Cambridge Journal of Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713410698

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Online Publication Date: 01 September 2007
To cite this Article: van Oord, Lodewijk (2007) 'To westernize the nations? An analysis of the International Baccalaureate's philosophy of education', Cambridge Journal of Education, 37:3, 375 - 390
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/03057640701546680
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057640701546680

Cambridge Journal of Education
Vol. 37, No. 3, September 2007, pp. 375–390

To westernize the nations? An analysis of the International Baccalaureate's philosophy of education

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The International Baccalaureate was developed in the late 1960s with the purpose of providing international schools with a pre-university curriculum recognized by universities around the world. The educational programmes offered by the International Baccalaureate Organization claim to foster international understanding and an appreciation of the variety of cultures. The question which content must be taught in order to enable students to become internationally-minded has occasionally been addressed, while questions on the philosophy and epistemology of such an international education have largely been ignored. This article sets out to analyse the educational philosophy that underpins the programmes offered by the International Baccalaureate Organization, by taking the Diploma Programme as a case study. It is argued that the programme is overtly international at the content level but thoroughly western at the epistemological level. This leads to a partial incompatabilty of goals that the International Baccalaureate Organization will have to face and address.

Introduction

The International Baccalaureate (IB) was developed in the late 1960s with the practical purpose of providing a growing number of international schools with a pre-university curriculum recognized by universities around the world. Those involved in the development of the IB set out to create an educational programme that would provide students with a sense of international understanding and citizenship (Peterson, 2003). This Diploma Programme was initiated at the International School of Geneva with other international schools stepping on board during the developmental stage. The first trial examinations took place in 1967; the first official diplomas were awarded four years later (Walker, 2000; Hill, 2004). The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) launched the Middle Years Programme in 1994. Three years later, the Primary Years Programme followed. From then onwards, the IBO was able to offer 'a continuous international

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ISSN 0305-764X (print)/ISSN 1469-3577 (online)/07/030375-16

DOI: 10.1080/03057640701546680

educational experience from early childhood to school graduation' (IBO, 2002a, p. 3).

While the number of schools offering the Primary Years and Middle Years Programmes is growing every year, the Diploma Programme remains the most popular. In 2005, over 30,000 candidates from 1335 schools in some 120 countries wrote the Diploma Programme examination, making the Diploma Programme the leading international pre-university curriculum (IBO, 2006). Schools around the world now enroll for the IB programmes on an almost daily basis. The biggest growth takes place, surprisingly, among national schools in Europe and the US who wish to offer their students an international education within or in addition to their national systems. It is therefore claimed that the Diploma Programme has developed 'from a programme for international schools, to an international programme for schools' (Hagoort, 1994, p. 11).

The IBO acknowledges that the Diploma Programme grew from a 'western humanist' tradition, but also states that the 'increasing influence of non-western cultures on all three programmes is not only being acknowledged, but is becoming increasingly significant' (IBO, 2002a, p. 4). In the IB community, however, one can still very often hear individuals complain that the IB is 'too westernized' or 'Eurocentric'. Those present usually greet this comment with approving nods and profound glances. George Walker (IBO Director General, 1999–2005) comments on these complaints in his *To educate the nations*:

> When I hear the oft-repeated criticism that the IBO is too 'westernized,' I ask myself exactly what that comment means. That the headquarters is in Geneva instead of Jakarta? That [the curriculum and assessment centre] IBCA is in Cardiff instead of Cairo? That the three official languages of the IBO are European in origin? None of that matters unless they are symptoms of a deeper problem, namely that the educational philosophy of the IBO is largely monocultural. (Walker, 2002, p. 51)

He continues to say that IB teachers should ensure that their students 'appreciate the diversity of models of learning, of which the western humanist is (but) one' (2002, p. 51). Still others reinforce the fear that, despite these good intentions, the IB programmes could play a role in the perpetuation of cultural imperialism (Fox, 1985; Drake, 2004).

