

Theory of knowledge in the 21st century



Competition Question

Why is Theory of Knowledge important to the 21st century international student?

“Every fact grows from an idea; it is the answer to a question we could not ask in the first place if an idea had not been invented which isolated some portion of the world, made it important, focussed our attention, and stimulated inquiry. Sometimes an idea becomes so commonplace [...] that it sinks out of awareness, becoming an invisible thread in the fabric of thought. [...] We live off the top of these ideas, harvesting facts from their surface.” (Theodore Roszak)

Rationale

This lesson promotes the new ToK programme by focussing on the historical development aspect of the knowledge framework. It is predicated on the view that an understanding of the present and readiness for the challenges of the future depend on an awareness of how knowledge develops and infiltrates thinking, and, by extension, action, in ways that are not always obvious - especially at the time. The invitation to take this approach is explicitly prompted by the new ToK programme, and reflected in the chapters of our book (learn more at www.PearsonGlobalSchools.com/ToK).

Aims

1. To appreciate how intellectual ideas from the past exert an impact on thought and action in the present (and future).
2. To understand how the ubiquity and proximity of intellectual ideas lures us into overlooking their power over own thoughts and actions.
3. To nominate ToK as one practice that helps us recognize these influences on our thinking and behaviour.

Class Management

Allocate one of the thinkers in the focus activity to an individual student or small group, as appropriate. Give students the opportunity to research if they are not familiar with the example - they should prepare responses to the first set of questions. Each student or group should then be given a platform to share these responses with the whole class. The teacher should manage and direct subsequent discussion in order to emphasise how each idea has had consequences for subsequent thinking and action (discoveries, policy choices, etc.). Then move on to the second activity with the 21st century challenges. A full group discussion can ensue - guided by the second set of questions.

Focus Activity: ideas from the past

Imagine, as a ToK student, you have the opportunity to be beamed back in time to meet each of the following individuals. Your conversation topic in each case would be what is written below:

- 100 Plutarch - history serves best as moral instruction for those who read it
- 1654 Blaise Pascal/Pierre de Fermat - the likelihood of future events can be measured quantitatively (probability theory)
- 1776 Adam Smith - economic arrangements are best guided by an “invisible hand”
- 1781 Jeremy Bentham - moral decisions should be based on the principle of utility
- 1913 Marcel Duchamp - it is possible for any activity or object to be art
- 1922 James Frazer - religion develops from magic and is superseded by science
- 1940 Franz Boas - cultures should be apprehended on their own terms (cultural relativism)
- 1944 Erwin Schrodinger - the characteristics of living organisms are encoded in a chemical

Jot down a few points that immediately occur to you about the topics.

Discussion Questions: the power of ideas

- Situate each of these ideas within the areas of knowledge of the ToK programme. Which of these ideas has arisen in your ToK or other DP courses?
- How successful or influential do you think each of these ideas has turned out to be in terms of (a) development of knowledge and (b) impact on the world?
- Have these ideas had any negative consequences - ie impeded knowledge or helped to create problems in the world? Would it have been better if any of these ideas had not occurred?
- To what extent do you imagine that each of these ideas was an entirely personal contribution to knowledge?
- What tools are offered by the ToK programme that might help us to understand the impact of ideas on knowledge?

Focus Activity: challenges of the century

Now consider some of the challenges facing humanity in the 21st century. These surely include:

- A. Gross material inequality around the world
- B. Oppression of particular groups within societies
- C. Escalating demand for affordable food and medicines
- D. Terrorism and fundamentalism
- E. Large-scale migration
- F. Climate change
- G. Danger of pandemic disease

Discussion Questions: ideas at work in the future

- How, if at all, might the ideas presented in the focus activity influence the approaches taken to these 21st century challenges?
- To what extent might these influences turn out to assist or retard the search for solutions to these challenges?
- What are the implications of having each of these ideas as a “thread in the fabric of our thought”?
- Stand back and imagine you are a ToK student from the 22nd century. What advice might you offer to your present self - confronted with these challenges?
- “One advantage of ToK is how it helps dredge knowledge from the subconscious and automatic realms and make it explicit for discussion and appraisal.” To what extent are your experiences in your ToK course consistent with this claim?

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Visit www.PearsonGlobalSchools.com/ToK to learn more about the NEW Theory of Knowledge 2nd Edition textbook and eBook.