

*Most of the time we introduce ourselves with what differentiates us from others.  
Have you ever thought of yourself as a person from the Milky Way Galaxy?  
Do we ever think of ourselves as just humans?*

— Abuubakar Ally, 18, Tanzania, United World College-USA

# A New Science of Leadership for Citizens of the Milky Way

By Catherine O'Neill Grace

As a co-author (with psychologists Michael Thompson and Lawrence Cohen) of *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*, I have spent much of the past few years researching the lives of children in the microcosm of schools. I know there are many wonderful moments in a school day, but I also know that schools are not sweet places. Any day can be ferociously painful. The social cruelty in children's lives is out in the open, right under everyone's nose. I also know that schools, as human communities, have the capacity to reconcile, and I recognize that not much separates us from the bonds of love and friendship.

Lately, I have been wondering if the same is true of communities on the regional, national, and international scale. There are wonderful days and bitter ones. We seem to know a great deal about the causes of hostile behavior, but very little about how to ameliorate the unthinkable violence that unfolds daily.

As an exercise in perspective, I imagined the Earth's predicaments from the edge of the Milky Way, as Abuubakar Ally suggests. The interdependence among all people and nations demands fresh, creative, and innovative approaches, yet I see the enormous complexity of issues such as the Nigerian population forecast, for instance. I see indigenous traditions that inform modern notions of sustainability. I see solutions that involve multiple perspectives, whole systems approaches, and the convergence of art, science, industry, and policy.

How can this generation produce global leaders with the skills to handle these new and escalating challenges?

To find out, I decided to ask John Braman, an educational innovator and leading proponent of youth leadership development. I knew that ten years ago, as president of the Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS), he founded the Global Youth Leadership Institute (GYLI), and that he has been active in youth development in Africa, Asia, Australia, Central America, Mexico and Europe.

## **The State of Global Education in Schools Worldwide**

Braman shares my curiosity about the state of global education and how schools are adapting and adjusting to what might be another wave of change. Last year, he conducted the Independent School Survey of 140 schools in 17 countries on five continents. First, he found a range of definitions for the term "global education." He found that global education encompasses classroom-based instruction, international student exchange, travel programs, and virtual exchanges, as well as elements of language instruction, diversity education, community service, and ethical education. In some schools, the same person is tasked with overseeing several of these subsets of global education. There are clearly front-runner institutions with whole-school approaches. Predictable impediments to innovation were identified: crowded schedules, tight budgets, lack of



*Leadership development can incorporate a variety of mindfulness practices as tools for regulating mental states in stressful situations. Physical and emotional self-care is part of the leadership journey.*

commitment from the top, and debate over what global competency means. (View the full survey [here](#).)

“There is general agreement that international travel and summer programs can accentuate the glamorous,” Braman says. “They are expensive, and often benefit only a few members of the school community. The fascination with the exotic is understandable, but I’m looking for evidence-based outcomes that increase learning and improve the odds for a more peaceful and sane world. That means young people who know how to build community, respond to suffering, interrupt violence, and find innovative solutions to increasingly interconnected and intractable problems. And I am always looking for ways that the learning of a few can be shared so that the whole community benefits when the learner returns home.”

“A new science of leadership is needed,” says Braman, “one that requires a focus, intensity, and pedagogy beyond our

*This is not a call to discard traditional ways of knowing. On the contrary, it is a challenge to make innovative use of traditional practices in a way that offers the possibility of compassionate and imaginative leadership in a struggling world.*

— John Braman

normal concept of schooling. This is not a call to discard traditional ways of knowing. On the contrary, it is a challenge to make innovative use of traditional practices in a way that offers the possibility of compassionate and imaginative leadership in a struggling world. That’s why the open canvas of out-of-school time is so opportune. It allows for intellectual and spiritual rigor without pressurizing the school’s schedule or fixating on academic data that may not be relevant.”