This article sets out to analyse the educational philosophy that underpins the programmes offered by the IBO. Is there indeed, as Walker questions, a 'deeper problem' and is the IBO's educational philosophy largely monocultural? A theoretical framework will be used to critically analyse the IBO's philosophy against its own claims of fostering an understanding of the variety of cultures. The IB Diploma Programme will be used as a case study, noting that, although this programme has the largest number of student enrolments, this is just one of the three IB programmes.

Educational mission

Although the IBO never explicitly published its philosophy of education, there are various monographs and official statements that reveal the philosophy underpinning

their educational programmes. A useful starting point is the organization's mission statement that states that:

> The International Baccalaureate Organization aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.
>
> To this end the IBO works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment.
>
> These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right. (IBO, 2006)

An earlier version of the mission statement did not speak of 'intercultural understanding and respect' but of:

> … international understanding and responsible citizenship … to the end that IB students may become … conscious of the shared humanity that binds all people together while respecting the variety of cultures and attitudes that makes for the richness of life. (IBO Council of Foundation, 1996)

The change from 'international' to 'intercultural' does not seem to stem from any change in the organization's educational aims, although it makes the statement slightly more ambiguous. What remains the same is that, ideally, in the words of Roger Peel (IBO Director General 1983–1998) students should after their IB experience 'know themselves better than when they started, while acknowledging that others can be right in being different' (Peel, 1997).

How then does the IB Diploma Programme go about achieving this? This question will be answered at two levels: at the content and the epistemological level. The content level answers the question: 'What does the IBO want students to learn?' while the epistemological level deals with the question: 'What kinds of knowledge are regarded as significant?'

The Diploma Programme at the content level

The structure of the Diploma Programme is fairy simple. The curriculum consists of six subject groups (first language, second language, humanities, experimental sciences, mathematics or computer science and the arts) and three compulsory core elements: the theory of knowledge course, a 4000-word extended essay and the creativity, action, service (CAS) requirement. Students choose one subject from each group, three at higher level (HL) and three at standard level (SL). Higher level subjects require 240 hours of teaching, standard level subjects 150 hours (IBO, 2002b, p. 5). Schools offering the Diploma Programme can choose from a wide variety of subjects (IBO, 2006). In the following, a brief overview of the programme will be given and examples from the many subjects and core elements will be discussed in order to describe the 'international' dimension of the programme. An exhaustive analysis of all Diploma Programme subjects lies beyond the scope of this article. As the available space requires, only a certain number of examples will be given.

Group 1: first language

The IBO offers some eighty different first languages in Group 1, as part of a desire to encourage students to maintain ties to their own culture (Carder, 2006). Obviously, schools cannot always provide teachers in all these languages. Students can therefore also pursue the first language courses as self-taught subjects.

The IBO finds the study of one's mother tongue essential because 'an understanding of the nature and value of one's own culture is a fundamental starting point for any educational programme claiming to be international' (IBO, 2002b, p. 8). Besides the study of mother tongue language and literature, a compulsory part of any Group 1 language includes the study of literary works from other regions and languages. This is achieved through the 'world literature' component, which aims to provide an international perspective in the study of literature. World literature can, according to the IBO:

> … play a strong role in promoting a 'world spirit' through the unique opportunities it offers for the appreciation of the various ways in which cultures influence and the shape the experiences of life common to all humanity. (IBO, 1999, p. 4)

Group 2: second language

A variety of languages are offered as a second language, such as English and Spanish but also languages that are less common in the western world such as Afrikaans, Urdu and Bengali. These courses focus on written and spoken communication. Second language courses may be offered at three levels: for beginners (*ab initio*), intermediate and for those who already have a high level of competence in the language. The classical European languages Ancient Greek and Latin may also be offered in this group. Within Group 2, students can also choose to study a so-called A2 language. This would be especially suitable for students with a near-native competence in the second language of choice allowing them to study the literature of a foreign language at a slightly lower level than the mother tongue students.

