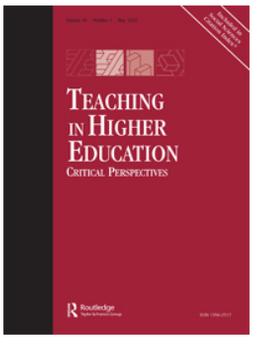

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Getting critical about critical world citizenship. Bottom-up skills development and in-classroom operationalization within a Dutch liberal arts college

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the challenge of translating critical world citizenship (CWC) into educational practice within interdisciplinary higher education. While scholarly literature provides theoretical frameworks for CWC, implementation remains difficult. Through a participatory educational design, we mapped current understandings and teaching practices. The resulting online toolbox[1] presents nine interconnected skills with teaching activities. Our findings reveal five insights for effectively teaching CWC: (1) critique should be personal rather than universal, focusing on tangible manifestations in immediate environments; (2) educators must help students navigate societal challenges to avoid paralysis and cynicism; (3) teaching should guide critical thinking without prescribing conclusions; (4) institutions must create safe yet brave spaces for dialogue across divisions; and (5) Potential and limitations should be recognized to prevent polarization. This pedagogical platform offers practical implementation for CWC education that acknowledges tensions between theory and practice, ultimately supporting students in developing skills to engage meaningfully with complex societal challenges.

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Global citizenship education; critical world citizenship; teaching practice; toolbox

1. Introduction

Between November 2022 and May 2023, activists in Rotterdam repeatedly occupied university buildings to protest institutional ties with the fossil fuel industry (Erasmus Magazine 2023). Among the participants were students from Erasmus University College Rotterdam, which has the explicit ambition to deliver graduates 'able to formulate a critical and well-reasoned evidence-based opinion' (EUC Academic Rules and Regulations 2021–2022). These specific participants saw their actions as a concrete way to live up to their role as critical world citizens. Their posturing was seen, furthermore, as a clear opportunity to realize the overall university strategy 'to involve students as co-creators and "critical citizens", focusing on interdisciplinarity and inclusiveness in an international context' (EUR strategy 2024; Erasmus University 2019).

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Meanwhile, others within the university community experienced discomfort in relation to these protests and pointed out that such activism disregarded protestors' obligation to 'engage with other opinions and arguments', another of the college's intended learning outcomes (EUC Academic Rules and Regulations 2021–2022). Such tensions surrounding activism on campus reappeared during the protests over the Israeli war on Gaza after October 2023. Pushing the question of what it means to be a critical world citizen beyond a perceived left-liberal bubble, still others in the community wondered whether young farmers demonstrating against Dutch agriculture policy also deserved the epithet of critical world citizens.

This discrepancy in understanding critical world citizenship and the subsequent translations into real-life action reveal an obvious challenge that many institutions of higher education currently face. The challenge is threefold: first, universities struggle to sketch out clear and broadly accepted contours of critical citizenship. Second, institutions of higher education have trouble identifying what skills their graduates need to mature into critical citizens. Thirdly, while they contemplate definitions or skills training, reluctance in institutional action exposes these same institutions of failing to live up to their aspirations.

At the heart of this debate as well as a more elaborate engagement with 'what it means' to be a critical world citizen are several fundamental obstacles. First, how do we translate such elaborate and complex concepts and educational objectives into tangible skills? Over a decade of experiences from Erasmus University College, an institution that explicitly aims to educate its graduates 'to reflect upon their role as critical world citizens' (Erasmus University College 2024), has taught us that many students do not find opportunity to acquire critical global citizenship skills in the curriculum. This has led to paradoxical situations whereby, on one hand, the programme is recognized as pioneering but where, on the other hand, we struggle to articulate the meaning of the concept into everyday educational practice. In other words, when embracing the aim to educate students able to recognize and speak out against inequality and injustice, what skills do we need to teach our students?

In this article, we further explore the notion of critical world citizenship, with a particular focus on skills associated to this concept. We do so from a double perspective. On one hand, we use a practical, bottom-up approach to make an inventory of understandings and teaching praxis among students and staff within the three-year Bachelor programme in liberal arts and sciences at Erasmus University College Rotterdam. On the other hand, we build on a more theoretical approach to map how existing scholarly literature understands critical world citizenship and, crucially, how this concept should be operationalized in terms of skills and teaching practice.

We focus on the implementation and operationalization of critical world citizenship – and critique at large – into an interdisciplinary educational context that transcends those disciplines where teaching critique is more naturally at home. As such, we aim to answer the questions: 'How to translate critical world citizenship from a theoretical concept into a tangible set of skills?' and 'How do we teach students such skills?'. The toolbox we present provides a first step in answering these questions. In addition, the lessons we have learned developing this toolbox allow us to interrogate the meaning of different components of critical world citizenship. Finally, it enables us to 'get critical about critique' and identify relevant lessons on teaching critique in higher education.

Below, we summarize what academic literature has to say about critical world citizenship, its associated skills and the teaching of such skills. We then explain how we approached this question within the small-scale setting of a Dutch liberal arts and sciences programme and the internal mapping exercise we undertook to identify how our community of students and staff understand this dilemma. Next, we present the outcomes of this effort in the form of a toolbox with nine selected skills including teaching activities, and we zoom in on two such skills. Finally, we reflect on our learning process, where the tensions lie and where we see room for further exploration.

2. Literature review

Despite wide usage in government, NGO's, businesses, international organizations, and education (Humes 2008; Schattle 2005), it remains difficult to talk about a single definition of global citizenship (Dower and Williams 2002). Moraes (2014) even refers to global citizenship as a 'floating signifier'. Furthermore, Dower and Williams (2002) cite Laclau (2007) who views global citizenship as a concept without meaning or definition when used independently. Instead, it derives different meanings through the different contexts in which it is used.

