Developing the Next Generation of Effective Altruists: How Digital Cross-border Communication can Help Reduce the Empathy Gap and Foster Greater Global Equity

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Abstract

Effective Altruism is a way of living and giving that uses rigorous evidence-based data and quantitative and qualitative analysis to determine the best possible scenario for doing the most good (Singer, 2015 & MacAskill, 2015). Developing an evidence-based awareness of issues of equity, a critical lens of our personal biases towards marginalized groups, and the analytical skills to weigh multiple giving scenarios, are all important in educating both teachers and students towards more effective altruism and global equity. However, this paper argues that these skills are not enough to sustain a commitment to social justice and social action, as there is a pervasive empathy gap created by the physical and social distance across borders and cultural groups, respectively. Online cross-border communications using video conferencing such as Skype, social media, and multimedia can serve to reduce the empathy gap and build greater mutual understanding and deep learning amongst students and teachers across the globe, thus empowering a sustained, intrinsic commitment towards effective altruism, global citizenship and equity.

KEY WORDS: EQUITY, EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM, EMPATHY, DIGITAL CROSS-BORDER COMMUNICATION, GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Consider this thought experiment, originally presented by the ethicist and philosopher Peter Singer of Princeton University: *You are walking to work and notice a child flailing in a shallow pond. The child appears to be drowning. You can easily wade into the pond to pull the child out of the water to save his/her life but you will likely be late for work and ruin your nice suit and shoes. What would you do? Would you leave the child and continue on your way to work or stop and pull the child out of the water* (Singer, 2011)*? Now, I shall extend this experiment and ask: w*hat if the pond was just around the corner, out of your sight, but that child's friend came frantically running up the street to find an adult (you) to come help. Would you acknowledge the situation and run around the corner to see what was going on and try and help?*

None of us would hesitate to answer that we would stop and pull the child out of the water regardless of whether he/she was around the corner or within our sight. It goes without saying that the cost of being late for work and ruining your clothes and shoes is negligible compared to the cost of a child's life. However, as Peter Singer (2009, 2011 & 2015) aptly makes us aware, every day we inadvertently choose our clothes and other such items over saving a child's life (or any human being, for that matter). Around the world, each and every day, there are children in the millions, dying *easily preventable* deaths. As Singer (2009, 2011 & 2015) emphasizes, **it should not matter that they live elsewhere for us to help them**, yet all too often, these children who are dying at an alarming rate are overlooked because they are further away. The adage '*out of sight, out of mind'* is all too real, tragic, and unjustly problematic. In most cases their lives can be saved at a cost even lower than a pair of shoes and an 'inconvenience' much less than that of being late for work. Even a relatively small donation, such as 3 US dollars for a long lasting insecticidal net (LLIN) to protect against malaria (Against Malaria Foundation, 2015), would be enough to save a life—that's the equivalent of a Starbuck's coffee! All it takes is a few minutes to donate online to an *effective* charitable cause. Singer (2015) and MacAskill (2015) call this effective giving, 'Effective Altruism'—a way of living and giving that uses rigorous, evidence-based data and quantitative and qualitative analysis to determine the best possible scenario for doing the most good. MacAskill (2015) and Singer (2015) argue that if we use science and ethical reasoning to

inform our giving, we can do the most good and significantly help reduce suffering on this planet.

Unicef reports that, *"About 29,000 children under the age of five – 21 each minute – die every day, mainly from preventable causes. More than 70 per cent of almost 11 million child deaths every year are attributable to six causes: diarrhoea, malaria, neonatal infection, pneumonia, preterm delivery, or lack of oxygen at birth. These deaths occur mainly in the developing world…Two-thirds of deaths occur in just 10 countries. And the majority are preventable"* (Unicef, 2015).

So as educators, what can we do? I believe that developing an **evidence-based awareness** of issues of equity as well as a **critical lens of our biases and inconsistencies** in the way we approach 'helping', is a necessary first step. Once building this understanding amongst ourselves as teachers, we can then work on developing awareness in our students. Singer (2015) and MacAskill's (2015) Effective Altruism approach and Gorski's Equity Literacy framework (Gorski, 2014) are useful resources to help build this critical awareness. Secondly, developing problem solving, analytical and math skills also helps in becoming an effective altruist as one must weigh and consider the multiple qualitative and quantitative costs versus benefits of various giving scenarios [for example: with a given dollar amount, what is the value added to save the lives of hundreds of children in immediate need versus investing in advocacy, research or structural change? What factors might we consider when comparing environmental versus social causes? How do we weigh causes that are more certain and measurable versus those that are less certain but whose impact may be greater? (Thompson, 2015)]. As such, teachers are encouraged to continually provide deep learning environments that help foster the necessary critical thinking skills.

However, I believe that a critical awareness of the issues and of our biases, as described above, is not enough to empower *sustained* action. I think that humans also need to *feel* a deeper sense of empathy, compassion and connectedness to the actual people (or other beings and things) suffering in order to become a committed agent of

change. As Singer (2009) and Payne (2010) point out, personal stories have more power to move others than larger statistics of human suffering, and as exemplified previously using Singer's (2011) thought experiment, distance also creates a disconnect to global suffering. While knowledge and analytical competence do indeed help fuel an emotional response to issues of inequity (Thompson, 2015), I think there is more that is needed to sustain a commitment to social justice. I believe that transformation can occur when equity becomes an intrinsic part of one's identity, approach to life and core values. But how can teachers contribute to this transformative process? Firstly, teachers can use The Citizenship Education Framework from the Ontario Ministry of Education's Social Studies, History and Geography curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, pg. 10), as a pedagogical guide. The Framework holistically brings together the knowledge, analytical, emotive, and identity aspects of social engagement (as described in this paper), under four overarching elements of citizenship education: *active participation, identity, structures* and *attributes*. Teachers can then plan lessons that not only connect the Framework to the curriculum expectations but that also provide *ongoing opportunities* for empathy building.

