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The Earth Charter Goes Interactive and Live with e-GLO : Using New Media to Train Youth Leaders in Sustainability on Both Sides of the Digital Divide

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What is This?

The Earth Charter Goes Interactive and Live with e-GLO

Using New Media to Train Youth Leaders in Sustainability on Both Sides of the Digital Divide

MIKE SHEEHAN and JAANA LAITINEN

Abstract

For ten years now the Earth Charter has been inspiring global citizens to engage in conversations and actions that benefit everybody. This article describes e-GLO, the Earth Charter Global Learning Opportunity, the Earth Charter International's semester-long, online leadership course inspired by the Earth Charter. It is developed and implemented in collaboration with BeatBoard Education and Training and *Heart in Action Enterprises*.

Keywords: Youth leadership, sustainability leadership, online learning, bridging the digital divide, Earth Charter, e-GLO

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WHAT IS e-GLO?

e-GLO is a semester-long, online leadership course inspired by the Earth Charter. The idea of the course arose in 2005 when Earth Charter Initiative convened in Amsterdam for the EC+5 celebration and networking event. Youth participation in EC gatherings is always valued and thus a good number of youth attended the event with support from Plan Netherlands and the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam. This group of youth comprised students, community development project planners, artists and entrepreneurs who had worked closely with the Earth Charter in their various activities.

At a youth dinner, hosted by council member Rick Clugston and past executive director Alan Atkisson, each participant was encouraged to share how they believed the Earth Charter Initiative could actively engage and positively impact a wider youth audience. The idea of creating an Earth Charter youth leadership training was initiated and well received. It was acknowledged that funding would be limited and that air travel has a massive environmental footprint, but in spite of these constrains the question remained: How could we give access to and train a diverse group of committed Earth Charter activists from around the world with a style of instruction that was aligned with a universal approach to education? e-GLO was created as an answer to this need.

e-GLO: GLOBAL YOUTH AND ONLINE EDUCATION

For the first time in April–June 2008 e-GLO began its semester-long, online leadership course. In this course the participants have an opportunity to learn more about the Earth Charter, and network with young leaders and experienced professionals from around the world. In addition, they gain new skills in sustainability leadership, project planning, fundraising and receive mentorship with local projects from other participants, the facilitation team as well as from e-GLO alumni. Throughout the course the participants develop new partnerships and channels for existing community development work. This, in essence, enables one of e-GLO's goals, which is to bridge the digital divide—the gap between those who benefit from digital technology and those who do not.

e-GLO is offered to youth aged 15 to 33 who are motivated and socially conscious community development project planners. Priority is given to youth leaders already engaged with the Earth Charter community. Its vision is to inspire highly capable and connected youth all around the world in bringing about justice, sustainability and peace in their own lives, local communities and the world.

The program consists of eight live, 3-hour-long online sessions that take place every second Saturday. The sessions cover introductions, presentations, networking, interviews, expert guests and participant presentations. e-GLO's finale is a live, interactive, multimedia event, which celebrates participants' accomplishments and is open to the public. e-GLO sessions take place online via webcam and mic in e-GLO's own interactive multimedia environment created and supported by 'Heart in Action Enterprises' (HIAE). HIAE is a multimedia event planning social enterprise that aims

to empower and inspire today's youth and nurture solid leadership skills utilising the most current communication and educational technology tools available.

e-GLO is developed and implemented in collaboration with BeatBoard Education and Training. BeatBoard is a Canada-based social enterprise 'committed to effecting positive change in communities through delivering leading-edge experiential education programs that value diversity, inclusion and solutions for healthy living'[1]. 'Heart in Action Enterprises', Plan Netherlands and the National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development provide in-kind and financial support.

e-GLO 1

e-GLO 1's focus was on digital story-telling. Digital story-telling happens when people make an emotional connection with others through using a blend of digital mediums in the sharing of stories from their lives or imagination. This new form of storytelling is emerging with the arrival of more accessible media production techniques using computers, digital cameras and software.

This course was designed to inspire youth to engage in critical and creative thinking about the current challenges they face and support them in developing the skills needed to engage in successful human rights, sustainable development and peace building initiatives. In addition to this e-GLO 1 also aimed to form a strong network of activists who would collaborate and support one another in furthering the work of the Earth Charter.

e-GLO 1 Digital Story-Telling and Community Leadership:

Session 1:   Introduction to e-GLO
Session 2:   Participants' stories
Session 3:   Media for peacebuilding
Session 4:   Grassroots community organising
Session 5:   Unearthing and addressing key sustainability challenges through interviews and digital storytelling
Session 6:   Making social and environmental documentaries
Session 7:   Animated youth voice featuring ReelYouth
Session 8:   Open House: Live, interactive, multimedia event open to the global public

e-GLO 2

Through the success of e-GLO 1, e-GLO 2 followed in September 2009–January 2010. With popular knowledge around internet tools growing, e-GLO 2's focus became training sustainability leaders. The reasoning for this was that as the problems of today's world are more complex than ever, we need leaders with a new and innovative interdisciplinary approach.

