

# Global Leadership Competency Development in a Global Virtual Classroom: A Transformational Learning Theory Approach

**Joerg Hruby**

*Universidad Anáhuac México, Business and Economics School, Campus Norte, Estado de México*

**Luis Felipe Llanos Reynoso**

*Universidad Anáhuac México, Business and Economics School, Campus Norte, and Instituto de Políticas Públicas del Estado de México y sus Municipios, Estado de México.*

**Fernando Granados Ruíz and Alfonso Brown del Rivero**

*Universidad Anáhuac México, Business and Economics School, Campus Norte, Estado de México*

**Abstract.** This study explored the enhancement of Global Leadership Competencies through a Global Virtual Classroom using Transformational Learning Theory within a Global Leadership Development program for 80 university students. Our approach, which employs a mixed-method design involving qualitative analysis based on Mezirow's (1991) Transformational Learning Theory and grounded theory, was a pilot study. In vivo, codes were extracted to fit each of the ten steps, and the quantitative analysis involved expert classification of interview sentences into Transformational Learning Theory phases, followed by frequency table preparation. Our findings indicate that the Transformational Learning Theory effectively enhances the development of Global Leadership Competencies in a Global Virtual Classroom. This pilot study provides valuable insights and a new perspective to improve the quality of Global Leadership Competency Development.

**Keywords:** Global Leadership Development (GLD), Global Leadership Competency (GLC) Development, Global Virtual Classroom (GVC), Transformational Learning Theory (TLT).

## 1. Introduction

Global companies, particularly human resource managers, face significant challenges in identifying executives and international business graduates with multicultural competence. A global leader creates positive organizational change by building communities, developing trust, and managing complex cross-boundary environments (Mendenhall et al. 2020).

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*Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson [pneilson@neilsonjournals.com](mailto:pneilson@neilsonjournals.com)*

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Global leadership competencies (GLCs) are necessary for navigating globalization. GLC development refers to acquiring and enhancing skills, knowledge, and attitudes toward effective leadership in a global context. Fakhreldin et al. (2021, p. 110) emphasized the necessity of international business graduates with international awareness, competence, and cultural sensitivity.

The best practices for GLC development have been discussed (e.g., Lane et al., 2017; Szkudlarek et al., 2013) in Global Leadership Development (GLD) programs in some corporations (e.g., Mendenhall et al., 2017; Hruby et al., 2022), and more exploratory research is needed on the activities conducted in business schools and training providers to effectively enhance GLCs development (e.g., Osland et al., 2017a; Osland et al., 2018; Renn et al., 2014). While business schools offer GLD courses (e.g., Mendenhall et al., 2020; Osland & Vogelsang, 2020), their effectiveness in developing GLCs has been controversial. Some argue that these courses effectively develop the necessary skills, whereas others question their practical applicability in real-world global business scenarios (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015).

The GLD Program for Students addresses this skill gap by fostering a global mindset and improving global leadership skills. A GLD program equips the global workforce with essential skills, including understanding diverse cultures and languages and navigating complex global environments. However, the absence of global leaders with a global mindset poses a risk to multinational companies (Salicru et al. 2016). Although GLD is a fast-growing area of global leadership research, most studies have focused on business practitioners with limited literature on university settings (Oddou & Mendenhall, 2018). Research in this field often targets study abroad, international service-learning programs (e.g., Caligiuri, 2006), or business programs that develop GLCs outside the classroom (e.g., Lane et al., 2017).

As international business scholars, we have observed the growing importance of online teaching in international business education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aggarwal and Wu 2020). According to Mendenhall (2019), critical factors for successful Global Virtual Classroom (GVC) implementation include experiential rigor and feedback sources that challenge and transform cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies. However, some studies suggest that a well-designed GVC can be as effective as, or even more so, study abroad programs (Mendenhall, 2019). Additionally, there is limited research on theory-driven approaches to enhance a global mindset in a GVC (e.g., Guo-Brennan, 2022).

Notably, the complexities of global leadership require adaptable leaders capable of navigating profound personal and organizational transformations. Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) provides a framework for understanding how individuals challenge assumptions, critically reflect on experiences, and reconstruct worldviews. Mezirow's (1991) model outlines ten phases of transformative learning, progressing from disorienting dilemmas to

reintegration from a transformed perspective. Although widely used in adult education, its application in GLD remains underexplored, particularly in addressing emotional, relational, and cognitive dimensions in volatile contexts.