The underlying principle of requiring the study of a second language is, according to the IBO, 'to promote cultural understanding through language and … an understanding of other cultures through the study of other languages' (IBO, 2002b, p. 8). The IBO seems to be particularly proud of the compulsory second language. Perhaps this pride reflects the Anglo-American origins of many international schools now offering the programme, where learning a foreign language is not always common ground. For those who were schooled in other parts of the world, such as the present writer whose national curriculum demanded the study of at least *three* foreign languages, the study of only one foreign language comes across as a fairly meagre attempt at understanding other cultures.

Group 3: humanities

Besides the more traditional humanities subjects such as economics, history, geography, philosophy and psychology, schools can also offer business and

management, Islamic history, information technology in a global society, social/cultural anthropology and the newly-adopted subject world religions (SL only).

All Group 3 subjects share a set of aims including the promotion of 'appreciation of the way in which learning is relevant to both the culture in which the student lives and the culture of other societies' (IBO, 2001a, p. 4). Students should also 'develop an awareness … that human attitudes and opinions are widely diverse and that a study of society requires an appreciation of such diversity' (*idem.*).

Taking history as an example (IBO, 2001a), it is clear that the course aims at providing students with a broad range of topics beyond the traditional national or regional history. Although schools can choose from five different regions (such as 'Europe' and 'The Americas') all students are also required to study prescribed subjects (e.g., 'The USSR under Stalin, 1924–1941') and twentieth century world history topics. These topics include 'The rise and rule of single party states' and 'The state and its relationship with religion and with minorities'. These topics take a comparative approach: students are for instance asked to compare the rise of a single party ruler in two states in different parts of the world or are asked to use various historical examples from different regions in their analyses.

Group 4: experimental sciences

Group 4 offers the following five subjects: biology, chemistry, physics, environmental systems (SL only) and design technology.

The experimental sciences have incorporated the IBO's mission statement in their subject aims, for instance by stating that the courses should 'raise awareness of the moral, ethical, social, economic and environmental implication of using science and technology' (IBO, 2001b, p. 6). In practical terms the traditional subjects seem to teach little content with a specifically international dimension. From the onset, those involved in the development of the programme believed that 'the context of the curriculum in mathematics and the experimental sciences is relatively culture-free' (Peterson, 2003, p. 36). This is reflected in the various books available to IB Diploma students. Publications such as *Biology for the IB Diploma* (Allott, 2001), *Chemistry for the IB* (Neuss, 2001) and *Physics for the IB Diploma* (Kirk, 2003), written by experienced IB Diploma teachers responsible for developing the syllabuses, do not make any specific reference to the earlier mentioned 'implications of using science and technology'. Perhaps the standard level environmental systems course can be seen as an exception, since it specifically aims at making students appreciate 'the nature and values of internationalism, since the resolution of the major environmental issues rests heavily upon international relationships and agreements' (IBO, 2001c, p. 35) with different topics that discuss these issues (Armstrong & Rutherford, 1999).

Group 5: mathematics or computer science

All diploma students are required to study mathematics, which is offered in four different courses at various levels. Students can also opt to study computer science.

The aims of all mathematical courses are to enable students to, among other things, 'appreciate the multicultural and historical perspectives of all Group 5 sciences' (IBO, 2004, p. 6). Teachers are encouraged to 'exploit this aim', the syllabus continues, by encouraging students to discuss 'differences in notation', 'the cultural context of mathematical discoveries' and 'how the attitudes of different societies towards specific areas of mathematics are demonstrated' (IBO, 2004, p. 6). Although teachers are encouraged to discuss these issues, they are not made explicit in the subject content provided in the various mathematics subject syllabuses.

Group 6: arts, electives and school-based syllabuses

This group includes music, visual arts and theatre arts, with emphasis on students' practical work. An arts subject is not compulsory, however. Students may also choose another subject from Group 1 to 5 or a so-called school-based syllabus. These special standard level syllabuses are developed by individual schools and approved and moderated by the IBO. Often these school-based syllabuses allow schools to combine the Diploma Programme with national educational requirements. Some 20 different school-based syllabuses have been authorized by the IBO, including human rights issues, art history and political thought (Hill, 2004).