For many adults and children alike, the physical gap of distance from those who are suffering, often creates an 'empathy gap' as well—that is, a difficulty to internalize and deeply connect to the struggles of those who have physical and/or social distance from us (i.e., those who belong to different cultural, race, age, class or social groups). The reasons for such empathy gaps are beyond the scope of this paper but psychological research abounds on this topic and points to various cognitive and sociological factors (see Goodman, 2001; Interlandi, 2015; Silverstein, 2013 and Payne, 2010, as a few examples). This pervasive empathy gap also exists within our very own communities and there is much work to be done right here at home, but its consequences are graver when we consider the *extreme suffering* and alarming death rates that continue to exist in developing countries. I hypothesize that travelling to developing parts of the world and meeting those who are suffering in person would be a great way to develop a more empathic connection to these global issues (and it was for me personally, what instilled my commitment to issues of social justice from a young age; see Venkatesh, 2010, for

more on my personal story), but travelling regularly to developing countries is not feasible for most people. I think that leveraging technology would be the next best method and that catalyst needed for helping children form stronger global connections to those who are marginalized.

In keeping with Fullan's *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning* (Fullan, 2014), I recommend that school and classroom communities reach out more to global grassroots organizations to form digital partnerships that connect children on both ends. Singer (2009) recommends using charity evaluators such as GiveWell.org, to ensure that decisions as to which organizations to work with are as evidence-based as possible. Real-time and *frequent* interactions between children from different communities across the world using video and chat services such as Skype, could serve to build understanding and develop unique connections that otherwise would never be possible. 'Skype in the Classroom' is a Microsoft program that brings together teachers and classrooms across the globe, interested in collaborating using Skype (see Waxman, O.B., 2012 & NTV Kenya, 2015, for further information and video examples). Online cross-border video forums would also offer powerful lessons in communication (i.e., learning how to listen and respond despite language differences, how to ask the right questions, how to respect social and cultural etiquette, etc…) and as such, teacher training in facilitating such online meet-ups would be important. As Fullan and Langworthy (2014) stress, "professional teaching capacity must be built for the new pedagogies to be effective" (pg. ii). Through effective online meet-ups, the three new forces of deep learning—new pedagogies, new change leadership and new system economies—would converge to "break open prodigious learning possibilities" (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, pg. i).

Furthermore, real-time online communication forums could potentially allow for inquiry-based cross-border collaboration to occur, especially if as mentioned earlier, such interactions were done frequently with a structured learning path guided by the teachers. Students from different parts of the world could learn to collaborate and inquire together over issues that matter to both parties and that would ideally arise organically through the collaborative process. Ultimately, relationships based on mutual understanding could

thrive. In building this understanding, the collaborative space could also be a powerful mechanism for helping students and teachers identify and challenge their own and others' deficit ideologies (i.e., a biased belief that those who are marginalized are that way due to personal deficiencies as opposed to systemic deficiencies) and shift their perceptions towards ones that are more structural and resiliency-based (i.e., those who are marginalized are extremely resilient, given the systemic barriers they face), eventually building greater equity literacy and fostering a drive towards structural change (see Gorski, 2014). Fullan and Langworthy (2014) also add that, "helping students learn about themselves as learners and continuously assess and reflect upon their own progress is essential to [the deep learning] process" (pg. ii).

Social media is also a great tool for facilitating advocacy and philanthropy and is ubiquitous in 21st century learning. Students of the 21st century generation are already familiar with and connected to social media, so advocacy efforts would be a relatively seamless and natural integration. For example, after analyzing different giving options, students may determine that microfinance is an effective cause. They can then use Facebook or Twitter to raise awareness about organizations such as Kiva (kiva.org), and fundraise through a 'gofundme' page (gofundme.com).

Using multimedia as a creative outlet for public messaging and advocacy is yet another possibility. Students creating multimedia (videos, movies, advertising campaigns, graphic art, presentations, etc…) to raise awareness on issues of social justice has far reaching curriculum connections (i.e., written, oral and media literacy, the arts, social studies and mathematics). This type of activity also has pedagogical depth, as it offers students the chance to take on the role as public communicators, community leaders and educators, and showcase their equity literacy and effective altruism while also being a champion for their cause. Leadership programs such as Me to We (http://www.metowe.com/leadership-programs/) also add to this pedagogy by working with students beyond the school to help empower them towards greater and better social activism. Hence, we will observe that students will be engaged in new pedagogies and deep learning that will require them to not only "…create new knowledge, but also to

connect it to the world, using the power of digital tools to do things that matter beyond school…to create value in our knowledge-based, technology-driven societies" (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, pg. ii).

The possibilities for leveraging technology to develop global citizens, effective altruists and equity literate students, teachers, schools and boards, are numerous. When used in conjunction with relevant pedagogical processes—a) raising awareness of equity issues including the critical lens of personal biases, b) building the communication skills necessary to navigate online mediums, particularly real-time cross-border interactions, and c) developing the problem-solving and computational skills to analyze the different outcomes of various altruistic options—technology can have the power to bridge the physical, social and empathy gaps, and ultimately serve as a mechanism for creating greater value and greater good, through a more connected, equitable world.

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