Whilst the basic principle of identification with a larger global rather than national community appears well accepted and is increasingly prevalent in (higher) education (Biesta 2021), a great number of interpretations and theoretical foundations coexist. According to Pashby et al. (2020), the current state of literature on Global Citizenship Education includes dozens of types and categorizations. For example, Schultz (2007) differentiates between neoliberal, radical, and transformationalist approaches. Schattle (2008), argues that Global Citizenship education is not a new ideology but a reflection of different forms of liberalism that can be divided into three ideological constellations: Moral Cosmopolitan, Liberal Multiculturalism, and Neoliberal. Furthermore, Gaudelli (2009) locates five different conceptions of global citizenship – National, Neoliberal, World Justice and Governance, Cosmopolitan and Marxist …

In their meta review of typologies, Pashby et al. (2020) adopt a heuristic approach and expand existing distinctions between neoliberal, liberal, and critical Global Citizenship Education types by mapping numerous conflations and approaches to Global Citizenship education. They identify two key trends in descriptions of 'critical' variants of Global Citizenship Education. First, approaches labelled as critical are those that explicitly problematize the status quo. Second, such critical approaches are often opposed to (neo)liberal interpretations of Global Citizenship (Education).

Oxley and Morris (2013) categorize different 'types' of Global Citizenship into dichotomous sub-forms of global citizenship: the cosmopolitan types and the advocacy types (see Table 1). Cosmopolitan types are 'mainstream' approaches that embrace the current global status quo and strive for individual positive change within the realms of human rights, universalism, and global institutions. Advocacy types refer to approaches of global citizenship that problematize cosmopolitan understandings for their perceived neoliberalism, neo-imperialism, west-centrism, and individualism. They explicitly juxtapose these with more relativist and holistic advocacy-based approaches to Global Citizenship. Critical Global Citizenship refers to an advocacy-based counter-hegemonic

Table 1. Types of global citizenship (simplified from Oxley and Morris 2013).

Cosmopolitan (soft)	Advocacy (critical)
Political global citizenship	Social global citizenship
Moral global citizenship	Critical global citizenship
Economic global citizenship	Environmental global citizenship
Cultural global citizenship	Spiritual global citizenship

approach that aims to deconstruct global structures of oppression and inequality and is mostly rooted in post-structural and post-colonial thought.

This problematization of cosmopolitan understandings of global citizenship is common in literature. As is argued by de Jong (2013), dominant interpretations of global citizenship contain gendered and racialized tendencies and only speak to a cosmopolitan, privileged subject, acting out of benevolence. Andreotti (2006, 2014) shares a similar argument as she outlines the difference between a 'soft' and a 'critical' global citizenship education. The former is seen as problematic since it reproduces and reinforces rather than effectively challenges existing structures of inequality (Pashby and Andreotti 2015). Building on the works of Dobson (2005) and Spivak (2003, 2004), Andreotti (2006, 2014) questions the ideologies behind global citizenship education and proposes a critical global citizenship education with power, voice, and difference as central themes – especially in relationship to the Global South.

Other authors also highlight the importance of critical pedagogy and striving for global social justice in teaching. For example, de Vries (2020) introduces an intersectional approach to Global Citizenship Education as a social-justice oriented framework that allows students to help understand and question global structures of oppression and domination based on race, gender, and class. Mansouri, Johns, and Marotta (2017) conceptualize critical global citizenship as a sense of belonging to a larger global community and a performative citizenship aimed at achieving social peace and justice. In practice, this requires (1) 'reflexivity and an externally oriented outlook', (2) 'openness towards an acceptance of cultural diversity', and (3) 'promoting universal human rights and ethical responsibility' (4).

Such interpretations resemble an understanding of social justice education where, according to Hackman (2005), teaching content alone runs the risk of invoking paralysis, hopelessness, cynicism, and powerlessness, and must be accompanied with a direction for the application of this knowledge.

2.1. Skills for critical global citizens

Critical Global Citizenship appears rooted in a particular 'critical' branch of understandings of global citizenship education. These understandings are closely related to postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy, and critical justice education. But what skills does a 'critical global/world citizen' need, then?

One of these answers is provided by Andreotti (2006, 2014) who introduces critical literacy as an important critical global citizenship skill. Defined as 'a level of reading the word and the world that involves the development of skills, critical engagement, and reflexivity: the analysis and critique of the relationships among perspectives, language, power, social groups and social practices by the learners' (27). Such

conceptualization views 'critical' as more than being able to deliver critique and merely point out injustices. Instead, it also asks of learners to reflect on one's own and others' epistemological and ontological assumptions and enrich their understanding of the world around them. Similarly, Torres and Bosio (2020) build on the work of Freire (1970, 2018) and state that educating global citizenship means training learners' 'critical consciousness' and allow the learner to become an 'emancipated, ethical, and critical global citizen' (Bosio and Waghid 2023, 1) and contribute to 'the construction of a new future rooted in sustainability and social change' (10). Another skill with a global justice orientation is what de Vries (2020) calls 'intersectional literacy'. Here, focus is on understanding global complexities, structures, and inequalities behind local issues of inequality. Doing so enables us to see the interconnectedness of local and global structures, rethink hegemonic structures, and imagine new realities.

Yet, despite its explicit commitment to global justice, there are critiques of the approach taken by scholars who embrace critical global citizenship. It is important to acknowledge that critical global citizenship education is firmly rooted in critical theory and critical pedagogy approaches. Specifically, it draws from neo-Marxist perspectives that view education as inherently political (Freire 1970; Giroux 2011). This stands in contrast to more general 'critical thinking' approaches in the Deweyan tradition, which are built on liberal and democratic values and tend to view education as more apolitical (Dewey 1916; Nussbaum 2006). Consequently, critical global citizenship education interprets the concept of critique in a particular way – as a means toward emancipation from oppression rather than as a form of reflective inquiry (McLaren 2015).

