

From a CASophile's Perspective

(or) – My critical reflections on the CAS component of the IBDP

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CAS has been one of the most successful endeavours undertaken by me to date. To sum it all up in a single sentence, CAS has made me a more all-rounded person than I would have been without it. One of my primary personal goals (and incidentally one of IB's too) is to be good at and excel in all walks of life, not just academics alone. To this end, CAS has taught me to venture out into the outside world, to interact with people who (surprisingly) think differently than me, to be more sensitive to others' opinions, to be more gregarious and finally, to be more light-hearted and humourous even in the extremes of situations. I have learned to acknowledge that others can be right by being different. Had it not been for CAS, I would have unproductively spent a large part of my spare time in the tiny prison cell that is my bedroom. Bye-bye to becoming a computer potato; hello to a more sociable and respectful citizen.

CAS has been beneficial to me in a number of ways, some of which I shall outline in the coming paragraphs.

I had had only one vision in mind when I made that uncomfortable decision of pursuing IB: I wanted to be intellectually challenged. CAS, among other things, was a tasteless side-dish, an unwanted burden that I had to put up with. CAS was like a lousy soccer player I didn't want on my team. Fortunately however, my negative mind-set vanished quickly and quietly. Today, my total perspective on CAS has taken a sharp 360° u-turn. When I helped set-up a local in-school garage sale to raise money for charity, I was happy to be informed a week later that the money I helped raise was put to good use somewhere. But it's not the money that makes it all interesting; it's the satisfaction, the pride and the contentment I derive by having helped someone less fortunate than myself. The intervening duration after I've said my nightly prayer and before my tired eyelids fall is awash with a nanosecond of bliss, each one of which I cherish to this very day.

Waking up with the sun on a Saturday morning can be extremely inspiring, not to mention the ab-

sence of a distressing mid-morning stupor. I took that up as a challenge when I agreed to volunteer at Glenbrook Elementary to help coordinate a carnival for little kids. That single day, I remained fresh and active throughout. On a typical Saturday, waking up at 10:00 would have rendered me obtuse for the remaining of the day. Thanks to CAS, some of my weekends have been much more eventful. To me, CAS was about participating in activities that I wouldn't normally participate in. CAS is a challenge. It is an adventure you know you can and will conquer.

Of course, let's not forget the wondrous sight of little children, their faces covered with their impeccable smiles, their cheeks about to tear apart with laughter, their eyes gleaming with mischief, their precociousness a tad disconcerting to an envious me, and them bubbling with infinite energy. The day-long action at the Vancouver International Children's Festival reminded me of my own tumultuous childhood, my innocence and an ephemeral sense of freedom in knowing that I could do whatever I wanted to do. This entire experience might have been only a streak of blurry imagination and wishful hope, had it not been for CAS. CAS, to me, was about drawing connections from the outside world into your own. It is about service and about teaching you your responsibilities towards your community and at large, the world.

In September of 2004, our entire IB troop marched down to a nearby IB school for a world music symposium. Good fortune gave me this opportunity to listen to music from various cultures – something that I had been longing for over a year but had never really gotten to do anything about it. My misconceptions were shattered when I sat listening to the melodies that were coming from makeshift musical instruments that I had never known even existed. The session that impacted me the most was spiritual music. “Good” music, I thought, was impossible without proper musical instruments. But here was a man whose voice-box was his source of sound, his palm a source of beat, his knowledge a source of rhythm, and his soul a source of emotional melody. An hour with this awe-inspiring gentleman was so unforgettably soothing to the senses that I just had to pen it down in my annual journal for the year 2004:

“2004 was the year when I attended the IB World Music Symposium. There I learned to belly dance (gasp!), and I learned how profound spiritual music can get. All the spirituals that I had heard in the past—which comprised of a set of confusing and cacophonous riddling rhymes and rhythms—came crumbling down in front of this simple yet

meaningful music that flowed out of this wonderful gentleman's heart.”