## A Prototype for the New Science of Leadership

Last year, when asked by a prominent school to start up a brand-new global leadership program, he had just the opportunity he was looking for: to combine research from the Independent School Survey with practices tested out in diverse settings. United World College-USA asked him to design and implement a two-week “short course” as part of its strategic plan to extend the impact of a program established by Kurt Hahn in 1962. Its core program is a two-year International Baccalaureate degree. The short course would distill elements of that degree program and offer a Certificate in Intercultural Leadership.

After Braman and his colleagues recruited students from 17 nations around the world, Global Leadership Forum (GLF) was launched in 2011 with 40 students and teachers. Participation was truly global, although the program would take place in New Mexico, challenging the assumption that global learning requires travel outside the United States. The young women and men came from rural and urban parts of Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Japan, China, Colombia, Kenya, Libya, New Zealand, Senegal, Swaziland, Tanzania, and the United States.

African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Caucasian students from the United States reflected American diversity. There was socioeconomic diversity throughout. Except for a pair of cousins from China, everyone was a complete stranger.

How do you boil down the essentials of a two-year mission and teach it in just two weeks? Perhaps, Braman thought, with an innovative approach that draws on ancient traditions while tapping into the most current uses of technology. GLF moved toward its goals through innovative approaches to learning, from high-touch, low-tech exercises to leveraging the power of new media.

## Low Tech, Deep Learning

Of course, there are advantages to learning experiences that last a semester or two. Students are well known to one another and to the instructional staff, and the scope and sequence of lessons can be broad and deep. How, I asked Braman, can short-term approaches achieve educational objectives and even life-changing outcomes? He referred to “high-intensity, low-technology” methods that can be transformative. These reboot consciousness, speed up group formation, and clear the way for learning. Students participated in mindfulness meditation, yoga, and early morning nature walks led by specialists. If this sounds touchy-feely, it’s useful to remember that Google, Inc. provides staff training in mindfulness to instill a work culture with “a healthy disregard for the impossible.”

In GLF, these practices grounded a process of attentive

listening in sharp contrast to the sped-up, social media world. The linchpin for this was “The Way of Council,” an unmediated, nonlinear process derived from indigenous traditions. Subgroups met under the guidance of trained facilitators. Personal stories relating to culture, race, and identity emerged. “After experience with Council, students find they can speak; they will have their turn and they won’t be judged,” says Braman. “It establishes the norms for a caring community where conflicts can be addressed more openly than usual.”

Council requires adults to be comfortable with a silence that ripens discourse, which is not the first tool in a classroom teacher’s toolbox. Instructors were trained for this new form of discourse. In diverse international groups, the bounty is rich, gathering multicultural perspectives that are a key element in critical thinking. The group begins to see itself as full of resources. Ethnocentric assumptions soften, giving new meaning to critical thinking. The protocol calls for deliberative statements and shuns debate. This slows down communication, a boon for English language learners in a group speaking six languages. Because

## The Way of Council

Neither a discussion nor group therapy, Council promotes the courageous inner work that is the heart of leadership. Youth and adults together explore questions that are often so risky that participants have never before broached them in public:

- ◆ Does my life have meaning and purpose?
- ◆ Do I have gifts that the world wants and needs?
- ◆ Whom and what can I trust?
- ◆ How can I rise above my fears?
- ◆ How do I deal with suffering—my own and that of my family and friends?
- ◆ How am I powerful?

This manuscript from the University of Minnesota outlines the process:

[http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/rjp/resources/rj\\_dialogue\\_resources/Peacemaking\\_Healing\\_Circles/Talking\\_Circles.pdf](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/rjp/resources/rj_dialogue_resources/Peacemaking_Healing_Circles/Talking_Circles.pdf)

I was eager to hear about GLF from a young person who had experienced it directly, Braman connected me with Libyan student Mohamed Bara. Bara probably knows better than anyone at that first summer session that if people don't learn to disagree constructively, it will be harder to solve problems that are ever more complex. He was separated from his family by the warfare in his homeland, escaping to the United States and unable to reach his family even by telephone. For him, Council offered a chance to learn from young people from different parts of the world. At GLF, he says,

"I found—we all found—that we are no different from each other. We talked about important topics regarding our lives; how we are equal and how there were no differences between us—even though we were from different places and different religions."

