

Study Day at Ecolint: 27 June 2005

“...other people with their differences can also be right.”

I want to start by thanking you for asking me to share this study day with you. It is an excellent idea and one that I wish I had thought of myself when I was director general!

I am not going to give you a detailed description and analysis of the IB Diploma Programme. If you want that there is plenty of material and advice within your school and our website may add some more. Instead I am going to try to give you a flavour of what the IB is about by focusing on that rather enigmatic title “...other people with their differences can also be right.” I will come back to it in a moment but first let me take you back some 16 or so years, to your very earliest childhood.

I think it is a rather obvious observation that very young babies are largely interested in themselves. Insofar as they have any interest in anyone else it is their mother as a source of food. Their world is egocentric.

However, quite quickly it becomes apparent that they do not exist on their own and as part of a group, a member of a family and then of a class at school, the long and complex process of socialization begins. In practice this process of – let’s call it growing up – usually takes place in a controlled environment. The immediate and the extended family share a set of common values. They may worship the same god. They probably eat the same kind of food and on certain days of the year they will not go to work but celebrate an important festival instead. For most children, growing up will take place amongst those who share a common language.

What I have described is not just ‘growing up’, nor is it best described as ‘socialization’. It is rather the process of ‘acculturation’, acquiring a culture that will pre-determine much of that person’s thinking for the rest of her or his life. Culture has been famously described as the ‘software of the mind’, in other words our minds become wired up culturally to respond in certain ways that are as inevitable as the functioning of a computer programme.

The person who proposed this image (his name is Geert Hofstede and his classic book is *Culture and Organizations*, published in 1991, if you want to follow it up) also proposed an onion model of culture. On the outside, the most superficial layer, lie certain **symbols**: words, gestures, pictures or objects that carry a particular meaning which is only recognized by those who share the culture. Those rather irritating HSBC advertisements in international airports operate at this level (why does the figure 8 have a special significance for the Chinese?). The next level down is labelled **heroes**: those people, dead or alive, who embody characteristics that are valued by the culture. My own country embarked a couple of years ago on a long television search for the Greatest British Hero – not surprisingly it was Winston Churchill.

The next layer down is **rituals**: the way we greet each other, pay respect to others, bury our dead and so on. At La Chât's graduation a few weeks ago, Phil Collins commented on how polite the Swiss are with the inevitable 'bonjour' greeting even to complete strangers.

And at the heart of the cultural onion lie our **values**, the way we prefer things to be, and these are learned implicitly and almost certainly acquired before the age of about 10. That is why primary schooling is even more important than the later stages of education.

In order to illustrate the powerful influence of culture I am going to take three extreme situations. I once had a maths teacher who used to say about a proposition in geometry, "if you're not sure, devise an extreme situation and see if it still seems to be true". Let's try that out on culture.

1. A few years ago I listened to a radio broadcast of a work known as the serenade for tenor, horn and strings, written by the English composer, Benjamin Britten. I found myself inexplicably moved, not just because I love the music but because it is so English (in a way I could not begin to explain to you) and I was suddenly reminded, living abroad, of something that is part of my soul. It was a reflex cultural reaction that I could not have suppressed.
2. In the 1930s an extraordinary meeting took place between the aborigines and white gold prospectors in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. The cultural differences were so extreme that the indigenous people thought the prospectors, despite their obvious physical similarities, must be the spirits of their ancestors. One of them said later that it was not until they had sex with the white people that they could believe they were human beings like themselves.
3. A few weeks ago, I was in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Before the war in the early 1990s the three ethnic groups, Bosniak, Croat and Serb, accepted a common language of convenience known as Serbo-Croat. Today, in order to emphasize cultural differences, each group is using its own variant of the language, the Serbs insisting that their version be written in Cyrillic script. Thus, every official message has to be written out three times in versions that differ only in trivial detail. Before we criticize, however, let us not forget that Switzerland is proud to use four official languages!

I have deliberately chosen that last example, where different ethnic groups are quite consciously seeking to widen the cultural gap between each other, in order to warn you against the superficial conclusion that we are all moving towards a common, global culture. Yes, there are some very obvious global symbols (the Nike swoosh, perhaps), global heroes (Nelson Mandela?) and global rituals (the world cup final) but a moment's reflection shows that, with the possible exception of sport, most are Western in origin and are increasingly in conflict with the values of other civilizations. Unfortunately, globalization has become a term of term of contempt.

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And that brings me, and about time too you will say, to the title of this presentation: **“...and other people with their differences can also be right”**. It also brings me to the International Baccalaureate Organization because those words are the final phrase of our mission statement. I have already said that I am not going to describe in detail the IB Diploma Programme (all too soon you will know all about it!) but instead let me try to sum it up in one simple sentence.

