

Essay 1

A conversation: Tim and David discuss what it means to be an IB teacher

Tim Pruzinsky: David, we've now finished creating all the content for the *English A: Language and Literature for the IB Diploma* teacher resource book. But looking back at it, I'm a bit concerned that we haven't dealt with what it means to be an IB teacher, and an IB Language and Literature teacher in particular. You're an opinionated Scottish man! What do you think here?

David McIntyre: Just as well you didn't refer to me as 'Scotch'. You must have one of those US 'college educations'. Joking aside, I think you are right, Tim. An IB education – a proper IB education – needs to be flavoured in a particular way. If my opinion matters, teachers need to begin by considering the IB's mission statement and learner profile. Few people, populists aside, will find much to argue about. The values, attitudes and attributes are, I think, easy to endorse. Still, you need to think about what is really meant. And, after reflection, you need, as a teacher, to think about how all of these things can be taught. That's much less straightforward. I've had the good fortune to visit many IB schools, and I frequently see lots of colourful posters promulgating the IB vision. That's great. I don't have a problem with this. However, an IB education can't start and stop here. It's the teaching that really matters, and that is, most often, a classroom thing.

Let me pause briefly. I may be getting ahead of myself. When you start teaching the IB, it's hard. We've both been there. There is a lot to think about and remember. Study guides can be complex and initially overwhelming. Then there is TOK and CAS and EEs and IAs and ATLs and so on. With so much to consider and remember, you would surely forgive the nascent teacher who shrugs and then suggests they have little energy, time or enthusiasm left for grand visions. I think, at any rate, this was something like how I thought as a younger, less experienced teacher. Something, somewhere changed.

I wonder, then, a little about your development as an IB teacher. Did you always proselytise for the IB's mission statement and learner profile, or was it something you felt was initially abstract and distant, but which you grew into?

Tim Pruzinsky: I wish I could say that I had it all together, but that's so far from the truth. I started teaching the IB fresh out of university – or college as we call it – at twenty-two. Twenty-two! I had no

idea what I was doing and I definitely was not thinking about the IB mission or learner profile. I just wanted to survive my first year of teaching. It was a slow process; the more I felt comfortable teaching the IB, and the more my school culture promoted the ideals of the IB, the more I grew into placing the mission at the centre of my teaching. I feared not being good enough, and spent way too much time worrying that my students would suffer because I didn't know my stuff. Once I was able to let go of the more insidious anxieties, I realised that being an IB teacher is a process, and one that you get better at over time. I'm still not where I want to be, but I keep getting better at it, and that's what matters.

How do we honour that in the teacher resource book we created? How do the units of study Brad's created and the resources we've developed help teachers and students, if at all, grapple with the grand visions of the IB? Or were we too narrow in our thinking, too concerned about day-to-day teacher needs?

David McIntyre: I can share the sentiment of feeling, once upon a time, overwhelmed and underprepared for IB teaching. As some of our students might say, I can 'relate to' your sense of feeling apparently inadequate. If it's any comfort, walking into a TOK classroom for the first time does take a sense of inadequacy to an entirely new level! I don't think it helps or comforts less experienced teachers to suggest the task is not daunting. It is, or can be. And, as you suggest, there is – or ought to be – a continual desire to change, modify and, above all, improve. I think, however, that pushing the IB mission statement and learner profile is easier than you might imagine, but it cannot be assumed or taken for granted. What do I mean by that? Well, earlier I mentioned posters. Displaying ideas does not inculcate them. Nice posters, however glossy, are never enough. In the same way, let's say, including works of literature in translation – because you have to – does not, through the simple act of their inclusion, promote international mindedness. As a teacher, you – I think obviously – need to have a sense of why, vis-à-vis your student body, you have selected the works that you have.

Here, Tim, in selecting works of world literature, and any other work or text for that matter, I am always guided by a sense of trying to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. In fact, I would say that this is my 'golden rule'. That is, my teaching is compelled by a desire to gently destabilise my students from their ethnocentrism, but also to draw attention to the universal qualities of what we might call a 'common humanity'. That is a very broad claim, of course, but I mention it because it is something that underpins all of my teaching, informing my selection of course materials and the ways I organise activities in the classroom. This is no different, then, in terms of the materials I have written for this book.

The intention is always to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. Of course, the IB does suggest in its mission statement that ‘others, with their differences, may also be right’ (and presumably also wrong!).

I have found my approach – if that is what it is – to be generally very effective, but that doesn’t mean that it is the only thinking tool that teachers can use to teach English through the lens of the IB learner profile. What larger ideas inform your own teaching and the writing that you have done for this book?

Tim Pruzinsky: In two of my other essays in this book, I talk about creating a culture of reading and about using a writing workshop approach as often as I can. Those ideas have had a huge influence on my teaching – and the learning that takes place in my class. I can’t emphasise this enough. I think, broadly speaking, that when students really take on the identity of a reader and writer, good things happen. There’s also been a big push in the IB – and in the school where I teach – to create enduring concepts and to design a curriculum around conceptual understandings. We’ve been thinking about that ‘common humanity’ you speak of, David, in terms of human truths and social concerns.

The IB themselves have seven concepts for this course. And they’re good. Representation, for example, is a no-brainer. You’ve written before about how we need to ‘consider how social and cultural life is represented, constructed and challenged by alternative representations’. I think we tackle that in this teacher resource and I think it’s something that teachers and students should be tackling too. Now I know you don’t play American football and so my tackle metaphor might be a bit too contrived here. Still, do you have any ending thoughts about all of this? What’s lingering for you as we wrap up this conversation?

David McIntyre: Do I have any final thoughts? I remember an occasion in a university tutorial where I used the expression, somewhat flippantly and probably too precociously, ‘the last analysis’. My sage old tutor paused, gave me a withering look, and asked, ‘When is the last analysis, David?’ Stinging, huh? I know now, of course, that the last analysis is likely to outlive me. I hope so! So our work as IB teachers will always remain incomplete. Just a work in progress.

As we are having this conversation, Tim, the IB has recently celebrated its 50th birthday. It’s a year older than I am! It has grown immensely in those years (as my girth has widened), but its founding principles

remain largely unchanged. In some recent writings, the academic Steven Pinker suggests that the world is becoming a better and more peaceful place. If that's true, possibly the IB has played a minor role. It is obvious, however, that there is a lot of work to be done. For example, the ecological situation of the planet is a serious concern. It is, I think, as if our ambitions for a better future life are always receding beyond our grasp. And yet, we must go on and remain optimistic.

The existence of the IB, and its growth, are grounds for optimism. The learner profile, as I've said, needs to be taught, not just talked about. This thought returns us to the classroom and what, as teachers, we do there. You mention 'alternative representations'. I think we can agree that at the time we are finishing this teacher resource, there are many alternative representations in the world – ways of thinking, being and behaving – but too few people talking about their differences. I hope that, in some small way, the activities we have included in this book are guided by a sense in which we would like to encourage young people to think about the plurality of social life and, as language teachers, how this is represented.

I am not a relativist. But, at the risk of being self-contradictory, there is a sense in which people with their differences may also be right. I hope that the resources we have put together here enable young people to consider our differences, celebrate them in some instances and work to resolve those differences where they may be problematic. If I seem almost naively ambitious, Tim, I think you have to be a bit of a dreamer to be an IB teacher in the first place!