He soon found himself engaging in deep interfaith dialogue. Bara, a Sunni, and other Muslim students, who are Shia, led a session in which they answered probing but respectful questions about Islam. "They made us like one family; you don't feel a stranger," says Bara of the trust that allowed this conversation to happen.

Now a student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Bara says that he is continuing to talk about topics begun at GLF, including nonviolence. "I am planning to go home to Libya this summer, and I want to share these ideas in my country. There has been a revolution over there, and everybody will be interested in new social ideas."

After Council sessions, staff can make adjustments to upcoming activities based on the social and emotional realities of the community. New learning informs the program as it does in the constructivist classroom, with students' interests and passions leading the process. Interfaith dialogues like Mohamed Bara's, for instance, put youth in the role of educators in workshops they decided to lead. The conversations were neither proselytizing nor polarizing.

### High Tech, Wide Impact

My research about the lives of children in schools has made me well aware that we are barraged by media in this digital age, and many worry that our children's—and our own—ability to concentrate is being eroded. The low-tech elements of GLF ensure that young leaders aren't oblivious to the threats posed by this culture of interruption. At the same time, global leaders need to make use of sophisticated media for constructive change.

In GLF, each student contributed to professionally produced digital stories. The low-tech foundation in the first week of the program became a building block for the high-tech work the

group took on toward the end of the program. Working in groups of six, students learned how to write scripts, interview, use recording equipment, and edit voice recordings for the program's *Stories of Love and Freedom*, which were posted to YouTube. Students learned a profound lesson: telling their own story in public can be one of the most powerful ways to build community. The recordings were used to extend their learning back home, a program requirement. Yacine Sylla, from Senegal, applied her new confidence with media to help create a nationwide television broadcast series, combining practice in the English language with presentations about topics of interest to French-speaking youth in a network of schools.



*Creating media for constructive change included lessons on interviewing, scriptwriting, use of recording equipment, and editing. To hear the voices of the 2011 GLF participants, watch [The Raven](#) and [Colors](#) on YouTube.*

High technology energized an innovative model for democratic, inclusive program development even before the program started. Once accepted into the program, students joined their parents and GLF staff in a virtual conversation about five essential questions undergirding the curriculum. Posted on Google, these questions elicited important ideas and opinions about curriculum development. The questions were as follows (click them to view the conversation that ensued):

- ◆ [What does it mean to be a global citizen?](#)
- ◆ [Is everything OK in the world?](#)
- ◆ [How am I powerful?](#)
- ◆ [What is intercultural leadership?](#)
- ◆ [What will I do with my learning?](#)

The virtual Google meeting space meant that even before students gathered in New Mexico, they were already having important conversations. Abuubakar Ally of Tanzania, an assistant instructor, had this to say in the online forum about what it means to be a global citizen:

“Do you ever think of yourself as a person from the universe, the Milky Way Galaxy, the solar system, the earth, the northern or southern hemisphere and the continent you are from? Do we ever think of ourselves as just humans? To me, being a global citizen is being able to recognize our differences as sources of new ways of dealing with problems.”

### High Touch, Deep Connection

**G**LF was grounded in a theory of youth leadership development that explores race, culture, and socioeconomic diversity in cross-cultural contexts. Instructors were trained to merge theory and practice at every opportunity. Cognitive learning was tested in role-plays to develop skills in conflict resolution, meeting management, planning, interviewing, and bias reduction. Experience-based lessons incorporated a reflective component to make meaning of the cross-cultural homestays and community service activities—or the intergroup conflicts that inevitably arise in the formative stages of group living.

