

Wood, Words, Worlds.
Perspective on Global citizenship Education: *A Conversation with*
Carlos Alberto Torres

Simone Leone

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2234-8240>

✉ simone.leone3@unibo.it

Abstract

This interview with Professor Carlos Alberto Torres explores the ethical and pedagogical tensions shaping contemporary Global Citizenship Education (GCED). Moving between fine woodworking, dialogic writing and Freirean critical pedagogy, Torres uses the metaphor of slowness to reflect on academic labour, the value of practice, and the pressures of academic labour. He highlights both the promise and the limitations of GCED: its Western genealogies, its potentially elitist character, and the challenge of balancing access with quality. Rather than proposing a new theoretical model, Torres extends existing critical traditions by foregrounding material practice, intercultural perspectives such as *sumak kawsay* and *Ubuntu*, and the everyday actions through which global responsibility is formed.

Keywords

Global Citizenship Education (GCED); Critical pedagogy; Slowness; Paulo Freire; Intercultural Perspectives.

C.A. Torres' biography

Carlos Alberto Torres is a Distinguished Professor of Education at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he directed the Latin American Centre. He is the founder and director of the Paulo Freire Institute, with branches in São Paulo (co-founded with Freire), Buenos Aires and UCLA, which has become an international hub for research and training. From 2016 to 2020, he held the UNESCO–UCLA Chair in Global Learning and Global Citizenship Education. Previously, he served as President of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES, 1997) and the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES, 2013–2016). His extensive body of work, translated into several languages, explores the political sociology of education, transformations in critical citizenship, and contemporary applications of Freirean pedagogy. Throughout his scholarship, theoretical analysis is consistently intertwined with a commitment to education as a practice of emancipation and global democracy.

Note on the Interview

This piece presents the full version of an interview with Professor Carlos Alberto Torres, conducted during his visit to Bologna in September 2025, when he delivered the seminar The Second Trump Administration and the Crisis of American Democracy, organised by the UNESCO Chair in Global Citizenship Education (GCED) in Higher Education at the University of Bologna. The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

INTERVIEW

Interviewer

Good afternoon, Professor, and thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me. I would like to begin this interview by referring to the seminar you gave this morning in the Department of Philosophy, where you also spoke about the value of slowness - a theme I personally found particularly thought-provoking. It reminded me of a conversation I had with Dr. Annalisa Quinto over dinner when we were both attending ECER 2025 in Belgrade. That exchange, together with your reflections today, led me to think about my

own position as a PhD candidate, and more broadly about the academic world, where the pressure to publish often seems to exceed the time available for careful reading and genuine reflection. In your view, how can this tension be reconciled with the idea of slow and meaningful research?

C.A. Torres

Well, it's interesting, because when I think about this idea of being slow, it's about practice. It's about your practice. And here we have a dilemma - or, if you put it in English, a conundrum. Somebody like me, who has published so much, suddenly is talking about being slow. That doesn't mean that you must publish slowly. It means that you must find an angle in your life in which being slow increases your connection with nature, increases your connection with yourself, and increases your ability to practice things with your own hands. In synthesis, to be very, very honest: for me, writing is part of my life. *I am the page I write*. The big problem for many people is that they find writing very challenging. It's never been a problem for me. And the other question is, well, yes, you have published so much. Have you ever been slow? No, I have not been always slow in publishing, because I keep reading, I keep thinking, I'm very creative. So publishing is part of my personality.

But when I look at what I do as slow moves, I like to stay in touch with animals, and with wood. For me, wood is a central element. Why? Because when you hold wood in your hands, you hold what was once a living tree - and by working with it, you give it a second life and that makes me feel very, very good. Some wood - not all of it - when I touch it, I feel good. I feel in connection with that wood more than with others. And that's good.

So, if I look at social movements, I cannot say that only the slow-going social movements are the ones that matter. That was a very good question posed to me [in today's seminar]. You do the macro analysis, where you have the whole argument about politics and public policy. Then you do the micro analysis with specific movements which are not scalable. So, you can do this, but this can serve twenty people. Can you do that ten times bigger? Maybe not. It depends on the conditions. But then the next question was: is there something in between? So, I gave an example of a group of cooperatives. Now, when you are in a cooperative, you can start working in ways that are either slow or not. I had a friend in a cooperative, and he used his time very wisely because he wanted to have autonomy - all his life he had wanted autonomy. He is not a nine-to-five kind of person.

He never worried about getting a pay cheque at the end of the month. He chose to work in areas outside the state and big capitalist society, while also allowing himself the pleasure of enjoying life. So, in a way, he's a good example of someone "slow," because he didn't conform to mainstream labour patterns.