The arts courses in Group 6 all include the study of art from various parts of the world. Visual arts students, for instance, will have to demonstrate 'some awareness of the cultural, historical and social dimensions of themes in more than one cultural context' (IBO, 2000, p. 5) in their personal research workbooks. As part of the examination, a student will discuss his or her research workbook with an external examiner, who might ask questions such as: 'How do you feel this part of the world has influenced your research? Which other cultures have you researched?' (IBO, 2000, p. 17).

The core elements

Perhaps more than any other element in the programme, it is the compulsory interdisciplinary theory of knowledge (TOK) requirement that is seen as central to the educational philosophy of the curriculum (Mackenzie, 2000; Cole, 2005), offering:

> … students and their teachers the opportunity to reflect critically on diverse ways of knowing and on areas of knowledge, and to consider the role and nature of knowledge in their own culture, in the cultures of others and in the wider world. (IBO, 2002b, p. 6)

The course is meant to provide the student with coherence. It can be described as the intellectual glue of the Diploma Programme, bringing all academic knowledge back to the central question: 'how do you know?' In practical terms, TOK involves a 100-hour course, usually presented in the form of lectures and discussion classes. Students round the course off with a compulsory essay.

The idea that TOK facilitates the development of international understanding is endorsed by many within the IB community (Hayden & Wong, 1997; Hinrichs,

2003), yet the course was not always specifically aimed at contributing to the development of such attitudes. In his history of the development of the diploma programme, Peterson for instance emphasizes that TOK was meant to 'help the student to think about the questions which underlie the nature of knowledge as presented in the school disciplines and his daily life' (Peterson, 2003, p. 48). Fox, writing in 1985, did not mention the fostering of international understanding either when she stated that the course was intended to:

> … help students understand the assumptions underlying the several academic disciplines, practice different ways of thinking, and reflect on the meaning of knowledge, with specific reference to the subjects they have studied. (Fox, 1985, p. 59)

Roberts believes that pragmatic reasons were equally or more important in the decision to include TOK in the Diploma Programme than philosophical ones:

> The impression I formed … was that TOK arose as a way of satisfying the requirement of French educators for the inclusion of a compulsory philosophical element. This is the pragmatic, political reason for its development. (Roberts, 2005, p. 11)

The linkage of TOK to the ideal of educating for international understanding seems to have been made in the early 1990s, when the inclusion of more international content to the course was being discussed (Hill, 2004).

Finally, the CAS requirement is worth mentioning since it provides IB students with a slightly different approach to education. CAS aims at developing students' creative, physical and social skills. Experiential learning through cooperation is key in the CAS requirement, which hopefully leads to 'a sense of responsibility towards all members of the community' and 'the development of attitudes and traits that will be respected by others, such as determination and commitment, initiative and empathy' (IBO, 2001d, p. 3). Individual student progress is measured through self-evaluation forms. Students are expected to undertake 150 hours of CAS throughout the two years, with time distributed evenly among the three areas.

Much of the more outspoken international content within the different subject groups was developed in the 1980s, for instance through international seminars held in Singapore (1980) and Nairobi (1984). In Singapore the IBO was keen to understand how Asian thought and knowledge could be incorporated in the different subject areas (Fox, 1988). In Nairobi the Eurocentrism of the language courses became evident when African teachers made the point that English literature written by Africans was as much a native language as English written by authors from Britain or the US. They also made the case for oral literature as a legitimate literary genre alongside poetry, short stories, theatre and the novel (Fox, 1985, 1998). The IBO also intended to organize similar seminars in Latin America and the Middle East. As far as I have been able to investigate this, these seminars never took place.