This theoretical foundation makes the concept and its applications vulnerable to several critiques. A key critique of critical global citizenship education literature involves its tendency to establish binary oppositions that simplify complex educational approaches. Andreotti's (2006, 2011) influential distinction between 'soft' and 'critical' global citizenship education exemplifies this rhetorical strategy. Such binary thinking, often prevalent in postcolonial theory, has been criticized (Felsch 2023). Also, binary frameworks can lead to problematic collapsing of distinct educational traditions. For instance, cosmopolitan approaches to global citizenship (Nussbaum 1996; Appiah 2006) have philosophical roots and educational implications quite different from neoliberal frameworks, yet critical scholars conflate these traditions as equally problematic 'non-critical' approaches. Oxley and Morris (2013) highlight this issue in their typology of global citizenship conceptions, demonstrating how the critical/non-critical binary obscures important distinctions between approaches. Ultimately, one could say that this results in the problematization of less radical alternatives as 'neoliberal' or 'neocolonial,' effectively monopolizing the use of the word 'critical'. Such critique suggests the need for a critical reflexivity where critical frameworks themselves are subjected to the same rigorous analysis they apply to other educational traditions.

Other scholars criticize the transformative claims of critical global citizenship education. Standish (2014) questions whether educational approaches can realistically achieve the ambitious social transformation goals they articulate, arguing that many programs lack both the pedagogical depth and institutional support necessary for such outcomes. Similarly, Marshall (2011) critiques the methodological foundations of transformative claims in critical global citizenship education, noting the limited

empirical evidence supporting assertions about its impact on students' worldviews and actions. Irrespective of whether such outcomes can and should be 'measured,' this critique points out that, perhaps, the step from the classroom to practice is quite difficult.

Furthermore, despite its emancipatory objectives, critical global citizenship education remains available primarily to a Western audience, with implementation largely limited to the Global North (Torres and Bosio 2020). Such critique is countered by Yemini (2023) who argues that online education has detached forms of Global Citizenship Education from physical mobility and made it accessible virtually.

Finally, a significant challenge that remains is the practical implementation of critical global citizenship education. Schattle (2008) highlights the persistent gap between theoretical models of global citizenship and their practical realization in educational settings. His research demonstrates how abstract concepts central to critical global citizenship education often fail to translate into pedagogical approaches that effectively engage students in meaningful action. Gaudelli (2016) further identifies specific pedagogical obstacles in implementation, including assessment difficulties, content selection dilemmas, and tensions between disciplinary requirements and transdisciplinary global issues.

Recognizing this issue of practical implementation, we mobilize over a decade of teaching experience at Erasmus University College Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The college offers an undergraduate (bachelor's) degree in Liberal Arts & Sciences to roughly 600 students and explicitly aims to educate students towards reflecting on their role as critical world citizens. Making this aim explicit has proven an institutional challenge since the start of the programme (in 2013) and, consequently, the role of activism in the classroom remains disputed. Whereas some regard protest as merely one of the ways to practice a critical attitude, others consider it a fundamental component that one must embrace to be authentic critical world citizens. This debate has repeatedly resulted in significant friction within the community.

These and earlier instances of discontent speak to a shared experience among students. Namely, the lack of a common understanding of what it means to bring theory into practice and defining the role of higher education institutions in doing so.

It appears to us that one way to start tackling such complex matters is to go beyond the complex skills prescribed in the literature by identifying a tangible set of skills applicable to undergraduate education in interdisciplinary settings and dare to ask how we teach those skills? It is precisely that challenge that stands at the core of this article.

3. Method

This article describes a teaching innovation project exploring critical global (world) citizenship in Dutch higher education. Taking our interdisciplinary Liberal Arts & Sciences bachelor programme as a microcosm of the university at large, we investigated what it means to be a critical world citizen, what skills are required to be a critical world citizen, and how to teach these skills effectively.

The project yielded both theoretical insights and practical outcomes, notably an online toolbox featuring nine interconnected skills and dozens of corresponding teaching activities. The contents of this toolbox result from a two-directional approach that combines

learnings from academic literature (top-down) with an elaborate practice-based stock-taking exercise within Erasmus University College (bottom-up).

We set up a participatory educational design project (Smith et al. 2025) inspired on Delphi studies (Lamoureaux, Van Soelen Kim, and Koundinya 2024) to gain insight into how critical world citizenship is mobilized within undergraduate education. Aware of the need to balance participation and practice (Cumbo and Selwyn 2022), we actively involved students, staff and alumni, to co-establish circulating understandings. Conscious of the risk of limited impact of educational change proposals (Janssen, Könings, and Van Merriënboer 2017), we were eager to map current teaching praxis within our organization, as a proxy for tools with proven efficiency and low implementation thresholds.

In our participatory educational design project, we ran two rounds of focus groups. To capture current understandings and practices, we conducted eight three-hour focus groups over two rounds with a mix of teaching staff and active students. Staff members were invited through a double selection process: first, a thematic scan of our course catalogue led to a target audience of about one third of our teaching personnel.[2]

Second, we ensured representation from all departments (Life Sciences, Economics and Business, Social Sciences and Humanities) and various levels of seniority. Students were selected (at least two per session) based on their active involvement in our programme.

The initial round of focus groups (in Spring 2022) used three exercises to map definitions and practices of critical world citizenship (CWC). First, participants brought objects symbolizing critical world citizenship for them. These varied from mirrors and cheese slicers to paintings and pictures or books. Second, participants shared their definitions by posting on a whiteboard followed by discussion. Thirdly, participants created a Mentimeter word cloud with skills they deemed essential for teaching CWC. The outcomes of this first round were presented in an intermediary report which listed a preliminary set of ten skills. This list served as input for the second round of focus groups.

The second round (held in Spring 2023) focused on how identified skills are currently taught at EUC, and on potential improvements. After discussing first-round outcomes, participants exchanged teaching activities and linked these to specific skills. This yielded about fifteen exercises for each skill and facilitated categorizing teaching approaches.

