

The Butterfly Effect

Accompanied on both sides by two of my friends, I walked into my first class of the morning. As I entered the art room converted for my Theory of Knowledge class for first period, I knew something was different. I turned to the board at the front of the class, and saw our IB coordinator, Ms. Turner, standing at the front of the room. A presentation was set up on the screen, aptly titled, “Welcome to the Extended Essay.” My friends and I exchanged a look of apprehension but waited patiently for Ms. Turner to begin her presentation. We were second-semester juniors at this point in the year, and the extended essay was discussed between classes like folklore. Previous IB students passed down advice and horror stories of the extended essay in an attempt to help out the class behind; finally it was our turn to begin this dreaded project. Taking a deep breath, Ms. Turner began her spiel, officially assigning the extended essay project to us. The presentation dragged on in the freezing cold classroom and honestly, I wasn’t listening as attentively as I should have been.

“Your final paper should be at least 3000 words, and no more than 4000 words. It will be roughly 15-20 pages”.

It felt like someone had poured ice water down my neck. I sat up straight, and looked around to my friends. Everyone had the same look on their face, complete dread. At this point the longest paper I had written in high school was roughly 1500 words, making this new project particularly daunting. Ms. Turner continued explaining the project, noting the importance of preparatory research and analyzing our sources. At the end of the presentation, we were each

given a small reference textbook, outlining exactly what was expected of our final products.

While the book weighed no more than a pound, I felt an existential weight on my shoulders as she placed the books in my hands. Of course I knew I would have to start this project at some point, but now it was real. Everything that we had been told, all the lessons previous classes told us to learn from, had now suddenly become my responsibility.

The essence of the extended essay was to write an extensive, analytical research paper on any topic of your choosing. The essay was assigned to us as second semester juniors to be turned in before Thanksgiving of our senior year. While I was dreading actually writing the paper, I was excited about the freedom to pick a topic that was relevant to my life. As a tri-varsity athlete in high school, sports came easily to me, so I knew I wanted to relate sports to my essay topic in some form. After talking with my assigned advisor, I settled on the topic: “The Implementation of Title IX in the 20th Century”. After picking my topic, discussing with my advisor, and spending quite literally 2 full school days researching, I was finally ready to write. As I flipped through the cool pages of the reference book we were given, I realized that this would be completely different from any paper I had written before. Sections in the textbook were dedicated to explaining how to incorporate a “holistic analysis” within your paper, how to evaluate different sources within the analysis, and how to discuss global impact. A project I had felt prepared for now felt like I had to climb a mountain to complete. Following hours upon hours in the library, the local coffee shop, and the comfy chair in my living room, I finally finished my paper.

When I handed the thick stack of paper to my advisor, the weight that I had felt for so many months was lifted. My advisor took the paper, looked at me, and asked “What did you learn?” I responded with the information I had drilled in my head about Title IX, court cases that enforced the law, women’s rights and more. He nodded, and said, “I’m glad you can recite the information in your paper. Now tell me what you learned”.

In this moment, I realized that this project and the IB program itself had become the biggest literacy sponsors I had ever had. However, the program sponsored me in a very narrow and complex way, tied to several economic and political motivations at the time. Obviously, I was already adapted to the literacy of writing when I began this project, so the IB program and institution didn’t sponsor typical literacy, but rather a global and analytical literacy that I had never been exposed to before. The IB mission statement outlines what they hope students gain from their sponsorship of global literacy: “allow students of all ages to think critically and challenge assumption, develop independently of government and national systems, incorporating quality practice from research and our global community of schools, and encourage students of all ages to consider both local and global contexts” (IBO). This form of literacy that they made a priority to expose students to, global literacy, became central to all of my work throughout the IB program. Through the extended essay and other course work, I learned that global literacy presents itself as understanding how our actions and ideas don’t just affect our communities. Literacy in this form teaches you to understand how we are all interconnected, despite possibly being hundreds of miles apart from each other. A movement for rights or political change can spark inspiration and action in a country across the globe, and it is our job to understand and be mindful of this interconnectedness. Global literacy fostered the idea that it isn't enough to just be