The study of innovation was propelled by uncommonly engaging, complex “games” led by an expert in leadership development. Only dogged persistence, teamwork, outrageous brainstorming, and prototyping surmounted these stubborn challenges. The faculty was trained to weave experiential methods into the day’s lesson plans. A Native American elder led a workshop on cultural sustainability. Students carved and painted willow branches for an indigenous stick ball game, followed by a team competition. The group invented its own entertainment without the use of media or money. Skits, songs, spoken word, musical performances, and dancing became the rituals of a fun, human community.

### Social Entrepreneurship

**T**he application of new learning when participants returned home was a fundamental purpose of the program. The curriculum for this was the Leader Learning Plan (LLP), woven through all stages of the program. Originally developed at the Harvard Principals’ Center for adult learners, it was modified for youth leadership development when Braman founded GYLI in 2002. Leadership as a holistic, learning journey, as opposed to a checklist of tasks, is one of the underpinnings of the LLP.

With the LLP, students mapped out what they expected they would need to learn along their paths of service, as well as the support they might need within their spheres of influence.

## Social Entrepreneurship and the Leader Learning Plan

Just as entrepreneurs change the face of business, social entrepreneurs act as the change agents for society, seizing opportunities others miss and improving systems, inventing new approaches, and creating solutions to change society for the better. Community service programs that address underlying causes can demonstrate this. The Leader Learning Plan (LLP) structures a creative process that is adaptive to new conditions, realistic about challenges, and inclusive of holistic learning.

Click [here](#) for a simple template of the LLP. The Clinton Global Initiative expresses public “commitments” that are good examples of social entrepreneurship, as this video demonstrates:

<http://new.livestream.com/cgi/cgiu2012>

“Students become adept at identifying three domains of their lives — interpersonal, cognitive, and intrapersonal, or what we call the I-C-I model,” Braman says. “Leading requires adaptation and change, and the learning is usually constant in all three of these domains.” In a step-by-step fashion, students developed a vision for a project they felt passionate about.

Meghna Purkayastha, from Los Angeles, for instance, felt passionate about instilling an ethic of sustainability in her school. She implemented a new project to significantly reduce the amount of plastic waste produced in the cafeteria. She inspired fellow students to switch from plastic cutlery to reusable bamboo or metal utensils. As she puts it, “Sustainability can embody a continuation of life, a person’s goals, a nation’s. In my LLP, sustainability encourages hard work and a change in attitude that becomes very important in transforming yourself and the world.”

Implementation plans were critically analyzed, with feedback from the whole group. A key part of the LLP is identifying the kind of support and ongoing learning students will need for success. By the end of the process, students were aware of what they needed to know on an ongoing basis, how to take care of themselves in the face of inevitable challenges, how to work

within their spheres of influence, and how to address the emotional challenges inherent in their projects. The LLP became the “demonstration of learning” required to earn a Certificate in Intercultural Leadership. It also provided the program’s multiplier effect by extending the learning of a few into the public arena of school, college, and community.

### A “Path with Heart” – Merging Skills and Abilities

I asked Braman which skills he thought were most essential for global leaders. His operating assumption is that a sense of deep purpose, almost like a calling, is a pre-condition. Everyone can find this “path with heart” when they are connected to core values, rooted in their personal cultural identity, and dedicated to the common good. This kind of leadership responds to the best interest of others, whether students, employees, customers, the larger community, or the planet.

Skills and competencies alone are insufficient. Fluency in a language is helpful, for instance, but will not necessarily equip young leaders for the challenges of a community-wide initiative in a multicultural context. Language instruction that incorporates cultural learning is essential, but a global leader needs more. They must be able to identify with individuals across language barriers and cultural differences. He or she has learned to communicate effectively one-on-one across cultural barriers. Diversity trumps homogeneity. Because of the program’s multi-modal design, GLF students without English proficiency were still of great value to the group.