For privacy and ethical reasons, focus groups were not recorded. Instead, a scribe took elaborate notes during the sessions and complemented these afterwards. Outcomes were summarized, ranked on frequency of their mentioning and analysed through visual thematic analysis (see Figure 1). Similar methods were merged to enhance clarity, and feedback on initial outcomes revealed that some skills overlapped, leading us to combine certain skills and add ‘fun and failure’ as a final component.

Lastly, we expanded our research by engaging additional targeted stakeholders actively involved in curriculum design and support staff to join the conversation, sometimes in parallel and sometimes subsequently to the focus group sessions. These discussions enriched CWC interpretations, associated skills, and how to practically teach these. The resulting toolbox offers resources for educators seeking to incorporate critical world citizenship into their modules.

Figure 1. Visual thematic analysis of CWC skills.

4. Outcomes

Combining these two rounds of bottom-up analysis with a literature review, we designed an online toolbox (TeachEUR 2024). An overview of its content is given in Table A1 (see appendix). We do not claim that these nine skills offer a novel way to teach CWC. Rather, the novelty of this format lies in it bringing together nine essential skills with a pairing of corresponding exercises that can easily be unpacked and integrated into teaching activities. Another contribution is that CWC is hereby made more tangible, contributing to raising awareness and offering concrete ways to implement critical thinking. In this sense, we present a pedagogical platform that can be useful to teachers and students alike. In short, ours is not so much conceptual renewal but rather a didactic innovation.

The toolbox is structured along one same typology for each skill. We first provide a detailed description of the competency (e.g. listening) and its relation to critical world citizenship education. We then add teaching activities divided into three different sub-levels, depending on the amount of time they require to be completed and whether they can be graded: tips & tricks; teaching activities; assignments. The first level, tips and tricks, are low-threshold measures that teachers can integrate without much effort and regardless of content-related constraints. A subsequent category of activities then features more elaborate exercises that require slightly more effort and/or time to fit into teaching modules. Lastly, we also included concrete assignments that can be emulated or adapted by teaching staff interested in assessing students' skills or in charting a learning curve.

We brought together our inventory of EUC experiences with existing expertise on teaching innovation within Erasmus University Rotterdam, most notably by

collaborating with Risbo under the umbrella of the Community for Learning and Innovation. This allowed us to streamline items in three subcategories as a coherent whole and further anchored the toolbox within our institution's digital landscape as part of TeachEUR, a platform promoting active learning across the university.

Before elaborating, we draw specific attention to the first and last skill, which together form the fundament of the toolbox. The first skill is patience, as it stands as a precondition to acquire all other skills. To grow, develop and learn, patience is essential. It is possibly the most difficult skill to acquire, especially in today's fast-paced society, but remains a crucial part of developing CWC skills. Fun and failure, similarly, hold an essential part in the toolbox. One participant observed that students aspiring to master all CWC skills must possess angelic qualities. This, of course, is unrealistic. It is of great importance to allow students to fail and to encourage them to have fun. Without patience, fun and failure, acquiring the CWC skills would be a tedious, impossible task.

In the coming section, we discuss in depth two additional skills, to highlight how we imagine their operationalization in the classroom.

4.1. Information literacy

Information literacy stood out as one of the most important skills for aspiring critical world citizens. Our participants found the ability to assess the quality of any kind of data or knowledge an essential tool to empower young individuals in navigating the massive streams of information circulating in the digital age. Critically evaluating authors, sources, narratives, discourses, and agendas is crucial to assess the value of information. Information literacy can only be acquired with due attention for the process of knowledge production and the intentions of all actors involved, from sender to medium to recipient.

In the literature on information literacy, emphasis often revolves around the credibility and reliability of sources. For example, Sarah Birrell Ivory urges students to become 'gatekeepers' of information able to 'filter potential knowledge' (Ivory 2021, 97). To foster students' capacity in measuring such qualities, we developed an assignment called 'Weekly News Analysis' in which we ask students to identify passages in their items that allows them to attribute a point of view. Crucially, we ask students to position their selected news item on an XY axis like the one featured by Ivory (see Figure 2). This trains students to critically evaluate the strength of knowledge and evidence that can be gathered from a self-chosen item.

Below, we elaborate two examples of resources that are worth discussing in undergraduate-level courses and that are relevant to our fields of study, respectively comparative politics and area studies (WV); Middle Eastern Studies (JD) and Balkan Studies (KS).

The first example is the *al-Jazeera* news network. This Qatar-based outlet is a favourite among many who seek a non-Western view to challenge Western mainstream news broadcasters. Scholars acknowledge that since its launch in 1996, al-Jazeera 'has enduringly reshaped the landscape of global news reporting' (Miladi and Mellor 2021, 313). When we explore the credibility and reliability of al-Jazeera's newsstreams, we indeed find a tendency to report from a different (pan-Arab and, some say, pan-Islamist) angle (Abdul-Nabi 2022) but that angle is hardly without bias. In fact, al-Jazeera has arguably been a public diplomacy tool privileging the perspective of (Islamist)

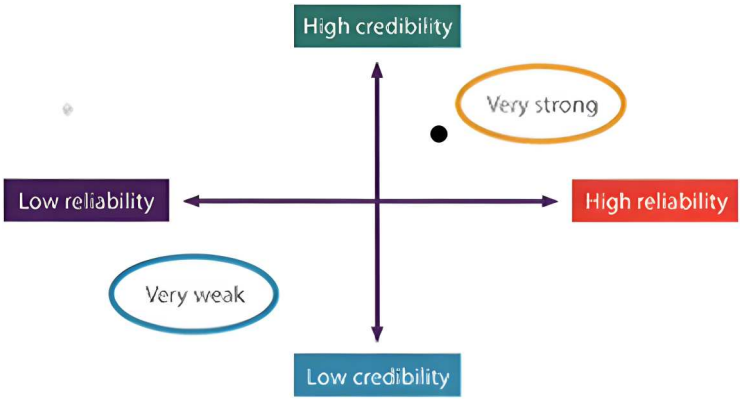

Figure 2. Example of a student positioning their selected news item on an axis to assess the strength of its credibility and reliability (Excerpt from a student enrolled in SBS208 in 2021–2022).

revolutionaries during the Arab uprisings in Egypt and Syria (Cherribi 2017); it has been said to reject violent radicalization as promoted by ISIS and affiliates (Satti 2015) and has been accused of promoting (foreign) policy issues dear to the Qatari elite (Kraidy 2008; Pourhamzavi and Pherguson 2015), all under the banner of offering views from the Arab street. It is important, therefore, to understand this background of al-Jazeera as a 'discursive propagator' (Al-Rawi and Iskandar 2022) in subsequent uses of the network's news items.

