

**News versus Newsfeed:  
The Impact of Social Media on Global Citizenship Education**

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Abstract: Suas Educational Development has worked since its inception to engage third level students in Ireland in global citizenship education. This article focuses on some of the challenges of supporting young people in reflecting, learning and acting on global justice issues. In particular, it focuses on students' relationship with media and social media; on the influence that relationship may have on their critical skills, confidence and connections with their communities; and on the ways in which organisations such as Suas can help overcome these challenges.

Key words: Global Citizenship; Higher Education; Immigration; Diversity; Social Cohesion; Community; Media; Social Media; Metaliteracy.

**Introduction**

Suas is an Irish-based international non-governmental organisation (INGO) whose mission is to transform the lives of children and young people through education. We deliver quality education programmes with partner schools in disadvantaged settings in Ireland and internationally. We also work with young people to educate and equip them as global citizens. Partnership, volunteering and mentoring opportunities are integrated into all aspects of our work, and over time we aim to collaborate with a wide range of agencies in Ireland and internationally to build a broad social movement committed to challenging injustice and inequality in education. Our latest strategic thinking brings into sharper focus the role of prejudice and discrimination in limiting a child's opportunities to realise their full potential. As such, we have committed that in all our work we will actively promote the right of children and young people in disadvantaged and marginalised settings to quality education and to live free of discrimination (with a particular focus on promoting gender equality and valuing diverse identities). Ultimately we want to see all children and young people valued equally.

Our Global Citizenship Programme aims to inspire, educate and engage young people as global citizens and foster collaboration on social change projects that promote educational and other opportunities for children and young people in disadvantaged settings. Since 2013, the 8x8 Festival has been one of the Global Citizenship Programme's key 'inspire' activities. With support from Suas staff, third level students design, develop and deliver this festival of film and photography. Last year, the 8x8 Festival was held on seven third level campuses across Ireland, spending a week at each one from October to November 2016, with an outdoor photo exhibition and learning events to accompany the films.

## **8x8 Festival**

From 2013 to 2015, the project was funded by the European Union and Irish Aid. In 2016, it was funded solely by Irish Aid. A range of people are involved in supporting the festival each year, including students and Suas student societies, staff on campus and Suas staff. For the 2016 festival, Suas recruited 20 student coordinators, who were the main points of contact on each campus. They worked together over the summer to first choose a theme for this year's festival and develop messaging around that theme. They then identified films to screen and images to display, and planned events on their campus, with each campus team working closely together on logistics, promotion and delivery of the festival.

The Global Citizenship Programme takes a 'stepped engagement' approach to delivery and the festival is a first step on this engagement ladder. Its aim is to cast the net out widely on campus to attract new students who may not normally have the opportunity to engage with global justice issues or who may not normally 'self-select' to attend such events. Students can take a few minutes to view the photo exhibition, or spend an hour or two attending an event during the festival. The idea is that they may then engage with other Suas activities, such as our Global Issues Course, our Ideas Collective, our international volunteering programme, or our mentoring programmes. While we face many challenges in supporting young people to reflect and act on global justice issues, 2016's 8x8 Festival highlighted in particular the influence of social media and the impact it may have on students' critical skills, confidence and sense of connection to their wider communities. Before educating students on global issues, is it first necessary to help them understand their relationship with media and social media? And are we doing enough to create the spaces in which students can contextualise their learning through shared experiences with the communities they are discussing?

### **No two people have the same story**

In 2016, the 8x8 Festival student coordinators chose to focus on the global refugee crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2015) more than 65 million people – or one person in every 113 citizens – were displaced from their homes by conflict and persecution in 2015. It is the first time in the history of the United Nations (UN) that the threshold of 60 million has been crossed, making it the largest displacement of people since the Second World War. The students wanted to examine the myths and misconceptions that abound about this crisis.

While war reduces entire neighbourhoods to rubble, western media and politics increasingly reduce the communities left devastated by that violence to one word: migrants. It counts them in 'waves', 'floods' and 'swarms'. It defines them by stereotypes, which the students wanted to challenge. Even the framing of the situation as a 'refugee crisis' was something the students would come to question.

Drawing on resources from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on the ground with refugees and asylum seekers, and from trusted media outlets (e.g. The Guardian and The New York Times), we began to break down some of the most

widespread stereotypes. These included the perception that Europe is facing a 'refugee crisis' of epic proportions; that most refugees coming to Europe are young, able-bodied men who pose a terrorist threat; that refugees are mostly economic migrants, who are happy to leave their home countries in search of prosperity; and that refugees are a drain on the economies of their host countries.

