

ToK Case study - The Issue of AIDS

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Introduction

One of the best ways for students to gain a sense of involvement in issues facing the 21C that cut across national boundaries is to examine, as members of a task force, how different ways of knowing, different areas of knowledge and different group perspectives can be brought to bear on a case study of global significance.

The following activity grapples with an issue of current international importance so that students gain a sense of acting on their knowledge to make a better world.

While AIDS is central in this case study, a teacher could substitute: terrorism, refugees, global warming or a particular situation such as a civil war in a neighboring country. In addition, a class could organize all of their ToK presentations around this issue.

Focus issue

Consider a table. There are ten chairs around it. AIDS is the topic of discussion. Who should occupy the chairs? Whose voices should be heard? Who should choose? How will the choices be justified? Decisions about representation will depend on the definition of the goal of the roundtable and the criteria for selection.

The list of those chosen to be at the table might include representatives from:

- Various disciplines in the IB or the Areas of Knowledge in ToK
- Political organizations
- Diverse cultures
- The world of philanthropy
- Gender and trans-gender groups
- Religious groups
- Different economic classes
- The media
- Other representation

Differing goals:

- If seeking a cure for aids, the scientist might be valued over the artist.
- If increasing public awareness, the artist or journalist might become important.
- If creating an action agenda, the political member might be valued over the artist.
- Other goals.

Questions to be asked periodically of the roundtable (meta-questions) as their discussions progress:

- Do we have enough knowledge to reach a decision? Is it tentative, incomplete or uncertain knowledge? To what degree?
- Do we have enough knowledge to educate others and to take action?
- How do we find out what else we need to know?
- What obligations of action or restraint do we have based on our current knowledge?
- How do we determine the consequences of our decisions? Of our actions? What do we do if we cannot figure out the consequences? Are we aware that there are always unintended consequences?

Discussion of the issue

How did this topic come to be chosen over others as a global issue of significance in the 21C? How does any specific problem come to the world's attention? Who has to be persuaded that this issue takes priority over others in a world of limited resources and attention?

Language

- How do we define our terms of discussion before we begin? What are the consequences of using language in one way rather than another?
- What is AIDS as an acronym in English? What is the acronym in other languages? How does the name we give something reflect and/or create our understanding and response to the issue?
- What does it mean to say that someone is HIV-positive and how does this set of words differ in reference and emotional overtones from AIDS? What about living with AIDS vs. dying from AIDS?
- Does the vocabulary in speaking of AIDS and sexual matters exist in all cultures? If not, are some people disenfranchised in reaching a solution if the issue cannot be discussed? Can language taboos alter the reality of the situation?
- Will the same pressures or factors affect other symbolic systems such as the visual arts? For instance, will posters affecting public awareness show distorting sides of the issue (AIDS posters in Sweden have shown condoms while those in Nigeria have approached the issue through depictions of “the healthy family?”
- Does the circumstances of the meeting affect what is communicated: where it takes place, the shape of the table, who is present, the expectations of the speakers and listeners?
- Do the metaphors we use—the description of one thing in terms of another—affect the way we understand the issue? For instance, in English illness and disease is talked about as invasion and fighting the battle. What other forms of discourse might open our minds to thinking differently?
- Is there such a thing as gender or group or culture or class-based ways of speaking?
- What mode of discourse should be dominant? Who should lead the group? How should it be recorded? Is it acceptable to interrupt? Should we always be seeking consensus?
- Does the way in which we speak in the group around the table follow from the group from which we were chosen? Do we have an obligation to represent that group or can we speak as an individual? Does our responsibility belong to the issue and our responsibility to be solution-seeking or does it belong firstly to the group we are representing?

Questions from the ToK areas of knowledge:

Mathematics

- What role do statistics play in the discussion?
- What role do they play in the prediction of the spread of the disease? In the predictions of economic impact? In the predictions of the effect on medical research and practice?

Science

- What scientific theories are available to the group? With what kind of empirical support? What facts are missing from our deliberations? What models?
- Are there alternative cures to what is now being used? What is their status? Have we reviewed our biases in terms of line of treatment over another?
- What are the open question in the research? Is there funding for research? From where?
- Do our decisions correlate with our confidence in our data-gathering systems and the data itself?
- Are there any beliefs from scientific findings that should override cultural norms and beliefs? How might this question have an ethical dimension?

Human sciences

- Are there particular myths or prejudices in a society that seize the popular imagination around the issue? Is being ill accepted as part of the suffering of life?
- How do we gain information on the extent of infection? How good are our systems of data-gathering? Is the data valid for all factors: the spread of infection, the danger to the general population, the population most at risk?
- What are the best means of persuasion to help people seek information and treatment (see the Gates Foundation reports on this topic).
- How do we integrate any program of communication or treatment into existing norms?

Ethics

- How can we identify the moral dimension of various forms of definition and treatment?
- Does any group in the various populations affected by AIDS have a major claim on our attention? How do we set up an ethics of triage for treatment when resources are limited?

History

- What is the history of the disease? How have we validated the historical record?
- What does history tell us about similar situations of plague, or scourge in terms of diagnosis and treatment?
- How does history give us lessons about the treatment of those with horrifying diseases on the order of epidemics? About the possible ostracism of the debilitated?

Art

- How can artistic expression increase the awareness of those most vulnerable to contracting the disease?
- How can the strengths of artistic expression be used to persuade various populations to change behaviour?
- How can art express a universal dimension about the suffering of humanity that would have universal appeal?

Indigenous knowledge systems

- How have the sources of wisdom in indigenous cultures been evaluated within the concerns of this roundtable?
- Have we taken account of the sensitivities of multi-cultural groups? Their strengths, their taboos, what works and what does not?

Religious knowledge systems

- Are there analogies of affliction in religious lore that can be tapped for various reasons within the context of the roundtable?
- Is it useful to discuss the notions of God's will or God's punishment in terms of the wide spread suffering from AIDS? Is prayer or sacrifice helpful?

Other questions

The questions above are not prescriptive as much as they are suggestive and their usefulness, and what can be added to the list, is central to this lesson.

Conclusion

It is left to the individual teachers and their classrooms to add and/or subtract from this lesson and to adapt it to the interests and needs of local concern. This includes substituting another issue of global significance for the one presented above.

Students and teachers will be the ones to conduct the research needed for filling out the responses to the inquiry about whatever topic is chosen. It is assumed that online resources will be available to the school and that part of the learning experience will involve the evaluation of those sources.

Given that the topic chosen should be one of global significance, it is good to consider if social media or the exchange between selected schools might add to the educational experience.

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