



# East is East and West is West

George Walker

## Introduction to IB position papers

This paper is part of a series of papers commissioned by the IB and written by IB practitioners. Each paper addresses a topic or issue related to the IB's philosophy or its educational practices.

### **Other papers in the series**

Hare, J. July 2010. *Holistic education: An interpretation for teachers in the IB programmes.*

Marshman, R. July 2010. *Concurrency of learning in the IB Diploma Programme and Middle Years Programme.*

What I object to is the artificial arrangement by which this foreign education tends to occupy all the space of our national mind and thus kills, or hampers, the great opportunity for the creation of new thought by a new combination of truths. (Rabindranath Tagore 1961: 222)

## Abstract

This position paper addresses the long-standing criticism that the International Baccalaureate (IB) is too closely associated with Western values and, despite its title, does not enable students to see the world from a truly international perspective. Considering evidence from different authorities, it analyses the IB learner profile and asks how appropriate it is for the cultures of East Asia.

The paper concludes that the learner profile does indeed reflect the strong Western humanist foundations of the IB, but accepts that the organization's successful growth (not least in its Asia-Pacific region) makes sudden change unlikely and undesirable.

Instead, it recommends that the learner profile be reviewed regularly and used as a focus for internal debate on this issue. It also proposes that some limited regional variation be encouraged in order gradually to seize "the great opportunity for the creation of new thought by a new combination of truths" (Tagore 1961: 222).

## Introduction

The perceived character of an organization will be made up of many contributing factors: its history which, for the IB, was largely European in origin; the cultural mix of its staff; the style of its governance; the location of its workplaces and the languages of its discourse. This paper, however, focuses specifically on the IB's programmes and, in particular, on the principles underpinning them. These are described in the IB learner profile (IB 2006) which "is based on values that are the embodiment of what the organization believes about international education" (IB 2008: 3).

The IB's first director general Alec Peterson (1987: 199) admitted:

there have been numerous criticisms of the IB recently on the grounds that it is too dominated by the demands of university entrance, not genuinely international enough, too Western oriented and too academic.

At the time fewer than 10% of IB schools were located in its Asia-Pacific region, a figure that has doubled today.

The longest serving director general of the IB Roger Peel (Tarc 2009: 56) voiced his concern:

Our programme of study tends to be different from that of national systems of education. But is it truly international? I think not. It is undoubtedly demanding and yet it also remains conventional in many of its parts. Its European ancestry is still dominant.

The present author (Walker 2004: 51) admitted to an audience in Canada:

For the moment I do not know how this issue can be addressed beyond saying that (one) objective of international education is to encourage its students to appreciate the diverse modes of learning of which Western humanism is one.

Understandably, some international educators have taken a less sympathetic line. Quist (2005: 5), for example, describes the current discourse on international education as

characterized in the main by the Western developed world talking to itself and demonstrating an unwillingness or inability to fully engage with the relevant perspectives and demands of colonial/post-colonial discourse.

Hughes (2009: 139) insists that international education

must go further than celebrating national difference or striving for Western standards of what is described as universal (but may actually be deeply Western). What we should be aiming for is the promotion of greater understanding in those areas of belonging and identity that make up the complexity of any individual and are discussed primarily in post-colonial thought.

## Western humanism

Western humanism celebrates the life, the only life, we have in this world, rather than any anticipated life beyond it. It does not deny the significance of religious belief but insists that human virtue does not necessarily owe anything to religious intervention. Authority—religious and secular—is open to challenge in the search for truth. Empathy and scientific understanding create a set of moral values that confer dignity upon human beings who have the capacity—though not the necessity—to “say no to God”.

For better or for worse, humankind is on its own, believing, in Socrates’ words, that the unexamined life is not worth living. Scholarship must function independently of religious authority and devise its own criteria for truth, or for the different truths that shape our chosen classifications of knowledge and understanding—scientific, historical, mathematical, religious, moral etc. The search for these truths will be through the accumulation and examination of evidence, through argument and debate, and through the construction and demolition of hypotheses.

