

What Exactly Is This Thing That We Call Knowledge?

By Peter Christiansen

In July 1945, American military commanders sent a message to the Japanese government demanding they surrender unconditionally or face "prompt and utter destruction". The Japanese responded with the term "mokusatsu" which apparently has two meanings, "to withhold comment" or "to ignore". The Japanese used the word in its first sense while the Americans understood it in the latter and as a consequence unleashed the nuclear attack on Hiroshima. A history question might ask what factors led to the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan? An ethics question might ask was the United States justified in dropping the atomic bomb on Japan? A Theory of Knowledge (TOK question) takes a more theoretical approach to the communication of understanding and might ask "How reliable is language in sharing knowledge across cultures?".

TOK is a core subject in the International Baccalaureate diploma, an internationally recognized course for senior students that many Victorian schools offer as an alternative to VCE. IB students engage with subjects similar to VCE units but also must pass TOK which is effectively a course in creative thinking. TOK asks students to develop an awareness of how individuals and communities construct knowledge and to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions. The International Baccalaureate embraces the concept of a globalized, diverse world community and these ideals are made explicit through its Learner Profile which states:

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The aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally minded people who, recognising their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world (Theory of Knowledge Guide: First Assessment, 2015, n.p.)

The IB champions the Theory of Knowledge in the belief that this subject will not only make students better thinkers it will also help them to become engaged global citizens by becoming aware of the great diversity in belief, opinion and knowledge that can be found throughout the world.

The IB clearly welcomes diverse perspectives when it comes to constructing knowledge and is suspicious of rock hard certainties. Indeed, TOK thrives on uncertainty; it celebrates questions and discussion but frowns on those who hold hard to unwavering positions and fail to consider the nuances and complexities of knowledge. The IB offers no concrete explanation or definition of what actually constitutes knowledge. In TOK the emphasis is on evaluation and exploration rather than mastering any particular content. The IB insists that TOK is not a course in philosophy masquerading under an assumed name. As students work their way through the course they are expected to cultivate their own understanding as to what actually constitutes knowledge. The IB would argue that if we are too definite in our views and too inflexible in what we claim we know then we will become blinkered to the existence of perspectives other than those that are produced within our own culture.

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If the Theory of Knowledge has no prescribed content what do students study in the course? The IB has identified eight key areas of knowledge which show a direct kinship to the way knowledge is organised within the Dewey Decimal System. Human knowledge according to the IB can be classified under the following eight topic areas:

- Mathematics
- Ethics
- History
- Human Sciences

- Physical Sciences
- Religious knowledge systems
- Indigenous Knowledge systems
- The Arts

Now the crucial question is how do we gain understanding in these specified knowledge areas. According to the IB our understanding is derived through the deployment of a series of methods called Ways of Knowing which serve as our pathway into the specified Areas of Knowledge. The eight Ways of Knowing (WOKs) are:

- Memory
- Language
- Imagination
- Emotion
- Sense Perception
- Intuition
- Faith
- Reason

TOK textbooks delight in pointing out the various limitations surrounding these key Ways of Knowing. Science clearly relies heavily on Reason when trying to ascertain the validity of theorems while the Arts would no doubt privilege emotion and sense perception when viewing painting and sculpture. Reason is obviously important but most human beings do not want to live their lives relying solely on logic. Emotion and Intuition may not be the most reliable ways of knowing but they often play a key role in human decision-making. Without language, we can't really have a functional civilisation but disputes over the interpretations we attach to the meaning of words and phrases are commonplace. Memory can also refer to history and published sources which we know are never static and change constantly as fresh critiques and new perspectives emerge. We rely on our senses to interpret the world but as contradictory eye-witness statements often prove, sense perception is not always that reliable in forming accurate knowledge. How can we be creative without imagination but sometimes our ingenious thoughts can take us down irrational pathways. The world is significantly divided over the value that should be ascribed to faith and the relationship it ought to have with knowledge.

The Ways of Knowing are an instrument for analysing knowledge and the IB understands we all use a combination of various WOK elements when investigating knowledge claims.

