Global Citizenship as a Floating Signifier

Lessons from UK universities

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Abstract
In a world where people interact across countries, citizens need to find their role in the global community; therefore, global citizenship (GC) has become an influential theme in higher education. Due to its various interpretations and modes of action, in this paper GC is addressed as a floating signifier. Our main data comes from interviews with ten academics from five UK universities that host internationalization programmes. The respondents were asked about the signified (in the Saussurian sense) that they attribute to GC, what skills are necessary to be a global citizen, and how the sciences contribute to the articulation of GC. Although showing different approaches to GC, academics agreed that the university is its main discursive context and that projects and programmes must involve all sciences in interdisciplinary relations.

Keywords: global citizenship, floating signifier, higher education, internationalization

Introduction

Global citizenship (GC), here viewed as a floating signifier (Laclau, 2007, 2013 (pers. comm.)), is becoming an increasingly influential theme within higher education in many parts of the world. Universities in North America, Europe, and the Pacific region refer to equipping their graduates to be global citizens. Whilst initially constructed from a Western perspective, GC has been discussed in recent times in relation to debates on post-colonialism (Andreotti, 2011), dominant and excluded knowledge (Santos, 2007), cosmopolitanism (Osler and Starkey, 2008), diversity, human rights, social justice and interdependence (Bourn and Hunt, 2011; Carter, 2001; Osler and Starkey, 2005), professional development and internationalism

(Bourn and Neal, 2008; Willott *et al.*, 2012; Blum and Bourn, 2013; Bourn and Hunt, 2011), and sustainability and systemic thinking (Bourn and Morgan, 2010; Meadows, 1991; Stone and Barlow, 2005).

In the Federal University of Ceará, Brazil, the discussion on GC emerged from thematic projects that student teachers developed during the years 2009–2012. Themes such as renewable energy, Amazonia, global warming, consumerism, evolution, hunger around the world, and pollution were treated from an interdisciplinary and transversal perspective, as determined by the National Curricular Parameters.[1] These topics assumed an even broader dimension when they were used to examine Brazilian and other countries' scenarios.

Despite such growing interest, however, there is as yet no consensus on how GC should be officially approached by the curricula of public universities in Brazil. Questions such as which of the myriad interpretations related to GC are actually relevant for Brazilian society, or which modes of action may maximize the interchange of knowledge between teachers and students, still have no answer. This motivated the project 'Global citizenship as an inter/transdisciplinary theme in the curriculum of Brazilian institutions of higher education', which underlies this research. It also determined the conceptualization of GC as a floating signifier (Laclau, 2007, 2013 (pers. comm.)). Floating signifiers are articulated in a variety of concrete projects according to the discursive contexts in which they are inserted, a feature that opens up many possibilities for their use as instruments of analysis in social research.

To broaden Brazil's perspective on the topic of GC, part of the project involved studying how other countries deal with this issue in their university curricula. The United Kingdom (UK) was chosen for two main reasons: its long tradition of scientific institutions, and the adoption of 'Global Dimension' – including GC, among other issues such as health, human rights, conflict resolution, values and perceptions, diversity, social justice, and interdependence – as a curricular theme in British schools and universities. Our aim was to understand the views and modes of action of academics from five UK universities that host internationalization programmes, namely the University of London, University College London, Bournemouth University, the University of Oxford, and the University of Edinburgh. The main results of this research are summarized in this article.

A signifier that floats from one project to another

The conceptualization of the signifier starts in linguistics, with Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure (1979) defined a linguistic sign as composed of a *signifiant* – the form of the sign – and a *signifié* – the concept that it represents. The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier to the signified, i.e. a recognizable combination of a signifier with a special meaning. For Saussure, signs are not endowed with a

'vital' or intrinsic nature: on the contrary, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. Moreover, signs refer mostly to one another. No sign makes sense on its own, but only in relation to other signs.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968) exemplifies the floating signifier with the notion of *mana*, something so general that is the most diverse of signifiers: the substance of which magic, mythic, and aesthetic invention is formed, 'a sort of fourth dimension of spirit, a plan in which the notions of "unconscious category" and "category of collective thought' become confused' (p.27). For Chandler a floating signifier is:

> *… a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or nonexistent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even any signified; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean.*
>
> (Chandler, 2013: 52)

Lacan (in Chandler, 2013) praised the character Humpty Dumpty as the master of meaning for his statement 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean.' Since no sign makes sense on its own, and does so only in relation to other signs, we are doomed to assume such an authoritarian attitude.