Although not all subject groups are equally explicit, the general aim to provide students with subject content that fosters an understanding of the variety of cultures seems to be met satisfactorily in a variety of subjects. Still, individuals within the IB community argue that this is not enough. McKenzie, for instance, believes that 'an academic curriculum that is avowedly international must be different and more

diverse than what is taught in most schools in most places' (McKenzie, 2004). Continuing his analysis, he argues that such an education should include content that is more openly global:

> Lessons should be learnt and applied across the curriculum, classroom and non-classroom, from IB courses such as Theory of Knowledge, World Cultures, World Religions, Peace and Conflict Studies and Environmental Systems. This infusion would create opportunities for our students to acquire skills in Environmentalism, Conflict Management, Interfaith Awareness and Global Citizenship and Global Ethics. (McKenzie, 2004)

It is indeed true that the courses mentioned by McKenzie are not taught in many schools. Exact data is unavailable, but most of these courses are only taught in a handful of school offering the Diploma Programme. In May 2005, for instance, only 35 students sat the peace and conflict studies examination, a small 0.13 percent of all Diploma candidates in that particular session (Van Oord, 2006).

McKenzie discusses which courses should be taught and which skills should be acquired; he raises the question of internationalism through education at the content level. There is a possibility, however, that the nature of a truly international education is determined as much by its epistemology as by the content being taught. In analysing the IBO's educational philosophy the question which kind(s) of knowledge(s) are being transmitted and perpetuated can therefore not be left out. To understand and answer this question systematically, we need a theoretical framework to underpin such an analysis. This requires a small excursion through the field of research in cultural anthropology.

Learning configurations theory

Among the many theoretical approaches of culture available in academic scholarship, a potentially useful one for our purposes is Balagangadhara's learning configurations theory (Balagangadhara, 1994). This theory explains what constitutes 'a' culture and approximates what makes human differences into cultural differences. In the following, those elements of the theory that are relevant for our analysis will be discussed. For a full treatment of the theory I refer to the work of Balagangadhara (1994) and Van den Bouwhuijsen (1995). For an educational context, see Van Oord (2005).

Human beings grow up and learn in the framework of groups. Each generation decides what it wants to transmit from its 'reservoir' of knowledge, traditions and customs to the next generation. By being instructed the younger generation also gets an often implicit yet equally important message about *how* to learn properly. This meta-message ('learning how to learn') is often referred to as meta-learning. Obviously, different groups draw from different reservoirs; they structure their learning differently since their natural and social living areas ask for different focal areas. This obviously puts constraints on *what* is taught and *how* this is done, in other words, on the mechanisms of transmission. These constraints turn out to be significant, since they determine how learning in a particular group is structured: which kinds of learning are valued over other kinds of learning.

Taking the above into account, Balagangadhara suggests that a culture should be understood as a tradition that can be identified in terms of a specific configuration of learning and meta-learning. In each configuration one particular kind of knowledge will be dominant: it will subordinate all other kinds of learning activities to itself. This does not mean that other kinds of learning disappear in such a configuration, yet they will be perceived as derived from or applications of the dominant kind of learning.

Balagangadhara argues that it was Christianity as a religion that brought about the western configuration of learning. Christian teaching focuses on the intention and concepts behind certain behaviour and practice. Christian ritual is motivated by its underlying *meaning*. This meaning is explained through theology. The ritual of the Last Supper, for instance, refers to the theology of salvation, in which Christ suffers and dies on behalf of mankind. This theory-oriented way of teaching has led to the emergence of conceptual learning as the dominant kind of learning over the other ones. Likewise, it is argued that Asian ritual has had the functional equivalent role as orthodox theology has had in the west. In Asian culture, performative learning appears to dominate over other kinds of learning.

To speak of 'the west' it is necessary to define it first. Although the west can be depicted as a distinct regional entity, it is unproductive to think of it in territorial terms. Balagangadhara convincingly shows how 'the west' has emerged as 'the becoming of a people' (1994, p. 442). He continues by citing Berman who writes that:

> The West … is not to be found by recourse to a compass. Geographical boundaries help to locate it, but they shift from time to time. … It is not, however, simply an idea, it is a community (Berman, 1983, p. 2)

Similarly, Nandy argues that we should generalize the concept of 'the west' from a geographical and temporal entity to a mental category. 'The West is now everywhere', he writes, 'within the [geographical] West and outside; in structures and in minds' (Nandy, 1988, p. xi).

