THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE (TOK)

Nature of the Subject

The theory of knowledge (TOK) course is one of the IB core mandatory subjects for full diploma candidates. TOK explores the nature of knowledge across a range of disciplines. It plays a special role in the Diploma Programme by providing an opportunity for students to reflect on the nature of knowledge. The task of TOK is to emphasize connections between areas of knowledge and link them to the knower in such a way that the knower can become aware of his or her own perspectives and those of the various groups whose knowledge he or she shares.

TOK, therefore, explores both the personal and shared aspects of knowledge and investigates the relationships between them. The raw material of TOK is knowledge itself. Students think about how knowledge is arrived at in the various disciplines, what the disciplines have in common and the differences between them. The fundamental question of TOK is "how do we know that?" The answer might depend on the discipline and the purpose to which the knowledge is put.

TOK explores methods of inquiry and tries to establish what it is about these methods that makes them effective as knowledge tools. In this sense TOK is concerned with knowing about knowing. The individual knower has to try to make sense of the world and understand his or her relationship to it. He or she has at his or her disposal the resources of the areas of knowledge, for example, the academic disciplines studied in the Diploma Programme. He or she also has access to ways of knowing such as memory, intuition, reason and sense perception that help us navigate our way in a complex world. It is easy to be bewildered by the sheer diversity of the knowledge on offer. For example:

- In physics, experiment and observation seem to be the basis for knowledge. The physicist might want to construct a hypothesis to explain observations that do not fit current thinking and devises and performs experiments to test this hypothesis. Results are then collected and analysed and, if necessary, the hypothesis modified to accommodate them.
- In history there is no experimentation. Instead, documentary evidence provides the historian with the raw material for interpreting and understanding the recorded past of humanity. By studying these sources carefully a picture of a past event can be built up along with ideas about what factors might have caused it.
- In a literature class students set about understanding and interpreting a text. No observation of the outside world is necessary, but there is a hope that the text can shed some light upon deep questions about what it is to be human in a variety of world situations or can act as a critique of the way in which we organize our societies.
- Economics, by contrast, considers the question of how human societies allocate scarce resources. This is done by building elaborate mathematical models based upon a mixture of reasoning and empirical observation of relevant economic factors.
- In the islands of Micronesia, a steersman successfully navigates between two islands 1,600 km apart without a map or a compass. In each case above there is clearly knowledge at work, although the collection as a whole illustrates a wide variety of different types of knowledge. The task of TOK is to examine different areas of knowledge and find out what makes them different and what they have in common.

At the centre of the course is the idea of knowledge questions. These are 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?

While these questions could seem slightly intimidating in the abstract, they become much more accessible when dealt with in specific practical contexts within the TOK course. They arise naturally in the subject areas, the extended essay and CAS. The intention is that these contexts provide concrete examples of knowledge questions that should promote student discussion.

Discussion forms the backbone of the TOK course. Students are invited to consider knowledge questions against the backdrop of their experiences of knowledge in their other Diploma Programme subjects but also in relation to the practical experiences offered by CAS and the formal research that takes place for the extended essay. The experiences of the student outside school also have a role to play in these discussions, although TOK seeks to strike a balance between the shared and personal aspects of knowledge. Recognizing the discursive aspect of the course, the TOK presentation assesses the ability of the student to apply TOK thinking to a real-life situation.

The TOK essay gives the opportunity to assess more formal argumentation prompted by questions of a more general nature. TOK is a course in critical thinking but it is one that is specifically geared to an approach to knowledge that is mindful of the interconnectedness of the modern world. “Critical” in this context implies an analytical approach prepared to test the support for knowledge claims, aware of its own weaknesses, conscious of its perspectives and open to alternative ways of answering knowledge questions. It is a demanding course but one that is an essential component not only of the Diploma Programme but of lifelong learning.

AIMS

The overall aim of TOK is to encourage students to formulate answers to the question “how do you know?” in a variety of contexts, and to see the value of that question. This allows students to develop an enduring fascination with the richness of knowledge. Specifically, the aims of the TOK course are for students to:

1. make connections between a critical approach to the construction of knowledge, the academic disciplines and the wider world
2. develop an awareness of how individuals and communities construct knowledge and how this is critically examined
3. develop an interest in the diversity and richness of cultural perspectives and an awareness of personal and ideological assumptions
4. critically reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions, leading to more thoughtful, responsible and purposeful lives
5. Understand that knowledge brings responsibility which leads to commitment and action.

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVE

A diploma candidate must follow a theory of knowledge (TOK) course. The IB recommends that TOK is an independent course of at least 100 teaching hours evenly distributed over the two-year period of study, and the course must meet the TOK assessment requirements that include giving a presentation and submitting an essay on one of the six prescribed titles for the examination session. The prescribed titles for May 2019 are released on the programme resource centre for coordinators in September 2018, and those for November 2019 are released in March 2019.