The second example is the *Journal of Democracy*. This case is particularly interesting because it publishes peer-reviewed academic journal articles, a category Ivory (2021) would qualify as 'highly credible', the highest degree in her qualification. The *Journal of Democracy* is indeed highly regarded by many scholars in the field and often ranked as an A-level journal. For example, Web of Science gives it a journal impact factor of 4.3, making it one of the very top journals in political science.

On its website, the *Journal of Democracy* confirms its status as 'one of the premier authorities in the field of democracy studies' and proudly states that the journal is published by The Johns Hopkins University Press which is 'America's oldest and one of its largest university presses', a prestigious and credible publisher. At the same time, the websites states that the *Journal of Democracy* 'is part of the International Forum for Democratic Studies, housed within the National Endowment for Democracy (NED)' (https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/about/; retrieved 29 April 2025).

This affiliation is significant because the NED is deeply connected to US policymakers and has an outspoken political agenda (Scott and Steele 2005; Sukhorolska 2016; Geoghegan 2018). Established at the initiative of President Reagan 'in 1983, the National Endowment for Democracy was mandated by an Act of the US Congress as an independent, nonprofit, nongovernmental grant-making organization dedicated to strengthening democratic institutions and values around the world' (https://www.ned.org/about/history/; retrieved 29 April 2025). While, obviously, the transparency of the *Journal of Democracy* is commendable and its scholarly contributions are widely acknowledged, it is worth making students aware that even such a credible outlet is a legitimate object of scrutiny.

4.2. Positionality

Among the skills expected from critical world citizens, positionality was a recurrent mention across all respondent groups even though it took participants considerable effort to describe what exactly they meant by positionality. Eventually, we came to agree on a basic understanding of positionality as the ability of individuals to reflect on where one stands as a person in relation to one's society and in the world.[3]

One useful way to reflect on our personal position as a researcher in society is by mapping one's own background and unpacking those components of our identity we have often taken for granted, as suggested by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019, 4). Engaging in such an exercise, we found, provides for an enriching experience with insightful conversations even among people who know each other rather well.

Obviously, such positionality exercises take courage, time, and a safe environment.

One example of how we can challenge students to reflect on their worldview and revisit long-held assumptions occurred when we asked participants to bring an item that signified CWC to them. When the discussion turned to positionality, one student showed a poster with the letters AMDG; a Latin abbreviation that translates as 'for the greater glory of God'. This participant explained how that slogan had seemed everlasting and omnipresent during his adolescence. At high school in Zimbabwe, these words had formed a crucial element of his education and self-development. Then, during his sociology classes and gender studies course at university, this same student had come to understand global social structures and his position within them. For one course, he had been asked to go to a place he would not normally visit and, to him, such a place was a gay bar. While going there, he was confronted with his biases about gay men. He recalled how that experience had taught him to critically examine the teachings of his upbringing and his own position.

Conversely, at least for one of the authors the multiple engagements with religiously obedient students and with fellow (Muslim) citizens has nurtured insights as to how specific (culturally Catholic rather than merely Christian) and how privileged his own upbringing (within a harmonious family in a peaceful, prosperous West-European urban setting) really was and, subsequently, what complexities this carried when relating to others while attempting to understand war-torn societies from a scholarly perspective.

Indeed, at teaching-intensive institutions like ours, the challenge we face is not so much that of a researcher trying to 'make choices when moving from outsider to insider roles (and between them) [to] better understand the political dynamics that underlie our research projects' (Kingston in Clark and Cavatorta 2018, 242). As Western white fe/male scholars teaching on areas where colonial legacy is arguably at its most problematic, we face complex relationships with our object of study.[4]

As lecturers, we are required to adopt a position as individuals scholarly engaged with a region with which we may have personal ties or feelings toward. Indeed, we try to challenge 'dominant views on the region and the assumed impossibility of cooperation among scholars connected to different parts' of that region (Stavrevska et al. 2023, 3).

For one of us, personal connections to the region she studies greatly influences her work, having to balance insider and outsider perspectives simultaneously. In analysing positionality concerns in Balkan studies, Stavrevska et al. (2023), argue that the only way to counter colonial, violent discourses is through 'radical, collective and

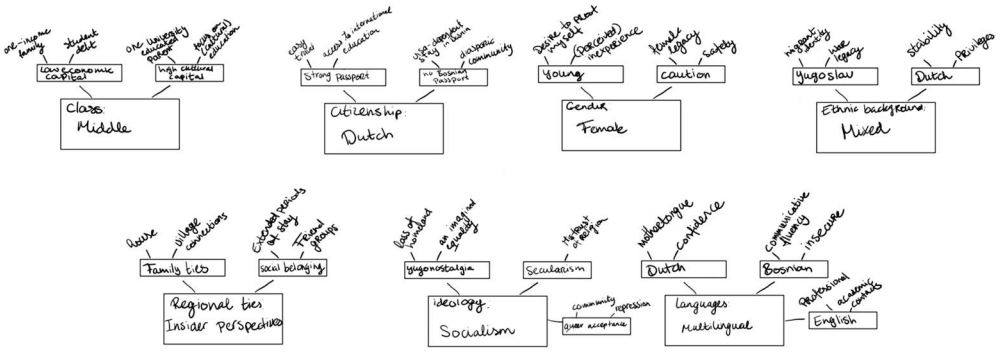

Figure 3. Example positionality map.

uncomfortable self-reflection' (4). In attempting to exercise such 'radical reflexivity' (4), our author finds that her connections to the field are strongly influenced by her father's migrant and war experiences, and by relationships with her friends who grew up in the homeland her father left. As an example of a toolbox exercise, her positionality mapping can be seen below (Figure 3). Assigning such an exercise to students can be useful to reflect on their positionality in a structured manner.