Cross-cultural differences in learning configurations can be found abundantly in the scholarly literature (see Madan, 1977; Todorov, 1984; Almond, 1988; Balagangadhara, 1994). An interesting example of a clash between these configurations of learning can be found in the work of primatologist De Waal (2001), who describes the difference between the western and Japanese pursuit of scientific knowledge. He explains how western colleagues used to complain about the 'lack of theory' in Japanese life science. In Japan 'emphasis was on data gathering … without mention of the idea behind it' (2001, p. 188). To western scholars, De Waal explains, 'data without a framework to put them in seemed pointless' (*idem*.).

In a different context, the well-known anthropologist Lévi-Strauss explains how he could not understand why young Native American Navahos did not ask conceptual questions when learning how to make jewellery: 'I mean the habit of asking questions such as ''And that, why do that?'' or ''After that, what are you going to do?''' (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, p. 95). According to the western scholar, it is this habit that gives the Native Americans their 'strange opinion of the white man, for the

Indian is convinced that the white man is a fool' (*idem*.). Apparently, asking conceptual questions about practical skills is ridiculous to the Navaho mind (see also Pinxten & Farrer, 1991). A similar difference in learning configuration can be observed in the following statement by a manager from Europe working for a multinational in Singapore. In an interview with a Dutch newspaper he comments on the native Singaporeans, saying:

> The people here are different. It is mostly a difference in mentality. They are eager to come to a solution. You give them a problem and they will find a solution. After that, they're done. Someone from Europe would keep on thinking. With the expatriates I am now trying to change the local people's mentality (Trouw, 1996, p. 6, my translation from the Dutch)

This comment is interesting, since it unravels how a conceptual thinker from Europe seems unable to understand his Asian colleagues whose performative learning configuration is adequate for solving problems without the western desire to conceptualize the problem and 'keep on thinking.' The manager believes he is encountering a difference in mentality that can be solved by changing the mentality of the local people.

These cultural 'clashes' are essentially encounters between different configurations of learning and meta-learning. Although the mapping of these differences is not an easy task and the scholarly debate of this theory has just begun, validity can be assumed in huge distinctions such as 'western culture', Asian culture', 'African culture' and so on and so forth (Rao, 1996). These cultural entities may come across as fairly large, perhaps even simplistic. Balagangadhara does not deny that one could find differences within these cultures, yet the differences between the larger groups such as 'western culture' and 'Asian culture' are significant enough in terms of their configurations of learning and meta-learning to treat them as separate and distinct entities.

Balagangadhara and his colleagues have mostly drawn comparisons between western and Asian culture, stressing the difference between theory-oriented learning in the former and performative-oriented learning in the latter. In the former, emphasis in the learning process is put on orthodoxy ('true beliefs'), while the learning process of the latter focuses on orthopraxy ('right practice'). In a theory-oriented culture, the learners should 'act to know', while a pupil in a performative-oriented culture should 'know to act' (Balagangadhara, 1987). Very little research has been carried out with a focus on other cultures such as Africa and we can only start to hint what a specific African configuration of learning would look like. Arnaut suggests in a preliminary study that African culture can perhaps be identified as a tradition with a configuration of learning that perpetuates 'kinaesthetic knowledge' (Arnaut, 1988; see also Reagan, 2005). The mapping of different configurations of learning is not an easy enterprise and needs extensive future research.

The learning configurations theory is useful in the analysis of the International Baccalaureate's philosophy of education. Which meta-messages about learning are transmitted to the students who study for the IB Diploma? Which configuration of learning underpins the educational programmes of the IBO? These are the questions that will be addressed in the next section.