Stuart Hall made a contribution to the discussion of the floating signifier in a lecture 'Race: The floating signifier', given at Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 1997. In our culture, he says, there is an urge to classify humans into different types according to their physical or intellectual characteristics. In a way, this is a positive cultural impulse, because we now understand the importance of all forms of classification to meanings:

> *What is important for us is when the systems of classification become the objects of the disposition of power. That is to say, when the marking of difference and similarity across a human population becomes a reason why this group is to be treated in that way and get those advantages, and that group should be treated in another.*
>
> (Hall, 1997: 2)

Once you are classified, a whole range of other things falls into place. Racism as a philosophy holds that there is a natural connection between the appearance (differences of colour, hair, and bones) and what people think and do, how smart they are, whether they are good athletes, good dancers, or even 'civilized'. Racists believe that these features are the result not of the environment but of our genetics. However, all attempts to substantiate the concept of race scientifically, in biological or genetic terms, have proven unsustainable.

In this analysis I use the concept of floating signifier proposed by Ernesto Laclau, professor of political theory at the University of Essex, in England, where he founded and directed for many years the graduate programme in ideology and discourse analysis and the Centre for Theoretical Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. For Laclau (2007) there are two types of signifiers: empty, and floating. In order to understand one, you have to know the other. An empty signifier is one that tries to sever its relationship with any meaning in order to represent a heterogeneous field. Its universality requires it to renounce a precise content. 'Demand will have to be emptied of its relationship with specific meanings and is transformed into a pure signifier ... a signifier that loses its direct reference to a particular meaning' (Laclau, 2007: 25). A floating signifier is one that can link up with a variety of concrete projects. Then, because it moves between projects, it is not empty: it is floating.

In an interview I had the privilege to conduct in December 2013, Professor Laclau clarified that a signifier is not a concept per se, because a concept must have a concrete content. A signifier is a name, and the difference between a name and a concept is that a name has no concrete content. A name operates as a support for some form of articulation; it is what sustains the unity of the thing.

Laclau exemplified an empty signifier with the case of the Solidarność movement led by Lech Walesa at the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk, Poland, in 1980. At the beginning, the demands of this movement were linked to a set of precise demands of the workers of the ship industry. However, they started to be employed in the context in which many other demands in different areas were also articulated. At the end, Solidarność became the signifier of something much broader. When this universality comes about, it cuts off the connection between the signifier and the signified. In the case of Solidarność, in the beginning it had a signifier but then, because the appeal increased too much, the reference to a particular signified was diluted.

A floating signifier is different. It can be connected to different contexts, so the function of meaning therein is fully realized. Even when it is ambiguous, it is not empty. It fluctuates between different forms of articulation in different projects. Often the two concepts, floating and empty, overlap, because you will never have a signifier that is so precisely linked to a meaning that the emptiness fully disappears, and you will never have a signifier that is so empty that no reference is included in it. Therefore, for all practical purposes, the categories floating and empty constantly cross each other, but analytically it is important to distinguish between them.

Democracy is a good example of a floating signifier that can become empty because it is open to contestation and articulation in radically different political projects – that is, it has one meaning for a certain group and the opposite meaning for another. There are some well-known examples of this: during Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, General Francisco Franco's in Spain, or General Geisel's in Brazil (with his 'gradual

and safe democracy'), the signifier *democracy* was emptied because authorities were using it in situations where democracy was the most distant system of all.

I proposed to look at GC as a floating signifier in the context of the university where it emerged, developed, and for where it can be passed on.

