Who is the TOK teacher?

The following is an excerpt from an International Baccalaureate Research Paper, published on the IB Online Curriculum Centre May, 2011: Eileen Dombrowski, John Mackenzie, Mike Clarke, “Perspectives on a curious subject: What is IB theory of knowledge all about?” The following excerpt (19-21) is taken from the section “TOK inquiry in the classroom”.

Profile of a TOK teacher

.... Who is the ideal TOK teacher?

Is there a necessary background?

No specific background is necessary and no qualifying degree exists for teaching TOK. Some notions still linger from the early days of TOK’s creation that courses in philosophy are a necessary background for teachers, probably reinforced by the name the course still carries—epistemology or theory of knowledge is a branch of philosophy. (The endearing little acronym TOK leaves such connotations behind.) Those notions may also assume that philosophy is always taught with a method of inquiry, and that only philosophy inquires into knowing. What a sadly limited view of all other disciplines!

Indeed, while philosophy is assuredly an appropriate background for a TOK teacher, all areas have their own methods of inquiry that give a teacher a familiar starting point for teaching TOK. The newest IB subject guides include a section identifying the kinds of questions their own subjects hold in common with TOK.

Certainly, TOK teachers benefit their classes greatly from increasing their own understanding of the ways in which areas of knowledge other than their own create knowledge. For teachers embracing the chance to be "lifelong learners" in the terms of the IB learner profile, TOK provides an opportunity for professional and possibly also personal growth.

However, teachers who are on the way to gaining an exciting holistic overview themselves must take caution: they must make sure that they use their learning to plan better activities and frame better questions for their students, rather than yielding to a temptation to tell their students all they’ve learned themselves so far—and thereby scotch students’ own exploration.

Are there necessary qualities?

Ideally, every IB teacher is a lifelong learner in this way. In TOK, though, many of the attributes of the IB learner profile are more evident in that the essential process of education is laid bare. There is no subject content in the form of information, and so the process of questioning and responding stands out clearly.

Five of the profile characteristics are instantly and obviously relevant, though others could be argued to be so as well. Ideally, TOK teachers are open-minded, reflective inquirers and thinkers, and knowledgeable in the sense of developing a cross-disciplinary understanding. For teachers initially ill at ease with guiding inquiry rather than delivering information, a further profile attribute is relevant—they should be risk-takers. In many ways, they have to model the qualities they aim to develop in students.

Is teaching solo or as part of a team?

TOK teachers guide students to see connections between knowledge issues and their experiences of knowing in their lives, the immediate and shared experience being their learning
in their IB subjects and in CAS. Whether a single teacher teaches the whole of the TOK course or whether it is broken into parts taught by a team of teachers is a school decision. Both ways have advantages.

Solo TOK teachers have the immense advantage of being able to build on past discussions throughout the course and to sustain thematic threads of ideas. They also have the flexibility to take paths through the course in response to student interest, mindful of the overview that ensures discussion of all of the topics of the course. For subject expertise, they draw out of their students what they are learning in their other courses, giving them the role of communicating the features of that knowledge.

To be able to link the TOK discussions most effectively with the areas of knowledge students are studying in their Diploma Programme courses, the solo TOK teacher will benefit from knowing what topics colleagues are treating in their own classrooms, and when. With some planned coordination, the TOK teacher and another subject teacher can arrange mutual reinforcement. In a sense, even solo TOK teachers are always part of a team; they support colleagues with heightened understanding of their particular ways of creating knowledge, and they gain in their own class from the teaching of their colleagues.

TOK teachers working structurally as members of a team to teach a single group of students have some advantages of their own. They can connect the knowledge issues of TOK with what students are studying in their own classrooms quite readily by being in both places themselves. They might also be able to bring their own subject’s perspective to bear on TOK course topics in common, such as a biology teacher and an art teacher leading discussions on sense perception as a way of knowing, using stimulus material appropriate to their own areas.

If TOK is taught in this way, though, all members of the team need to have an understanding of the nature of TOK and work within an overview so that the course does not fragment counterproductively into isolated chunks. They have to be able to make connections from one part of the course to another in order to develop threads of ideas relevant to all.

The role of the TOK teacher

1. Stimulate

TOK teachers do not deliver knowledge for students to learn; they do not give students pre-packaged, static notes to memorize. Instead, they provide students with activities to stimulate them to make their own synthesis.x The spotlight is not on the teacher as the one who knows but on the students as the ones who are actively learning.

This does not mean, however, that the teacher should never give information on topics, show films, invite guest speakers, or give students articles to read, for instance. Many resources for ideas are appropriate in the TOK classroom—as long as they are set within appropriate questions for students to pursue themselves.

2. Facilitate

TOK teachers are, to a large extent, facilitators. They set up activities to provoke thought and encourage interchange between class members, whether in collaborative small group work or in group discussion.

In discussion, they elicit student ideas, bring out the thoughts of all students as much as possible, nudge students to articulate and consider their ideas more fully, encourage them to consider direct counter-claims and alternative views, and lead debrief discussions to pull out the major points that contribute to building threads of TOK ideas. In facilitating the exchange of
ideas in multicultural classrooms, they attempt to draw out differing cultural perspectives.

TOK teachers are not facilitators, however, in the sense that they simply follow where the group wants to go, solely helping discussion along. The teacher is active too.

3. Guide

TOK teachers are guides with goals and plans for reaching them. They foster a class culture within which students feel respected and safe to venture their thoughts. They have some overview of knowing themselves, and design activities to encourage students down paths of “structured inquiry”. They are responsive to the paths students want to take as they make sense of knowledge questions in terms of their own experience, but can guide those paths in the broad direction of the course sequence of ideas.

As the course progresses, teachers can expect students to gain familiarity with the TOK way of questioning and thinking, and increasingly to explore effectively on their own.