

## **‘Being Here Now’ as a First-Year Student: Cultivating Global Citizenship and Mindfulness on the Move in a Co-Curricular Learning Adventure**

**Shelbee R. NguyenVoges and Linda M. Lyons**

*Dept. of First-Year and Transition Studies  
Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, USA  
[shelbee.voges@kennesaw.edu](mailto:shelbee.voges@kennesaw.edu) and [llyons5@kennesaw.edu](mailto:llyons5@kennesaw.edu)*

**[Abstract]** At a large, public Southeastern University, a co-curricular experiential learning initiative was implemented with the aim of cultivating global citizenship by using guided visits to various organizations in Washington, DC and reflecting about those experiences using journaling techniques. In this study, the researchers first examine 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and literature concerned with developing global citizenship, specifically mindfulness, via experiential educative cityscapes. Next, a discussion of this particular experiential learning adventure and the participants is offered, with an overview of data collection and analysis techniques. The researchers conclude by discussing how students in this particular learning-by-doing opportunity connected to the idea of mindfulness within the city context, mindfulness of their felt experience, and their development as global citizens.

**[Keywords]** First-year studies, first year experience, global citizenship, experiential learning, co-curricular learning, mindfulness

### **Introduction**

In the contemporary, increasingly complex, and globalized world, ability to understand the interconnectedness of political, social, cultural and economic contexts, has become one of many requisite competencies for first-year students. Ismail, Morgan, and Hayes (2006) illustrate that over half of the United States (US) population will be comprised of a more diverse and multicultural minority demographic by 2041. Students will be challenged by a dynamic social, political and economic landscape both domestically and internationally. As such, instructors in the first-year seminar (FYS) are tasked to facilitate educational experiences, fostering 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and understandings that encapsulate global citizenship, to prepare learners for the ever-evolving cosmopolitan world (Coker, Haskell, & Nelson, 2014).

The first-year seminar is a course designed to assist new college students in their transition into higher education and to provide experiential resources to assist them in achieving academic success. A new college student could be one that enters an institution of higher learning directly from high school, transfers to a school from another accredited institution, or, a returning student (e.g. a non-traditional student, where the learner is at least 25 years of age or older (Bell, 2003)). Experiential learning has long been the answer to engage a multitude of diverse student groups, not only in their immediate studies, but also in helping students to be prepared for life beyond college (Barber, 1992; Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Dewey (1938). Additionally, this process recognizes that learning by doing and reflection can serve to enhance the learner’s development and refinement of knowledge. This is particularly impactful when students can learn in the environment where that knowledge exists in its natural state – out in the real world (Zundel, 2012). Additionally, the American Association of Colleges and Universities recognizes High Impact Educational Practices that identifies specific teaching and learning methods that have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for first-year college students from diverse backgrounds (Kuh, 2008).

At a large, public Southeastern University, one such co-curricular experiential learning initiative was implemented with the aim of cultivating global citizenship by using guided visits to various organizations in Washington, DC and reflecting about those experiences. In this study, the researchers first examine 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and literature concerned with developing global citizenship, specifically mindfulness, via experiential educative cityscapes. Next, a discussion of this particular experiential learning adventure and

the participants is offered, with an overview of data collection and analysis techniques. The researchers conclude by discussing how students in this particular learning-by-doing opportunity connected to the idea of mindfulness within the city context, mindfulness of their felt experience, and their development as global citizens.

### Review of Literature

Coker, Haskell, and Nelson (2014) stress the critical importance of global citizenship as a foundation to the 21st century learners' undergraduate degree. However, young adults in the US have been critiqued heavily in the public sphere for limited knowledge about the global and interconnected world that they live in (National Geographic, 2006; Robelen, 2012). More importantly, it is difficult to challenge a first-year student entering higher education to think about how they might engage as a global citizen when less than half of high school students report that their grade 6-12 education did not facilitate learning about "roots of global issues" affecting their daily life (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012.) Today, globalization is referred to as "the new normal" leaving instructors the daunting task of remedying the gap in global competency early on in the college experience (Reade, Reckmeyer, Cabot, Jaehne, & Novak, 2013, p. 100).

