

The Zone of Tolerance

by Dr. Richard van de Lagemaat

*“The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”*
[William Butler Yeats]

International education, it could be said, operates in the grey area that spans the distance between the extremes of those that “lack all conviction” and those that are “full of passionate intensity”. This is no easy territory to inhabit - perhaps because, as some biologists have suggested, we are genetically predisposed to think in terms of binary oppositions: fight or flight, friend or foe, black or white. Sadly, it is so much easier to flee to the extremes - the black of dogmatic certainty, or the white of relativistic indifference - than inhabit the messy middle ground where shades of grey blur imperceptibly into one another. However, it is on this unpromising ground that we must pitch camp and lay the foundations of inter-cultural understanding.

I believe the most important quality an internationally educated individual can possess is that of *tolerance*. This is hardly original; but since the belief in tolerance can easily calcify into unthinking dogma, or become a euphemism for lack of conviction, it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves just what is meant by this word. The dictionary informs us that tolerance is “the disposition to be patient with the opinions or practices of others”. The underlying idea that justifies - and, indeed, demands - such “patience” is that my own way of looking at things is not the only one that there is - that there are many different and equally valid ways of being human. Since we all suffer from a degree of cognitive egocentricity, it is much easier to state this idea than to live up to it.

The Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, once conducted an experiment in which he let a child examine a cube painted red on one side and green on the other. He then put the cube on a table with the red side facing the child, and sat down opposite him. When he asked the child “What colour can you see?”, the child correctly answered “Red”. And when he asked him, “And what colour can I see” the child again - wrongly - answered “Red”. Piaget concluded from this that young children are unable to adopt the perspective of other people. I suspect that when confronted by cultures significantly different from our own, many of us regress to a way of thinking not so different from Piaget’s child. Since I see the world this way, then that’s the way the world must really be. To transcend such egocentricity at a deep level is no easy task; but it minimally requires that we engage with people from other cultural backgrounds, and seek imaginatively to project ourselves into their way of looking at the world. One of the best ways of doing this is through face to face conversation. As the Oxford historian,

Theodore Zeldin observes: "Conversation puts you face to face with individuals, and all their human complexity. Our education cannot be complete until we have had conversations with every continent, and every civilization." By furnishing the environment within which such conversations can take place, international schools surely enable students to develop a more inclusive conception of humanity.

Or do they? In defusing the unthinking conviction that one's own culture is inherently superior to other cultures, there is a danger that we simply swing to the other extreme of "the best" that "lack all conviction". Certainly, tolerance is a key element in the outlook of an internationally educated person; but there is, I think, a widespread and disturbing tendency - not least among students in international schools - to confuse tolerant open-mindedness with ignorant empty-mindedness. It is therefore worth insisting on the obvious point that since one cannot be tolerant or open-minded about something of which one is ignorant, an internationally educated person should have a good working knowledge of at least one cultural tradition other than their own, which can then serve as an exemplar for making sense of the variety of cultures that exist in the world.

I would further argue that if we are to learn anything from our encounter with other cultures, then we must look carefully at their various beliefs and practices, and, at least on occasion, be willing to judge them as being more - or less - insightful or beneficial than our own. Now, some people claim that we have no right to make any kinds of judgments about other cultures, and that any such judgments will inevitably be covert forms of cultural imperialism. To the extent that precipitous, blanket judgments about other peoples' way of life tend to go hand in hand with intolerance and prejudice, I am sympathetic to this view. However, the alternative to precipitous judgment is not *no judgment* but *slow judgment*; and the fact that a culture is too rich and complex a tapestry to be judged in its entirety, does not mean that we cannot make provisional judgments about some of its strands.

As I see it, consistent non-judgmentalism is not only psychologically impossible - we cannot help but judge - but is as undesirable and damaging as precipitous judgment. For if I am *never* willing to judge other peoples' opinions, then I am in effect saying that no opinions are any better or worse than any others, and that they are all of precisely equal value. Not only does this rob us of the ability to condemn things such as racism that clearly merit condemnation, but it also means that in the last analysis we have nothing to learn from one another. And in that case we might as well all shut up. If we are to resist such a conclusion and ascribe to conversation an educative function, then we must believe that we really do have something to learn from one another; and this in turn requires a willingness to make tentative and provisional judgments about one another's beliefs and opinions.

To square this with my earlier observation that there are many different and equally valid ways of being human requires that we accept that there are limits to legitimate human diversity. Consider the following analogy. When studying a literary text, such

as a poem, we should not assume that there is only one acceptable way of interpreting it; for there are likely to be a range of equally legitimate interpretations, and our understanding will be richer and more insightful, the more interpretations with which we are familiar. However, textual richness notwithstanding, it remains the case that some interpretations are simply wrong, and cannot be sustained without doing violence to the text. In short, from the fact that there is no single “right” interpretation, it does not follow that there are no “wrong” interpretations. I believe that something similar is the case with respect to our judgments about the world, and that from the realization that our own way of looking at things does not exhaust the possibilities, it would be a mistake to conclude that anything goes. So rather than equate tolerance with non-judgmentalism, it might be more helpful to think of it in the engineers’ sense as “the allowable deviation from a standard”. What constitutes an “allowable deviation” may, of course, be difficult in practice to determine; but we must keep some such idea in play if we are to give substance to the idea of an internationally educated person who is able, not only to understand and empathize with people from different cultural backgrounds, but also to make sensitive and discriminating judgments about the world in which they live.

In conclusion, I think that if there is to be meaningful conversation between cultures of the kind that international education seeks to encourage, then we must both rise above the sectarianism of those that are “full of passionate intensity”, and eschew the “anything goes” attitude of those who “lack all conviction”. William Butler Yeats was on to something when he wrote the lines with which I began this article, and those of us involved in international education would do well to ponder them.