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## Becoming Globally Literate through the Arts

*Robert Walker*

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## Becoming Globally Literate through the Arts

**Robert Walker**

*Crossing Borders and Boundaries* was the theme of the GFE Conference in 2007, and shortly after the GFE and GIA conferences and the Arts and Education Weekend, I left for a trip to Asia including visits to Thailand, Cambodia, and Hong Kong. The GFE conference underscored the fact that one of the most important skills needed now is to be globally literate, which is pretty much being neglected in schools at the moment.

My Asia trip reinforced an idea that had permeated my thinking after having attended the three conferences: if we need to prepare students to engage with people around the world and to address problems and realize opportunities that are increasingly global, then the arts offer an amazing platform for this education. For those of us that have been involved in the arts in our professional careers, this may not come as a lightning-bolt statement. But it might be provocative to our colleagues in education who have not yet realized the power of the arts to teach, to convey history, and to inspire. Cambodia, which had been the seat of one of the greatest civilizations in human history, is an example of how the arts can be used to understand global issues. When 90 percent of a nation's performing artists perish at the hands of a brutal regime, the preservation and renewal of the country's ancient cultural heritage becomes a matter of international concern. In less than four years (1975-79), the Khmer Rouge wiped out nearly two million people, among them scores of dancers, actors, directors, writers, and musicians. As Cambodia slowly rebuilt its confidence and a sense of national identity, the performing arts were at the heart of the process. Painstaking work was done to record the memories of dancers who survived the Pol Pot era so that ancient classical ballets were documented before they disappeared forever. And at the same time, young artists were finding their own form of expression in the creation of new works, some of which reflected the history of these times. A Cambodian play, "3 Years, 8 Months, 20 days", directed by the renowned Dutch director Annemarie Prins, depicted the lives of three actresses during the Khmer Rouge regime. Art can be a powerful method to convey history and global issues to a wide international audience.

We need to use the arts to develop students' understanding of world cultures and history so they can thrive in our growing global community. It's no secret that the U.S. lags behind other nations in our educational achievements.

Our graduation rate ranks twenty-first in OECD nations (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), and when you compare our system to education in Asia, students there get forty to seventy-five more school days per year, which over a K-12 education translates to three to four more years of education. It's no wonder that we're lagging behind much of the world.

We need a new skill set beyond math and technology – knowledge of world issues, cultures, people and languages. We need to develop values of respect and concern for other cultures and peoples. Globalization matters and, when one studies the trends, it is clear that our welfare is increasingly interwoven with that of other nations. In a ten-year period (1990–2000), multinational corporations increased from 7,000 to 63,000, and their global philanthropy reflected that growth. Fourteen foreign-born CEO's are running Fortune 100 companies, and companies in the Standard & Poor's 500-stock index expect to achieve more than half their sales from abroad in 2008. Our co-workers in the future will be from around the world. Eleven percent of the US population is now foreign born, up from 6 percent ten years ago, and 60 percent of the world's population is in Asia.

Arts education professionals in their research have well documented the impact the arts can have on an individual – collaborative learning, critical thinking, reasoning, creativity, imagination, the development of empathy, social tolerance, and a sense of community. Global knowledge and understanding can be added to the list. There are myriad examples that one could cite. We have the art and dance of Africa, Chinese opera, Noh plays, and Chicano art where artists celebrated their cultural heritage and expressed their concerns over social issues such as farm worker labor and discrimination. Consider what the impact will be of the New York Philharmonic playing in North Korea for the first time. In New Mexico we saw Native American jewelry, Pueblo Indian pottery, Hopi and Zuni kachinas, and Native American paintings. The advance readings for the GIA conference spoke eloquently of our Native American population and their relationship to the land and environment.

The arts can be a powerful force in developing global literacy, and hopefully our educational institutions will embrace this idea as they seek to develop students who will be successful in the twenty-first century.

*Robert Walker is executive director, the Frank H. and Eva B. Buck Foundation.*