#### *21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills & Global Citizenship*

Wagner (2008) further critiques the broader systemic educational landscape in the US, citing that many institutions do not place value in global citizenship or global competencies in the interconnected global environment as a critical 21<sup>st</sup> century skill. Furthermore, there is no consensus of how 21st century skills are defined. Consequently, a sharp focus has been placed on what and how development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and competencies can be fostered with first-year students where there appears to be much contention about how to define these skills and whether or not global citizenship should be included. While there is not an official and exhaustive categorization or definition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, The Glossary of Education Reform identifies a preliminary list including:

1. Critical thinking, problem solving, reasoning, analysis, interpretation and synthesizing
1. information
2. Global awareness, multicultural literacy and humanitarianism
3. Research skills and practices and interrogative questioning, creativity, artistry, curiosity, imagination, innovation and personal expression
4. Perseverance, self-direction, planning, self-discipline, adaptability and initiative
5. Oral and written communication, public speaking and presenting and listening
6. Leadership, teamwork, collaboration, cooperation and facility in using virtual workspaces
7. Information and communication technology (ITC) literacy, media and Internet literacy, data interpretation/analysis and computer programming
8. Civic, ethical and social-justice literacy
9. Economic and financial literacy and entrepreneurialism
10. Scientific literacy and reasoning and the scientific method
11. Environmental and conservation literacy and ecosystems understanding
12. Health and wellness literacy, including nutrition, diet, exercise and public health and safety

Other organizations like the not-for-profit Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning (P21) broadly summarizes that today's 21<sup>st</sup> century education should address the increasing global demand for students, future employees, and citizens to thrive in a "hyperconnected, diverse, and complex world" (Soulé & Warrick, 2015, p.178). Furthermore, critical thinking, problem solving, group communication/collaboration, and digital/technology literacy within multicultural contexts become imperative for mere survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Soulé & Warrick, 2015). Practitioners and scholars alike intimate that while many of these skills are not necessarily novel to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they have increasingly more relevance

and importance given the fact that it is nearly impossible to be successful when there is an absence of these skill sets (Soulé & Warrick, 2015; Wagner, 2008). Less contested is the importance of critical thinking and global awareness as prerequisites to global citizenship (ChenyuWang & Hoffman, 2016; Sharma et al., 2011). Stated more simply, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are nothing new and have long been valued, however, the dynamic context of the global environment for applying this learning is transforming and generating an increasing mandate. Ultimately, there is consensus among professionals in higher education, that a basic understanding of the interconnected global environment is imperative for any student beginning first with critical thinking and reflection about one's own cultural understandings (Bennett, 1986, ChenyuWang & Hoffman, 2016; Sharma et al., 2011).

Advocacy for global citizenship across higher education is another source of elusiveness and can be difficult to exhaustively define when it comes to the requisite competencies. Reade, Reckmeyer, Cabot, Jaehne, & Novak (2013) explain “globally competent citizens possess the essential knowledge, skills, tools, attitudes and values that enable them to be *informed* about critical global factors and *engaged* in building a better world, regardless of where they live or what they do” (p. 102). While there is certainly ample debate and discussion about what characterizes a global citizen, most scholars agree that the stepping stones leading to competency in this arena start with awareness, and developing mindfulness about one's self as well as the world around them (Cabot et al., 2013; Cabrera & Unruh, 2012; ChenyuWang & Hoffman, 2016; Sharma et al., 2011; Soulé & Warrick, 2015). In summary, if the aim is to have students understand the interconnected and interdependent global world, they must first employ critical thinking about their own identity and notions of citizenship in general.

### ***First-Year Seminars and the Warrant for Experiential Global Learning***

In recent years, much attention is focused on strategies that promote 21<sup>st</sup> century skills like global citizenship, beginning first with critical thinking, cultural awareness, and mindfulness, especially within the context of a first-year seminar (FYS). Institutions of higher education across the United States utilize FYS's, or “small discussion courses that focus on teaching basic study skills, academic planning, and time-management” along with several of the other aforementioned 21st century skills like critical thinking, problem solving, group communication/collaboration, and digital/technology literacy (Clark & Cundiff, 2011, p. 618). First-year seminars are characteristic of nearly 90% of higher education institutions and serve as one strategy to increase retention, progression and graduation (RPG) by addressing academic and social concerns early in the students' college life (Clark & Cundiff, 2011).

