political agency of educators is minimized. They are concerned with all aspects of pupils' welfare. It is not likely that their understanding of the teaching profession entails standardising pupils for their future role as productive human capital in the global knowledge economy (Acker, 1995; Haritos, 2004; O'Brien, 2004). For teachers to be motivated by social values and individual concerns as opposed to the global economy's understanding of pupils as future human capital constitutes a clash between two value systems of epic proportions. To view economy, production, achievement, and talent devoid of any consideration for how individuals function psychologically and socially is to *dehumanise* individuals (Haslam, 2006). A more appropriate term for human capital would in fact be *inhuman capital* (Persson, 2022). The transformative values guiding teachers in their daily work and the World economy's imposing transactional characteristics are incompatible. These conflicting value systems have had little or no effect on the global knowledge economy as far as I know, but they are causing teachers worldwide considerable distress, not infrequently resulting in burnout (e.g., García-Carmona, Marín & Aguyao, 2019; Iancu, Rusu, Märoio *et al.*, 2018). Although there are several reasons for leaving the teaching profession; one reason is indeed the accountability pressures generated by the neoliberal knowledge economy creating stressful working conditions. It accounts for 66% of all American teachers leaving their profession for other reasons than retirement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). For educators to foster their pupils into becoming benevolent and compassionate world citizens motivated by a moral responsibility is not compatible with how the global economy has been made to function and the demands it has on education systems and teachers worldwide. Yet, there is another unanticipated drawback with universally imposing individual transactional perspectives. With increasing individualism follows increasing narcissism.

Collective responsibility versus cultural narcissism

Homo sapiens, it has been suggested, was originally a solitary animal (Bowles & Gintis, 2011), but through the ages and by the forces of evolution prompted by environmental demands, our species has developed into a social one. Existing in groups facilitated survival. Despite the World being increasingly forced into individualism, it remains true that we tend to be more intelligent as well as more creative as a group rather than as single individuals. It is likely that no matter how gifted or talented a single individual might be, a socially cohesive group will nevertheless have a greater potential for creativity and problem solving than such a cognitively extreme individual (cf. Sumpter, 2010; Surowiecki, 2005). This collective advantage, however, *only* applies if everyone in the group accepts and respects one another, and if there is an absence of individual ambition. Such a state is very difficult to achieve by strategic design (Barker & Barclay, 2016; Barker, Barclay, & Reeve, 2012; Couzin, 2008; Nijstad & Paulus, 2003). Strict social cohesion is likely to occur unaware and only if a group of individuals perceive a common and very tangible threat. The greater the perceived threat the less interesting individual conflicts, differences and ambitions within the group become (cf. West, Gardner, Shuker *et al.*, 2006).

As the global knowledge economy takes increasing hold on the World promoting profitable individualism extreme narcissism tends to follow (Lasch, 1979; Twenge & Campbell, 2013). Importantly, no narcissistically inclined individual is likely to prioritise acceptance and respect for a collective endeavour for the benefit of everyone else. Whether a clinical disorder or a culturally learnt behaviour, narcissism expresses a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration and lack of empathy, all together serving a consistent drive to express self-importance at the expense of others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In this light, the idea of cosmopolitanism and its aim to convey the value of moral responsibility irrespective of background and culture becomes difficult. Narcissists are usually interested only in themselves.

While cosmopolitanism is an attractive idea, good intentions often fall unexpectedly short not only because of conflicting value systems, unanticipated antisocial behaviour in the wake of individual

relative affluence, but also because of inherited and ubiquitous social behaviour which we all engage in daily.

Personal ambition and social cohesion

Even though we are born and brought up in different cultures, we belong to the same species and share about 400 or so biologically motivated social behaviours which, in one way or another, *always* relate to survival, mating, parenting and kinship, group living and co-operation (Brown, 1991; Buss, 2005). Our shared biology motivates our daily behaviour *without* us necessarily being aware that it does. Ambition, or competition, is part of this behaviour, but not usually in the way that Western cultures have led its members to believe. While we are all inevitably competitive, we are *only* nudged to become ambitious when searching for a partner, for resources and for dominance as well as survival (cf. Keddy, 2001). It is unlikely that we can successfully compete for “better quality” on an individual level, nor can competition be used as an intentional strategy. Competing always involves stress, motivating to some degree, but detrimental to health if prolonged, exceeding coping ability and initiated in situations for which competition was never intended. Competition also challenges social cohesion (see Persson, 2021a, 2021b, for a review of the literature). To intentionally introduce competitiveness between individuals while at the same time demanding that they must co-operate constitutes a paradox. It does not work. If we argue that we convey, for example, a cosmopolitan mindset including moral standards—no matter how potentially beneficial—and at the same time encourage competitive behaviour among pupils, our objective to foster co-operation and welfare for all will fail. Little do the architects of the global economy apparently know that, as far as working life and education are concerned, a competitive culture is likely to be tied to moral disengagement and delinquency (Groß, Hövermann & Messner, 2018; Zhang, Li, Ahemaitijiang *et al.*, 2020). Moral disengagement is well known in a sports context. The more extreme the competitiveness the more detrimental it will be to physical and mental health, sympathy, empathy and the welfare of others who happen to exist in the same context (Collier, Ryckman, Thornton *et al.*, 2010; Gat & McWhirter, 1998; Ryckman, Libby, van den Borne *et al.*, 1997).