Teacher-librarians through their training and outlook are natural TOK specialists. They constantly consider a range of perspectives and they understand the complexities that exist around producing evidence and justifying opinions. They well understand that knowledge is different from the mere accumulation of facts.

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The IB recognises the important work that school libraries perform in educating young people and it argues they should play a central role in the implementation of their learning program. The IB stipulates that a school cannot be accredited to teach their course unless it has a functioning library/multi-media learning centre. The library must be adequately staffed and have a range of appropriate materials to support the implementation of the Diploma Programme (*Guide to School Authorization: Diploma Programme*, 2016, p. 15).

In conjunction with the IB, library professionals have long recognised the distinction between information and the creation of knowledge. The IB would like to see the Ways of Knowing taught explicitly in all subject areas in all educational systems. To some extent this is already happening as some of the educational ideas that feature in the IB course have infiltrated into mainstream educational practices. Explicit references to critical thinking, for example, are in the modern educational framework. Library professionals have supported over the years efforts to incorporate Higher Order Thinking Skills into the curriculum. We have seen, for example, that self-reflections have become a common feature of school projects. Teachers could use some of the TOK Ways of Knowing to ensure the self-reflections their students produce move beyond superficial statements.

The ideals enunciated by the IB are, of course, very praiseworthy. As part of their assessment, the students who undertake the course are asked to reflect on their thinking through an oral presentation and a formal

written essay. In order to successfully complete the assessment tasks a student needs to be quite articulate and have well developed skills in self-expression and abstract thought. High achievers would be expected to do well in this subject, but what can the TOK approach offer those educationalists working in schools which do not actually teach the IB course?



Charging Bull & Fearless Girl

I would like us to consider one more example of how a TOK approach can be used in a real-life debate over meaning. Late one night in December 1989 in a creative, bold and clandestine act, the sculptor Arturo Di Modica installed a massive bronze statue of a charging bull opposite the New York stock exchange. The artist had not obtained any civic permission for his art work and the city authorities at first sought its removal. Arturo had made what the IB would call a 'Knowledge Claim', though it was probably more of a knowledge gamble as it is not a cheap process to cast a three ton bronze statue and install it in the heart of a major city. Even though the artist had flaunted planning by-laws, his artwork proved to be very popular with the public and was allowed to stay. In 2017 several powerful investment corporations commissioned a bronze statue of a young girl with a wind-blown ponytail produced by the sculptor Kristen Visbal and entitled Fearless Girl to be placed opposite the Charging Bull figure. Fearless Girl was installed on International Women's Day, and many New Yorkers and visitors to the city by and large liked the new statute with its suggestion of feisty female determination and the contrast it made with Charging Bull.

However not everyone thought Fearless Girl was such a good idea. Arturo Di Modica claimed the second statue changed the meaning of his bull from an image of strength and vitality and optimism into a symbol of threat and menace. He alleged his moral rights as an artist had been compromised by the second statue ("Charging Bull' Sculptor says New York's 'Fearless Girl' Statue Violates His Rights", 2017).

Some journalists claimed that because Fearless Girl had been paid for by a corporation it was not really an image of female independence but a sham object that cynically sought to manipulate the sympathies of the viewing public. A good many of the TOK ways of Knowing are in play in this debate. We have Sense Perception, Emotion, Intuition and Language – including the language of visual art – along with Reason and Memory all at work.

TOK is not overly concerned with which sculpture has the greater validity as a work of art. TOK would ask what elements of knowing are we relying on to form our opinions? If we think and reflect on exactly how we come to form our judgements, then the IB would argue we will all end up making better judgements. There is no copyright over the ideas inherent in TOK and all educators are welcome to use these elements in classroom discussion to help enhance their own and their students' thinking processes.

References

'Charging Bull' Sculptor says New York's 'Fearless Girl' Statue Violates his Rights' (2017) *Guardian on Line*, 12th April, Accessed on 20th April 2017 at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/apr/12/charging-bull-new-york-fearless-girl-statue-copyright-claim>

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