However, not all FYSs introduce or incorporate globally themed course content, and in fact, global studies are generally missing from common core/general education requirements (Coker et al., 2014). Granholm explains in the *National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good Report*, “university courses that focus on interdisciplinary global interrelationships and global interdependence, the kinds of education we require in the twenty first century, are simply not being taught” (National Forum, p. 168).

Additionally, it is not enough to simply inform students about global concepts if they are to *use* this knowledge in making the world a better place. Coker et al. (2014) extend these notions and explain that integrating course content and knowledge about globalization into practice and action is key. The equally and critically important task to make learning active, focusing on the process of how these concepts manifest in their lived experiences is challenging from design to assessment. Because traditional methods of testing and examination do not adequately gauge application and do not naturally lend to the evaluation of higher ordered thinking, developing and then measuring these experiences can be another avenue of contention. Using the conceptual framework of first-year learning and experiential education to underpin this study, the researchers investigate how students make meaning about themselves and course themes in a weeklong learning-by-doing adventure.

### **Methodology**

Kennesaw State University, a large Southeastern public institution, employs a flexible and student-centered

approach to the FYS. While the course is not required for students with more than 15 credit hours, a globally themed option for a FYS entitled *KSU1111: Tomorrow's World Today* aims to promote the development of globally competent citizens. By facilitating learning grounded in imperative knowledge, skills, and attitudes, this specific course focuses on major challenges that are impacting an ever-changing globalized society. Learning outcomes stated that by the completion of the course students will be able to:

1. Describe various global, political, social, and behavioral systems, and the underlying causes of issues related to these systems;
2. Apply global perspectives when examining the critical issues currently facing our world and identify alternative solutions and opportunities associated with these issues;
3. Demonstrate the interconnectedness and interdependence of the seven global challenges and world events, and the relevance of the revolutions to local, state, and national communities; and,
4. Articulate personal skills in research, critical thinking, communications, and leadership.

Among other course learning objectives that include:

5. **Life Skills:** Students will acquire knowledge of the life skills necessary to succeed in college and their post graduate life. As a result of this, students will be able to: develop personal goals, apply time management strategies, and communicate in a group setting.
6. **Strategies for Academic Success:** Students will demonstrate academic success strategies by: implementing critical thinking skills, applying research and library skills, creating a presentation, and recognizing and applying appropriate academic writing and technical skills.
7. **Campus and Community Connections:** Students will be able to explain and demonstrate an appreciation for the importance of campus and community connections by describing various academic services, campus resources, and policies; and discussing the importance of civic engagement.

### ***Participants and Background***

To further make 21<sup>st</sup> century learning active and contemplative with critical thinking and mindfulness at the forefront, students from *KSU: 1111 Tomorrows World Today* classes competed in an essay competition where ten were selected as a Global Engagement Scholar (GES). The GES program is a unique learning initiative that allows first-year students an opportunity to receive an all-expenses paid trip to Washington DC, which involved meeting with officials from the Department of Defense, the Department of State, U.S. Congress, and other governmental and nongovernmental institutions. This week-long experiential excursion reinforced the global learning shared in the students' first-year seminar and is an extension of course discussions about how defense, diplomacy and civil society shape the US, the world, and our daily lives.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Students took part in journaling their experiences about each of the site visits and reflected on their own identity throughout the course of the weeklong trip. Students were given the same open-ended prompt for each day and for each organization they would be visiting. Additionally, students are afforded the opportunity to develop their reflection and elaborate on their experiences verbally with the researchers through debrief sessions at the end of each day during the course of the trip. Responses included data from the last four years of the GES trip to DC. Questions gauged:

1. How did being selected (as a GES participant) impact you directly? Impact you as a student? Impact how you think about your own abilities?
2. How did the GES experience connect to some of your learning about academic skills in *KSU: 1111 Tomorrows World Today*?
3. How did the GES experience connect to some of your learning about global issues in *KSU: 1111 Tomorrows World Today*?
4. How did the instructors who facilitated the GES to Washington D.C. (DC), engage you as a partner in your learning?
5. How did the GES experience and the instructors encourage your learning?
6. What sort of new thinking, or major transformations, arose while you were in DC as a GES? (new perceptions?; new insights?)
7. In what ways, if any, did the GES experience shape your academic and/or professional path?
8. What is something that you will always remember about the GES experience?
9. What was your most memorable educational moment from the GES experience and why is this information that resonates with you?

