

Circles of Action

A routine for organizing one's understanding of a topic through concept mapping.

What can I do to contribute...

1. In my inner circle (of friends, family, the people I know)?
2. In my community (my school, my neighborhood)?
3. In the world (beyond my immediate environment)

Purpose: What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

Globally competent students go beyond understanding the world in which we live – they reveal a growing disposition to take responsible action to improve such world in in large and small ways. Moving from understanding to action requires that students develop an agency mindset. That they develop a sensitivity to opportunities to influence their environments, the capacity to do so in effective, informed, and responsible ways and a drive and motivation to do so over time. When students learn about the world and feel inclined to make a difference, they can feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of issues like climate change, transnational consumption or human rights violations. A mismatch between calls for global citizenship and students' perceived capacity to act can stifle motivation to engage. It becomes essential that students learn to recognize that actions can have multiple scopes (small- big) and occur in multiples spheres (personal-local-global) if they are to develop a disposition to take informed and responsible action.

This routine is designed to foster students' sensibility to opportunities to take responsible action and their concomitant motivation to doing so. It invites them to distinguish personal, local and global spheres and make local-global connections. It also prepares them for an intentional deliberation about potential courses of action and their consequences.

Application: When and where can I use it?

This routine can be used with varying degrees of structure. In a curriculum context it can be used across disciplines (geography, science, literature, economics) and with a broad range of provocations (films, narratives, photographs) typically addressing a conflict, a problem, a system, or design that can be improved through participation and engagement. In addition, the routine can be used informally in daily school contexts and interactions where individual students can exhibit agency (e.g. a conflict among friends, consumption patterns, the integration of immigrant students). In both cases the routine may lead students to realize acting intentionally to learn more or to raise a topic among friends or family are in themselves viable and productive actions.

Launch: What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

Priming students' mind for this routine may involve calling their attention to an issue that students can perceive as requiring solutions. Students are best prepared when they have a moderate understanding of the issue, are primed to care about it, and have a sense of urgency or need for a response. The routine is particularly effective when students sense the need but have difficulty considering viable paths for action. Preparing students may also involve foregrounding their own role as citizens empowered to influence their environment.

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Share your experience with this thinking routine on social media using the hashtags #PZThinkingRoutines and #CirclesOfAction.



This thinking routine was developed as part of the Global Competency project at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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Circles of Action, cont'd

This routine invites students to map possibilities for action. The order of questions can be inverted, and the routine can be productively followed by meaningful discussions: What are the barriers that students see to their capacity to take action at various levels? Weighing potential courses of action can deepen students' intentionality in participation. Drawing on a rich initial actions map, students may be invited to consider factors such as ethics, viability, personal interest, and potential impact as they decide what to do next.

What is Global Competence?

Global competence can be defined as the capacity and disposition to understand and act on issues of global significance (Boix Mansilla & Jackson 2011). Globally competent students prepare for complex societies and a global economy by learning how to investigate the world beyond their immediate environment, framing and making sense of significant issues. How do migrant populations adapt to their new places of work and living? What tools do governments have to promote economic development and eradicate extreme poverty? What is an ecosystem and how do different ecosystems around the world work? Globally competent students also learn to recognize their own and others' perspectives, articulating and explaining such perspectives thoughtfully, empathically and respectfully. Globally competent students can communicate across differences, bridging cultural, linguistic, economic and religious divides – two additional capacities that are especially important to today's fragmented and interconnected societies. Most importantly, in order to be prepared to participate and work in today's world students, must learn to take responsible action. They need to learn to identify opportunities for productive action to develop and carry out informed plans. Prepared students, this framework suggests, view themselves as informed, thoughtful, compassionate and effective citizens and workers in changing times (Boix Mansilla & Jackson 2011).

Global competence is cast as a capacity to understand – meaning, broadly speaking, to use disciplinary concepts, theories, ideas, methods or findings in novel situations, to solve problems, produce explanations, create products or interpret phenomena in novel ways (Boix Mansilla & Gardner 1999). It focuses on issues of global significance and action to improve conditions; learning must be visibly relevant to students and the world. When significance is considered, global competence curricula becomes a call for authenticity, for carefully looking to the contemporary world for topics that matter most to examine (Perkins 2015).

Finally, “global competence” as a disposition speaks of student ownership and long-lasting transformation. Thinking dispositions, Project Zero researchers have proposed, involve the ability to think with information, the sensitivity to opportunities in the real world to do that, and the inclination to do so over time (Perkins et al 1993, Tishman et al 1993). Dispositions are about the “residuals” of learning beyond formal contexts (Ritchhart 2014); they are about the “kind of person” a student will become (Boix Mansilla & Gardner 2000). Broadly considered, global competence dispositions include:

- A disposition to inquire about the world (for example, engaging with questions of significance, exploring local-global connections, and seeking information beyond familiar environments, describing, explaining and developing a position about the world).
- A disposition to understand multiple perspectives--others' and their own (for example, considering cultural contexts, resisting stereotypes, and valuing our shared human dignity-- especially as students interact with others whose paths differ greatly from their own).
- A disposition toward respectful dialog (communicating across differences listening generously, sharing courageously, openly and appropriately given their audience and context).
- A disposition toward taking responsible action (being inclined to see and frame opportunities to improve conditions, and collaborating with others, and mobilize themselves to act).

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