



A Method for *All* High School Students: The IB Model

SUMMARY

With the introduction of *Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy*, there is a renewed emphasis on critical thinking and analyzing texts. An educator who teaches International Baccalaureate (IB) classes describes a model of assessment based on a long-term project of the student's choice, and systematic instruction in the skills of judging sources and synthesizing information. He argues that projects of this nature can be used across the content areas and across the high school years — and can be beneficial for all students.

When assessing students on their academic growth in school, the field of education has often been divided into two camps. The first camp supports the style of “traditional assessment,” where evaluation is based on the conventional methods of measuring a student’s grasp of the concepts through multiple choice, true-false, fill-in-the-blank, or essay questions. The second camp embraces the concept of “authentic assessment.” Authentic assessment has been defined by Grant Wiggins as an approach that engages the learner in:

worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively. The tasks are either replicas of or analogous to the kinds of problems faced by adult citizens and consumers or professionals in the field. (1993, p. 229)

Using the definition provided by Wiggins, it seems logical to apply

authentic assessment to *any* area of school curriculum to better prepare students for the 21st century. One such program that has embraced this concept is the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Founded in 1968 in Geneva, Switzerland, the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) has blossomed into a worldwide educational program that encourages students to think independently, become academic risk-takers, and to inquire and reflect in an attempt to acquire worldly knowledge. As the IB community has grown, so have the program’s ideas regarding assessment. The IB embraces the concepts of assessing students through various formative approaches (i.e., means of improving a student’s learning) and summative approaches (i.e., determining the success of a student’s comprehension at the end of unit or course). However, the IBO insists that these two methods should not be viewed “as being mutually exclusive” and that “the two approaches should interact and be mutually supportive”

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(IBO, 2004, p. 3). One aspect of the IB program that incorporates both approaches while allowing the students to be authentically assessed is the Internal Assessment (IA) in the high school social studies classroom.

The IA is a historical investigation that “enables students to demonstrate the application of their skills and knowledge, and to pursue their personal interests” in the form of a research paper (IBO, 2008, p. 82). According to the IBO, the history IA allows students to demonstrate their research skills while working at their own pace. The teacher serves as a moderator of their progress and provides feedback to the students throughout the process. Using specific criteria related to each section of the paper, the students work independently over a predetermined timeline to fulfill the IB requirements.

As a high school history teacher, I have taught IB courses and worked with many students in completing IAs. While many districts do not offer IB courses, this does not mean that they

cannot integrate a project similar to the IA into their curriculum. An IA is structurally different from a typical history paper. Whereas a history paper traditionally proposes a thesis that is proven throughout the work, an IA is a 1,500–2,000 word “problem-solving activity” (IBO, 2008, p. 84) that allows the students to demonstrate their own research skills and knowledge on a topic of their choice.

The topic that students choose for an IA does not have to be an essential topic covered in the curriculum. While enhancing the knowledge and understanding of the curriculum is imperative, the heart of the IA is focused on skills needed in the discipline of history. Virtually any topic that a student chooses to write about will align with one of the New York State social studies standards of US history, state history, world history, geography, economics, civics, citizenship, and government.

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Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy. According to David T. Conley (2007) of the Educational Policy Improvement Center, the basic skills used in the social studies include emphasizing the skills of “interpreting sources, evaluating evidence and competing claims, and understanding themes and the overall flow of events within larger frameworks or organizing structures” (p. 15). These skills, which are all key components for an IA, are delineated as an outcome for students who meet the *Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy*; that is, students demonstrate “cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic” (p. 1). As stated in the *Introduction* to the standards, “to conduct research in order to answer questions or solve problems,” is so important to being college and career ready that these skills are embedded throughout the standards (p. 2). One

example standard (of many) for which the IB is clearly relevant is the following:

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced search engines effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the specific task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation. (p. 79)

The IA makes it possible for a teacher to incorporate and evaluate a range of skills above (e.g., interpreting sources and evaluating evidence) by dividing the assessment into six different sections. These sections, in the order they should appear in the paper, are: (1) Plan of the Investigation; (2) Summary of Evidence; (3) Evaluation of Sources; (4) Analysis; (5) Conclusion; and (6) Sources and Word Limit.

Step One: Plan of the Investigation

The *Plan of the Investigation* is the opening section of the paper where the student will state what topic will be investigated. The student should explain what will be covered and what will be omitted in the paper. Usually, the topic will be presented in a

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question format. By writing a logical *Plan of the Investigation*, a student is showing the ability to select a focused topic that can be researched and answered in a short paper. In my experience, the following types of questions have emerged:

- To what extent did Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal plan pull the United States out of the Great Depression?
- How did the music of the 1960s contribute to the growth of the countercultural movement in the United States?
- Did Adolf Hitler’s handling of the 1936 Summer Olympics held in Berlin hurt his image as a world leader?