Both information literacy and identifying positionality are valuable skills for critical world citizens. The teaching methods offered in our toolbox can help educators operationalize these skills into the classroom.

5. Discussion

It has become apparent throughout that a critical world citizen is driven by the desire to make a positive and inclusive social impact. A skill any critical world citizen needs is being capable of situating, evaluating, and interrogating a multitude of perspectives and positions. Ideally, they grasp how certain knowledge was produced and what assumptions it is built upon.

Besides, as we have attempted to demonstrate, a critical world citizen is not only critical towards the outside world but can also reflect on oneself. Though far from an exhaustive effort, our toolbox provides tools educators can use to incorporate a productive engagement with students' positionalities in the classroom.

At the same time, despite feeling a responsibility to work towards inclusive social change, our findings suggest that we need to remain realistic about the impact individuals can have on the world at large. To avoid the disappointment and perhaps even cynicism that some seem to experience when they see little immediate effect of their efforts, we propose that a dose of humbleness and pragmatism is required to understand and deal effectively with the individual's limited scope of action.

The value of this toolbox on critical world citizenship skills lies in its capacity to serve as a point of entry, be it in a role of student or as a teacher, as novice or expert. In our efforts to bring critical world citizenship into educational practice, we aim for critical world citizens who dare to engage with the big issues of their own time; we equip our graduates with knowledge and skills to intervene in society in ways that contribute to a better, more durable, and just reality.

On one hand, this involves the need to think beyond immediate surroundings and engage transnationally. We do so by encouraging collaboration and constructive criticism to continually improve ourselves and our surroundings. On the other hand, fostering critical world citizenship skills can lead to uncomfortable situations in which tensions within our community are laid bare. We do not claim to solve these issues, rather we believe that the skills in this toolbox are an invitation to engage in such discussions with courage and authenticity.

The tension between viewing the university as a mere training ground or approaching it as a battleground of ideas is nothing new. In his days, Desiderius Erasmus proposed a humanist approach to confront major societal transitions in a world moving from isolationism towards incremental globalism (Van Raak and Van Ruler 2024). It is in the critical attitude Erasmus had that we see potential to inspire users of this toolbox. Navigating big issues of our times can be daunting. Many of our students feel overwhelmed by the burden of future challenges.

For example, our discussions on positionality can play out in practice when we relate the CWC concept to some of the most contentious issues at play within our university: the war on Gaza. Most of us found ourselves in roles where we are expected to take a stance. Beyond a dominant attitude of abhorrence and worry, many experienced feelings of helplessness and being lost, regardless of one's sympathies. Besides this shared feeling, multiple questions haunted us, as individuals and as a community: what to do in response? How to make sense of claims and reports related to it? What implications could this have for our daily lives? How to deal with the complexity of this conflict in an educational setting? Like others, we also wondered: what does critical world citizenship look like in a situation like this?

For some within our institution, critical world citizenship means: ignore the war and avoid it affecting our workplace; as critical world citizens we must be mature enough to overcome our differences. Others disagree with such views and believe that critical world citizenship urges us to speak out against injustice and act in favour of the marginalized. A third posture believes in engaging with the war's actors and mitigate its consequences. For those members, critical world citizenship means: addressing issues in society (however painful) by starting with yourself.

In all cases, the discomforting questions underpinning such controversies created considerable tension. The challenge for us as educators is to make the tension productive and, identify where exactly our agency lies.

We are aware that teaching critical world citizenship skills is a tall order that is unlikely to be ever fully accomplished. We hope a toolbox can offer a tangible starting point for students looking what skills to hone and, for curious teachers, perhaps some concrete activities or exercises to experiment with in class. In many ways, our toolbox is a trade-off rather than an end-product: it is a selection of the broad array of skills, exercises, and resources available. We insist that this selection is only one of different answers to help manage expectations of change-ability that we may harbour as students, staff or practitioners. Future research will undoubtedly add to and adjust the skills, teaching methods, as well as theoretical observations we have identified. In this sense, these skills need to be permanently re-invented and continuously re-achieved (Lechner et al. 2025).

Building on the lessons learned in conducting this study, getting critical about critical world citizenship means at least five things. First comes the awareness that it is personal

in its application. This requires us to think thoroughly about the scale and scope of our aspirations. If we want our efforts towards a better future to be effective, it is essential that the causes of our mobilization are personally anchored and find a tangible manifestation in our immediate environments.

Despite students' dedicated efforts and teachers' best intentions, it is often impossible to make a clear short-term impact. Staying close to one's immediate environment and embracing a strategy for long-term, value driven commitment might alleviate some of these concerns.

Getting critical about critical world citizenship means – second – that we must avoid situations where students feel overwhelmed by the burden of current challenges. Students hear about very serious societal problems daily. At the same time, our education claims to prepare young people for the future and make a tangible contribution to the pressing issues of our times. This can put a considerable burden on students: on the one hand, they are expected to deal with these societal issues and, on the other, they are repeatedly introduced to the systemic issues of this world. It is important to note that this should not refrain us from engaging with issues playing out farther. Rather, it means that we should avoid growing frustrated by factors beyond our control. Feeling paralysed or growing cynical is probably a worse outcome than the realization that one's individual impact might be limited.

