

Biennial Conference of IB Nordic Schools

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What have I learned about international education?

It is a great pleasure to be back in Scandinavia and a particular pleasure to be in Sweden. I have very special memories of previous meetings in Iceland and Denmark so thank you for inviting me once again to join you at your conference.

Not surprisingly, you find me in retrospective mood. At the end of this month I shall have been director general of the IBO for six years (which means it is now impossible to blame anyone else!) but quite soon after that – 1st January to be exact – I shall be handing over to my successor, Jeff Beard.

Describing international education

It is a good moment, therefore, to look back but instead of asking the obvious question, “What have I achieved?” I am going to ask the more intriguing question, “What have I learned?” and in particular, “What have I learned about international education?” After all, that is our core business; it is the ‘I’ in IBO and we put it at the heart of our mission when we state that it is through ‘challenging programmes of international education’ that we expect to develop those inquiring, knowledgeable, caring, active and compassionate life-long learners.

I am going to start back in 1991, long before I joined the IBO. I had been appointed director general of the International School of Geneva which (it would claim from time to time) had practically invented international education. Anyway, that did not stop me setting up a small working group to reach a consensus, and then publish a set of principles, on an international education. In the end, it turned out rather well, and the work they did has been widely quoted, but I shall never forget the first meeting when the most articulate member of the group said, “I really don’t know what we are doing here. There is nothing special about international education: it is simply a good education that everyone should have.”

Fifteen years later, I agree and I disagree. I agree that everyone should have the opportunity to benefit from an international education. I do not agree that it is ‘simply a good education’ because I believe it has some distinctive elements which do not happen by chance; they need deliberate planning. Anyway, my first opportunity to write on the subject (and remember that for the previous 25 years I had worked in the national state system of education in Britain) came in 1995 and here are the six characteristics of international education that I thought important:

- Communication: knowing how to access information
- Negotiation: the skill of persuading people to compromise or change their minds
- Political awareness: understanding why nations have particular priorities
- Cultural understanding: recognizing that different groups have different mindsets
- Global issues: studying issues that impact across nations
- Criteria for truth: how do we judge what is right or wrong?

I shall be coming back to these six points, so do try to keep them in mind.

Step 1: International awareness

Looking back, I am quite pleased with that list – it was not a bad first try – but I now find it rather muddled and I will explain why in a moment. But first, I want to mention what I deliberately left out which included teaching groups of different nationalities, studying the history, geography and customs of other countries, arranging exchanges with foreign schools and having a strong modern languages department, though I did add that each of those might help.

Let me explain why I chose to exclude ‘teaching groups of different nationalities’ which many would regard as a key feature of international education. I disagree. It may be a key feature of international schools but I see no reason at all why international education should be confined to, or defined by, international schools. Its relevance is much wider than that.

I now realize that, in that early list, I was struggling to make sense of three different levels of international education. The first is what I now call ‘international awareness’. This means being conscious of other nationalities for very practical reasons: you may go on holiday to a different country or buy property there; you might want to do business there, or work successfully in a mixed-nationality team; there is a possibility your children will live there and your grandchildren speak their language, not yours. For all those reasons you will want to know about that country’s location, its history, its culture and its language.

International awareness in education has become an important area of concern for politicians. Former US Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, expressed this in 2000 when he said

I strongly believe that the growth of democracy, economic prosperity and economic stability throughout the world is linked to the advance of education. This is one of the strongest reasons why the United States should have an active and strong international education agenda.

More recently, the Australian Federal Minister of Education, Brendan Nelson, wrote of the importance of

encouraging all Australian students to study abroad, to study an internationally relevant curriculum and to learn other languages so as to engage in a dynamic global workforce.

and there will be very few developed countries that are not measuring their education systems against those in other countries, for example via PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) which surveys every three years the knowledge and skills of 15-year old students in the principal industrialized countries. Indeed, to become part of PISA is a political aspiration for many developing countries.

So an early piece of learning about international education was to put international awareness on the first step on the ladder. Yes: it is certainly encouraged by appropriate history and geography programmes, by a vibrant modern languages department, teacher and student exchanges and by all kinds of other international experiences including the famous five Fs: food, festivals, folklore, fashion and famous people.

But, for me, it is only the first step on the ladder.

Step 2: Global Awareness

The next step was described by a former UK Secretary of State for Education who was a strong supporter of the IB in its early days, Shirley Williams, now Baroness Williams. Back in 1981 at an IB conference of governments she suggested that

The world is becoming like scorpions in a bottle, who have learned in a very short time that they either live together or that they mortally wound one another. For we deal, of course, with a situation which is very new: where the luxury of being able to vent national feelings, xenophobia, national hatred, racial prejudice and so forth, is one that has only recently come into question; and where much of the education system in all countries, including our own, has simply not taken on board sufficiently the international dimension and the degree of international interdependence to which we are now heir.