Methodology

Since the floating signifier GC is articulated in concrete projects that are engendered in the university, the most important data of the study was collected in interviews with academics. Institutions were selected because of their internationalization programmes, and the interviewees chosen for their positions as researchers, post-graduate supervisors, members of committees and councils, and/or coordinators of projects that involve students of universities in the UK and other countries. They collaborate with a wide range of organizations, such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO, the British Council, the House of Lords, and NGOs concerned with nature conservation, human rights and humanitarian aid. The choice of respondents also took into consideration their fields of expertise, which span education, earth sciences, health, biological sciences, and social sciences.

The invitation to participate was sent in an e-mail containing the research abstract and the research questions: their views on GC; what skills a student should acquire in order to be a global citizen; how their institutions favour their projects; and what role they thought science and the university should play in the articulation of GC. These questions had the purpose of identifying their personal opinions and modes of action pertaining to the insertion of GC into the curriculum. The interviews took place between February and November 2013. They were recorded, transcribed, and sent to respondents for editing. Building on the revised versions of the interviews, it was possible to learn which views and modes of action give support to the academics' projects and how they integrate with the internationalization efforts of the universities to which they belong.

Results and discussion

Academics' views on GC

This section presents the academics' views (meanings) and modes of action (projects) in relation to GC. They are grouped under the following headings: (1) Favouring the terms *international* or *cosmopolitan*; (2) preserving linguistic and cultural diversity; (3) including and dividing – the paradoxical role of the global market; (4) relating ecology, sustainability, and education; (5) providing scientific foundations; and (6) revising the university curriculum. Each of these sections combines my summary of the academics' main ideas with comments about the context at the time of the study. I have also included passages from contemporary authors to contextualize within

the prevailing literature what is being said in the interviews. In order to illustrate and reinforce the academics' ideas, it proved necessary to include, and hard to choose from among their interesting generous contributions, some of their exact words, which are presented below as unattributed quotes.

Favouring the terms international or cosmopolitan

Three of the interviewees preferred the word *international* to *global*, since they consider *global* a commercial construct that has to do with markets and partnerships with wealthy countries. It also implies a cultural homogenization whereby one watches the same television programme in Calcutta or Texas. Internationalism, on the other hand, implies negotiations with countries not so financially fortunate and helps the preservation of cultural diversity. In one of the academics' words, 'internationalism gives you a sense of belonging to a community of minds, having a historical link, a kind of continuity of thought, which embraces different countries, a philosophy that includes Western and Eastern'. For internationalists, inclusion is an assumption: it is not necessary to take the initiative to include the Other because, in theory, we are included just by the fact that we all see ourselves as international citizens, 'meaning that you are in line of heritage to a whole body of intellectual traditions'.

The term *cosmopolitanism* was brought up by one of the academics interviewed. Cosmopolitanism implies overcoming political boundaries, ignoring the configuration of the world into nation states. It is the view that all groups belong to the same community, opposing nationalism and patriotism, moving from a national perspective to a cosmopolitan perspective of interaction with humans. Cosmopolitans are in the group of those that take institutional initiatives to include the Other based on principles of social justice and peace, values, human rights, democracy, and citizenship. It is similar to the type of global citizenship that Oxley and Morris (2013) classify as activist.

In Hannerz (1994), cosmopolitanism resembles internationalism in the sense of cultural entanglement. The cosmopolitan, says Hannerz, is not merely one who travels around the world. His perspective involves relationships with a plurality of cultures considered as distinct entities. 'The most authentic cosmopolitanism is, above all, an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity' (Hannerz, 1994: 253).

Preserving linguistic and cultural diversity

The preservation of cultural diversity was directly related to linguistic diversity, having the English language as a tool for world communication but being able 'to

move between different linguistic situations'. Although seven interviewees declared that they speak only English, participants were unanimous that the teaching of other languages has become necessary. English, Spanish, and Mandarin were mentioned as possible contemporary global languages. At this point, the academics find themselves at a disadvantage because most of the people with whom they interact speak English; therefore, in general, native English speakers have not so far felt the need to learn other languages. When speaking about cultural diversity, the disadvantage becomes even more profound, as they pointed out: one is prevented from knowing other cultures more deeply because of being monolingual.

