

counterpoint: in the classroom

Do They Tune In...

by Steve Stewart

The inclusion of international development issues in the curricula of our public schools can be a challenging and sometimes controversial process. But the effort is essential if international development is to become a priority among Canadians. Making development issues part of regular classroom fare is more effective than merely offering it as an extra-curricular or outside-of-school activity because it exposes all students to the theme.

Youth participating in global issues clubs or attending exciting conferences organized by development education NGOs tend to be more enthusiastic and ready to become involved in follow-up activities than the general student body, the numbers and range of social backgrounds of students reached tend to be far greater in the latter.

Some critics of incorporating development education (dev ed) into school curricula warn that it will create a negative reaction. Students who are unable to relate the issues to their daily lives will reject international development as boring and irrelevant. As a former high school teacher who frequently incorporated global issues into my lesson, and as a development educator who works with public school teachers who include dev ed in a variety of subject areas, I argue that it is not whether something is in the curricula that evokes student rejection, but what is included and how it is taught.

Global issues can, and must be taught in a way that motivates and inspires students. For the past 15 years at CoDevelopment Canada (CoDev) we have been developing lesson aides on a variety of global issues. Our experience has taught us several key principles to follow in the creation of a successful dev ed resource.

- Work closely with classroom teachers in the development of the resource. Many activities that seem great to development educators are unworkable in a large classroom setting. Working closely with an advisory board of teachers from the target grade level or subject area helps to ensure that the activities are presented in a useful way for the teachers.
- Link the resource to education ministry-prescribed learning outcomes. As standardized testing becomes ever more pervasive, teachers are under growing pressure to “teach to the test” omitting anything that is not

evaluated in ministry or district exams. Linking a dev ed resource to ministry prescribed learning outcomes helps allay the concern that “there’s no time” to teach these issues. It can also shield a teacher from criticism by administrators or parents over the teaching of what are sometimes considered controversial issues.

- Make the resource relevant to students’ lives. Global education should not be about the South; it should be about linkages. What happens in far off countries has an affect on the lives of Canadian youth and Canadians often have a profound effect on people and environments thousands of kilometres away. Global education’s job is to help students understand those linkages.
- Empower students. Teaching about the tremendous problems that face our planet without discussing concrete solutions and providing tools for action can do more harm than good. Students can feel overwhelmed, fearful and helpless. In each of its teaching units, CoDev includes sections on exploring solutions to the challenges presented in the resource, on how students can participate in these solutions and a tool kit for taking action.

In British Columbia, a growing number of schools are offering global education courses that partner with a development NGO. The course involves the study of a range of international issues using a particular country as an example, then travel to the country studied to work with community groups on small development projects. When the students return to Canada, they become educators sharing their experiences and teaching development issues at elementary schools.

This process not only provides a powerful motivator for students in the classroom, but also empowers them as educators and agents of change. But this method need not be confined to global education courses. A group of shop and tech education teachers is currently working with the BC Teachers’ Federation to develop a unit on appropriate technology in which students learn about technology and the issues related to it and then liase with communities in Cuba and Guatemala to build technology that reflects community needs before travelling to the country to install the project.

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Of course, the cost of travel to another country can be a barrier that effectively excludes many students. But global education learning can be empowering without the travel component. For example, a Francophone elementary school in the BC community of Powell River developed a relationship with a coffee cooperative in Guatemala after a carpenter from the town worked on a project there. The students began to sell fair trade coffee imported from the co-op by the BC Central America Student Alliance and used the profits to support a scholarship fund for children from the Guatemalan co-op.

This activity has sparked a series of classroom activities. The students created a pamphlet in French, built a display about the cooperative and developed order forms and other marketing materials. Through this process the students not only developed language, design, math and marketing skills, but in order to produce their materials, they also learned about coffee processing, fair trade and the culture and living conditions of the Guatemalan Maya. Most of these activities took place within the classrooms during school hours. This relationship has continued over several

years and this year, representatives of the cooperative will visit the students in Powell River.

A couple of years ago I accompanied a global education class from the Vancouver Island town of Comox to Guatemala. Included in the group were two students who had dropped out of high school the year before. They returned to school because they were excited about participating in the global education Guatemala project. Two years later, both students remain in school and continue to be active in educating their peers and parents about global issues.

Some believe that incorporating development education into the curricula of public schools denaturalizes it, forcing it to be as staid and sterile as the walls that surround it. But done creatively and effectively, dev ed can have just the opposite effect. Because global education is about the real world and about making it a better and safer place, its inclusion in the curricula of a wide range of subject areas can revitalize the classroom, making it an exciting and relevant place for students of all learning abilities and backgrounds.

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