Had she been writing today, I believe she would use the word ‘globalization’ because that is what she is talking about – international interdependence on a multilateral scale – and, interestingly, she is discussing it not in terms of communication or economics, not even in terms of politics, but in the context of ethics. How are we all going to behave as the world becomes like a glass bottle and how is education going to help us to behave?

Shirley Williams provides the second rung of my ladder (don’t worry: there are only three rungs!) which I shall call ‘global awareness’, the recognition that we are now all globally interconnected. The idea is not exactly new, and it is interesting to find on the internet the famous (almost clichéd) lines of the 16th century poet, John Donne

Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

linked to two very modern, global disasters, the events of 9/11 and the tsunami catastrophe.

Looking back at my original list which I criticized as muddled, I can recognize three items which are related to the concept of global awareness. The first is **communication** and I was making the point that in the modern world, very little can be concealed or kept confidential. Today I would add that the internet puts the power of communication into the hands of people who no longer need to be part of a recognized institution to make use of it. That applies to the wealth-creating entrepreneur who may be anywhere in the world and it also applies to the terrorist who may also be anywhere in the world.

I called the second point **political awareness** and by it I mean understanding why nations behave as they do. Why has the United States refused to sign up to the Kyoto Protocol on atmospheric pollution; why has the government of Serbia taken so long to arrest suspected war criminals; why does Japan keep asking to resume its whaling operations; why has Iran restarted its uranium enrichment programme? Are they all being deliberately perverse or are there more complex reasons that the globally aware person should understand? Politics has been defined as the art of the possible and I sometimes think there is a lack of understanding amongst international educators about what is politically possible in certain situations; what is reasonable to expect of politicians in real-life situations.

My third point was a rather obvious one and simply suggested that what I am calling global awareness is likely to be encouraged by a study of **global issues** that cross national frontiers, which might include issues of disease, the environment, poverty, conflict resolution, and so on. Such issues feature strongly in the IB Primary Years and Middle Years programmes, but they are often hard to find in the Diploma Programme.

Professor Howard Gardner has written

The trends of globalization – the unprecedented and unpredictable movement of human beings, capital, information and cultural life forms – need to be understood by the young persons who are and will always inhabit a global community. Some of the system will become manifest through the media; but many other facets – for example, the operation of worldwide markets – will need to be taught in a more formal manner.

(in Globalization. Culture and Education in the New Millennium eds M.M.Suarez-Orozco & D.B.Qin-Hilliard. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004)

and the distinguished American journalist, Thomas Friedman, in his best seller The World is Flat (Allen Lane, 2005) has described how a number of factors have come together in the past decade to create unprecedented opportunities around the globe for people who have hitherto been excluded from participation. These factors include the collapse of the Soviet Union and its state-controlled economy, access to the internet and the supportive interconnectivity of software and these, in turn, have led to new sets of business practices and skills that have released the energy and ideas of millions of new participants. At the same time they threaten the continued traditional economic prosperity of millions of others, not least in the United States where, in Friedman's view, the quality of education is too poor to allow people to compete on what is slowly becoming a more level playing field.

Education, insists Friedman, is the most effective leveller of the playing field.

Jobs are going to go where the best educated workforce is with the most competitive infrastructure and environment for creativity and supportive government.

So, I have learned that to be on the first rung of the ladder of international education is not enough. The best educated workforce is no longer just internationally aware. It has an understanding of the major influences that have consigned the concepts of the independent nation state, national company and national economy to the history books. I have learned that students need to be globally aware.

Step 3: The global citizen

There are three remaining items on that original list and those of you who are really paying attention will notice that I have changed their order! They have become

- Understanding criteria for truth
- Cultural understanding
- Skills of negotiation

and these are going to take me up to the third level of my ladder where I learn what it means to be a 'global citizen'.

Sometime last year, I received a pamphlet from Washington International School (WIS) entitled Educating the Global Citizen. Let me quote:

Educating global citizens means much more than exposure to many nationalities, learning about multiple cultures, or even immersion in other languages. It requires giving students the outlook and skills that equip them with mental flexibility and a basic respect for perspectives other than their own.

A global citizen is one who seeks out a range of views and perspectives when solving problems. He or she does not 'tolerate' or 'accept' cultural difference or viewpoints, since these words implicitly place the speaker at the centre of what is acceptable and right. Global citizens proactively seek out those who have backgrounds that are different from their own, examine ideas that challenge their own and then enjoy the complexity.