Humankind must now learn to take responsibility for its own behaviour, without necessary appeal to some higher religious authority. If moral authority is no longer vested in the priest then where does it lie: with military muscle, academic wisdom, economic power or, perhaps, just with ordinary people themselves? The construction of appropriate systems of justice, supported by citizens who can argue different points of view without coming to blows, has occupied the human mind since the time of Aristotle.

## The IB learner profile

The learner profile provides a clear and explicit statement of what is expected of students, teachers and school administrators in terms of learning (IB 2006: 2). Its ten main attributes and many of its descriptive phrases resonate with a Western humanist style of education, describing the role of the learner in the process of constructing learning. Examples appear below.

### **The active participation of the learner**

IB learners strive to be:

Inquirers ... Communicators ... Risk-takers ... They are encouraged to show independence in learning ... express ideas and information confidently ... exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively ... approach unfamiliar situations and uncertainty with courage and forethought.

### **The personal responsibility of the learner**

IB learners strive to be:

Thinkers ... Knowledgeable ... Balanced ... Reflective ... They are encouraged to develop their natural curiosity ... develop understanding across a broad and balanced range of disciplines ...

take responsibility for their own actions ... be able to assess and understand their strengths and limitations ... be brave and articulate in defending their beliefs.

## The moral development of the learner

IB learners strive to be:

Principled ... Caring ... Open-minded ... They are encouraged to act with integrity and honesty ... show empathy, compassion and respect ... be open to the perspectives, values and traditions of other individuals and communities.

## The study of non-Western cultures

In her defence of a liberal education, Nussbaum (1997) devotes a chapter to the study of non-Western cultures. She acknowledges the danger of producing internationally minded students who no longer grasp their own tradition but she writes:

A new and broader focus for knowledge, however, is necessary to adequate citizenship in a world now characterized by complicated interdependencies. We cannot afford to be ignorant of the tradition of one half of the world, if we are to grapple well with the economic, political and human problems that beset us ... We need to learn more about non-Western cultures—above all for these reasons of good citizenship and deliberation in an interlocking world. (Nussbaum 1997: 114)

She points out the complexity of the task, for example, does a study of “Chinese values” mean Confucianism, the Marxist critique of Confucianism or the values of contemporary Chinese feminists? And she warns against the extreme positions of chauvinism (trying to accommodate the other culture into the more familiar and comfortable structure of one’s own) and romanticism (viewing the other culture as excessively alien and virtually incomparable with one’s own). She also challenges two stereotypes that dominate current thinking: that the East values order, while the West values freedom and that the East values community, whereas the West values the individual. The modern reality, she insists, is far more complex.

Nussbaum also explains how the same word can translate into different meanings for different cultures. “Compassionate”, for example, which occupies a key position in the IB’s mission statement, would have a quite different significance for a Buddhist group compared to a Western audience influenced by Rousseau.

One way of avoiding these difficulties, suggests Nussbaum, is to focus on common human problems. All human beings have to cope with the fear of death, regulate their bodily appetites, take a view on property and the distribution of resources, and plan their own lives. This focus will enable the learner to construct a sense of shared humanity while accepting that the responses to these problems may be culturally very different. As we shall see, this approach is further explored by Hofstede.

Finally, Nussbaum proposes that students should gain some understanding of the major world religions: “We simply cannot afford to have citizens who are ignorant of Islam, or Hinduism, or Buddhist or Confucian traditions” (Nussbaum 1997: 145); they should also master a foreign language which “puts the problem of cross-cultural understanding before the student in a way nothing else does”; and they should be required to study in some depth one non-Western culture.

## The geography of thought

The research of psychologist Professor Richard Nisbett (2003) conducted among students in America, China, Japan and South Korea, has identified significant cognitive differences between Westerners and East Asians. As a simple example, shown a card with a picture of a cow, a duck and some grass and asked to pair the two related objects, Chinese children will tend to match the

cow to the grass while American children will choose the cow and the duck. This is one of many examples of the East preferring relationships while the West prefers to think in taxonomic categories.