In synthesis, the world is changing, academia is changing, but by and large my recommendation to young scholars is that they have to publish. They must publish. And when they publish, they must publish their best work - period. Whether it takes three months or three years, that's another matter. But publishing matters - if you don't publish, you're buried.

Finally, I am aware that one of the things I like most is fine woodworking, but lately my production has not come to a halt, it's just slowed down. It's been a slowdown for a number of reasons, and I'll give you two or three. One is that when you work with machines, the more you do, the better you learn the machines. The less you do, every time you are not working you have to relearn the machine. That's a big deal. So in that context, learning cannot be totally slow - one problem. Another problem is that wood has properties, and among those properties, there is humidity. So here you have a very good example. If you are going to make a table - a real table - the first thing you do is make sure the humidity is not more than 8-7%. But on the other hand, when you are going to make the product, you want that wood to be in your workshop for years so when you take it it is ready. In other words, you cannot take wood that is fresh and produce anything right away; it would be a disaster. So slow moving is interesting: you let it stay for a long time, and then when it's ready you do the project.

Interviewer

You are widely recognised for your expertise in Critical Pedagogy and Global Citizenship Education. In your view, which aspects of GCED are most capable of addressing the pressing historical and contemporary challenges facing our societies? Conversely, do you perceive any limitations or critical issues within this approach, and if so, what would you identify as the most significant?

C. A. Torres

One interesting part of the answer for me is that the whole idea of Global Citizenship Education - or being a citizen of the world rather than only of a particular country - has

been with us since the Greeks. Greek philosophy had that idea: “I am a citizen of the world.” It is true that some people are literally citizens of the world. I am one of them. I travel all over the place.

People who work in defence of the environment, the green environment and so on, are not doing that to benefit specific people; they benefit everybody. In that context, this idea of the green economy is an idea of a citizen of the world.

Add to that another kind of global citizen: a man or woman who travels constantly between cities because of their corporations, because they work in an environment where they need to coordinate different offices in different parts of the world. One of the things that has made capitalism so important these days is how they manage time. In other terms, you have an office in Tokyo that, when it closes, ships to Boston; Boston works the day, closes and ships to Indonesia. You can have the same group of people in three, four, five different places working on the same product. Who can do that? Only large corporations, right? Corporations are able to compete for products with the best architects and engineers. Many of them are not in the same country. That is a different model of global citizenship. There are many more examples. So, in synthesis, you do have global citizens everywhere doing many things. But the great dilemma is how global citizens intervene in the spirit of being a citizen; how this adds value to national and local citizenship. That is a big question. I am convinced it does add value. We are, you naturally speak Italian, I naturally speak Spanish, we are talking in a language that is not our mother tongue, and we can communicate. There is something in this model: being able to communicate in other languages speaks highly of the idea of global citizenship.

[When considering the limitations of this approach to global citizenship,] I’d like to focus on three topics. The first is the critique that this model is elitist. The second: is it a Western concept? Third: the tension of access versus quality.

Let me start with the first. The critique of elitism has a lot of value. I could argue that someone like me - a working-class kid, first in his family to go to university, who had to migrate given conditions in Argentina - without fully knowing it, I began to learn about other places: Mexico, the US, Canada, Brazil, etc. So, while you may argue it’s elitist, you may also argue that sometimes it’s a necessary product to continue some projects. For example, how could you, being an Italian, be a very good person to work on policies for the Italian Parliament if you do not speak two or three languages, have been educated abroad? When they need a good model of global citizen they need to connect with other

global citizens. Diplomats are the best examples. Countries with very good diplomatic schools - Brazil has good ones - then you realise those people are in another category because the people they deal with are in another category. So, I'm not too worried about elitism per se. It's a reality, but it's not the whole story.

Second topic: is this a Western concept? Well, of course it is historically; it comes from the Greeks. But who put it into practice? I have been studying this carefully. I will argue that when you look at a concept like *sumak kawsay* in Quechua - commonly translated into Spanish as *buen vivir*, which means the good life - there is a conception of community and nature. *Sumak kawsay* implies "I exist because the community exists," and "we exist because I exist," a reciprocal relation. That idea of community, with community and nature, *sumak kawsay* - that's Global Citizenship Education extended a bit further than just the Western model. Ubuntu in South Africa is the same concept. If you check UNESCO's materials, you will find notes that list similar categories in the Middle East and parts of Asia. So even if it's a Western academic concept, it has equivalents. Use those equivalents; use the model of solidarity as a global product.

