



TOK COORDINATOR'S HANDBOOK

Introducing Excellence Into Your TOK
Department

A guide for experienced TOK coordinators.



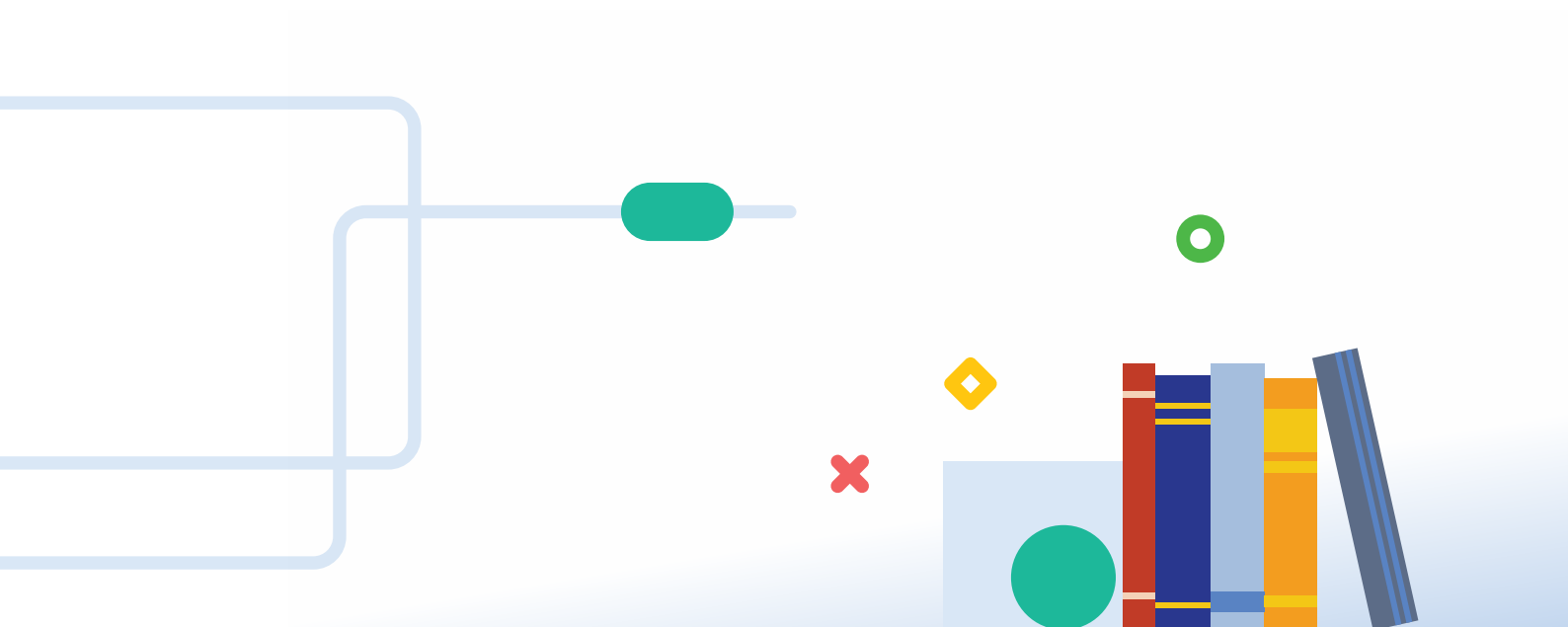
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PART 2