Braman uses the term *capacities* to denote the combination of abilities and skills that enable people to adapt and renew when they move from the known to the unknown at an ever-increasing pace of change. “This may be a new frontier for education. Time will tell,” he says, “since it involves the application of cognitive learning in ways that schools haven’t been designed to do.” He identifies his “wish list”—six capacities for global leaders. (See Sidebar).

Here’s how one GLF participant, Mzwakithi Prestige Shongwe of Zimbabwe, explains this kind of leadership:

*When I think of intercultural leadership, I think of people of variant cultures interchanging perspectives and information smoothly. I think of people who bring peace to people of different cultural beliefs who have been warring for decades, or even centuries. I think of people who can make people, who never thought they shared anything in common, share a meal at a table. I think of intercultural leaders like Nelson Mandela, who, despite the differences in melanin concentration between white and black skin, unified an entire sub-region, Southern Africa.*

## Six Capacities for Global Leaders

- ◆ **Personal Ecology:** To see oneself as only part of the solution in order to be effective, as opposed to having the one right answer, and to adapt accordingly.
- ◆ **Personal Flexibility:** To understand self-identity in new ways when physical and cultural environments change.
- ◆ **Empathic Friendship:** To draw out the best in others and serve their needs with compassion.
- ◆ **Creative Imagination:** To craft new knowledge of benefit to the physical, aesthetic, ethical, or spiritual lives of others.
- ◆ **Ethno-Relativism:** To put aside one’s own cultural assumptions when working cross-culturally.
- ◆ **Intelligent Curiosity:** To challenge paradox and ambiguity in making sense out of nonsense.

The United Nations published this overview of leadership capacities:

[http://asia-pacific.undp.org/practices/capacitydevelopment/documents/080717\\_Leadership\\_paper\\_draft.pdf](http://asia-pacific.undp.org/practices/capacitydevelopment/documents/080717_Leadership_paper_draft.pdf)

### An Evidence-Based Pedagogy

The evidence for the impact of the GLF approach is impressive. In pre- and post-surveys, there were increases in every content area, including conflict resolution skills, intercultural leadership skills, collaborative leadership skills, overcoming stereotypes, critical thinking, media skills, and innovation skills.

Taken all together, the methods of the program point toward a pedagogy that liberates young people from the mythologies that can divide. There are no grades, the group establishes its own norms, the adults are co-learners with students, and the curriculum is developed in collaboration with learners — yet expectations and standards are very high. “There’s very little evaluation in the normal sense, but there is a great deal of support,” says Braman. “Youth — and maybe people in general — release their imaginative potential when they lose their self-



By offering "open space" in the schedule, the program encouraged workshops led by participants on topics about which they were passionate, such as this lesson on Mandarin about two tigers who must share the same mountain.

consciousness; when the environment is not laden with score keeping; and when the orientation is toward how well the community is doing versus how well the individual is doing."

"A reality of our age is separation and anxiety," Braman adds. "How can we expect our future leaders to untangle the complex web of interrelated problems—and stay grounded in a vision for a more peaceful world—if they haven't had the experience of living this way? It's like trying to explain an orange to someone who has not experienced one. Young people touch the substance of this way of living, and it can have an indelible influence."

GLF students "take a deep dive into community—and then they turn outward and take it public when they return home," he says. "We have youth out there strengthening their communities all over the globe. They are learning any new skills they need as they go." As Mohamed Bara says, GLF teaches young people "how to be equal, how to be creative, how to be peaceful, how to be a global leader. You are building a better generation."

Maybe history will show that this generation will prove that categorizing each other as friends or enemies is a false dichotomy. Maybe it will be the one that helped schools discover innovative ways, like GLF, to deliver a new science of leadership that can address the intractable problems that await us. If so, these youth will help us identify as human beings, citizens of the same Milky Way, unable to imagine violent options because we will have the skills to listen, adapt, and reconcile.

---

*Catherine O'Neill Grace, a freelance writer in New York City, is the co-author with Michael G. Thompson and Lawrence Cohen of Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children (Ballantine). She is at work on a memoir about her childhood in India in the 1950s.*