Based on the evidence that the Global Dimension project requires it, global universities are now teaching a large number of languages. The two London universities together teach around 80 languages, including those from Eastern Europe, major Asian languages, and some African languages. In the areas of physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, and economics, publications and conferences are in English, 'the closest we have to a lingua franca', as one of the academics mentioned.

Another academic synthesized the relation between cultural diversity, language teaching, and education:

> *I think what we are understanding is the type of narrowness of traditional education which tends to be very focused on the history and language of your own culture. One thing you find when you travel that other people learn about different kings and queens and different battles and this is actually a surprise to people because everyone thinks that everyone else should be interested in British history just as much as we are. I think the first point is understanding that we see things from a particular perspective but there are other perspectives that we need at least to understand in order to get a wider view of what the world is and what matters to other people.*
>
> (Anonymous interviewee)

For Habermas (Freitag and Rouanet, 1995) we are living amidst a polarization between opposing forces: on one side universalist trends, such as the globalization of power, technology, satellite communications – in Habermas's terms, *technological criteria*; on the other hand, particularistic forces try to neutralize these universalizing tendencies through the revival of nationalism, the appreciation of local culture, ethnicity, and religious fanaticism – phenomena that Habermas calls *normative criteria*. They are reactions to modernization processes that destroy traditional bonds, causing transformations of all kinds and creating areas of insecurity.

Including and dividing: The paradoxical role of the global market

The global market, as presented in the academics' words, can lead to the homogenization of products, loss of cultural identities, and the exploitation of people and countries. As one of the interviewees, from a business school, observed: 'I was shocked when I was doing research on employability and found out that the top three global businesses are drugs, weapons and human beings.'

On the other hand, the global market can also be a territory for transactions that may lead to social progress, especially in the academic sector. As an interviewee noted:

> *I would say that if you really want to become international, you have to get global staff. Adam Smith talked about the civilizing influence of trade and I think he was right about that. If you open up your markets, you have to learn about other countries for buying and selling. Yes, the invisible hand will do.*

The allusion to the civilizing function of trade, one of Adam Smith's maxims in *The Wealth of Nations* (1979), translates somehow the thought of most leaders, students and teachers of global universities: that there is a huge field of opportunities for people with certain 'global skills' such as a knowledge of other languages, other cultures, and technology.

Employability, seen as an including factor by two of the interviewees, is a major concern in the global universities, for these institutions are evaluated based on the number of their graduates that are employed in the academic and corporate sector. A healthy relationship between the university and the market is possible if market leaders acquiesce to be subject to more ethical patterns and agree that reforming the economic system is mandatory. 'If we produce global citizens, they can change the world business', says an interviewee.

By forming critical global citizens, conscious of their responsibility of changing world business, the universities are on the way to articulating a *normative universalism* (Freitag and Rouanet, 1995), the improvement of international political institutions that would respond to the search for solutions to global problems. What is needed, suggests Habermas, is a theory that accounts for globalization trends, not only with regard to peacekeeping and combating drug and arms trafficking, but one that addresses especially the wider economic sphere: that is, a theory that serves to reflect on the political capacities and action that need to be taken globally in order to tame this economic system.

Relating ecology, sustainability, and education

On the United Nations webpage *The Future We Want* it is stated that 'sustainability calls for a decent standard of living for everyone today without compromising the needs of future generations' (United Nations, 2014). In today's world, where so much

damage has been caused to the environment and where, on the other hand, it is necessary to produce basic items for daily life, there have been attempts to emphasize sustainability as the organizing principle for development.

In several documents issued by the United Nations, countries have agreed to implement action plans with regard to sustainable development. Agenda 21, a product of the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (the Eco-92), is one of the most important (United Nations Sustainable Development, 1992). However, sustainability has been losing political strength in the UK, exposing the current dilemma of combining development and conservation. In UK schools, as detailed by the *Daily Telegraph* environment correspondent Louise Gray (18 March 2013), over the last three years pupils from age 7 to 11 have been taught 'about ways in which living things and the environment need protection'. However, in a consultation issued by the government the topic of caring for the environment has been pushed back to Year 4, when pupils are aged 8 to 9, and the message changed to state that 'pupils must recognize that environments are constantly changing and that this can sometimes pose dangers to specific habitats'. Environmentalists fear that the message has been 'watered down' in order to fit in with the government's development agenda. Academics and student groups also joined environmental organizations to condemn government plans to drop debate about climate change from the National Curriculum for under-14-year-olds in English schools. All references to sustainable development have also been dropped, in a move widely interpreted as the result of political interference (*The Guardian*, 18 March 2013).

