

TOK – Theory of Knowledge

TOK plays a special role in the Diploma Programme by providing an opportunity for students to reflect on the nature of knowledge, and on how we know what we claim to know.

The fundamental question of TOK is “how do we know?” Students are encouraged to think about how knowledge is arrived at in different disciplines, what the disciplines have in common and the differences between them. TOK therefore supports and is supported by the study of other DP subjects, as students are required to explore knowledge questions against the backdrop of their experiences in their other DP subjects. Discussion and critical reflection form the backbone of the TOK course, centring around discussions of questions such as:

What counts as evidence for X?

What makes a good explanation in subject Y?

How do we judge which is the best model of Z?

How can we be sure of W?

What does theory T mean in the real world?

How do we know whether it is right to do S?

Through discussions of these types of questions students gain greater awareness of their personal and ideological assumptions, as well as developing an appreciation of the diversity and richness of cultural perspectives. The TOK course is assessed through an oral presentation and a 1600 word essay. The TOK presentation assesses the ability of the student to apply TOK thinking to a real-life situation, while the TOK essay takes a more conceptual starting point; for example asking students to discuss the claim that the methodologies used to produce knowledge depend on the use to which that knowledge will be used. TOK is a demanding and challenging course, but one which plays a crucial role in effectively preparing students for the complex and rapidly changing world they will encounter both during their DP experience and beyond.

TOK at a glance

Knowing about knowing

TOK is a course about critical thinking and inquiring in to the process of knowing, rather than about

learning a specific body of knowledge. It is a core element which all Diploma Programme students undertake and to which all schools are required to devote at least 100 hours of class time. TOK and Diploma Programme subjects should support each other in the sense that they reference each other and share some common goals. The TOK course examines how we know what we claim to know. It does this by encouraging students to analyse knowledge claims and explore knowledge questions. A knowledge claim is the assertion that “I/we know X” or “I/we know how to Y”, or a statement about knowledge; a knowledge question is an open question about knowledge. A distinction between shared knowledge and personal knowledge is made in the TOK guide. This distinction is intended as a device to help teachers construct their TOK course and to help students explore the nature of knowledge.

The ways of knowing

While there are arguably many ways of knowing, the TOK course identifies eight specific ways of knowing (WOKs). They are language, sense perception, emotion, reason, imagination, faith, intuition, and memory. Students must explore a range of ways of knowing, and it is suggested that studying four of these eight in depth would be appropriate.

The WOKs have two roles in TOK:

they underlie the methodology of the areas of knowledge

they provide a basis for personal knowledge.

Discussion of WOKs will naturally occur in a TOK course when exploring how areas of knowledge operate. Since they rarely function in isolation, the TOK course should explore how WOKs work, and how they work together, both in the context of different areas of knowledge and in relation to the individual knower. This might be reflected in the way the TOK course is constructed. Teachers should consider the possibility of teaching WOKs in combination or as a natural result of considering the methods of areas of knowledge, rather than as separate units

The areas of knowledge

Areas of knowledge are specific branches of knowledge, each of which can be seen to have a distinct nature and different methods of gaining knowledge. TOK distinguishes between eight areas of knowledge. They are mathematics, the natural sciences, the human sciences, the arts, history, ethics, religious knowledge systems and indigenous knowledge systems. Students must explore a



range of areas of knowledge, and it is suggested that studying six of these eight would be appropriate. The knowledge framework is a device for exploring the areas of knowledge. It identifies the key characteristics of each area of knowledge by depicting each area as a complex system of five interacting components. This enables students to effectively compare and contrast different areas of knowledge and allows the possibility of a deeper exploration of the relationship between areas of knowledge and ways of knowing.

Assessment

There are two assessment tasks in the TOK course: an essay and a presentation. The essay is externally assessed by the IB, and must be on any one of the six prescribed titles issued by the IB for each examination session. The maximum word limit for the essay is 1,600 words.

The presentation can be done individually or in a group, with a maximum group size of three.

Approximately 10 minutes per presenter should be allowed, up to a maximum of approximately 30 minutes per group. Before the presentation each student must complete and submit a presentation planning document (TK/PPD) available in the Handbook of procedures for the Diploma Programme.

The TK/PPD is internally assessed alongside the presentation itself, and the form is used for external mode