Nisbett traces these differences back to the social structures and philosophies of Greece and China two and a half millennia ago, the former encouraging individuality, curiosity and debate; the latter favouring social harmony and a strong sense of mutual obligation. Language plays an important part, he argues, with East Asian children learning verbs (the key to relationships) as quickly as nouns (the key to categorization), in marked contrast to their Western counterparts.

Nisbett quotes many examples of the West favouring individuality and distinctiveness while the East seeks to blend harmoniously with others. Asked to choose a pen as a gift, Americans chose the least common colour and East Asians the most common (p 54). Japanese mothers playing with their children will tend to ask questions about feelings while American mothers focus more on surrounding objects (p 59). A Canadian academic who had spent some years in Japan started his letter of application for jobs back in North America with an apology for his unworthiness for the job in question (p 68)! In summary (but, as Nussbaum reminds us, summaries can be misleadingly over-simple) the West prefers to be independent, the East interdependent.

Nisbett's research also showed (p 109) that modern Asians

view the world in holistic terms: they see a great deal of the field, especially background events; they regard the world as complex and highly changeable and its components as interrelated; they see events as moving in cycles between extremes; and they feel that control over events requires coordination with others.

By contrast, modern Westerners

see the world in analytic, atomistic terms; they see objects as discrete and separate from their environments; they see events as moving in linear fashion when they move at all; and they feel themselves to be personally in control of events even when they are not.

Gert Hofstede's worldwide research into the values of IBM employees (2001, 2005) led him to propose five "dimensions of national cultures". These are social challenges that are universally present but provoke markedly different reactions from country to country. They are:

- social inequality
- relationships between the individual and the group
- concepts of masculinity and femininity
- attitudes to risk
- long-term versus short-term orientation.

His study gives us an opportunity to cross-check one of Nisbett's findings, namely the independent orientation of the West versus the interdependent orientation of the East. And indeed Hofstede reports that Japan, China and South Korea occupy respectively positions 33, 56 and 63 out of a total of 74 nations on the individual-group scale while the United States and the United Kingdom are respectively in positions 1 and 3.

This gives us some confidence (Hofstede's work has its critics) to explore two more important dimensions.

- In the tolerance of social inequality, Japan, China and Korea are in positions 49, 12 and 41 while the US and UK are respectively 57 and 63 (again a total of 74 nations).

- When it comes to risk aversion, our three Eastern countries are respectively in positions 11, 68 and 23 with the US and UK in positions 62 and 66.

With Nussbaum's warning against stereotyping ringing in our ears we can perhaps draw some tentative conclusions about education systems in East Asian countries. It seems reasonable to suppose that teachers will deal with students as a group rather than encouraging individual initiatives; students may be reluctant to stand up and argue their case; in-groups of students may expect preferential treatment; the teacher may be perceived as the guru who transfers personal wisdom; parents may side with teachers to keep students in their place; students will expect to be told the right answer and not be encouraged to challenge the canonical view.

## UNESCO offers an Asian perspective

At the end of the last century, the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century presented its report entitled *Learning: the treasure within* to UNESCO (1996). As part of the report's epilogue, one of its members, Professor Zhou Nanzhao, offered an Asian perspective on the interactions of education and culture. At the time, Professor Zhou was a member of the IB's Council of Foundation.

Zhou identified a number of traits of Asian cultures which he believed benefit educational and economic development:

- deep-rooted appreciation of the value of education
- the consequent high expectation of the young
- emphasis on the group rather than the individual
- stress on the spiritual rather than the material dimension of development
- meritocracy based upon examination performance
- legitimization of authority.

Zhou's negative elements included the neglect of individuality, the focus on interpersonal relationships rather than on man over nature and gender bias. He concluded:

If and when the East and West could learn and benefit from each other, integrating each other's cultural strengths—for example, the individual initiative with the collective team spirit, competitiveness with cooperativeness, the technological capacities with the moral qualities—then desirable universal values will gradually develop and a global ethic will be formed, which will be a fundamental renewal of cultures and a great contribution of education to humanity.