The IB Diploma Programme offers a high quality international education which is welcomed by the best universities around the world.

Two key words in that sentence separate the IB from other high quality programmes such as the French Bac, British A levels, the Swiss matu or the American AP: the words **international education** are what makes the IB different. And at the heart of a good international education lies, I believe, an understanding that who I am, and how I relate to others, is to a very large degree determined culturally. Cultural understanding is therefore a key component of any programme of international education.

At this point I have to acknowledge that some of you in today’s audience fit into a special cultural category. You are what are known as TCKs or third culture kids – not my phrase, I hasten to add. You do not have the culture of your passport, indeed you may never have lived in the country of your passport. You have not had time to acquire the culture of your place of residence, which happens to be Switzerland today but may be the other side of the world in a year’s time. Instead, you have acquired a third culture and research suggests it has some distinctive features. For example, you are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to other people than belonging to a particular place. You form relationships easily, but you avoid intimate relationships because they are too quickly broken as your family moves on. You have an interest in and a desire to learn new languages. And so on....

Some people have suggested that the future will belong to TCKs precisely because they do not feel an allegiance to any particular culture but are at ease anywhere in the world, but I find this as unlikely as a move to a single, global culture. The vast majority of the world’s population come from and belong to a single place, they speak a single language and, as we noted earlier, many are desperately striving to create an even more distinctive cultural identity. A more likely scenario for the future therefore is neither a single world culture, nor a significant dilution of cultural awareness but the potential clash between different cultures, as the world shrinks.

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Let us therefore ask how it is possible that ‘other people with their difference can also be right’. Well, to start with it depends what you are talking about. I think we could quickly agree that the two statements ‘Liverpool is a better football team than AC Milan’ and ‘Jane Austen is a better novelist than Dan Brown’ require a completely different set of value judgements. But even within the same discipline, science for example, there is plenty of room for ambiguity. No one doubts, at least for the

moment, that $E=mc^2$ but there is still considerable disagreement about the origins of global warming. Different people can legitimately hold different views on what is true or false and I hope the IB helps students to be clearer about different criteria for truth first by requiring that students study a broad range of subjects and second by placing a course known as Theory of Knowledge, which examines the status of knowledge, at the very centre of the programme.

But many of the really difficult decisions in life rest not upon what is true or false but what is right or wrong in a moral sense. We are back to values and those, you will remember, are culturally determined.

- Which is more culturally acceptable, to tell the police that your younger brother has been shoplifting or to maintain family unity by keeping quiet?
- Someone offers you a substantial bribe in order to influence the award of a lucrative contract: is it culturally right to accept it?
- What right have you got to speak out against female circumcision when it is a recognized cultural practice in many African countries that you know nothing about?

To whom do you go for guidance in these issues: to your god, to your family, to your teachers, to the IB and its Theory of Knowledge course or to your own developing conscience?

This brings me finally to the important concept of cultural relativism, an ugly phrase for a simple idea. Cultural relativists insist that you can never understand a culture unless you are part of it. I think the extreme relativists would go on to say that you cannot legitimately pass a moral judgement on a practice that, by definition, you do not understand. I do not agree: the two issues of understanding and judgment are linked but separate. For example, the fact that I can only have a partial understanding of the Taliban's policy on educating women does not prevent me from condemning the part I do understand as offending against a higher moral code of human rights.

These are complex issues that rarely have a simple right or wrong, true or false, yes or no conclusion. One thing you will have to learn, as you grow older, is how to live with uncertainty and to become suspicious of black or white alternatives. Helping you to come to terms with ambiguity is a key requirement of a programme of international education like the IB.

I am going to end by recommending two different stories, each describing the problems young people experience when they grow up amidst cultural ambiguity. The first is *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) by the young Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Adichie, in which a 15 year old girl, Kambili, is torn between British imperial traditions, the Catholic religion and her own indigenous culture. The second is my all-time favourite modern novel, *Le Testament Français*, (1995) written in French by the Russian writer Andrei Makine. This describes a boy growing up in Siberia under the supervision of his grandmother who is French. Which will shape his identity, the rigours of the Soviet Union or the distant, seductive luxuries of la belle époque in France?

I hope that if you forget everything I have said today, you will nonetheless read one or both of those novels! Which reminds me that a study of world literature is another key component of the IB Diploma programme.

I believe the IB is about the struggle to live with ambiguity. Very little is completely black or white, true or false, good or bad and this is summed up in the phrase ...*other people with their differences can also be right.*

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