Third, getting critical about critical world citizenship means that we as educators may have to help learners in making CWC personal, tangible – and feasible. The role of teachers can be to guide students wondering where, when, how to be critical, when to listen and when to speak up. Put simply, we need to help students to think without telling them what to think. Doing so allows us to critically debate, if one is committed to identifying and combatting global inequalities and injustice, what constitutes an inequality? From what perspective? And to which audience? This entails the acceptance of different communities' perspectives and interpretations and requires from the learner a willingness to be flexible and accept multi-perspectivity. This unpredictability means that, as teachers, we have to offer our students the possibility to take positions that go against our personal convictions. That liberty is essential if we insist on 'questioning how facts (figures), concepts (representation) or values (freedom) are being 'used in practice, not just in theoretically' (Fosl and Baggini 2020, 283); *examples between brackets added by authors*.

If we want our university to be a platform where various opinions can be voiced, discussed, and interrogated in a safe and open environment, then we believe – fourthly – that getting critical about critical world citizenship means that we actively explore (new) means to generate safe space, facilitate brave spaces and foster language that can conquer cleavages. Doing so might sometimes feel like walking a thin line. Especially in times of heightened political tension.

Such activities can provide for what Nagle (2024), drawing on sociological analysis of power sharing in divided societies calls 'bridging social capital': a form of social capital to foster inclusivity and bind communities together across cleavages. Such activities also require respect for positionality of all participants – and may lead to unexpected dilemmas about the way we organize teaching.

Getting critical about critical world citizenship means – fifthly – that we should appreciate the potential as well as the limits of activism. Clearly, affirmative stances

are of major contribution in challenging the status quo and, as such, they stand at the heart of democratic politics (Moreira 2022). At the same time, speaking out on sensitive issues with strategic provocation and embodied indignation carries dangers because it can backfire and fuel polarization, or fragmentation within the community. In a community of critical thinkers, dissent should not only be tolerated but embraced. To guarantee this, we should carefully avoid criticality turning into dogmatism. A potential way out of this conundrum is by making it feasible to practice critique in a tangible and personal way within our programme. We should thus aim to make CWC personal (not: universal), to make it feasible (not: unsurmountable) and make it tangible (not: imperceptible). The role of teachers in this is essential.

6. Conclusion

Students experience an explosion of knowledge about societal challenges in a short time span. They need to translate this often-difficult reality into ways they can cope with. This means that students might feel a strong urge to do something meaningful to tackle global warming, genocide, and other injustice or inequalities. CWC can offer opportunities to escape the trappings of a theoretic, abstract-level academic programme.

In this paper, we have aimed to bridge this gap between theory and practice, by proposing a concrete skillset that can be applied in multiple higher education curricula. Existing literature shows CWC as rooted in theoretical frameworks of decolonial, social-justice oriented thought, often presented in binary oppositions. Despite the existence of several interconnected skills in the literature, we set out to address this gap and provide an overview of tangible interdisciplinary skills and options to implement these into teaching. Therefore, over a period of two years, we have performed a Delphi study at Erasmus University College by systematically exploring ways in which CWC is understood and taught. By conducting two rounds of focus groups, and comparing these outcomes to the existing literature, we presented nine CWC skills in an online toolbox and zoomed in on two of them: information literacy and positionality. Besides offering hands-on tools for students and educators, our enquiry also enables us to identify several lessons about critique in higher education. First, critique should be personal in its application, not universal. Second, these skills must be applied in a tangible manner, by accepting the feasibility of an individual's scope of reach and focusing efforts on a limited set of issues. Third, the role of teachers is crucial in acquiring these skills, as they can craft opportunities for students to find paths out of the overwhelming realities they (will) need to confront. Fourth, when applying CWC skills, learners should be aware of their positionality and the need for a safe and a brave space to develop criticality. Lastly, we propose that activism is most fruitful when learners are encouraged to avoid polarization; thereby reiterating the need for critique to be personal, feasible and grounded. Overall, tension on practicing CWC will remain; rolling out a toolbox will not solve that. However, realizing that there always will be tensions as well as opportunities to discuss can serve as a helpful beacon. In that sense, we should remind ourselves – students and teachers – that tackling societal challenges is best done one at a time and by arming oneself with patience. The biggest benefit our students have is time and long-term perspective.

Notes

1. https://www.eur.nl/en/themes-0/critical-world-citizenship.
2. In the EUC course catalogue 2021-2022, fifteen out of 118 courses (somehow) mentioned critical world citizenship in their description. The term 'critical world citizenship' occurred 4 times while 'critical thinking' had 3 occurrences, 'critical thinkers' 2, 'critical' 62 and 'critically' 25. Based on this filtering, we invited twenty course coordinators from all four departments to join the focus groups.
3. For an accessible overview of positionality, see: Seale and Rivas (2025) p.37. These authors think of positionality as part of research ethics that play out 'at two levels: the pragmatic level of processes and practices, and a broader level which focuses on the situated nature or research knowledge' (p.37).
4. Clark and Cavatorta (2018) provide an insightful discussion of positionality in relation to Middle Eastern Studies. They understand positionality as 'the complexities of status and power relations as well as identity shaping the interactions between the researcher and the participants and ultimately the knowledge that is produced' and, as such, view it as 'an increasingly important aspect of research because it speaks to the self-awareness that researchers have to display in order to avoid biases that might invalidate their research findings' (p.11-12).

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Appendix

Table A1. Visual overview of critical world citizenship skills toolbox (TeachEUR, 2014).