## The IB learner profile revisited

From the work of Nussbaum, Nisbett, Hofstede and Zhou it is possible to identify four major cultural areas where there is strong evidence to suggest that Eastern attitudes differ markedly from those of the West. These are: a concern for the group rather than the individual, respect for authority, a holistic view of the world and an aversion to risk. There are certainly others, but the chosen four have the advantage of being especially relevant to programmes of education.

### **The group and the individual**

At first sight, the learner profile seems much more concerned with the achievement of the individual than with the individual's contribution to a group. Of its ten main attributes, only one (caring) necessarily involves another person. This is unsurprising—the document is intended as a

profile of the individual learner—and a more detailed examination does reveal several group references. Nonetheless, one can reasonably conclude that a similar document written in the East would reflect a very different balance between the goals of independence and interdependence.

## Respect for authority

Interestingly, the learner profile has nothing to say about student–teacher relationships though many would regard them as the key to a successful IB programme. However, in a closely associated document (IB 2008: 13) we read that IB teachers are expected to

model themselves on the learner profile, consider themselves lifelong learners and be able to support all their students on the journey to becoming autonomous learners.

Three elements of this statement would puzzle an Eastern audience: that a description of a student should at the same time fit the teacher; that the teacher should support rather than direct the learning; that the goal of the learning should be autonomy rather than collaboration.

## A holistic view

There is much evidence that those from Eastern cultures “see the whole picture” when confronted with an issue. When something goes wrong they are more likely to examine the context of the problem than blame the individuals involved and they seem better able to live with complex shades-of-grey conclusions than their black-or-white Western counterparts.

The IB has always sought to encourage a sense of balance in its programmes to which the term “holistic” is sometimes applied. Indeed one of the ten learner profile descriptors is “balance” and one is reminded of Peterson’s (1987: 33) early description of the aim of the IB curriculum:

To develop to their fullest potential the powers of each individual to understand, to modify and to enjoy his or her environment, both inner and outer, in its physical, social, moral, aesthetic and spiritual aspects.

## Taking risks

“Risk-takers” quickly became an iconic descriptor for the IB’s Primary Years Programme and subsequently for the learner profile. Of the latter’s ten attributes it is the most distinctive, the one that comes most readily to mind. Perhaps this is unfortunate since risk has negative connotations (one does not risk winning money) coupled with a sense of irresponsibility, newly heightened by the global financial crisis.

“Courageous” might be a more appropriate word and certainly one that would resonate more clearly with Eastern cultures.

## Conclusions

There is little doubt that, with its strong emphasis on individual inquiry, personal responsibility and independent critical thinking, the learner profile is embedded in a Western humanist tradition of learning. However, since the IB offers evidently successful programmes of education and continues to expand rapidly, particularly in its Asia-Pacific region, there is little incentive to change. Besides, how should it respond to Indian cultures and to the huge variety of different cultures in Africa? The IB cannot be everything to everyone and many students study the Diploma Programme precisely to achieve a passport to higher education in the West.

At the same time we are attracted to Tagore’s challenge to create something new—some kind of fusion of West and East that exceeds the sum of its parts—an ambition echoed by Zhou and, more modestly, by Peterson himself; an ambition that the IB is perhaps uniquely placed to achieve. We have already noted Nussbaum’s suggestions for the study of non-Western cultures but Hughes (p 137) rightly points out the practical difficulties of adding to an already over-loaded programme

which might lead only to “a student ... well stretched in multicultural knowledge but ankle-deep in knowledge of major Western paradigms”.

Perhaps the best way forward lies with a less assertively humanistic learner profile that gives greater emphasis to social cohesion and the “respectful mind”; with a learner profile that is perceived as a stimulus for debate rather than a tablet of stone, and is reviewed regularly by a multicultural team; a learner profile that leaves some space for regional tradition. Over the years a slow process of osmosis might occur across the cultural East–West divide until the point is reached where a student submits an extended essay entitled *The Cultural Other: A Study of Western Humanism*.

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**George Walker**  
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