To me, CAS is all about tolerance. Tolerance for other people's ideas, opinions, ambitions and religion. It is about a sense of openness and inclusion, of your willingness to accept another's—even your opponents'—views, and of your capability to demonstrate the humility of an ant when time calls for it.

My activities for action hours were one of the best. They were definitely hours well spent. In playing badminton, for instance, I learnt the spirit of self-leadership and sportsmanship. I learnt to become a team player because, of course, a team of two is far better than two isolated players. I, for the first time, took losses sportively. Whenever we won, we would give ourselves a promising high-five. During those moments, I would feel such a complete sense of synergistic harmony. CAS, to me, was about self-governance, cooperation and persistent diligence. It was about getting up whenever you fell and still keeping that mischievous smirk on your face.

Three times I went down to Buntzen Lake Park, once for a seven hour hike and twice for the rehabilitation of broken hiking trails. The work involved in the latter was back-breaking to say the least; we had to haul buckets of sand and gravel over relatively large distances. Here I was, losing my sweat for people I didn't even know, while at home, when asked to perform a small favor for my mother, I sulk as though the world was crumbling. At the end of the day, I wiped the remnants of my perspiration, and as we were about to leave, an old man thanked us all full-heartedly for our undying enthusiasm and support towards the community. CAS, to me, was about dedicating your resources for the community you live in. It was about what you created for others, not yourself, that mattered. It was about working without keeping an eye out for gains. This was my early teenage lesson in success — a lesson that some learn the hard way, others never do.

During the seven hour hike, my lungs leapt and danced ecstatically with renewed joy. It was a wonderful change from the dry, acrid air that my bedroom had to offer. The breathtaking views from mountain-tops stole my consciousness for a jiffy. CAS, to me, was about a sense of commitment and involvement with nature. It was about rejuvenating your body and mind, even in the midst of a hectic workload. Speaking to the Grade 11's and learning of their aspirations made my own seem so puny. They taught me a significant lesson that day – you treat small people with more respect than you treat big people. Respecting your subordinates is more important than respecting your

superiors.

A large portion of my service hours came from tutoring my peers. Although it was fun to play 'teacher' for a while, tutoring someone of your own age (and sometimes even your own caliber) can be excruciatingly strenuous. Tutoring, besides serving as a revision, forced me to know the content well and to think before I spoke. It taught me what a difficult job it could be for my own teachers and it brought about a new level of sympathy for them. I began to realize, for the first time ever, how amazingly well my teachers were handling the challenging task of imparting education. I grew more respectful towards them and never once took advantage of their willingness to help. CAS, to me, was about putting yourself in others' shoes and walking a mile in them. It teaches you to see things from an opposite perspective and to never take things quite at face value. Most importantly, CAS was about sharing your knowledge with others and helping them out regardless of any differences or boundaries that may stand in the way. A teacher is his first student, and a student is his first teacher.

Many of my CAS activities were about showing consideration for others. Life, I believe, begins and ends with this simple precept.

"Contemplation is the best source of knowledge," goes the old adage and I so passionately concede with it. A day without introspection is a day wasted. Over the last two hours that I've spent at my desk here, in my desperate attempt to induce some turbulence in my hitherto rigid mind, I've gone over nearly twenty months of happenings. CAS is about building a bond with your inner self. It is about looking back and evaluating your successes and failures no matter how uncomfortable it might be.

CAS is about challenge. A challenge of whether you can complete one hundred and fifty hours worth of activities, a challenge of standing tall and firm despite the relentless bashing by some as to why CAS is "useless". CAS is about participation. These days, I am more inquisitive. I take an active interest in many different things. My temper levels have subsided noticeably. I now live with the knowledge that the world is indeed a friendly place to be in. I will continue to reap the harvest of satisfaction and contentment forever – creative endeavours, jostling activity and selfless service are one-time seeds that germinate, live and grow until they're asked to perish. CAS can be as beneficial to you as you'd like it to be.

Sadly however, CAS has had to become an “excuse” for me to engage in activities I should already be engaged in as an aspiring teenager and a responsible denizen of my observable community. Keep trying something new Rajesh, it won't hurt.
