

## THE IB A TICKET TO WHAT?

By: John Messenger

Head of International Baccalaureate Diploma Program

Nova Scotia Department of Education

English Program Services

The International Baccalaureate is more than a ticket to university. Some time ago the President of Harvard University, Dr. Derek Bok said to a group of students. "Society is not lacking in people with the technical skills for professional careers. What the professions need are people with a breadth of knowledge, people with judgement and taste, people with a sensitivity to the problems of others, and people with a strong sense of ethical principles. These are the subtler goals of a liberal arts education." Therefore the most compelling reason for committing to the IB Diploma is the inherent value of the program. The IB can open your mind.

The qualities of an educated mind of course, are not limited to those with an abundance of formal education. The builder of the CPR, Sir William Van Horne, was expelled from school at the age of 14 for drawing rude caricatures of his teachers. Van Horne's subsequent self-directed liberal education, which saw him read a book a day, led him to become an academically honored botanist, paleontologist, and an artist with a dozen of his best paintings hung in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. His business acumen and engineering genius with the CPR are legendary. But few of us have Van Horne's genius. A program like the IB Diploma is a necessary catalyst in the quest for what novelist Robertson Davies called "a life of the mind."

My own father was born in 1900, graduated from McGill engineering in 1922, started his own construction business in 1926, and lost it with the onset of the Depression in 1932. He like many of his generation went jobless from 1932 to 1939. He told me that it almost killed him, not the deprivation, but his inability to provide for his family. The family survived by living with my grandparents in Montreal, and on the \$25-30 a month my mother earned as a professional singer with the CBC. I didn't arrive on the scene until 1937, but my older sister told me that she doesn't remember the deprivation of the Depression even though in that period the family never ate out in a restaurant, attended a movie, or bought a new article of clothing other than underwear or socks. Instead, what she remembers is the wonderful extended family parties, games with friends in Westmount Park, and the magnificent Westmount library which became the gateway to her world of literature, and a voracious reading habit she maintained all her life. My sister you see, never suffered from that most terrible of afflictions, boredom. Today in contrast, we are surrounded by endless trivial entertainment on demand, and we have the highest incidence of depression in history. Yet I don't know any IB Diploma graduates who are bored!

To me one of the most important values embraced by the IB is the emphasis on strong writing throughout the curriculum. This emphasis, I am pleased to report, is being enhanced by the IB as each new subject review is published. Robertson Davies made a great case for language in his book *Happy Alchemy*. He wrote, "It is mankind's discovery of language which more than any other single thing has separated him from animal creation. Without language what kind of thought is possible? Without language, what concept have we of the past or future as separated from the immediate present? Without language, how can we tell anyone what we feel or what we think? It might be said that until he developed language man had no soul, for without language how could he reach deep inside himself and discover the truths that are hidden there, or find out what emotions he shared or did not share with his fellow men or women." I won't suggest that the IB will make you a great writer, but it will improve your writing and certainly deepen your appreciation of great writing.

Great writing often emerges out of great thinking. One of the most important things that students learn in the IB program is how to question. You do this in constructing your Extended Essay and in the Theory of Knowledge course but critical thinking is also embraced by all your courses. You are pushed to another level of understanding in facing difficult questions.

As you contemplate the challenge of the IB Diploma you will ask your self: " Will I have enough time to do all the things I am passionate about?" The American poet, David Whyte, has a nice take on that. He wrote " We speak continually of saving time, but time in it's richness is most often lost to us when we are busy without relief. At speed the world becomes a blur and all those other lives we encounter become another blur too. We speak of stealing time as if it no longer belongs to us. We speak of needing time as if it wasn't around us already. We want to make time for ourselves as if it were in our power to do so. But, time is the conversation between ourselves and those we love. The hours become ripe with happening only when we are attentive, patient, and present."

Most of IB Diploma students I know are already making the hours become ripe with happening and are not busy without relief. Indeed many of them have been swept away with IB pursuits so intense that all that matters is the activity itself in all it's beauty, logic, and sense of possibility.

There is an IB student at Halifax West High School who has many pursuits. One of these is dance to which she commits 20 hours a week. On a recent visit to the school I asked this student how much homework she had on an average weekday. She responded that homework took only an hour each night. Surprised, I asked how could this be managed when there were so many novels and history articles to read. The student reflected for a moment and said, " Well those are so interesting that I don't consider them to be homework." Pursuits we are passionate about are never work!

The recent cyclone in Myanmar demonstrates the interdependence of peoples and how complex are the global issues facing humanity. A value unique to the IB curriculum is the emphasis on internationalism. Most teachings today are designed to develop in students an understanding of and loyalties to a particular province or state and a national perspective on world events. What the IB attempts to do is to teach students to understand other cultures and global issues. It does so while encouraging a sensitivity to the human condition by raising moral and ethical issues in a global context. Students are encouraged to become citizens of the world and make meaningful contributions to the problems that threaten all humanity. IB refers to this as a commitment to international mindedness which is integrated into all learning rather than as a separate subject. One of the most promising developments in recent years within the IB world community of schools is the growth of international service projects to which so many students are directing their service hours in the CAS program. Many of these international commitments see our students traveling abroad with agencies such as Habitat for Humanity, Free the Children, or the Stephen Lewis Foundation. Such an involvement empowers students like few others.

And finally, I believe the greatest strength and most compelling feature of the IB program is its holistic nature. The IB program emphasizes values which permeate the curriculum including internationalism, open mindedness, literacy, compassion, engagement with difficult questions and intellectual curiosity. All together these give the program a special character and depth. As a consequence IB graduates gain a special character and depth. Of course all of these attributes provide students with a splendid preparation for university and beyond. Thus you might say that the IB is a ticket to a fulfilling life, one that is characterized by an enduring thirst for knowledge service to humanity and strength of purpose.