 Introducing excellence into your TOK department





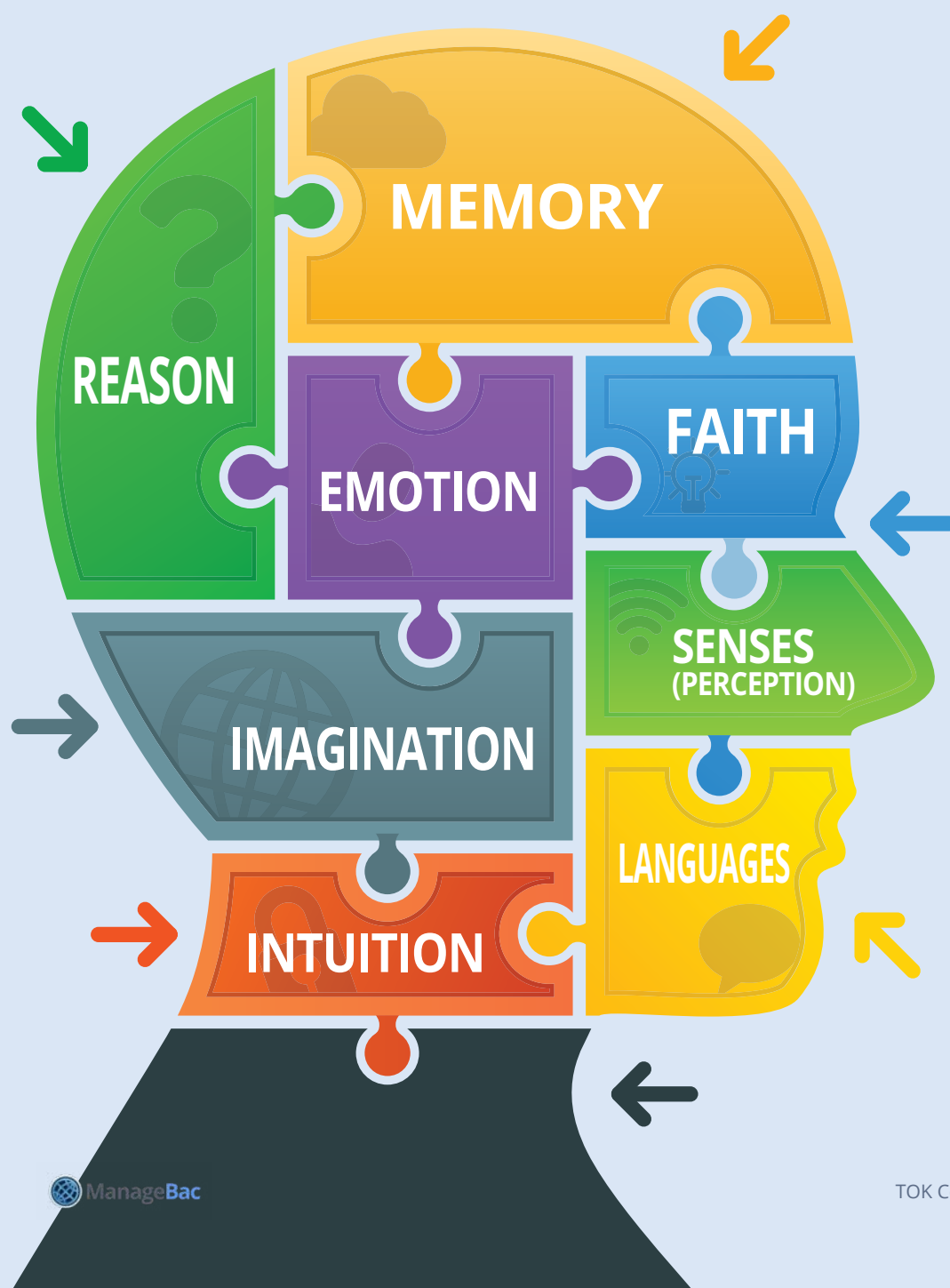
About the Author

Michael Dunn is the creator of theoryofknowledge.net. He attended school in Cambridge, followed by the Universities of Edinburgh (MA hons) and Exeter (PGCE). He spent a couple of years teaching in London, and since then has been hopping between Colombia, Peru, and the UK. He also runs the world's largest website for TOK where he manages customers in over 100 different countries, as well as serving as the TOK Coordinator and Head of Form VI at Newton College, Lima, Peru.

Michael is now dedicated to revolutionizing not only resources for TOK, but also how to conceive the course itself. With the development of the '[8 Big Question Framework](#)', he has created a completely new approach to TOK, which enables teachers to deliver a course that is far more engaging and integrated than the usual 'shopping list' approach based on separate ways of knowing and areas of knowledge. You can find out more, and download sample lesson resources [here](#).

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WAYS OF KNOWING



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An illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman with brown hair, wearing an orange long-sleeved shirt and a black skirt, holding an open book. She is standing next to a large, stylized globe with green continents and blue oceans. The globe is partially cut off by the left edge of the page. The background is a solid pink color.

Introducing excellence into your TOK department

a.