aware of events happening around me, but also those that seem far away, because they could potentially impact my own life. The dread and burden I felt throughout this project was because the program was sponsoring a literacy that I wasn't used to, and it forced me outside of my comfort zone. That feeling and pressure allowed me to grow outside of typical literacy that I never would have been able to achieve without the sponsorship of the IB program. American writer Alvin Toffler wrote in his book *Future Shock*, "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn" (275). In their sponsorship through the extended essay project, the IB program undoubtedly enabled me to learn and relearn to write with a global, holistic perspective. Instead of evaluating how Title IX affected women in the United States, I was pushed to research and analyze how Title IX inspired equal rights movements worldwide, and how our actions aren't just affecting our communities but the world around us. I found through my research that the women who championed the Title IX movement continued to work for equality across the globe after Title IX was passed in 1972. The Women's Sports Foundation, founded by Billie Jean King, began working to create opportunities for girls across the world to play sports at a high level. From sponsoring athletes to play at a university, to creating the International Women's Sports Hall of Fame, the Title IX movement was far from over after 1972. While this "global literacy" is a rather narrow form of literacy, this sponsorship didn't just impact my writing for this assignment. It began to instill the importance of global learning in my everyday life, and has translated into understanding the importance of our actions as a whole and not just as an individual.

However, like most sponsorships, the sponsorship of the IB program was more complex than simply supporting students to think, write, and learn with a global mentality. In the piece

“Sponsors of Literacy”, author Deborah Brandt discusses the intricacy of sponsorship: “Literacy, like land, is a valued commodity in this economy, a key resource in gaining profit and edge. This value helps to explain, of course, the lengths people will go to secure literacy selves or their children. But it also explains why the powerful work so persistently to conscript and ration the powers of literacy. The competition to harness literacy, to manage, measure, teach, and exploit it, has intensified throughout the century” (169). The duality between the IB sponsoring students simply to enable them to become global learners as well as the economic and political motivations to exploit literacy creates a gray area regarding the clarity of their sponsorship. Schools pay for their candidacy application to bring the IB program to their school. Schools in the Americas pay roughly \$4,000 for the diploma program and \$8,500 for the certificate program, as well as additional thousands of dollars in authorization and evaluation fees, workshops and conferences, annual school fees, and examination fees (IBO). The examination fees for IB exams are substantially higher than AP exams, adding to the disparity and ability for students to participate. These fees and regulations for schools make the sponsorship of the IB program for students very limited, and solely based on the wealth of the area and the school itself. Additionally, the IB program is used only in about 5,000 schools worldwide, limiting the opportunity for students worldwide to have these experiences.

While this economic factor contributes to the IB program both enabling and suppressing literacy, there is also a large political motivation, especially in the United States. As state governments and the federal government determine the quality of education children in the United States are receiving, they often look at rankings, standardized testing, and other data that can be extremely skewed by the presence of IB or AP sponsorships in high schools. In the

consensus study report *Learning and Understanding: Improving Advanced Study of Mathematics and Science in U.S. High Schools*, the National Research Council investigated this political motivation for schools to acquire IB or AP programs: “Using the number of AP and IB examinations or number of AP and IB courses offered in a school as a measure of school quality also penalizes in the arena of public opinion schools that have chosen” (187). The study continues on to analyze how these programs being the factor determining the quality of a school can often impact the creativity and innovation of students and teachers. The study concluded that oftentimes these programs inhibit students' ability to reach their full potential due to the strict regulations put in place by these programs. With the limited number of schools that have access to the IB program, in addition to the demands of state and federal governments for students to perform well in rigorous programs, the sponsorship of the IB program is not as directly beneficial as the experience I had with it. However, this supports Brandt’s arguments that literacy is becoming a “valued commodity” and that sponsors will go to lengths to provide literacy in an attempt to exploit it for economic or political gain (169). Brandt’s idea that literacy is directly tied to economic gain because of how valuable and competitive it is, gives a deeper insight to why these programs are perceived as being so “elite”. They directly translate to students having opportunities to go to prestigious colleges and win reputable awards, because of the perceived idea that their specific forms of literacy will be a valued commodity for these institutions. The perceived values of these programs and the literacy they provide, as Brandt states, has caused “competition to harness literacy, to manage, measure, teach, and exploit it” to heighten throughout the past several decades (169).

The experience I had with the extended essay and the IB program as a whole supported me to learn and relearn types of literacy, specifically global literacy. However, I understand how the political and economic motivations behind their sponsorship impacted my literacy and the motivations for the program and my high school itself to provide that form of sponsorship for students. While these programs were created and implemented to give students opportunities, like the one I had through the extended essay, they have been skewed in a way that continues to increase the disparity between those with access to the economic resources to pay for these programs and the privilege to live in areas that supports these programs to grow their rigor and “quality”. The perceived quality of one’s education being based in these “elite” programs is significantly damaging equal opportunity for high school students, and often the reputation of these programs is played into by parents, teachers, and even the government. While their goal to create opportunities for students is achieved, it is often limited as to who is allowed to reap the benefits of those opportunities. As Brandt discussed in her article, sponsorship is a two-sided sword, and oftentimes the economic and political motivations behind sponsorship can impact the benefits that come from that sponsorship.

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