Step Two: Summary of Evidence

In the *Summary of Evidence* section, students attempt to answer their investigative question. The students will prove their research skills by properly citing various sources using a consistent and appropriate citation style. While the IB does not require it, using the *Chicago Manual of Style* or the *Turabian Manual for Writers* is most appropriate for a history paper. Both are often used in college-level history classes. It is important that students write their *Summary of Evidence* in the

style that presents the material either thematically or chronologically. For example, a student who is asking, “To what extent did Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal plan pull the United States out of the Great Depression?” might approach it chronologically and address the following major events:

- The economic climate of the United States when Roosevelt was elected to office.
- Roosevelt’s issuance of a bank holiday during his First Hundred Days in office.
- The Second New Deal of 1935.
- Roosevelt’s understanding of Keynesian economics.
- The Roosevelt recession of 1937.
- The economic impact of the Second World War in Europe on the United States.

Step Three: Evaluation of Sources

In the *Evaluation of Sources*, students are asked to evaluate two of the sources they cited in their paper. This section is what makes the IA unique from other traditional history papers. In order to properly evaluate a source, the student must reference the origin,

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purpose, value and limitations of the source. In essence, the students are learning how to pinpoint the positives and the drawbacks of a source and why a historian must be cognizant of these limitations when researching. Below is an example of what a teacher could use as a model for evaluating a source:

Source:

Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (United States: Macmillan, 1928).

Origin:

- *The Origins of the World War* was written by American historian Sidney Fay.
- Originally published in 1928, a revised edition of the book was released in 1930.
- Fay received his Ph.D. in history in 1900 from Harvard University and then continued his studies at the University of Berlin.

Purpose:

- The general purpose of *The Origins of the World War*, as indicated by the book's title, was to explain the root causes of the First World War.
- Often considered a revisionist piece, Fay contradicted the traditional belief that Germany was to be blamed for causing the First World War. Rather, Fay believes that the war was a culmination of many different factors.

Value:

- Fay's work has tremendous value for those studying the causes of the First World War. Shedding light on a new interpretation of the causes, Fay believes that the war broke out because of five distinct underlying causes. They are (1) the system of secret alliances; (2) militarism; (3) nationalism; (4) economic imperialism; and (5) the newspaper press.
- The book's value goes beyond Fay's thesis. Fay demonstrates a high level of scholarship with the numerous sources he utilized in his research. The sources are a combination of primary and secondary sources from British, German, American and French archives.

Limitations:

- While Fay's research is outstanding and his thesis is convincing, one must question if this revisionist historian is simply a German sympathizer.
- As previously mentioned, Fay spent some of his time studying at the University of Berlin. It is possible that the daily interaction with the German people made him sensitive to the German plight.
- Fay seemingly dismisses the traditional "blank check" theory that argues that Germany gave Austria unconditional support to declare war on Serbia for the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand.
- Fay also downplays the roles of the

German hawks in government who felt that a war with Russia was inevitable and if the war began now (1914), Germany stood a better chance of winning.

Step Four: Analysis

The *Analysis* allows students to delve further into the research process by critically examining the findings from their *Summary*. The students are expected to bring forth key elements of their research and make historical connections by contextualizing their topic. As an extension activity, students can present alternative interpretations of their *Summary*. In a recent issue of *Social Education*, former NCSS President Gayle Thieman stated that a key component of authentic assessment is using “digital tools to interpret and evaluate complex information while considering multiple perspectives and alternative solutions” (2011, p. 129). The *Analysis* section fulfills Thieman’s criteria. It allows students to not only improve their research skills, but to also become aware of multiple perspectives and understandings. Below is an example of what a teacher could provide for discussing multiple perspectives:

- Compare Fay’s *The Origins of the World War* to Berghahn’s *Imperial Germany, 1871-1914: Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics*. Whereas Fay argues that multiple

factors contributed to the start of the First World War, Berghahn claims that Germany and its aggressive foreign policy is responsible for causing the war.

Students are instructed that by reading both sources, or even just parts of the sources, they will have to utilize their analytical skills to formulate a position. In addition, they will benefit from a more holistic understanding of the causes of the First World War.

Steps Five and Six: Conclusion and the Sources and Word Limit

The last two sections, the *Conclusion* and the *Sources and Word Limit*, bring the research to an end by highlighting the key findings and providing the reader with a complete, properly formatted “Works Cited” page. Students are encouraged to use websites such as RefWorks (www.refworks.com) or KnightCite Citation Service (www.calvin.edu/library/knightcite/) to help them generate the reference page.

As with all papers, an appropriate rubric must be generated for the IA. The IB bases its “Internal Assessment Criteria” on a scale of 0 to 25. Its rubric is broken down by the six sections of the paper and offers general descriptors that allow the teacher to respond to the unique topic chosen by the student.