Our interdisciplinary approach bridges TLT and global leadership practices by addressing theoretical gaps while providing actionable insights for educators and practitioners. By applying Mezirow's (1991) phases of leadership education, this study enriches organizational tools for promoting transformative growth and systemic change. Our study explored the intersection of Mezirow's (1991) TLT and the GLD program, offering insights into how GVC can rival traditional methods in fostering GLCs effectively (Mendenhall, 2019).

While some studies have explored the relationship between TLT and GLD programs (e.g., Wallace, 2022), our pilot study is the first to assess the effectiveness of a GVC design using TLT in a university setting, offering a novel explorative perspective in the field. We assume that integrating TLT into global leadership studies highlights its role in fostering resilience, cultural intelligence, and ethical decision making, which are key competencies for managing complex systems and global challenges.

Our pilot study contributes to the field by providing actionable insights that can be directly applied to enhance the GLC. These insights include (1) describing the theoretical foundation of the GLD program, (2) examining the relationship between the GLD program and TLT, particularly how Mezirow's (1991) ten phases are reflected in students' learning outcomes, and (3) assessing the effectiveness of the GLC development methodology. Our research question addresses the critical theoretical gap in the GLD program.

"How can TLT be applied in a GLD program for students in a GVC to effectively enhance GLC development in a university setting?"

This question serves as the guiding principle of our study, emphasizing the relevance of understanding how TLT can be effectively integrated into university-based GLD programs to strengthen GLC development. Based on this theoretical framework, we propose the following two hypotheses.

H1: The ten phases of Mezirow's (1994) TLT process hold equal importance in the transformational learning process.

H2: The ten phases of Mezirow's (1994) TLT process follow a sequential order in the transformational learning process.

This mixed-method pilot study provides empirical insights that inform both theoretical development and practical applications, further advancing the understanding of TLT's role in fostering transformative growth within global leadership frameworks.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The following is a review of the literature on GLD, GLC development, and multicultural learning in GVC. Subsequently, the focus is on describing a GLD program design, its relationship with the TLT, and existing studies. Next, we provide details of our mixed-method methodology, sample, data collection, and analysis. Our findings have practical

implications and provide valuable insights to leadership educators and practitioners. Finally, we highlight the main findings, limitations, and implications for scholars, illustrating the effectiveness of GLD program design in enhancing GLC development in a university context.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Global Leadership Development Program (GLD) in the University Setting***

Recent academic literature has critically analyzed and evaluated GLD program designs within universities (e.g., Mendenhall et al., 2020; Osland et al., 2017a; Vora, 2020; see also Osland et al., 2018a; Hruby et al., 2022). Many Global Human Resources program designers recognize the transformative potential of GLD programs (e.g., Mendenhall et al., 2017), which promises to enhance future global leaders' development.

By understanding the desired developmental outcomes (Simmonds & Tsui, 2010), GLD programs can be designed effectively using theories such as Adult Development Theory, TLT, Experiential Learning Theory, and Vertical Leadership Theory.

Our study applies TLT as a framework for understanding global leaders' development, focusing on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. Enhanced by self-reflection, commitment, and peer feedback, this approach aims to challenge and transform mindsets within an intensive 12-week GLD program, offering a fresh perspective on GLCs development.

### ***2.2. Global Leadership Competencies (GLCs) Development***

GLCs are rooted in reducing cultural bias, increasing adaptation, and enhancing ambiguity tolerance (Caligiuri and Tarique 2012). A review of the GLC literature has identified over 200 competencies that influence global leadership effectiveness (Bird et al., 2020). Although some conceptually overlap, these GLCs range from personality traits and knowledge bases to behavioral skills (e.g., Bird et al., 2020; Jokinen, 2005).

Recent literature discusses the traits, skills, and attributes crucial for effective global leadership (Kim & McLean, 2015). Despite these developments, more research is needed on how future leaders will develop GLCs (Mendenhall et al., 2017). Bird et al. (2020) classified GLCs into three categories: organizational acumen, managing people and relationships, and managing oneself. The GLD program focuses on the latter two categories because the former is addressed in other international business classes. The university course aims to enhance GLCs, such as

- a. Learning Mindset,
- b. Building Trust across Borders,
- c. Enhancing Cultural Intelligence,