This sustainability approach to leadership requires special competencies compared to traditional leadership; knowledge about the challenges of globalisation, capacity

for innovation, dialogue and communication skills, systems thinking, global mindset, peer networking ability and strong capacities in Information and Communication Technologies, to mention a few. e-GLO 2 recognises that training youth leaders is no longer solely about deepening their understanding of sustainability issues but more about strengthening their values.

e-GLO 2 Earth Charter: Guiding Leaders Towards Sustainability Action:

Session 1:   Earth Charter, sustainable development and youth leadership
Session 2:   Innovation
Session 3:   Intercultural/interpersonal communicative competence
Session 4:   Learning from successful projects
Session 5:   Planning for sustainable action projects inspired by the Earth Charter
Session 6:   Fundraising for sustainable action projects inspired by the Earth Charter
Session 7:   Tutoring session with e-GLO graduates and Earth Charter representatives
Session 8:   Open House: Live, interactive, multimedia event open to the global public

With this structure e-GLO 2 aimed to make a positive impact on society by familiarising participants with sustainability leadership skills and shared ethics. Furthermore, it equips them with innovative skills in sustainability project planning, management and fundraising, in addition to facilitating the effective use of new media. The ultimate aim is to further develop the capabilities necessary to conduct Earth Charter inspired action projects in the participants' own communities.

The need for this type of course is recognised by the Earth Charter Initiative's activists who have been actively asking for funds to implement their Earth Charter inspired project ideas. Consequently e-GLO 2 was designed for the activists from the Earth Charter youth network. This innovative program supports the belief that newly learned skills will stay in the Initiative and that the participants will be more motivated to take local-level Earth Charter related actions.

e-GLO PARTICIPANTS

Many of the voices and valuable perspectives who are underrepresented in world decision-making live on the other side of the digital divide. Today 25.6 per cent of the world's population are internet users. This number has doubled since 2004. In Africa 6.8 per cent of the population is online, compared to 28.3 per cent of people in the Middle East and 74.2 per cent in North America.[2] When the call for applications for e-GLO1 was released in 2008, it was surprising to see that over 70 per cent of interested applicants lived in a region where access to digital technology was sparse. We realised after reading applications that these activists in developing countries wanted to enhance their skills related to digital media to further their work. It was recognised that ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) were regarded

as a valuable tool that enabled individuals to share their voice, values and perspective in an 'international dialogue'. It is not necessary for every community around the world to access the Internet as part of their daily life, yet the Internet is a powerful tool for information sharing, and when individuals and communities request access to this global community, we believe every effort should be made to support equal opportunity.

The e-GLO participants are selected based on their motivation and level of commitment towards the Earth Charter. They represented 48 different countries from 5 different continents. The average age of the participants was 25 years. Attention has also been paid to the geographic diversity and gender balance. The first two e-GLO programs had a total of 64 participants, of which 21 were females, which was due to the low number of applications from females in e-GLO 2. This is something we are considering closely regarding the marketing of future e-GLO programs.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

e-GLO 1 was closely evaluated by Karim El Mantawi, a student of the UN-mandated University for Peace, for his master's thesis. In his research El Mantawi used e-GLO as a case study to determine whether educational usage of ICTs can help ensure equitable distribution of knowledge and understanding to further the overarching principles of the Earth Charter. His evaluation outlines successes and pitfalls of the e-GLO course concept, content and implementation and measures achievement of its stated objectives.

e-GLO struggled with Internet connection quality in regions where participants lived in rural areas. At times unreliable connections added an element of frustration when a participant's feed dropped unexpectedly. Another unique challenge the program faced was to understand 'global time'. Some participants were logging on at 7am and others at 2am to begin a session. Another time-related challenge was anticipating Daylight Saving Time.

In spite of these challenges e-GLO's participants gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about the benefits of this course. Participants commented on experiencing inspiration and a deepening of connection with other participants, a more thorough understanding of the Earth Charter and its benefits as well as feeling rejuvenated inside their own initiatives in their regional communities. This was clear in the e-GLO participants' feedback: 'We must use all ways possible to increase peace-building and sustainability, and this one is an excellent way because it is more global, it doesn't depend on local politics, its fast and its possible to share information in real time.'

FUTURE OF e-GLO

The Earth Charter International Secretariat is interested in continuing e-GLO. The next course will begin in September 2010 with a focus on sustainability leadership and local level action projects

In the words of e-GLO's co-founder Dominic Stucker[3]:

> e-GLO continues to provide young sustainability practitioners from all around the world with a safe, interactive and creative online space. Participants support one another in developing Earth Charter-inspired projects and building the skills necessary to implement them, moving our world toward greater justice, sustainability and peace. Cutting edge software, expert facilitation and coaching, and self-organized communication between sessions help bridge digital, national, and cultural divides, forming a strong activist network that provides alumni with resources, partnerships, and inspiration well beyond the semester-long course. e-GLO alumni are so commited to the course that they return to contribute to subsequent sessions, weaving the e-GLO network into a vibrant, global fabric.

This ability to connect and to interact with others is no doubt shaping our global community. e-GLO believes equal access to ICTs for every nation will help balance and inform choices that individuals, corporations and nations make every day. The Earth Charter is a values-based movement with a sense of global inclusiveness that is making a difference. e-GLO is the youth vision of sharing these values.

Notes

1 From BeatBoard director Mike Sheehan. (Guiding Principals Statement) Available at www.beatboard.org 2009.
2 Statistics available at www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (accessed 31 December 2009).
3 Mike Sheehan 2009. Personal Communication with Dominic Stucker in December.