What causes the lack of emphasis on sustainability in the discussion is, among other factors, the pressure for economic growth to produce needed jobs. The enlargement of the European Union has created even more demand for jobs in the UK. In elections in the UK in 2014, notably through the rise in support for the UK Independence Party (UKIP), immigration, economic growth, and sustainability were major polemic issues.

There is much space to be filled with serious discussions about the environment and sustainability, which must be led by scientists of all areas. 'I have always argued that Global Perspectives is ESD', said one of the interviewees. The professional career of another interviewee is illustrative of such movement. He moved from working as a chemical engineer into theoretical physics, then to applied physics, and finally became very interested in environmental and ecological issues. The Vietnam War, he said, sparked many environmental activities.[2] The evolution of his research is emblematic of the way in which universities have become more involved in environmental issues and interdisciplinarity. At the start of his career, he brought expertise from mathematics, a 2,000-year-old human activity, to ecology, a discipline with its origins in the early 20th century. At a later stage of his career he went on to

use ecological theory to explore financial systems. He observed, 'There is a good deal of recent study, post-2008 and the banking crisis, of what might be called "stability and complexity in banking systems"'.

Another academic interviewed did not believe that environmental solutions will come from the government. His research group has shown that, in Europe, local people take seven times more decisions regarding managing the environment than do higher levels of government. This means that, though in European society power to take decisions still resides at the higher levels of government, the activities of local people have a comparably much larger effect when it comes to, for example, protecting a certain species or driving it to extinction.

Moreover, England has suffered extreme natural phenomena – floods and storms – closely associated with global warming. The tendency is to address the issue of sustainability together with health, human rights, conflict resolution, values and perceptions, diversity, social justice, and interdependence.

One initiative mentioned that stands out as promising – a *concrete project*, in Laclau's terms – is the creation of four Global Academies at the University of Edinburgh: academies of Health, Environment and Society, Development, and Justice. The Global Environment and Society Academy relates ecology, sustainability, and education by working with partners in academia, industry, and communities, building interdisciplinary bridges to better understand and address global environmental challenges (University of Edinburgh, n.d.). 'Environment, health, justice, and development overlap', said one of the leaders of the academies.

Providing scientific foundations

The remaining topic brought up by a question in the interviews was the role of science in the articulation of GC.[3] As respondents demonstrated, science is starting on the task of opening up to more effective participation, taking an epistemological step towards the social sciences that have traditionally dominated the discussion on GC. Projects like Global Health are establishing partnerships with people from other countries who have knowledge of local remedies and treatments that have been successful for a long time.

The view of science as an international language is consensual among academics in the natural sciences, while for academics in the social sciences, it is simply a particular way of dealing with the natural world. As one commented, 'There are hundreds of communities around the world where their perspective is totally different, so, in that sense, science is in itself a perspective'.

English history being full of references to scientists who made a difference in the world, the emphasis on science is very strong among academics. One can even say

that there is enthusiasm behind their words. Each of these sentences comes from different interviewees: 'Scientists are a great hope.' 'Science is a way of life.' 'It is the past, present and future of every progressive activity.' 'It is based on evidence; it envisions how any university is going to grow, to impact, how it is going to make a difference.' 'Science itself is a lingua franca.'

Although there was among the interviewees criticism of the directions that science has taken in today's society – 'It is just a method.' 'It serves both to destroy people as well as to protect them' – there was nonetheless unanimity that the scientific approach helps to clarify certain vital topics in GC: 'It is very promising to unite citizenship education with science education. Discussion of controversial issues of science in the light of human rights, social justice, and sustainability is not only desirable but also necessary'.

