NAMING THE WORLD: COMING TO TERMS WITH COMPLEXITY

Helen Young

Introduction

First world, third world; developed world, developing world; global North, global South; minority world, majority world. This terminology is constantly being debated and changed for various reasons, such as geographical inaccuracy and a questioning of the primacy that 'first world' implies. However, all these terms share an assumption that the world can be, or is, divided in two, which makes them problematic in any form. This article sets out why the two-worlds concept is not a useful way of understanding the world and argues that terminology which implies that the world can be clearly divided hinders global learning. It proposes that those working in global learning need to allow learners to develop a one-world concept which values all people and recognises inequality and injustice wherever it is found.

This discussion around the specific case of the two-worlds concept is also meant to highlight why it is essential that learners recognise the socially constructed nature of all conceptual frameworks, appreciating that they are frequently dependent on contexts and agendas. It is necessary to be open to using a variety of frameworks to understand issues from a range of perspectives.

The limitations of the two-worlds concept

Perhaps the most obvious problem with the two-worlds concept occurs at the country level. There are an increasing number of countries which are hard to fit into either category. In the 1970s, the separation of countries into one category or another was still questionable but more clear: there were a group of countries which were mostly high on a range of indicators from wealth to life expectancy, and a group of countries which were mostly low on the same range of indicators. This is no longer the case, as there are an increasing number of countries which fall along the middle range on scales of these indicators, or rank highly on some and lower on others. For example, where should we place countries such as Bahrain, Brazil or Belarus? In a few years, China is likely to have the highest gross national product (GNP) globally but maintain a low per

capita GNP (Jacques, 2009); i.e. it will be a very rich country with a lot of poor people, a reality with which the two-worlds concept struggles.

One of the reasons for the persistence of the two-worlds concept is that a number of global learning organisations are funded by Ministries of International Development such as the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID). These organisations often adopt the model of their funder which divides the world into the donors and the recipients (even though a number of countries are actually both). Hence organisations such as DfID support activities such as 'North-South linking' that perpetuate the use of terminology promoting the two-worlds concept.

Tinker (2007) explains why he finds the North-South paradigm dangerous for international development, an explanation which is also useful for educators. He draws attention to the power of transnational corporations and financial bodies (another obvious addition would be international non-governmental organisations), the mass migration of people around the world, and the wealth of elites in countries where some of the poorest people in the world live. These are tangible reasons why the paradigm is not working but he also adds an important point relevant to learners' identities and world views:

> "For the North, the North-South mentality is too often mere patronage, a 20th century version of noblesse oblige, a duty towards the less fortunate. Not wholly unworthy motives, but ones that are uncomfortably rooted in an illusion of superiority" (Tinker, 2007).

This is a major issue which is tackled elsewhere (Andreotti, 2007) but which needs consideration by educationalists to avoid approaches which lead to that illusion of superiority. For example, thinking about whether (or how) fundraising for people in other countries is done in educational contexts can be a useful starting point for considering how to avoid such an illusion.

Concepts which are useful in understanding history are not necessarily useful in working towards a better future. We certainly need to understand the past, including the horrors of the racial hierarchies constructed to justify slavery and colonialism, in order to understand modern day racism and globalisation. Exploring the two-worlds concept is critically important, therefore, for historical understanding. However, we need to develop forward-looking ways of seeing the world in order to change it.

The needs of learners

Paulo Freire's work has provided an invaluable foundation for development education and global learning. He wrote at length about 'naming the world' (taken literally in the title of this article). He emphasised that the way we understand the world affects the way we change it, stating that, in problem-posing education, learners:

> "...develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 1996:64).

However, the oppressed/oppressor dichotomy which forms a foundation of Freire's work, and which was arguably appropriate to the socio-economic context in which he was working, has been extrapolated to the global scale in learning based around the two-worlds concept. Young people need opportunities to develop a more complex understanding of globalisation and of global power relations than that provided by the two-worlds concept.

