

# Inviting Global Perspectives into the Classroom

by Alan November of November Learning | [NovemberLearning.com](http://NovemberLearning.com)

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As our schools and universities prepare students to make a contribution to the world, it is important to benchmark the emerging critical skills they will need to solve increasingly complex problems. As we accelerate the speed of moving data and communications around the world, one strategic skill emerges that we traditionally have not taught: global empathy.

My own introduction to how valued this skill is came from an interview I had with the CEO of one of the largest banks in the world. He did not hesitate when I asked him, “Which skill is the most important one where you see a shortage in the workforce?” His answer: global empathy. He went on to explain why. “Global empathy,” he said, “is the ability to understand and respect different points of view. We invest in complicated projects across the globe. The shortage we see is hiring people who understand how to value the various points of view on a team who are digitally connected from all over the world. We can have engineers, bankers, architects, researchers, designers, marketing people, and more—all working on the same project who live and operate from dozens of countries.”

The executive continued: “It’s not hard to find employees who have high test scores. What *is* hard to find are employees who can effectively contribute to teamwork and be sensitive to the needs of people from other cultures, religions, and regions, who might have very different perspectives from their own.”

The boundaries of relationships prescribed by our traditional classrooms typically limit students to conversations with peers sitting next to them. In many classrooms, this means that when we assign work that challenges students to understand geographically diverse topics, or different points of view on a local topic, there is a complete lack of authentic global empathy. If the global banker is correct, we must tap our investment in Internet connections to our classrooms and provide our students with meaningful experiences to develop a sense of working with the world. It is no longer sufficient to earn high test scores without global empathy.

Fortunately, technology makes it extremely easy for today’s students to become globally aware. From web and video conferencing platforms, to social media channels and collaborative software (like Cisco Spark and WebEx), educators now have incredibly powerful tools to connect their students instantly with classrooms and subject-matter experts from around the world—a development that has profound implications for education.

My consulting work takes me to schools all over the world, and I regret to say that many educators I’ve met still are not taking full advantage of this ability. Some teachers might believe there is not enough time in the school day for them to get through everything they have to cover in the curriculum, while also connecting their

students with others around the globe; others might fear the loss of control that comes with opening their classrooms to the world at large.

What if you could cover the curriculum and leverage authentic global connections to motivate students to work harder on required content *and* develop global empathy? The teachers I have met whose students are globally connected have witnessed a dramatic increase in student engagement. Globally connected classrooms do not have to give up focus on basic skills such as reading and writing in elementary school or subject content in secondary school. Not only are their students learning essential skills that will prepare them for success in work and life, but these students are more fully engaged in their learning. They're also gaining rich experiences that will stay with them long after they have handed in their final exam.

Here are some of the key aspects of global empathy:

- *Listening.* This is such a vital skill. By actively listening, students are showing that they value the ideas of others.
- *Balancing different points of view.* This requires careful and critical thinking. Students should be able to identify biases, assumptions, and whether some arguments are more valid than others.
- *Developing lines of inquiry.* Learning how to ask good questions helps deepen students' understanding. Effective questions give students further insight into how their peers see the world—and why.
- *Publishing reflections for authentic feedback.* Students should be given the time to reflect on what they have learned from others, and how this has affected their own way of thinking. By sharing these thoughts online, students can get real, authentic feedback from their peers and others around the world—which is much more meaningful than just getting a grade from their teacher.

### **Understanding Different Points of View**

*Bergen, Norway:* Terje Pedersen's students have authentic conversations across the curriculum from North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. His students have come to expect and value that they will be challenged to think, reflect, and reconcile various points of view.

Terje teaches English and social studies to what would be the equivalent of high school freshmen in Bergen, Norway. He taps various social networks to challenge his students to learn more deeply about topics in the curriculum. His global network includes teachers from around the world who are willing to open their classrooms to his students, a policeman in Chicago, a state senator from Brooklyn, New York, grandparents in Russia, survivors of Apartheid in South Africa, a teen behind bars in the U.S., and students in Australia who are studying Aborigine culture.

"Students *need* to connect with others around the world," he said. "We need to be giving them the tools to understand different points of view. Plus, they love to debate their peers."

Making these global connections not only builds empathy among his students; it also helps them understand there are multiple perspectives about the issues they are learning. When his students are studying the Cold War, for instance, Terje has them connect with students in Russia to hear Russian points of view about defining

events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. Each class shared their interviews with their grandparents about how they felt growing up during the Cold War. This personal connection to a historic event gave his students a much deeper sense of what that period meant to people on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Differing facts about what happened and *how* it happened led his students to learn to think critically, ask probing questions, and challenge their assumptions—all while taking their learning deeper.

“We spend very little time memorizing dates,” Terje said about his classroom. “We need to be going more in-depth. I’m not going to give my students an assignment where they can just copy an answer from Wikipedia or a textbook.”

In talking with their peers from around the world, Terje’s students are learning how to be culturally sensitive, and they’re developing important communication skills. In one project, his students connected with an American teen serving time in a juvenile prison. The American’s story moved them deeply, and around Christmas they sent him letters to cheer him up.