The Diploma Programme at the epistemological level

In order to analyse the Diploma Programme at the epistemological level, it is useful to return to the early days of the IB movement, when under the leadership of Alec Peterson (IBO Director General 1968–1977), the foundations of the programme were put in place. Peterson writes:

> We sought not to ensure that as 'generally educated men and women' our students should have acquired a wide range of knowledge, but that they should have developed as far as they were able, their powers in a wide range of what Montaigne called 'ways of thinking'. In other words … they should 'learn to learn'. This theory, that the aim of general education was not the acquisition of general knowledge, but the development of the general powers of the mind to operate in a variety of ways of thinking, had a profound effect on the planning of curricula and methods of assessment. (Peterson, 2003, p. 41)

In history, for instance, they hoped that an IB student would not learn to memorize historical facts for the sake of memorizing, but only as a means to an end. The aim would be that the student would learn how to think historically, so that 'when faced with a problem in politics, or commerce, or literary criticism, or any other human predicament, [s]he will not neglect, but will be able to assess, the historical element in his situation' (2003, p. 46).

These intentions sound familiar, since they are part of an influential movement in educational psychology emphasizing the importance of learning for understanding. This approach transcends the perceptions of learning for knowledge and skills. Understanding has been defined as 'the capacity to take knowledge, skills and concepts and apply them appropriately in new situations' (Gardner, 1993, p. 2). 'If someone only parrots back what he or she has been taught', Howard Gardner elaborates:

> … we do not know whether the individual understands. If that person applies the knowledge promiscuously, regardless of whether it is appropriate, then I would not say he or she understands either. … But if a person knows where to apply and where not to apply, and can do it to new situations, he or she understands. (Gardner, 1993, p. 2)

Understanding involves *transforming* and *using* knowledge, skills and concepts in appropriate and creative ways (Woolfolk, 2001). These understandings (such as interpretation and judging of material, creating new solutions, critical comparison and so forth) are considered higher-level cognitive objectives in Bloom's famous taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956). There seems to be a fair amount of consensus in contemporary scholarship that the road to understanding involves emphasis on the learning of concepts and ideas over the learning of vast amounts of content. Peterson and his team clearly lined themselves up with this educational development, stating that:

> … what matters is not the absorption and regurgitation either of facts or of predigested interpretations of facts, but the development of powers of the mind or ways of thinking which can be applied to new situations and new presentations of facts as they arise. (Peterson, 2003, p. 47)

These intentions are echoed in other IBO publications. Drennen developed a set of criteria for curriculum continuity in international education, which includes

'equipping students with the skills to learn and acquire knowledge, individually and collaboratively; and to apply these skills and knowledge across a broad range of areas' (Drennen, 2002, p. 57; IBO, 2002a, p. 7).

Hill (IBO Deputy-Director General) argues that the pedagogical reasons for the development of the Diploma Programme were to 'promote critical thinking skills (rather than an emphasis on encyclopedic knowledge) via a balanced programme in the humanities, the experimental sciences and experiential learning' (Hill, 2002, p. 20). Roberts elaborates on Hill's comment by stating that it 'represents an explicit reaction against encyclopedic memory work with an emphasis on thinking skills. This would be characteristic of many other manifestations of Western liberal-leaning general education' (2005, p. 10).

From this perspective, the Diploma Programme is placed in the 'western liberal' epistemological tradition. According to Bridges, three elements of this tradition are, first, an availability of a wide range of opinions (the 'free market' of ideas); second, acknowledgement of the fallibility of one's own or others' opinion; and third, confidence in free competition of ideas as a condition for the emergence of truth as the best opinion available (in Sobulis, 2005). Echoes of this thought can be found in the IBO mission statement, for instance when it states that IB students should learn to 'understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right' (IBO, 2006).

Understanding is valued over memorizing, concepts are more important than facts; thinking skills are favoured over encyclopedic knowledge. This hierarchy of knowledge can also be found in various subject guides. The history syllabus, for instance, mentions 'a good conceptual ability' as a fundamental criterion that any student should be able to demonstrate in order to receive a top grade (IBO, 2001a, p. 51). Likewise, visual art students can achieve well if their work 'exhibits a synthesis of conceptual content, formal knowledge and technical skill'. The work should also display 'strong personal, sociocultural and aesthetic meaning', with a clear relationship between 'form, function and meaning' (IBO, 2000, p. 26). This hierarchy of knowledge can be found explicitly in many other subject syllabuses too (see IBO, 1999, p. 49; 2002c, p. 49; 2003, p. 27; 2004, p. 64).