Field notes, observations, journals and follow up responses were transcribed and comprised 24 single-spaced pages of data for analysis. Individual transcripts were coded and analyzed for common themes using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A coding template was implemented in order to facilitate the constant comparative technique “to group answers...to the common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues” (Patton, 1990, p. 376). Cross-case analysis methods were utilized systematically to take an individual participant response and compare it to other participants’ responses in an effort to identify spaces of convergence and divergence across the data set (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### Findings and Discussion

The researchers and facilitators of the globally themed FYS and domestic experiential learning opportunity respond, in part, to the idea that it is not enough to simply inform students about global concepts if they are to *use* this knowledge in making the world a better place. At the forefront of thinking, are ways we can encourage both mindfulness and cultural awareness as a precursor and complement to learning about global, political, social, and behavioral systems, and the underlying causes of issues related to these systems. The ten students who participated in reflective journaling over their experiences in Washington D.C. report a variety of new knowledge gained that contribute to their understanding of global citizenship and competency as a 21<sup>st</sup> century learner. Findings below demonstrate how students cultivate an attitude of mindfulness, or ‘being here now’ in two different ways: 1. Connecting to city life and 2. Seeing and believing.

#### *Be here now– Connections to City Life*

One byproduct of the technological and interconnected world that students are living and learning in is the constancy of being ‘plugged in.’ Competencies in computing and digital literacy are an obvious given for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, but what about balance and unplugging? One of the most pervasive findings across the data set (recurring in 33 different responses) connected to the idea of “living the experience” of DC life and culture. One student illustrated “it was empowering to be in the moment, seeing and being in conversations real time.” As a matter of homeland security, students were not allowed to take in any technology or cell phone devices at the Pentagon, State Department or Congress, so it became a general practice to leave technology behind and bring only reflection journals. One student commented, “it was kind of cool to just be riding Metro—DC’s subway system—and be just overall connected to city life.” Upon elaboration this student commented that city life “had a different feeling” than the more suburban life students are accustomed to in Kennesaw and/or in other suburbs of Georgia. Discussions about geography and characteristics of urban versus rural environments revealed deep thinking about how context shapes the people and culture within it. One participant observed “its faster here, than at home [rural Georgia], and I

think that impacts how people connect with each other in it.”

Life in DC receives much attention as a tourist destination and as the political epicenter of the US – a “higher profile” than life in suburban Georgia. Our nation’s capital serves as the setting to legislation that governs how we live and interact within a global context. One participant elaborates on this position intimating “this was the life I wanted (living in DC), I want to wake up every day, put on beautiful clothes and work in an important job.” Another participant shared “...and I surprisingly loved the Metro, led me to believe the city is right where I belong.” Students were able to connect to parts of their identity as “suburbanites” that they may not have been fully aware of before their contrasting urban adventure.

Zundel (2012) offers commentary on the notions that support experiential learning suggesting that the physical act of walking and existing within a cityscape creates ways to rethink our associations with space. Further, Zundel (2012) indicates that because physical movement within a cityscape involves experiencing the world ‘not only through the rarefied features of our intellect, but through our whole body which is not so much a way of believing about the world, but a condition of being in it’ (p. 119). In short, physical proximity can make all the difference. For participants in this study, reflecting on attitudes about living and connecting with other citizens within an urban environment uncovered new insights about how their own life might be shaped by the city. The findings are significant and are evident of the impact of the experience and course.