Finally, access versus quality. Education for all is an idea that has been discussed for a long time. Many institutions put money in so more people who are not fully educated can complete their studies. More children who are out of school come back. Elderly people who have been outside the school for a long time can go and finish high school. That's a good idea. But the quality of education is more debatable. Who decides what quality is? To what extent do you prioritise quality? Some argue that children being in school - even if the school is imperfect - is better than being in very risky environments. So for them, access is crucial. On the other hand, some insist quality is indispensable for educational processes to produce real transformation. It's a big debate. When they talk about the quality of education, they might point to countries with longer formal educational histories and compare outcomes. But those comparisons are complex. So, the challenge is to find ways to combine access and quality so that GCED does not remain a slogan without real impact in contexts of exclusion.

Interviewer

Paulo Freire has been a pivotal reference in your work. Rather than summarising your whole body of work, could you explain how Freire's ideas specifically shaped your approach to GCED, and in what ways your work extends or reinterprets that tradition?

C. A. Torres

There is always reinterpretation. By definition, reinterpretation is an extension. My encounter with Freire was when I was very young and being trained; I thought I was being trained as a Marxist. Over time, I discovered my training was more universal. I read Marx, I read Hegel. When I met Freire, I was not initially convinced his model was a rigorous scientific model, and I was concerned it might be populist. Over time, he convinced me. It was important because I wrote many things when I was young and sent them to him; he wrote back to me by hand saying, "You have interpreted me very well." From that point on, we became friends and connected. It was through contradiction that I began to encounter him.

During the dictatorship and after I began to publish, I used my full name Carlos Alberto Torres Novoa - using my mother's name as well. I published three books in a short time. One of those books was on Freire. I had lots of material; I produced three books that were translated and published in Portuguese and Spanish. Interestingly, nobody in Brazil knew this Torres Novoa, so in a way I introduced Freire into some parts under difficult circumstances. Many friends later told me, "I read Freire because of your books."

Some of those books could be considered reinterpretations. I wrote a book in Spanish during my MA, and I was amazed I had captured so much of the argument and expanded it. I spent 40 years working with Freirean material and taught over a hundred courses on Freire, so my connection with him has been profound. In short: Freire influences me a lot, and my work is part of a living conversation with his ideas.

Interviewer

Before we conclude, I would like to ask you for an overall assessment and a synthesis. Among your publications, which do you consider most representative for understanding the current challenges facing GCED? Based on this body of work, how would you define, in your own words, the essence of Global Citizenship Education, its core components, and ultimate goals?

C. A. Torres

One way to answer your first question is to ask which of my books has been most translated. One book, which I wrote after Paulo Freire's death - *Democracy, Education, and Multiculturalism: Dilemmas of Citizenship in a Global World* (Rowman and

Littlefield) - was translated several languages. It was a way of coming to terms with his physical absence. It was a well-organised, solid book on democracy and diversity, useful as background material. It helps to give a picture of the conversation at the end of the twentieth century. Is it helpful for GCED? Yes, as background.

Another very important contribution is the book with Massimiliano Tarozzi from 2016 - *Global Citizenship Education and the Crises of Multiculturalism (Bloomsbury)* - which deals with dilemmas of citizenship vis-à-vis diversity across Europe and the US. That book has been translated into Chinese, among other languages.

The next, in 2017, is my book on how to analyse the theory and practice of GCED - *Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Critical Global Citizenship Education (Routledge)*. I compiled lectures, feedback, and a lot of material over one to two years and put it together. That book was successful and was translated into Portuguese later and into Chinese recently. I've been invited to China to give lectures at top universities; translation and dissemination open doors to further engagement. I'm also developing research connections - one example is working with an organic farm project in central China supported by the Academy of Agro-Sciences, which I plan to study as part of comparative work.

So, these books - those with Freirean engagement, the 2016 comparative work, and the 2017 theoretical/empirical volume - are the principal ones I'd point readers to. Perhaps the best definition of GCED is the intersection of three terms: the global, citizenship and education. The global implies some level of cosmopolitanism - an invitation to recognise interdependence among peoples and the environment. Citizenship is crucial: it is not just legal status but rights and responsibilities that enable people to live together with justice and peace. Education is the mechanism to transmit knowledge, values and competences: if education is critical and dialogic, in Freire's sense, it becomes a practice of emancipation. The ultimate aims are twofold: to promote peace - not merely the absence of conflict but the active building of just relations - and to care for the environment, a collective good essential for shared survival. GCED is not an institutional slogan: it is everyday practice realized in schools, communities, movements and small daily acts. Global change always begins with local action.

Bibliography as cited by C. A. Torres

Torres, C. A. (1998), *Democracy, Education, and Multiculturalism: Dilemmas of Citizenship in a Global World*, Rowman and Littlefield.

Tarozzi, M., & Torres, C. A. (2016), *Global Citizenship Education and the Crises of Multiculturalism*, Bloomsbury.

Torres, C. A. (2017), *Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Critical Global Citizenship Education*, Routledge.