Social cohesion is a complex notion and maintaining it depends on multiple factors. Common to them all is their function to promote our species, but not necessarily in the way that societal visionaries and policymakers envision the World to develop. While the World has been engineered to transform transactionally following political designs (e.g., Schwab, 2016; Schmitt & Cohen, 2013), the human species, unaffected by trendy visionaries, continues to evolve according to ancient biological algorithms which have remained largely unchanged for thousands of years. At least for now, we remain a social species with everything that this entails (cf. Bowles, & Gintis, 2011). We are socially collective in how we behave and never transactionally individual. When forced to become empowered and largely transactional individuals, we simultaneously untangle the social fabric provided by evolution, and in so doing profit and production are likely to gain momentum but human health will decline.

Should cosmopolitanism be part of the curriculum?

Considering the apparent difficulty of introducing any morally based teaching in education systems, the question whether cosmopolitanism has a place in them is not easy to answer. There is no clear yes or no answer, little depending on what we hope to achieve. The reason for this is our evolutionary human nature (cf. Persson, 2016).

The origins of social paradox

Behavioural scientists have often assumed that all humans are genetically the same. The variation between each one of us, it has been argued, is at most around 0.5%. However, this assumption must be read as *at least* 0.5% (Levy, Sutton, Ng *et al.*, 2007). With the advances in genetics, particularly in epigenetics, we now know that our genome is partly active and will to some extent change during our lifetime. We also know that variation between individuals is likely to be greater than 0.5%. It has even been suggested that we vary genetically with up to 12% (Witherspoon, Wooding, Rogers *et al.*, 2007).

On the premise that we are all genetically similar, grand theories of expertise were construed during the 1990s assuming that everyone is able to develop any skill to almost any level given that they have good support, good instruction and engage in much deliberate practice over at least a 10-year period (e.g., Howe, 1990; Krampe & Ericsson, 1996). The discovery that genetics play a more extensive role in our development than we perhaps would care to admit is likely to explain why the argued importance of extended deliberate practice has been difficult to replicate (e.g., Hambrick *et al.*, 2014; Lombardo & Deaner, 2014). Deliberate practice is itself a skill affected by genetic variation (Ullén, Hambrick, & Mosing, 2015).

The fact that individuals are genetically different is important. The variation provides an “experimental laboratory” in which individual differences, randomly generated by mutation, are tested whether they have species survival value or not. Variation and its effects strive to always achieve fitness by natural selection. This process is on-going albeit too slow for us to perceive. In addition, it is a process difficult, if not impossible to predict with any degree of certainty (Losos, 2017). In a World characterised by a global economy relying entirely on prediction and prognoses, this inability to predict human evolutionary behaviour is no doubt like throwing a spanner in the works. The humanly engineered World economy functions according to the standardisation of everything for control and predictability (Ritzer, 2009), but natural human evolution functions on the basis of random variation and non-predictability.

Because of random variation, natural selection and a relentless development toward fitness, we will always exist in a social paradox characterised by both conflict and social upheaval. We cannot have one or the other. They exist together always moving toward all things average, which makes social cohesion possible. We are driven by evolution to be as similar to one another as possible (see Persson, 2018, for a literature review). Social cohesion, in turn, makes co-operation possible. Social disruption and conflict generate new social groups. These may or may not have better fitness as tested by existing conditions for survival and procreation. Most of us prefer a settled life with equal opportunities and responsibilities as we go about our lives in reasonable harmony. But the potential for conflict and upheaval will always be present. It is well established that the collective functions best and is at its happiest when its members are reasonably equal (or average) in everything that matters for general welfare (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; 2018). No ideology, policy or societal visionary can dismiss the random process by which our biological legacy is constantly tested, nor can a cosmopolitan mindset.

Concluding thoughts

If we aim to teach a moral ideology such as a cosmopolitan ideal to our pupils we can certainly do so, but our expectations on what this could achieve needs to be adjusted to reality. The difficulty of implementing a cosmopolitan mindset in education has indeed been picked up by scholars, who have found that whatever is taught and conveyed in school is affected by a considerably larger social context than the classroom (Schechter & James, 2022). It is known, for example, that children tend to inherit their parents’ values (Dalhouse & Friederer, 1996; Miller & Glass, 1989). An important dimension of critical pedagogy is to challenge internalized beliefs that limit or constrain critical perspectives and transformative learning; yet, it is not a “given” that all educators embrace an emancipatory vision of learning. To teach the value of respect and acceptance of everyone, therefore, a wider social context must be brought on board including parents and others of social significance. Even if we succeed in doing this it is by no means guaranteed that it will work, since values involved in generating identity is to a large extent drawn from social similarity with others. While we certainly need to develop an individual identity, identity is construed by comparing ourselves to the social context. Collective and individual identity are equally important for wellbeing and normal functioning. They are therefore dependent on one another (cf. Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

I will argue that we should make the effort. We need to follow in Diogenes’ footsteps and impart a cosmopolitan mindset to pupils. But we must at the same time be keenly aware that we cannot achieve the impossible. Our effort will not create World Peace or general acceptance and understanding. Our best effort in trying to convey the equal value of everyone irrespective of

background, abilities--or lack thereof—and must involve the entire social chain affecting pupils' identity. The only tool we have at our disposal is information and dialogue. Individuals representing the vast number of possible differences setting them apart in comparison to the societal majority will need to meet and learn about one another (Mignolo, 2012). The aim of which is to offer a way of discovering that we all have more in common than separates us.

Every effort aiming at social cohesion should be understood as a worthwhile effort, but it always needs to be pursued with the understanding that it can never resolve all conflicts or dissension. Evolutionary dynamics will never arrive at a social status quo where acceptance and respect create a global society of absolute inclusion. This is not how evolution works. Social harmony and conflict always go hand in hand.

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