Skill	Description	Tips & tricks	Teaching activities	Assignments
Patience	• Calm perseverance; • Ability to identify when to sit back and listen, when to speak up; • Long-term thinking; • Underpins all skills	• Check-ins	• One day without talking	
Information literacy	• Evaluate reliability, credibility of information (types) to contextualize knowledge and its production	• Background check • Find own sources • Make pedagogical approach explicit • Reading questions • Harris profile	• Data visualization • Comparing news items	• Film analysis • Case study
Listening	• Gathering perspectives; • Facilitating personal connection • Hearing all voices	• Changing the seating plan • Check-ins • Removing tables • Participant observation • Make space for fragility	• Debate • Interviews • Post grading dialogue • Sensory walk	• Opposing viewpoints
Self-Reflection	• Learning from (own) mistakes and success; • Attention for (self-)analysis of actions, feelings and thoughts; • Focused on DOING	• Doing something badly • Weekly notes • Role models • Shattering the mirror • Critical assumptions • Mapping knowledge genealogies	• Ongoing reflection • Post grading dialogue	• Reflection paper • Experience based paper

(*Continued*)

Table A1. Continued.

Skill	Description	Tips & tricks	Teaching activities	Assignments
Open mindedness	• Openness to different value systems – curiosity, respect and humility – willingness to embrace/ learn from cultural diversity	• Devil's advocate • Contradictory readings	• Community connection • Close reading	
Empathy	• Intellectually: recognizing frames of reference and ability to shift between them; • Inter-personally: connection, emotional atonement (what do they hear/see/say/do?)	• Informal introductions • Share a song • Film screenings	• Video analysis of someone/ something you don't like • Interview with an actor • Climbing the empathy wall	• Film/book review • Perspective paper
Positionality	• Reflection on one's relations to knowledge (production); • Situatedness of experiences and perspectives; • Focused on BEING	• Positionality discussion	• Mapping positionality • Opposing viewpoints	• Position paper • Perspective paper
Autonomy	• Liberty to act or decide independently; • Requires courage aimed at (self-) empowerment; • Carries responsibility towards others and their rights	• Reading questions • Own readings • Peer-to-peer feedback	• Student Led Tutorial • Research Project/ Proposal	• Open essay • Mindmapping • Peer-to-peer feedback • Individual presentations
Fun & Failure	• Becoming a critical world citizen is a constant challenge; • An urge to learn from mistakes while making fun together	• Alternative grading • Extracurricular activities • Doing something badly • Individual presentations		

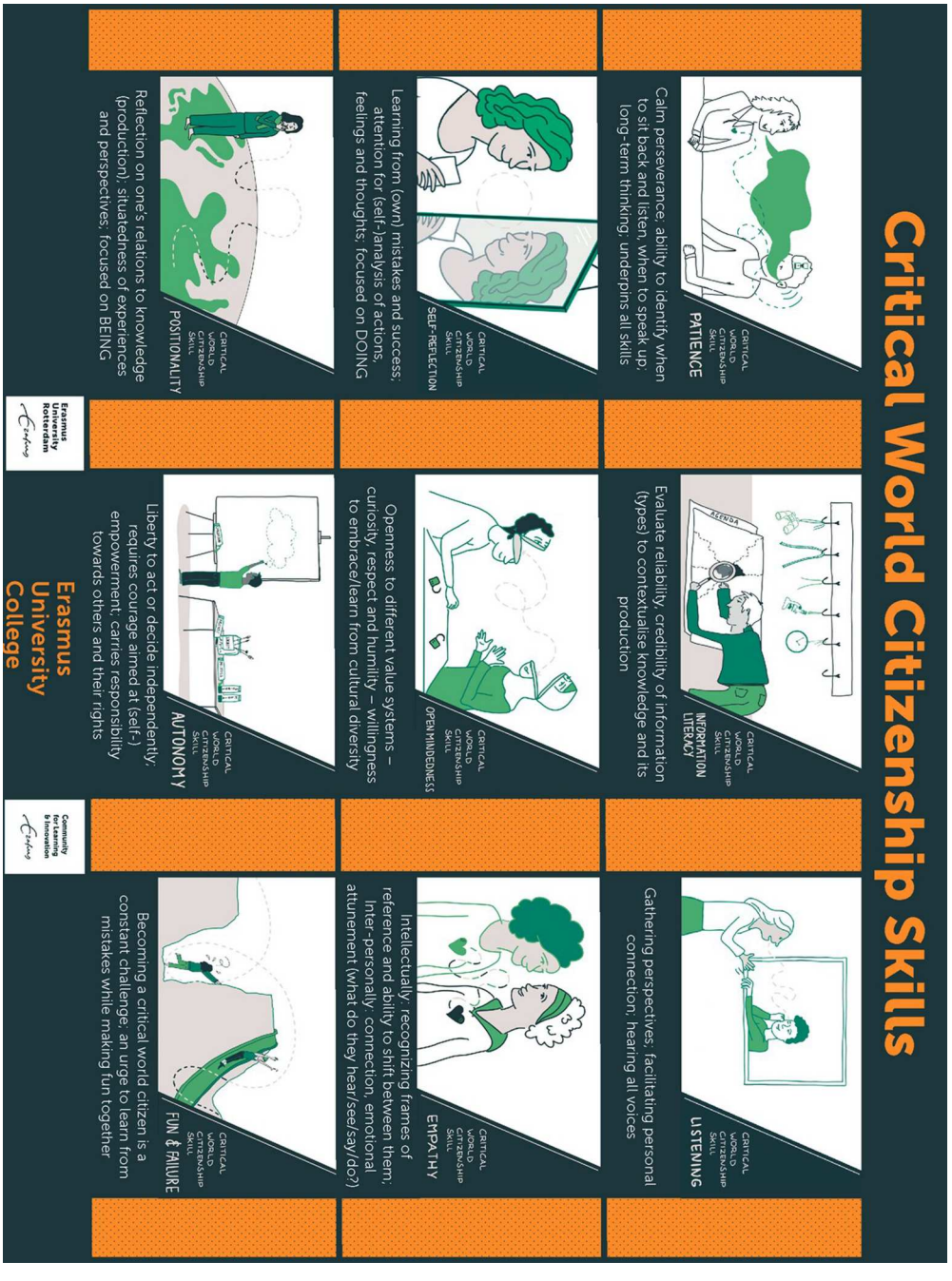

Figure A1. Visual overview of critical world citizenship skills.