Making global connections is a much more motivating way for students to learn than reading from a textbook, Terje said—and his students agree. “This makes school more motivating” one girl told me. “We look forward to talking to other people. We get to learn in more ways than just reading information.”

### **Not Just for Older Students**

Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan Connecting with others around the world isn’t just an effective learning strategy for older students. Canadian teacher Kathy Cassidy has her first graders in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, connect with students worldwide.

“We follow other classrooms because it’s a way for kids to improve their reading and writing,” Kathy said. She noted that her students are far more engaged when they are reading something that was written specifically for them by children their own age from around the world. They are also naturally curious to learn more about their new global friends: where the students live, what their school is like, and what they like to do. As Kathy’s students are practicing their reading skills, they’re also learning geography, how to ask questions, and how to be globally aware.

One day, her students came to school worried. They had heard there was a flood in Brisbane, Australia, which was where one of the classes they had met on Twitter was located. Kathy contacted her colleague in Australia, who assured them the students were safe—and she sent pictures, maps, and videos of the flooding.

“My kids were fascinated that there were sharks in the water,” Kathy said, noting that Moose Jaw is far from any ocean. “It was such a learning experience for them. And it all started because my kids thought the same way about these students in Brisbane as they do about the kids next door. They were able to empathize with someone far away because of this connection.”

If Kathy didn’t have her global connections, she said she would lose opportunities for what she calls “serendipitous learning.” For instance, her students saw a tweet from a class in British Columbia referring to “samn eggs.” “What are those?” they wondered. In tweeting back and forth, they learned the B.C. students were

referring to salmon eggs. Kathy's students knew what salmon were, but they hadn't realized that fish start out as eggs. That triggered a discussion about which types of animals come from eggs and which give birth to their young.

Often, Kathy and her students will see ideas from different classrooms for projects they'd like to try themselves. "We saw kids who were doing these Lego challenges, like: Can you make something out of Legos that floats?" she explained. "My kids were thrilled by this. They tried it themselves, and that led to conversations about why some designs float when others don't. Ordinarily, we would not cover buoyancy. Our connections are leading us to expand our wonderment of the world."

Because her students are young, she takes precautions in how they use social media. For instance, they aren't allowed to tweet a message themselves without showing her first—and she previews the account to make sure new posts are appropriate. "If someone tweeted something inappropriate to us, I would see that first, and I would block that user," she noted. "But since I've been using Twitter in my classroom, I've never had that happen."

Besides following other classes on Twitter, her students connect with "reading buddies" from around the world through real-time video to practice shared reading, and they also maintain digital portfolios of their work. These first graders from remote Moose Jaw are learning how to have a global voice early on in their lives, which is empowering them to become lifelong global learners.

"One day, one of my students was reading a book he had written about snowmen," Kathy relayed. "When he asked his reading buddy in Brisbane if she had any questions, the Australian girl asked, 'Why aren't there any snow women in your story?' Of course, none of our students in Moose Jaw would ask that question. These relationships provide our students with the opportunity to reflect on their work in new ways and from different perspectives. That's priceless."

She added: "With the internet, we can *do* anything and *be* anything. Our students have wonderful imaginations. We need to nurture this natural curiosity in a safe globally connected way. We live on the prairie. What used to be a relatively limited set of conversations with children in the neighborhood is now global."

## Overcoming Objections

Both Terje and Kathy recommend tapping social networks to connect to authentic global relationships. Kathy happens to use Twitter to connect to other first-grade classrooms around the world. Terje uses Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter to meet his contacts.

A common concern among many teachers is that they don't have the time to make global connections in their classrooms, because they're too busy covering the required curriculum. But everything that Terje and Kathy do online is related to their curriculum goals.

"All of what we do is curriculum-based," Kathy said. "It's just a different way of doing it. Instead of reading on chart paper, we read on Twitter. I'm modeling reading and writing for my students in a digital way instead, and

I'm getting all of these side benefits as well: teaching them to be good digital citizens, teaching them geography skills, and teaching them to have empathy for others around the world."

Making global connections also requires teachers to let go of some degree of control. When Terje had his students connect with an incarcerated American teen, he had no idea where the conversation would lead. But Terje said it's well worth the risk—and his students agree as well.

I had the privilege of talking with three of Terje's students about how they have benefitted from the global connections they have made, and they were remarkably self-aware of their own learning.

"You learn that there are different opinions than what you might find online," one boy said, adding that teachers shouldn't be afraid of trying something new. While making global connections requires more work on the front end—teachers have to find classes to connect with, and students have to prepare questions they will ask—this extra work definitely pays off.

"I remember more from these conversations," another boy said. The lessons he has learned from making global connections are "something you will carry with you for the rest of your life."

### **Action Steps:**

If you're ready to inspire global connectedness in your classroom, here are three simple ways to start:

1. Search in Google for "twitter second grade" and you can begin to search for partner teachers by grade. When you find a twitter account you want to follow then click on the number they are following to continue to build your global network.
2. Use <https://www.epals.com/#/connections> to use their membership database to contact teachers by country around the world.
3. Head to <http://www.globalschoolnet.org/> to search for scheduled projects designed by educators around the world.

Have you had a fantastic experience connecting your students to peers globally? Tell us more in the comments below.