### ***Be here now – Seeing is Believing***

Other examples of participants’ mindfulness to their physical environment included testimony from one student who shared “physically seeing them [Supreme Court Justices] and hearing them in court really made my knowledge of being here a reality.” The participant here touches on the idea that seeing was believing and elaborated that the “decorum” of the Supreme Court was something quite palpable needing to be experienced in real time and in real life. Other respondents noted “The two congressmen we met were very interesting to see in person; compared to hearing about them in the news or on the radio.” While many of the participants had seen and heard of these governmental representatives from news media and their coursework, the actual interaction was impactful on how they made meaning of their experiences. A student echoes these remarks and shared “it all just so unreal, I was actually in the room that was pictured in my AP government textbook with Sonia Sotomayor and Ruth Ginsburg in front of me.”

In addition to connecting real time with course content about the interconnectedness of political, social, cultural and economic current events and cases, students were able to also align course content to their awareness to personal thoughts, feelings and emotions. Another participant shared their excitement and commented “I can’t believe that I sat in the highest court in the land; in the same room with THE Ruth Ginsburg.” When students were asked to reflect about what stood out as the most powerful supporter of their learning, they were quick to credit the examples above around physical presence. Participants seem to engage in an ongoing contemplative practice or “mindfulness,...often used to describe contemplative practice in its most basic form, it means moment-by-moment present awareness, which is available to everyone, regardless of religious or spiritual orientation” (Haynes, Irvine, & Bridges, 2014). In many ways, news media and courses that are focused around understandings about a variety of critical global issues served as a primer and created a valuable comparison for students’ focusing efforts, a process that Gendlin (2014) refers to as the practice of being mindful to our felt experience. In this case, participants experiences outside the classroom in the context of a global city like Washington, DC was a critical strategy to promote deeper thinking and bring awareness to feelings and experiences in a way that students could connect to personally. Amodeo (2015) notes:

“weaving together focusing with mindfulness positions us to be-here-now in a way that makes room for our human experience...we develop a friendly relationship with our feelings without clinging to them or being overwhelmed by them” (p. 1).

Students were encouraged to think deeply about the application of course concepts, but also in how the idea of mindfulness manifests in their daily lives and habits. This becomes exceptionally useful for first-

year students as they navigate new terrain, new identities and new responsibilities in their transition into higher education.

### Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Globally competent citizens, or global citizenship in general, speaks to core understandings, skills, resources, attitudes and beliefs which arm 21<sup>st</sup> century learners with information about critical global issues so that they can build a better world (Reade et al., 2013) This is no doubt a tall order for students first entering into higher education, who we know may come with limited understandings about their global world. Across participant responses, there are ample evidence that students are able to connect to new knowledge, skills and attitudes understood from course concepts, but what do we really know about the prerequisite competencies, and their initial frame of mind in the outset? How can we foster critical thinking about the self in an effort to facilitate critical thinking about the world?

Sharma et al. (2011) touch on one systematic process of critical thinking and reflection about awareness and mindfulness whereby “awareness of the self... calling into question one’s prior knowledge or taken-for-granted frames of reference... beliefs, assumptions, values, and cultural norms of thinking and acting” (p. 11). Here, researchers emphasize intentionality and the method by which an individual can actively and conscientiously critically reflect on experience to promote global citizenship. While many subscribe to the effectiveness of the process, it can manifest across learners individually, with varying degrees of depth.

Incidentally, students engage in the practice of contemplation and mindfulness in the classroom—interrogating their thoughts and feelings about a variety of interactions in the city of Washington DC. The simple practice of navigating both experiences and their corresponding emotions is of the utmost value in a transitional time of a college student’s life. College can be a rite of passage for some, but it can be daunting and transformative (Mezirow, 1978) all at the same time as well. Demographics will continue to change in the United States, the need for a deeper knowledge and comprehension of one’s own culture as well as other cultures persists (Deardorff, 2011). Facilitating the practice of mindfulness has far reaching and innumerable benefits for first-year students long beyond the first semesters of college. Students who find themselves experiencing a flood of overwhelming stress and emotion, while simultaneously charged with the additional task of self-questioning about how to make the world better place find both value and solace in the practice of mindfulness as a 21<sup>st</sup> century skill.

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