A global citizen examines and respects differences, and evaluates them critically. He or she does not passively accept all ideas or philosophies. Engagement – in thought, in discussion, in active learning – is the basis for global citizenship.

I have quoted that at some length because it is one of the best descriptions I have seen of the qualities of the global citizen. I also believe that there is considerable overlap with the three items that I selected from my own list.

For example, you will have noticed the emphasis on active learning in the WIS statement: 'seeks out', 'examines', 'evaluates', 'mental flexibility', 'proactive' and so on. At the heart of global citizenship is a lively mind but a mind that will be operating within boundaries defined by truth and falsehood. The sky is not the limit when it comes to exercising the intellect: our **concept of truth** will define the limits and that will need refocusing depending on the particular area of knowledge – scientific, mathematical, artistic, literary, ethical, religious and so on. That is why I have learned to appreciate the value of the Theory of Knowledge course in the education of the global citizen.

I also have learned a lot about the importance of **culture** (the 'software of the mind') in making sense of the way other people behave. During the past 15 years I have frequently been required to surrender my autonomy, my competence, even part of my personality (I do not believe I exaggerate) by speaking someone else's language. But since I am a native English speaker it happens more frequently that the other person is required to use mine (today is a good example). I have learned something about the different symbols and rituals that characterize life in Switzerland and I can now sympathize with the nation's fear of being gobbled up into a large, anonymous European Union. I think I can *understand* why a group of neo-Nazis disrupted the traditional annual speech of the Swiss President at the Grütli Field, the spiritual home of the confederation. However, understanding these issues does not in any way imply approval and I will return to that in a moment.

But let me not exaggerate: living in international Geneva is not a hugely different experience from living in any other cosmopolitan city. How would the IB get on, I wonder, if we moved our curriculum and assessment centre to Damascus? After all, we are supposed to be international, it would certainly be cheaper than Britain and Syria is in the same IBO region as Cardiff and Stockholm. How would the IB get on, I wonder, if my successor were not American, but Chinese, educated exclusively in China? I seriously doubt whether the

organization could sustain either culture shock because, in the end, much of what we do is not truly international, it has been developed from a very influential Western humanist tradition of learning.

So another thing I have learned about international education is that it is very rarely truly international. For example, what view do we have of collaborative working which is an important feature of many non-Western cultures? We seem to encourage it in the classroom and then punish it in the examination hall. How do we reconcile a spirit of inquiry with a patriarchal culture that values received wisdom and rote learning? How can a secular curriculum be adopted in country where religious faith, rather than empirical observation, defines the limits of truth? *Is it possible to be a free-thinking individual, perhaps perceived as amoral, in a culture where the rules and rituals are unconditionally accepted and rigorously adhered to?*

That last question is not mine, but was asked by a young Jordanian IB coordinator during a presentation she made at a regional conference in Oman in 1999. I was so impressed by the clarity with which she explained her cultural dilemma that I asked for a copy and I have kept it ever since. There is no simple answer here and the best we can do is to be honest about what the IB is and what it is not, to try slowly but deliberately, to widen its international perspective and to help our students to understand that there are very different ways of looking at the same world.

Cultural understanding does not imply infinite cultural tolerance. Cultures which encourage corruption, and censorship and deny basic human rights, particularly those of women, are undesirable and the global citizen should be prepared to say so and to engage in debate to persuade others of this point of view. That is why I have listed the art of **negotiation** as an essential skill. I listened recently to a fascinating interview with the conductor, Daniel Barenboim, who had brought his mixed Arab-Israeli orchestra to London (it is called the East-Western Divan Orchestra). He was asked if the different groups brought their arguments into their work as musicians. Yes, he said, they often argued passionately about their differences but three special factors pertained:

1. no one was allowed to join the orchestra if they believed that the Middle East problem required a military solution
2. they all recognized that the success of a symphony orchestra requires everyone to support everyone else; it is a collaborative effort or it is nothing
3. the shared commitment to making music provided a bond that allowed differences to be explored without a threat to mutual respect.

He described it as follows: “The opportunity to listen to the narrative of others – their story – to challenge it and to have them challenge yours.” But that common thread of music (or whatever – it has been called a ‘thread of affiliation’) is an essential starting point.

Barenboim’s word ‘challenge’ makes me think that my choice of the term ‘negotiate’ was right. It is not just a question of listening, understanding and then disagreeing. That achieves nothing. It is rather taking up the challenge to seek an agreement which will often be in the form of a compromise. And that is the process that negotiation describes.

We have arrived at the third rung on the ladder: we have moved from the student who is internationally aware, to one who is globally aware to one who is a true global citizen, the

person who has the necessary intellectual skills, the cultural understanding and both the ability and the attitude that wants to shift another person's position as well as their own. For me, citizenship implies action.