When natural scientists participate in the articulation of GC, many issues are elucidated in the light of scientific research: racism, for example, loses its arguments when confronted with genetic research, as shown in Stuart Hall's aforementioned lecture (1997). One respondent noted that the immigration debate should include the evidence that the current UK population already consumes about three times the country's productive capacity.

As one of the academics pointed out, scientific research relatively free of market influences and economic power is expensive, therefore we cannot disconnect it from the economy. However, as interviewees noted, this proximity can bring problems:

> *The university is becoming much more commercial. In the UK, the universities were civic institutions. Undergraduates did not pay anything. Everything was paid by the state. Now the mission is more allied to income. You (academics) have to do more for the commercialization of the university. So the global agenda is a way of saying we have partnerships.*

Based on the international meetings in which I have participated in Europe and Brazil, where the issues of social justice, citizenship, and human rights are either implicitly or explicitly present in the agenda, I am inclined to conclude that the implication of natural sciences and hard sciences in the articulation of GC is still to be fully explored.

Revising the university curriculum

The interviewees stated that the curriculum supporting the GC project must necessarily be interdisciplinary and must contextualize topics from a global perspective, developing projects and partnerships with groups from other countries and stimulating faculty and students to travel abroad. Curricula that combine humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences have been created in order to

prepare the student for work in a broad range of sectors of the world economy as well as to enroll in most graduate programmes. There are thematic projects in business schools with objectives that meet the current demands of organizations concerned with human rights and sustainability. One interviewee said 'The solution to global issues will only come if people work across disciplines'.

Qualifications like Bachelor of Arts and Sciences imply spaces where the arts and sciences are given the same level of importance, with a combination of disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge. One of the academics goes even further by saying that 'There must be a distribution between groups: some with interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary perspective and some with a strict disciplinary outlook. Those who engage in this integrated, inter/transdisciplinary thinking are multitalented. They don't have to be specialists'.

The Global Academies mentioned earlier in the article (see 'Relating ecology, sustainability, and education' above) propose to develop a global network of experts capable of finding innovative solutions to the problems of the world that, because of their complexity and scope, require collaboration among experts from various disciplines. All employees and students of the University of Edinburgh are invited to participate in the academies devoted to global health, global environment and society, global development, and global justice (University of Edinburgh, n.d.). One of the main leaders, an enthusiast for this project, provides more details about how the academies work:

> *Each of those areas encourages cross-disciplinary engagement. In the Global Health Academy, you have people from anthropology, social sciences, divinity, law, and music, all around projects on Global Health. In international development, you have all the conventional things you would expect: big projects, cross-cultural, linguistic, and anthropological engagements around different populations of different regions, other universities, other countries to learn and give what is required. Science is part of that process, quite clearly. In the Global Environment Academy, carbon capture, renewable energy, solar energy, Higgs particles; in Medicine global health as vaccine development, malaria control, stem cell biology, regenerative medicine, live imaging of body systems.*
>
> (Anonymous interviewee)

Aiming to clarify the relation between disciplinary and interdisciplinary and knowledge, Campos *et al.* (1997) divide the area of competence of each specialism into two: the more general *field of competence*, where there is a possibility of intersection with other areas, and the more specific *nucleus of competence*, which includes the exclusive content of that specialism. The traditional curriculum was (and still is) concentrated on teaching the nucleus. The curricular revisions are

dealing with the incorporation of the field of competence, where interdisciplinarity is located. One can say that the nucleus of competence – the core – provides the specific knowledge for the field of competence (the intersection). The next level is the transdisciplinary, where a theme like GC plays the role of *organizing knowledge* and provides a consistent and coherent relation among parts of the whole process.[4]

An academic engaged in a health project explains that medical courses, while emphasizing disciplinary knowledge – hard science, anatomy and physiology, drugs, major diseases – are also introducing projects based on teamwork, collaboration, and problem solving. The Students as Global Citizens Project (2009–2012) was a research partnership between the Development Education Research Centre (Institute of Education, University of London), the Institute for Global Health (University College, London), the Royal Veterinary College, the School of Pharmacy (University of London), and the London International Development Centre. It was established to develop and evaluate methods to embed learning about global and development issues within degree courses on pharmacy, veterinary science, and human health. Activities included engagement with students and staff to assess existing understanding of global and development issues, and to evaluate the learning that results from the new teaching and learning opportunities provided via the project. The core aims of the project were to both support and extend the existing work of the colleges, and to research the links between discussions of 'global citizenship' and learning about global and development issues within higher education (Institute of Education, 2014).

