

Eileen's advice for new TOK teachers

- “I’ve never even *taken* a course like IB Theory of Knowledge, and I’m not sure at all how to *teach* it.”
- “I’m just planning the course for the first time, and have some ideas...”

(Eileen Dombrowski, March 2015) Voices and faces linger with me as I return from a gathering of teachers (a flocking of my own kind!). Among them were many teachers new to TOK — still taking it in, connecting it with their own backgrounds, and beginning to plan. It’s to these new teachers – with their ideas, energy, and uncertainties — that I’d like to speak in today’s blog post. May I offer you some suggestions for enjoying to the full your teaching of IB Theory of Knowledge?

My last question, note, was purely rhetorical — and disingenuous. I really *want* to offer some suggestions and simply hope that what I prize from my own experience will find some place in your own shaping of a course that I consider central to education. I’m not at all detached, and not at all neutral: in my opinion, the whole way of thinking of TOK is crucial to the knowledge that our students *should* take with them as they graduate.

From the five pieces of basic advice I offer here, please take whatever is useful to you — and accept my good wishes that you may love the course as much as I do.

1. Make the knowledge questions drive the entire course.

In Theory of Knowledge, we’re not in the business of delivering pat answers. As teachers, we’re not experts on the content of the whole range of knowledge, and never can be. Although we certainly want to become better and better *informed*— perhaps especially on those areas of knowledge we left behind us as we specialized — it is not *information* that drives the course. The *questions* do. If we can treat knowledge as alive with questions and intensely human in all the possible ways of constructing answers, then, I feel, we can enter the course and the classroom with humility and excitement.

In TOK, the questions are meta-cognitive ones that get at the very essence of knowledge. For example:

How do we know? What ways do we have of knowing, how do we use them, and how might we use them better? What are the best methods of reaching reliable conclusions in different areas of knowledge and public life? How do different areas of knowledge enrich our overall understanding? What responsibilities does knowledge bring?

It is by *leading with the questions* that we open up the **active process of knowing**. “How do we **know**?” With a stress on the final word, this core TOK question leads to discussion of what we mean by “knowing” and what different forms it might take in our lives. “**How** do we know?” With a shift of emphasis to the “how”, the same core question leads straight into the interplay of ways of knowing, skills of critical thinking, and the methodologies of the different areas of knowledge.

If we treat knowing as a response to questions for which we want answers, we put the stress on active engagement with problems and solutions, and value both the subjective and the objective in the methods of construction of the best answers we can presently achieve. We recognize the body of knowledge already created in the past as a human achievement and we welcome the living edge of creating, researching, or reflecting that modifies our understanding from year to year.

By leading with questions, we also open up for thoughtful examination the active perspectives that synthesize knowledge claims into internally coherent theories, explanations, or worldviews that differ from group to group:

*How do **they** know? What are their assumptions, their values, their selected “facts” – and how do we know these? What are their processes for validating their knowledge? What are the implications of accepting this perspective and its knowledge claims?*

In our real world, perspectives shared by different groups affect where we go next in developing our knowledge, and how we apply the knowledge we already possess.

As TOK teachers, we don't have to be experts in all knowledge. But we *do* have to seize knowledge questions and bring them to life for our students. If we're successful, our students are more likely in the future to question the knowledge claims they hear all around them and to appreciate sound methods of reaching conclusions in academic areas and the social sphere. Crucially, they are more likely to think clearly and critically in a world where it matters profoundly what we accept as knowledge and how we act on its basis.

2. Recognize the support all around you.

Once you start posing knowledge questions, you begin to see vast resources all around you. Libraries take on fresh significance, and so does the entire world wide web with its news sources, articles of commentary, blogs, podcasts, music, and videos. So do books (ordered on the web far, far too easily!) and many of the films playing in the local theatre – and so do the meetings of every group of which you're a member.

So too, for me, did family members and friends — I think I wore out them out by my incessant questions about the areas in which they worked. No other IB subject is so utterly omnivorous in its scope (knowledge) and as open to almost any application of its course questions (Why are they making *that* knowledge claim? How do they know?). As a new TOK teacher, it's easy to become completely overwhelmed by the possibilities and to feast indiscriminately.

To direct your energies and use your limited time well, it's useful when first planning a TOK course to be able to zero in on the few most useful resources. The IB now provides immensely more than when I first started, and a substantial subject guide and the Online Curriculum Centre are enough in themselves to get you launched. One of the most valuable items of all is the annual TOK subject report, which not only gives an overview of the previous exam session but in the process gives salient advice on dealing with course ideas.

For understanding the thrust of the whole TOK course and the ideas treated most centrally within it, you couldn't do better than to order some of the books currently available specifically in support of the IB TOK course, and use all of them as resources. Hardly surprisingly, I like best my *own* book, the 2013 Oxford University Press course book [Theory of Knowledge](#). Yet I step back with appreciation also of the books contributed by my TOK colleagues, with their somewhat different emphases and connections of ideas. The authors of the main books know each other and have shared ideas and worked together across the years on numerous TOK projects. Collectively, we are committed to Theory of Knowledge and provide new teachers with a community of support.

And then, once you have a firm grasp of the ideas of the course, *do* go romping through the fields! Even if you use a support book for class background on topics, *do* keep

renewing the activities and class materials that prompt discussion – both to demonstrate with current news and research the relevance of TOK to knowledge in the world, and to keep your own interest fresh.

3. Connect with – and appreciate – your colleagues.

Few people can resist genuine interest in their own areas of specialization. Even though your teaching colleagues are busy people, they are likely to give you their time to talk about their areas of knowledge. And they are among your best resources! If you can work together to reinforce each other's courses, you both teach better – and your students are the winners. The IB now expects all teachers to integrate TOK questions and ideas into their courses, so the bridge is already built for you.

4. Think of yourself as a *guide* for your students.

In some education, the teacher aims to deliver knowledge, pre-digested and pre-packaged. And there is a place for simply transferring knowledge claims from teacher to student. That place, however, is not TOK.

In some group communication, the facilitator aims solely to enable participants to voice their thoughts and feelings, without any prior agenda or guiding intention. But TOK is a course with aims, objectives, and a syllabus.

In TOK, you are neither a delivery teacher nor a neutral facilitator. You are a *guide*. You know various paths through the territory and, depending on your group and the circumstances, you provide the directions ahead. At need, you nudge the questions and discussion back onto the broad route forward. You can encourage your group ahead more quickly, or entice them to linger. You can pull them along with directions or questions from the front, or encourage them along from behind. But in all cases, you're exploring along with them, and taking them along with you.

5. Let the TOK course enrich your own life.

Learning is stimulating. Knowing more gives you more to think about and more to wonder about. How could you NOT love teaching a course that inspires you to ask questions about everything around you, and to take an interest even in areas of knowledge that, at one point in your life, you were pleased to leave behind?

Although my advice to you, as a teacher new to TOK, is primarily about understanding the course in order to teach it, I will end with the best personal wishes that I can possibly give. May you find a sense of purpose and satisfaction in guiding your students to think more clearly! May you love the knowledge questions and find they heighten your own curiosity and critical edge! May you enjoy entering into different perspectives on the world to get the view from multiple angles! May you keep your sense of humour about how odd – and how oddly human — people can be in their thinking, even when you find them infuriating! And may you always have far too much that you really want to read and think about than you will ever have time for in this life!