It is expected that by the end of the TOK course, students will be able to:

1. identify and analyse the various kinds of justifications used to support knowledge claims
2. formulate, evaluate and attempt to answer knowledge questions
3. examine how academic disciplines/areas of knowledge generate and shape knowledge
4. Understand the roles played by ways of knowing in the construction of shared and personal knowledge 5. explore links between knowledge claims, knowledge questions, ways of knowing and areas of knowledge
5. demonstrate an awareness and understanding of different perspectives and be able to relate these to one's own perspective
6. Explore a real-life situation from a TOK perspective in the presentation.

TOK and the Learner Profile Attributes

Attribute	Link to TOK
Inquirers	TOK students seek to find out how knowledge is constructed using various ways of knowing and by considering what constitutes knowledge in various areas of knowledge. It is a fundamental premise of TOK that personal knowledge should not result from simple acceptance of knowledge claims without sufficient inquiry and evidence.
Knowledgeable	TOK students strive to be knowledgeable about the nature of knowledge. This means becoming knowledgeable about the methods of inquiry of a variety of subject areas, from a number of perspectives. Students are encouraged to explore the processes by which individuals arrive at their own knowledge and understanding of the world and the presuppositions that underpin this understanding.
Thinkers	TOK students examine thinking in order to understand what constitutes good thinking and also to recognize potential flaws in thought processes. Students also think about what thinking is required in a variety of situations, as well as how thinking relates to emotional processing and intuition.
Communicators	TOK students are required by the TOK assessment tasks to communicate their understanding and perspective in both oral and written form. Students also study the language that is used to develop a body of knowledge, so they learn what gives language its power as well as what causes failures of communication.
Principled	TOK students scrutinize knowledge in a critical manner, leading to what could be called principled knowledge. Students are required to examine the relationship between possessing knowledge and the moral obligations that this carries.

	Learning to see the world from a TOK perspective challenges students to think about acting in principled ways.
Open-minded	TOK students need to be open-minded about knowledge claims they encounter. They will learn not to simply accept claims at face value, but to consider the factual accuracy of any proposition and the potential emotional, social or cognitive bias of any person making a proposition. At the same time, they must learn to balance skepticism with belief, and recognize that in many situations there is a need to make decisions without possessing absolute certainty.
Caring	TOK students are asked to care about how they use their knowledge. This necessarily means thinking about how knowledge can be used in sympathetic, empathetic and compassionate ways.
Risk-takers	TOK students must be willing to risk questioning what they hold to be true. This means that they must be willing to risk being wrong. When we are willing to accept being wrong then we make progress towards correcting existing misconceptions and increasing our knowledge and understanding of the world. The word "judgment" is central in TOK, and students should be prepared to take the risks involved in making judgments in matters where the evidence does not definitively favour one view or another, while at the same time acknowledging the provisional nature of these judgments. Balanced TOK students are committed to viewing
Reflective	TOK students learn to reflect on the degree to which their own and other people's motivations, beliefs, thought processes and emotional reactions influence what they know and what they are capable of knowing.

WAYS OF KNOWING

The TOK course identifies eight specific ways of knowing (WOKs). They are:

- language
- sense perception
- emotion
- reason
- imagination
- faith
- intuition
- memory.

Students must explore a range of WOKs. It is suggested that studying four of these eight in depth would be appropriate. The WOKs selected for detailed study should be carefully selected to ensure a coherent and balanced approach. There are two central purposes to the WOKs in TOK. On the one hand they are the tools that answer the question "how do we know?" and on the other hand they help us answer the question "how do I know?" For example, we can analyse the role of imagination in the construction of shared knowledge in terms of scientific discovery, but we can also discuss imagination in the context of personal knowledge and understanding. While there may be a place in a TOK course to analyse WOKs and their impact on how individuals construct their own personal knowledge, TOK teachers are encouraged to explore WOKs, not in isolation, but from the perspective of their contribution to understanding different areas of knowledge.

AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE

How do we know things? We know things because we use a range of methods of inquiry that incorporate ways of knowing to help construct knowledge in different areas of knowledge (AOKs). The theory of knowledge course distinguishes between eight AOKs:

- mathematics
- natural sciences
- human sciences
- history
- the arts
- ethics
- religious knowledge systems
- Indigenous knowledge systems.

Students must explore a range of AOKs. It is suggested that six of these eight would be appropriate. While this guide identifies eight broad AOKs, students should be encouraged to think about individual academic disciplines, that is, to think about the nature of knowledge in their own specific IB subjects, such as chemistry, geography and dance.

Reference:

International Baccalaureate Organization (2017). The Theory of Knowledge Guide, First Assessment, 2015. Retrieved from https://resources.ibo.org/dp/subject-group/Theory-of-knowledge/resource/11162-occ-file-d_0_tokxx_gui_1304_1_e/data/d_0_tokxx_gui_1304_3_e.pdf