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Some administrators will be skeptical about implementing an IA into their curriculum because of the academic level of their students and the time commitment required of the students and teachers. In response to this, first, it is important to note that, as reported by Yazzie-Mintz (2010) in the 2009 *High School Survey of Student Engagement*:

- Only 48 percent of high school respondents claimed to have been challenged in “most” or “all” of their classes (p. 9).
- Only 39 percent of high school students spent between two and five hours a week doing written homework (32 percent spent one or fewer hours, and 7 percent spent no time doing homework) (p. 8).

In contrast,

- 38 percent spent two to five hours watching television or playing video games and,
- 35 percent were spending an equal amount of time chatting and surfing online (p. 8).

While it is admittedly difficult to compete with students’ recreational and social interests, there are ways to raise interest in academic work completed during and outside of the regular school day. Administrators must realize that every student can write an IA, that they will all benefit from it, and

that the key is to capture student interest in a particular topic. It is the belief of the IBO that every student can handle the rigors of writing an IA. The IB program is not geared toward advanced students but rather toward the enhancement of knowledge for students of all academic levels. Thus, the challenge is to use a process that engages the students in writing an IA — both during the school day and beyond. Some suggestions follow:

- Ask students to write down three things that interest them. These do not have to be historical topics. For example, if a student writes down that he or she is interested in rap music, the teacher should encourage the student to research and write an IA on the origins of rap music or a comparison between the influence of jazz music and rap music on black culture.
- Educate students about the various types of historiography. The IA does not have to be written purely through a political or diplomatic perspective. Cultural, feminist, economic, and military history are just a few of the other widely accepted historical lenses a student can use.
- Students who cannot decide what to write about because of multiple interests should list potential topics and then search for sources at the local library or online that might be helpful in completing the IA.

Topics for which there are a limited number of reliable sources for research are then eliminated.

Even with these suggestions, there will be some reluctant and disengaged students. As the teacher, you have the ability to change the format of the paper to keep the students interested in the process. Districts that do not offer the IB Program also have the luxury of altering the methodology.

For some districts, the IA can serve as a senior exit paper for students to demonstrate their historical skills and understanding of the discipline. However, the paper does not have to be introduced and concluded in the senior year. It is recommended that the different parts of the IA be taught to students throughout their high school experience. For example, 9th-grade teachers can implement the concept of evaluating sources for authenticity and bias. Building on this skill from 9th through 12th grade will enhance the quality of the *Evaluation of Sources* section of the IA. The 10th-grade teachers can continue working with source evaluation but can also introduce a small scale IA by having the students write all of the sections except for the *Analysis*. This will teach students the basic historical skills of: (1) selecting an appropriate topic; (2) writing a history paper; (3) properly citing their sources; (4) explaining the limitations of their research; and (5) generating a “Works Cited” page.

In the 11th grade, students should begin to work on a new IA that will be carried over into their senior year. (The major difference between the 10th- and the 11th-grade paper is the addition of the *Analysis* section.) By gradually introducing the various parts of the paper, much of the anxiety that comes with writing a paper will be quelled.

In my experience with this method, I have seen students who were completely disengaged by the discipline of social studies find a new interest in the subject. Students are being eased into the research and writing process on a topic that they choose. One student decided to research the economic impact of Operation Bootstrap on Puerto Rican society. This student had initially asked:

“Why do we have to study history? It’s in the past and we can’t change it.”

He found writing the IA to be one of the most rewarding tasks he was asked to complete in high school. Acting as an economic historian, this student stated that,

“After every sentence I wrote, I kept asking myself ‘why?’ I wanted to get into the mindset of the economists of that time period.”

If an IA can turn a reluctant teenager into a student with historical curiosity,
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the IA or a similar project should be seriously considered by all teachers. This student was clearly building critical thinking skills.

In a time when the teaching profession is the focus of national debate, it is imperative that the public better understand effective teacher practices. Authentic assessment can result in products that build understanding, not only on the part of students, but parents and community members as well. The IA lets students leave a social studies classroom with a well-researched history paper that not only demonstrates their ability to write, but accentuates their skills in reading, conceptualizing, and theorizing. One area of concern expressed by post-secondary teachers is that incoming freshmen do not have the reading and writing skills expected at the collegiate level. These concerns were justified when the ACT published its annual report showing that nationally, only 66 percent of high school graduates who participated in the English ACT and 52 percent in the Reading ACT were

college-ready (see “The Condition of College & Career Readiness: 2010”, p. 8). In New York, only 37 percent of students who entered high school in 2006 left four years later adequately prepared for college — that is, they met the state’s college-ready standard of scoring a 75 on the English Regents and an 80 on the math Regents (Otterman, 2011, p. 23). While the IA cannot guarantee improved literacy skills for all, it would be a step in the right direction in acting on the concerns of college educators.

In 2006, educational theorists McCarthy and Kuh noted that “the more students practice a skill, such as reading, writing, or problem solving, the more adept they become at the activity, especially when they get feedback about their performance” (p. 665). By correctly implementing an IA into the curriculum and providing ongoing feedback, schools will be launching a new initiative toward building critical skills in reading, writing, and research and will better prepare students for college and beyond.

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