From a teaching point of view, using a two-worlds concept as a basis has a tendency to lead to a focus on difference between 'us' and 'them'. Making lists of opposites is always an easy teaching technique. However, using a two-worlds lens can lead to activities such as '*we* live like this so how do you think *they* live?' with the assumption being that it will be the opposite. It tends to lead to an idea of a homogenous and exotic other. Education needs to move beyond focusing on difference between 'two worlds' and recognise diversity within countries and similarities between people from a range of countries.

A key element of global learning is recognising similarities between people in different countries and making the connections between the local, the national and the global. The two-worlds concept with its broad generalisations can exclude and devalue the experiences of people who suffer poverty and oppression in countries where this is not part of the generalised expectation. Learners need to understand the complex nature of power and consider the similarities and differences between different forms of oppression and the interrelationships between them.

Recognising diversity within countries (including their own) is as important as recognising diversity between them and in many countries this is increasing along a range of indicators (Rosling, 2009). It is very valuable to learn about stories of individuals and groups in distant localities but there always needs to be consideration by educators and learners about which aspects can be generalised from these stories (maybe insights about power, for example, rather than assumptions about lifestyles).

Global learning has always had as a central element the challenging of stereotypes. However, there is a danger that the two-worlds concept exacerbates the issues around representation. If young people are learning about the lives of students in a particular school in a particular place in Ghana, it is important that they recognise that the experiences of these young people are not representative of the whole of Ghana or of the whole of Africa. When learners are presented with the two-worlds concept, they are in danger of going even further and thinking that the particular experience of these young people is representative of the whole of the 'global South'.

We all need our stereotypes challenged and education certainly has an important role in presenting a range of images, including more positive images, of people and places that are negatively represented by the wider media. However, education can do much more than this. We need to build on learners' experience of having specific stereotypes challenged to develop their meta-understanding of stereotypes, not just the challenging of specific stereotypes. The two-worlds concept, by introducing an extreme generalisation, is not helping to address this. Learners need to understand how psychology and social structures lead to the development and acceptance of stereotypes in the first place, and how easily these can escalate into prejudice and discrimination. They need to recognise that we all use stereotyping as cognitive shortcuts to make sense of the world, but that cognitive shortcuts are an inadequate basis for greater understanding and for appropriate responses. Opportunities to discuss issues around the idea of representation, for example in what way one person can represent a group of people, need to be provided. Both educators and learners need to appreciate the relationship between individuals' constructions of their own identities and their constructions of 'the other'. They need to consider what social norms and constructions of difference existed in extreme situations such as Nazi Germany or Rwanda that allowed people to carry out evil acts (for further discussion of these issues, see Stainton Rogers, 2003).

Conclusion

We will always need conceptual frameworks to describe the world, but when they no longer serve useful purposes, we need the flexibility to use others while always recognising that they are merely maps, not the actual territory. Learners need to fully understand Freire's (1996) key message in recognising the distinction between nature and culture and recognising that the conceptual frameworks we use are not 'natural', they are constructions which can help us to understand the world and which will always have limitations.

This article has argued that the two-worlds concept is doing more harm than good in helping us to understand the world and to change it for the better. To live in an interdependent world, which is unequal in numerous, overlapping and cross-cutting ways, we need a one-world concept which values all people as equals and explores the root causes of poverty and oppression wherever they are found.

References

Andreotti, V (2007) 'The contributions of postcolonial theory to development education' in *DEA Thinkpieces*: http://www.dea.org.uk/getinvolved/thinkpieces.asp.

Freire, P (1996) (first published 1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Penguin, London.

Jacques, M (2009) *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World,* Penguin, London.

Rosling, H (2009) 'Gapminder': http://www.gapminder.org.

Stainton Rogers, W (2003) *Social Psychology: Experimental and Critical Approaches,* Open University Press, Maiddenhead.

Tinker, J (2007) 'The Drum Beat 401 - Should We Dump the North-South Lens?' in *The Communication Initiative Network*: http://www.comminit.com/drum_beat_401.html.

Helen Young is a doctoral student at the Institute of Education, London. She was formerly Policy and Research Manager at the Development Education Association.