A theory-oriented approach to knowledge transmission appears to be central to the Diploma Programme. The learning configurations theory suggests that such a hierarchy of knowledge and learning abilities unravels a western configuration of learning and meta-learning, transmitting and perpetuating conceptual knowledge as the dominant kind of knowledge. Other kinds of learning, such as memorizing, are not necessarily seen as bad in this configuration, but are 'a means to an end'. This end is conceptual knowledge, since only this type of knowledge is able to create meaning in the western mind.

Discussion

Analysing the IBO philosophy of education leads to the conclusion that there indeed seems to be, in Walker's words, 'a deeper problem' (Walker, 2002, p. 51): namely

that the educational philosophy of the IBO, at least in terms of the Diploma Programme, is largely monocultural. Although the programme has become increasingly international at the content level, western thought remains the cornerstone of its epistemology. Perhaps it would be better to describe the Diploma Programme as a western-liberal curriculum for internationally-minded students than as an international education or as an international programme for schools.

The International Baccalaureate Organization, by many seen as the 'torch-bearer for international education' (Walker, 2002, p. 96), has since long asked itself what it is that makes an educational programme into an *international* programme (Fox, 1985; Skelton, 2002; Peterson, 2003). The organization claims that their programmes foster international understanding, even in national schools without an international staff and student body.

The first studies researching this claim show that, although students from national schools offering the Diploma Programme do speak the *language* of international understanding (Hinrichs, 2003), the programme itself hardly facilitates in the development of this attitude (discussion in James, 2005). These conclusions are preliminary and research in this area is difficult to conduct, but the few studies available suggest that it is mostly the international school *environment* that fosters international understanding (Hayden & Thompson, 1995; Hayden & Wong, 1997). IB graduates, for instance, place the formal aspects of school such as their academic subjects lower than school environmental aspects such as mixing with students with different backgrounds (Hayden & Thompson, 1995). Learning in an international environment with teachers and peer students from a diverse set of countries can obviously contribute to an appreciation of the 'variety of cultures'. But evidence that such an appreciation is developed through a successful completion of the Diploma Programme is currently unavailable. The claim that the Diploma Programme has developed 'from a programme for international schools, to an international programme for schools' (Hagoort, 1994, p. 11) should therefore be reconsidered, at least until further research suggests otherwise.

By describing the educational philosophy of the IBO as one that might value and transmit a western configuration of learning and meta-learning, the intriguing issue of cultural imperialism comes lurking in the background. Claiming that the IBO contributes to cultural imperialism is a bold accusation, yet the analysis in this article suggests that the organization might contribute to the transformation and westernization of non-western kinds of knowledge. If this is the case, then the IBO could indeed play a modest role in the perpetuation of western domination by westernizing the youth of non-western traditions.

Here the question whether there is an alternative needs to be raised. As mentioned in the introduction, the IB was set up with the practical purpose of providing international schools with a pre-university curriculum recognized by universities around the world. Without the western emphasis on understanding and conceptual learning IB graduates might be disqualified from admission to many universities in a large number of countries, since universities in the west have set the standard of higher education in the rest of the world. This could be the most important reason

why more and more schools are clamoring for the preparatory curricula offered by the IBO. Many would argue that for this reason alone the IBO cannot plausibly be accused of being driven by cultural imperialism.

Tension between the two goals of the IBO (recognition by universities around the world and fostering 'international understanding') has always existed and probably will always exist. If the IBO wishes to meet the first practical goal, it is unadvisable to go very far down a path of furthering its second goal by abandoning the promotion of conceptual understanding. Contrariwise, if the IBO wishes to develop its second more idealistic goal, the organization might discredit the reputation it holds among many universities in the western world. This incompatibility of goals is something the organization will have to face and live with.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this article who raised a number of helpful and thoughtful comments on an earlier draft.

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