Being a TOK leader

Recruiting your TOK team



A school's commitment to fulfilling the IB mission can be measured to some extent by the way in which it appoints TOK teachers. Schools that advertise specifically and actively for TOK teachers - and even more so, TOK coordinators - are generally the ones that have more awareness of the importance of the subject, and understand that those who deliver the course require certain skills and experience. On the other hand, schools that regard TOK as being an add-on to a teachers' primary subject are less likely to give recruitment sufficient importance and prominence. This is definitely one area where effective TOK coordinators can play an important role - ensuring that the right people are recruited!



It's worth establishing a protocol that you can draw on to help establish a great TOK team. Here are a few recommendations that might help you do this.

Success in having raised the profile of TOK is essential

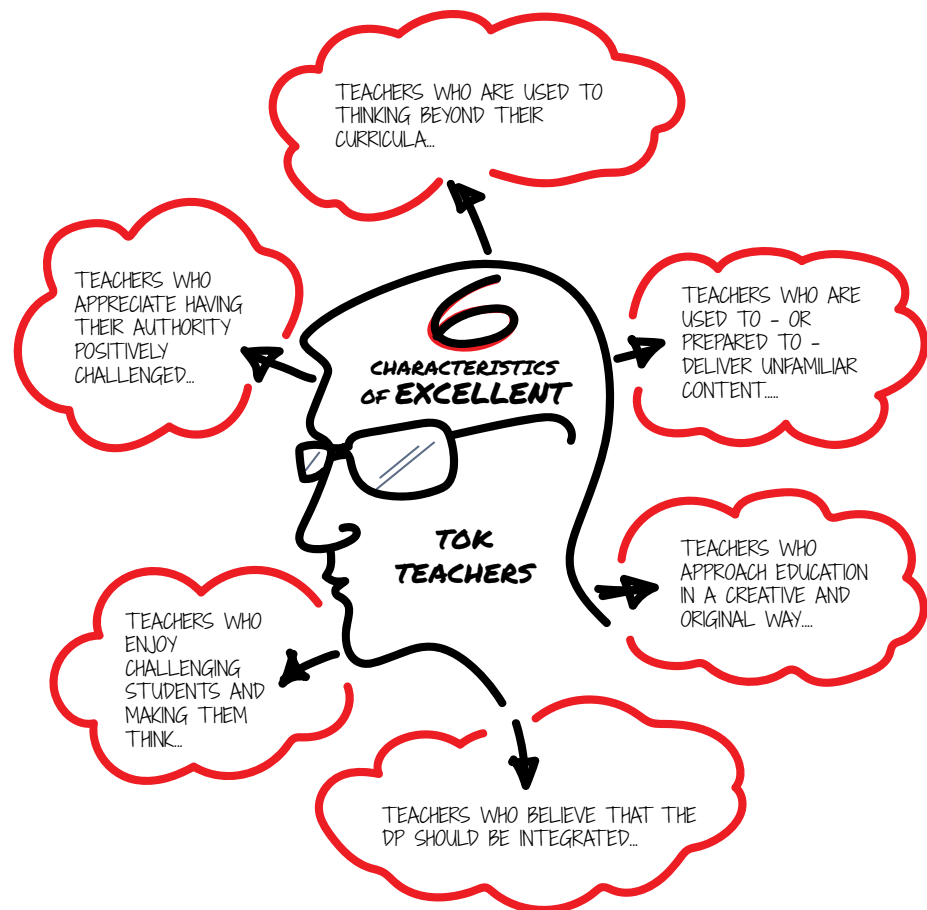
Ensuring that your TOK department is a successful, vibrant, and significant part of your school is the first step towards ensuring that recruitment is taken with the seriousness it deserves. Of course, there is something of chicken and egg logic here - to be successful, vibrant, and significant, you need to have the right team. But assuming you follow our advice in both this section and Part 1: Creating your TOK department, you will discover many other ways to achieve this. Ensuring that your TOK department is a successful, vibrant, and significant part of your school is the first step towards ensuring that recruitment is taken with the seriousness it deserves. Of course, there is something of chicken and egg logic here - to be successful, you need to have the right people in your department in first place. But the advice we provide in both this, and the first part of the guide, should take you some way in establishing this even before you have built the right team.

Taking responsibility for recruitment

It's vital that you take a leading role (or the leading role) in deciding on who makes up your TOK team. Your school will have wider consideration points and practical details to bear in mind (do candidates have the necessary qualifications, are they experienced educators, are they likely to stay at your school beyond their initial contract, do they have the right visa status work in your country, etc.), but - given that you will be working closest with them - ideally, you need to be the person who has the biggest say in whose CV is worth following up with an interview, and gives the green light to an appointment.