By reading more and talking to organisations such as the Irish Refugee Council, the students began to understand the dehumanising effect of reducing the lives of tens of millions of people to a single narrative. The main aims of the festival would be: to humanise refugee and migration issues through sharing personal stories; to challenge perceptions by debunking myths surrounding these issues; to include both local and global stories to show how the issues play out at home as well as overseas; and to encourage and inspire people to do something following the exhibition by providing them with channels through which they could directly support or show solidarity with refugees. In the end, the students chose a simple but powerful theme on which to base their film and photograph selections: 'No Two People Have The Same Story'. The 20 images chosen for the outdoor exhibition were broken down into four parts to bring the viewer on a journey that would loosely follow that of a person seeking refuge. The first focused on 'home' and provided a perspective on the many and varied reasons why people flee their homes, from climate change and natural disasters to conflict and persecution. The second focused on 'fleeing' and highlighted the often perilous journeys men, women and children make to seek refuge beyond the borders of their own countries. The third, 'arriving', looked at the dehumanising conditions faced by millions of people living in camps and reception centres, while also highlighting the issue of separated families and the fact that the vast majority of refugees are hosted in developing countries that can ill-afford to provide for their needs. The final section, 'new life', told the stories of people who had been granted asylum, focusing on the potential for the future and the benefits of immigration to host countries.

Alongside the main exhibition, we ran a second, indoor exhibition, curated by one of the students, focused on a fishing community displaced by conflict in Colombia, which now faces huge environmental challenges to its way of life. We also screened three documentaries of varying lengths filmed at three different refugee camps: *Salam Neighbor* (2015), a feature-length film about people living in the UN-run Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan; *Transit Zone* (2015), a 40-minute film focusing on the experiences of a young man at the unofficial refugee camp in Calais; and *Refuge* (2016), a nine-minute short filmed at the military-run Vasilika refugee camp in northern Greece. Informal supporting learning events included panel discussions, debates and talks, alongside which we ran classroom-based workshops on media, identity and diversity. The students also organised a photograph campaign on Facebook to show solidarity with refugees coming to Ireland. And at several campuses, students carried out direct action 'installations' to highlight barriers to education for young people living in Direct Provision, the controversial system by which the Irish government houses people seeking asylum (Quinn, 2016).

In total, across the seven campuses, an estimated 12,000 people engaged with the outdoor exhibition. About 1,400 people attended screenings and other supporting events. In feedback surveys, students said they found the festival ‘insightful’ and ‘eye-opening’, and appreciated the opportunity to ‘hear a different point of view than mainstream media’. They also reported feeling empowered to take action on the issue of immigration.

### News versus newsfeed

The festival’s learning events, and in particular workshops and debates with a media focus, highlighted the importance of unpacking the students’ relationship with media and social media in order to equip them with the skills and understanding they need to engage with global development issues. In discussions around media coverage, students often displayed a poor understanding of the roles of media and social media. It was clear that attendees were struggling to critically engage with the content they were consuming, mostly through social media. According to Reuters Institute (2016), social media has for the first time overtaken television as young people’s main source of news (Figure 1). In Ireland, 56 per cent of under 35’s use Facebook weekly for news – far exceeding the rate for the UK (41 per cent) and also ahead of that of the US (51 per cent).

**Figure 1. Top Social Networks (used weekly for news)**

NETWORK	Ireland		UK		US	
	ALL	U35s	ALL	U35s	ALL	U35s
Facebook	45%	56%	28%	41%	45%	51%
YouTube	17%	17%	12%	20%	19%	24%
Twitter	13%	15%	7%	11%	10%	15%
WhatsApp	7%	12%	3%	5%	4%	8%
LinkedIn	4%	4%	2%	3%	3%	3%

Source: Reuters Institute ‘Digital News Report’ (2016)

In keeping with these recent trends in news consumption, we found Facebook was by far the most popular medium for sourcing news among the students who engaged with our media workshops and discussions. It was seen by the majority as part of ‘the media’ and therefore presumed to uphold the same news values as more traditional media, regardless of the original source. There was a confused

expectation from many that social media was responsible for reliably informing the public about global issues such as war and migration, rather than the user being responsible for seeking out that information from reliable sources. While some students were more aware of the need to 'curate' their Facebook feed and find reliable news sources, most showed little awareness of Facebook as a corporation for which they as users were the 'product'. With more than a billion daily users, billions in ad revenue and billions in profits, Facebook has become the world's most influential source of news. That influence extends not only to its billions of users, but also to the news organisations whose survival depends more and more on the social media giant. This raises concerns about the impact on the news agenda of a multibillion-dollar technology company with no commitment to media ethics or codes of conduct. It calls for greater understanding of the influence of 'news by algorithm' and 'echo chambers' and the potential for bias – inherent (Manjoo, 2016) or otherwise (Nunez, 2016).

Research carried out recently by Stanford University (Wineburg, 2016: 4) found that 'when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels', young people 'are easily duped' by misinformation. The report suggested students may be more likely to 'focus more on the content of social media posts than on their sources' (Ibid). According to the researchers, 'Despite their fluency with social media, many students are unaware of basic conventions for indicating verified digital information' (Ibid). In an era of fake news (Silverman, 2016), this is an issue of particular concern in the context of young people with relatively limited life experience, whose views and attitudes are potentially being shaped from an early age by such immersive media exposure. Ireland, for example, has one of the highest penetrations of smartphones in the world (RTE, 2016). Some 90 per cent of 18-24's own or have access to a smartphone and almost 9 in 10 of them use their devices 'always' or 'very often' when using public transport, meeting friends, shopping or watching television (RTE, 2016).