The issues of human, social justice are addressed in councils and committees that influence governments and in papers presented at conferences, in journals, in newspapers, and in books. Populations that suffer from not having their rights recognized in the international arena need the university to raise their flags. The role of the university in this aspect is fundamental.

Conclusions

The study proposed to look at GC as a floating signifier as it is articulated in projects developed by ten UK academics in the discursive context of their universities. The different meanings attributed to GC by the academics – internationalism, cosmopolitanism, global market, employability, sustainability, and cultural diversity – portray agreements that project participants engage in, and such agreements materialize the floating signifier GC in their particular discursive contexts. In others, the signifier will most likely be different.

GC has shown it is a complex issue that needs to be dealt with from various perspectives. The leaders of the projects occupy top positions due to their expertise and openness to the world in the form of active participation in international research, having already achieved a high degree of external recognition. This puts them in a

comfortable position of legitimacy to express their views and carry out their projects. There is more possibility for communication among parties when they belong to the same life-world (Habermas, 1992) and are familiar with the terminology used. The university was the context where the research question emerged, developed, and from where it can be passed on to other groups.

Internationalism and cosmopolitanism are taking the form of a cultural and academic evolution that suggests the need for partnerships and negotiations among equals, assuming that learning is a collective phenomenon, an exchange of experiences and ways of seeing the world. The teaching of other languages is highly encouraged in the universities examined because it is a way to favour communication between partners and to preserve cultural diversity.

The emergence of interdisciplinary research and transdisciplinary themes shows that the global problems we are facing – the limits of natural resources, pollution, wars, religious and ethnic conflicts – require multiple perspectives and articulatory practices around a large negotiating table. There is a kind of momentum for it.

The paradoxical role of the global market has been highlighted by the academics: it fosters transactions in the academic world, but one must be aware not to submit to its rules at the risk of losing independence. The university needs money to perform its duty but it must retain academic autonomy. Business schools have a decisive role in developing a healthy relation between the two parts: the university and the market.

The discussion about sustainability is placed between opposing forces that still have not found a constructive conviviality: development on the one hand, and nature conservation on the other. It is an urgent issue to be addressed and brought into action, and education has a lot to contribute. This study has shown that the combination of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences is essential for the articulation of GC.

Although the academics interviewed show different opinions regarding the term GC and the ways to put it into practice, there is a consensus that the university is the place par excellence for discussion of the issues. Divergences in the approach to the phenomenon are part of the discursive context of the academia. If different interpretations are suppressed, the whole idea of free thinking and criticism, which is inherent to the university, will be lost. No opinion can always be predominant: the university represents the space of controversy, of debate. We therefore emphasize the role of the university as a territory for the articulation of GC in all its scope and importance.

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Notes

1 Ethics, cultural pluralism, health, environment, sexual orientation, work, and consumption are treated transversally in the school curriculum and compose the larger theme, Citizenship (National Curricular Parameters – Brasil-MEC, 1998).

2 The use of Agent Orange by the Americans to combat the Communists led to widespread reactions against it.

3 The nucleus of exact and earth sciences, biological, agrarian, environmental sciences, and hard medical sciences.

4 In Portuguese we have two words for knowledge: *conhecimento* and *saber*. Conhecimento may refer to a more formal knowledge, as from the academic sciences. Saber is a more contextualized knowledge which is related to social demands, to the life-world where all traditions, culture, and the sciences meet. 'The life-world forms the indirect context of what is said, discussed, addressed in a situation ... it is the intuitively present, in the sense familiar and transparent and at the same time vast and incalculable web of presuppositions that have to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be at all meaningful, that is, valid or invalid' (Habermas, 1992: 131). The transdisciplinary GC is a '*saber organizador*'.

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