Step 4: Making it happen

A moment ago I said that the International School of Geneva sometimes claims to have invented international education. It is not quite as arrogant as it seems because in 1948, twenty years before the IB, the director of the school, an extraordinary lady called Marie-Thérèse Maurette, wrote a handbook for UNESCO which is still to be found in their archives in Paris. It was entitled *Techniques d'éducation pour la paix. Existent-elles?* In English we might say *Is there a way of teaching for peace?* It is a very special document and I am going to use it to illustrate my final point today.

Perhaps the most important thing I have learned about international education is that it does not happen by chance, by some kind of mysterious osmosis. It is not caught; it is taught. In order to make this point I want, quite deliberately, to take you away from the IB with which you are so familiar and present you with Mme Maurette's views which will be quite new.

First of all, Maurette is quite sceptical about the role played by friendships. Rubbing shoulders certainly helps, she says, but it is certainly not enough. So she starts by insisting on certain values. For example, to insult someone's nationality or race is, in her words, "le crime des crimes" but at the same time, she urges her teachers to play down the whole concept of nationality, either as a source of pride or of pity. Let's avoid all sentimentality, she says.

She then argues the case for a new kind of geography which puts the students into contact with the whole world before they ever see a map of their own country. Individual maps are hopelessly misleading in their scale, she says, so the Swiss have no idea that the delta of the River Ganges is as large as Switzerland! The geography teacher (who conveniently happened to be her father) called the subject 'international culture' and spent much time getting each student to build up maps of the world. She had equally radical ideas about history which, she insisted, should not be taught before the age of 12 if it was to avoid becoming a gallery of dubious national heroes. For the next six years it should become world history with events in India, China, Japan and the Middle East synchronized with those in Europe. She adds rather deprecatingly, "We have had to create our own Ronéo booklet, which is far from perfect and needs looking at by specialists."

Maurette then insists upon the acquisition of two working languages:

Mais dès qu'un individu pratique vraiment les deux langues, il pratique les deux modes de pensée. En tous cas, il comprend le mode de pensée de son interlocuteur. Il n'est plus étonné et hostile. Et dès qu'il y a compréhension et familiarité, la possibilité d'entente est là : l'esprit international est né.

(Once someone uses two languages he uses two modes of thought. And then he understands the other person's way of thinking. He is no longer surprised or hostile. And from understanding and familiarity comes agreement: a spirit of internationalism is born.)

She then describes ways of encouraging students to keep up to date with contemporary political and economic events, and alumni of that period (for example the American General,

Norman Swarzkopf) remember being suddenly called out of their classes to meet together to discuss some important world event, as it was happening (in his case it was the communist takeover in Prague in 1948). I suppose we would now call it ‘current events’ but it does not seem to play much part in the modern curriculum.

Finally, she turns to the importance of human solidarity, saying that it depends on habits of mutual support and community action and she goes on to describe the IB CAS programme 20 years before it ever happened, noting the importance of self-help projects, team sports, the student council, the school bakery run by students and so on.

I have skimmed over the surface of this unique publication because for my purpose today the details are unimportant. The important point I do want to make is that the curriculum of a school can be divided roughly into three elements. There is the

- compulsory, timetabled part of the learning in which everyone participates
- extra- or co-curriculum which is voluntary but enriches the compulsory curriculum; it is what we often remember most from our school experience
- hidden curriculum, the informal but influential rules, beliefs and attitudes that determine the transmission of norms and values.

Mme Maurette attacks on all three curriculum fronts: compulsory, extra and hidden realizing that each part must reinforce the others; there must be a consistency of message. But I particularly admire her courage in attacking the compulsory curriculum. “It’s not going to be any old history course; it’s going to be this special kind of history” and that, of course, is her legacy to the IBO and it is no coincidence that the IB Diploma Programme grew out of a syllabus and an examination called Contemporary World History.

But the IB can only do so much and within each element of the curriculum, and particularly in creating the hidden curriculum that determines the school’s values, it will be the teachers and the administrators who have an overwhelming influence. The research of my colleagues at the University of Bath, Dr Mary Hayden and Professor Jeff Thompson, has confirmed that in the eyes of students, teachers and alumni who have experienced an international education, the international-mindedness of their teachers and a management regime value-consistent with an institutional international philosophy were two essential ingredients.

It is time to sum up. I have tried to trace a path within international education from being internationally aware, to being globally aware to being a truly global citizen. I do not believe that international education is simplistically synonymous with ‘a high quality education’, nor do I believe that it happens by chance. So let me end by paying tribute to all of you here today who work so hard to help us to design international programmes and then use them to create international education in all your different schools.

George Walker
Director general
Geneva
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