When taken in tandem with the fact that most of the students we engaged with during the festival had limited if any connections with the communities they were discussing, the ability to recognise and seek out authentic voices on development issues is even more vital. The students were eager to connect with these communities and we encouraged them to contact groups in Ireland working with migrants and refugees. They seemed to innately recognise the value of meeting people with lived experience of the issues they were discussing, drawing huge motivation from these encounters. The complexity of the subject matter, which could silence them in more formal discussion settings, was removed in the humanity of meeting people who recounted their experience of fleeing their home countries, seeking asylum and trying to make a new life in Ireland.

### **Information overload**

Indeed, the inability to cope with the vast quantities of information being shared online is an issue not just for global citizenship education but for academia in general. According to Mackey and Jacobson, social media and online communities challenge traditional definitions of information literacy:

“As the number of information sources continues to increase, skills connected with determining the extent of information required for a particular search must be more finely honed. A sense of information overload or perhaps uncertainty about how to make choices among many options may cause researchers (especially novice searchers) to truncate or give up on the process of assessing how much information is needed, or to abrogate prior determination, basing decisions solely on results retrieved while searching” (2011: 10).

Possibly connected with this ‘information overload’, we found throughout the festival that students often lacked confidence to express their own opinions in talks, debates and discussions. While an element of this can be attributed to a general fear of public speaking and could be addressed by simple confidence-building interventions, there seemed to be a perception that their own experience, knowledge and sense of justice was inferior to what they saw as ‘expert opinion’. This went beyond respecting the experience of speakers: from both the coordinators and the student attendees, there was a sense of apprehension about getting involved with the discussion, even in smaller, more intimate settings. There seemed to be an expectation that they were there to listen, rather than to inquire or to express their own opinions and concerns. However, it did not seem to be born out of apathy, as the same students were interested in taking action, or indeed already had through their involvement in the festival.

### **The challenge**

All of these contribute to a sense of disconnect among young people and a lack of confidence in how they can or should engage with issues such as immigration. And this is not just a challenge for global citizenship education but for education in general: it is crucial that young people are equipped with the modern critical skills needed to help them reflect on – rather than be disempowered by – the vast quantities of information at their fingertips. As the first step in engaging with our Global Citizenship Programme, the challenges for the next 8x8 Festival will be to jolt students into questioning their relationship with media and social media; to continue to challenge their assumptions and stereotypes; and, crucially, to create a space in which students can contextualise their learning through shared experiences with the communities they are discussing.

That need to ‘jolt’ presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the 8x8 Festival. The challenge is to find creative and interactive ways to make students think not just about development issues but about their consumption of information in general – and to do so with relatively light engagement through our outdoor exhibition. The opportunity is that by using a subject familiar to every student (as of June 2016, Ireland had 2.7 million Facebook users according to <http://www.internetworldstats.com/europa.htm#ie>) we may have greater potential to attract our target audience: new students who may not normally have the opportunity to engage with global justice issues or who may not normally ‘self-select’ to attend such events. By using our outdoor photo exhibition and supporting

events to make students' more critically aware of their interaction with social media, we can not only highlight the importance of questioning the information they are fed – and questioning their own stereotypes and assumptions – but also pique interest in development issues.

Likewise, the challenge to create a space in which students can contextualise their learning is also an opportunity. There is a clear need for more and diverse spaces – in social contexts as well as more formal educational settings – for students to connect with people with lived experiences of issues such as immigration, rather than passively taking in information. In an increasingly connected online world, communities seem to be living more disconnected and separated lives, something that can only serve to foster a lack of empathy for and understanding of experiences beyond our own realities. The challenge, therefore, is not just to empower young people to take action but to enable them to share experiences that organically foster a sense of global citizenship. However, our experience with the 8x8 Festival would indicate an appetite for such experiences and therefore another opportunity to engage our target audience.

According to a 2014 marketing report by Bord Bia:

“In an always-on tech world, Millennials [22- to 30-year-olds] are looking for ways to forge deeper, more meaningful connections with the people who matter to them most... They want to create the space and time for real conversations, going out of their way to create occasions for proper bonding and catch-ups” (2014: 16)

The same report noted: ‘The buzz of doing something new fuels a sense of personal achievement as well as generating some easily sharable social currency’ (2014: 13). By facilitating that need for connection and discovery, the 8x8 Festival has the potential to not only attract those students who would not normally engage with global justice issues, but to create a space for conversation and enquiry that goes beyond passive listening. Watching a film is an informative and low-effort way to attract those students, but we need to reimagine our supporting events so that panel discussions become conversation salons, rigid debates become townhall-style meetings, and question and answer sessions become opportunities to socialise and share culture with new communities. To watch and listen is not enough. To like and share on social media is not enough. We have to empower students to take action, and that action may start with the simple act of meeting someone new in person or seeking out authentic new voices online.

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