Skills and experience

The point of TOK is that it should be compatible with any of the DP subjects, so it doesn't matter what the background of your TOK teachers is - mathematics, history, science. It's great to have a range of these different areas of knowledge, but if you are all from a similar background, you can always compensate by drafting non-TOK teachers to give specialist talks. So, what should you be looking for? Here are six characteristics of excellent TOK teachers:



1. Teachers who are used to thinking beyond their curricula, and challenging the sources of knowledge utilised in their subject
2. Teachers who appreciate having their authority positively challenged, in whose classrooms debate and discussion is the norm, and...
3. ...enjoy, in turn, challenging their students, making them question their own assumptions and biases and work harder to establish an understanding of the world
4. Teachers who believe that the DP should be an integrated, interlinked educational programme, and like to promote the overlaps of their subject with others
5. Teachers who approach education in a creative, original way, who innovate and renovate their courses every year
6. Teachers who are used to - or prepared to - deliver unfamiliar and challenging concepts to students

Interview questions

You should open with a question about what they think TOK is, in terms of its aims and structure. Answers that aren't too clear shouldn't be viewed unfavourably - this is definitely preferable to a candidate viewing TOK as being something it isn't (like philosophy, or a course in study skills) - but they should have an awareness of the broader ideals of TOK.

We've outlined six characteristics of great TOK teachers above; guide candidates onto a discussion of these points, seeking evidence on each one, and helping them to see why each one is important for the delivery of TOK.

Preparing new recruits

We look in more detail at the process of inducting new teachers into TOK here. You should definitely stress to candidates the challenges of teaching TOK, to prepare them for how difficult it can be (as well as, of course, stressing how wonderful it can be!). Here are some points worth making before they accept the role:

- TOK is a mandatory course, and students can occasionally resent this
- TOK deals with unfamiliar concepts that are difficult for students to grasp and, again, this can lead to resistance
- TOK is assessed in an unusual way that is not based on a concrete curriculum and this can be unnerving to some students
- Whilst other DP subjects are esteemed in part by the 7 points they're worth, TOK can be viewed (incorrectly) as representing only 1.5 points and this can lead them to undervalue the course. See more of our thoughts on this in the Aims of TOK section;
- The essay and the presentation involve a lot of autonomous effort. Some students adapt to this well; others struggle. They need to be able ready for this challenge

Inducting new TOK teachers

TOK can be as challenging for teachers coming to it for the first time as it can be for students. It's therefore necessary to be ready to offer a lot of support to new TOK teachers, and head-off any problems before they occur.

Good recruitment is essential

If you have helped drive the process of recruitment, and you have focused on finding new teachers who possess the six characteristics of an excellent TOK educator, then you're off to a flying start. Additionally, it's worth having prepared the ground in terms of how challenging TOK can be - again, see our advice on the recruitment process in TOK.

Have a well-planned TOK curriculum in place Your excellent new TOK teacher/s should be matched by an excellent TOK curriculum. It should be well planned, well resourced, with clear objectives for each unit and individual lesson, and everything ready to run before your teachers step into the lesson. Of course, they should be allowed and encouraged to adapt lesson plans, but they should also have the option to just follow what you've already established and test-driven.

Model good practice New teachers should be encouraged to spend time in your TOK classes, and watch you teach TOK. Ensure that they are familiar with the mechanics of an effective TOK lesson, and that they realise the key differences between TOK classes and ordinary classes. These include:

- Lessons being driven by contemporary events (the more recent, the better) - meaning that lessons will need to be updated on a regular basis
- Students encouraged to draw on personal experiences to help support and produce their arguments
- An emphasis on second order knowledge - how we know, rather than what we know
- An acceptance that there may be multiple ways of understanding the same issue, topic, or question

If you are able to timetable a whole year-group 'plenary' lesson once a week or fortnight, this would give you the perfect opportunity for team teaching, which is a great way to help your new teacher understand and overcome the demands of TOK.

Be on hand Be available to accompany new teachers when they teach TOK for the first time (if they wish), and run a formal lesson observation during the first month or so of them teaching, offering positive feedback on their teaching techniques. Open-door teaching should be the norm in TOK, not just amongst department members, but also for teachers from other departments - not just a way of ensuring good teaching practice, but also to demystify the subject.

Clarity of purpose Unless your TOK team is clear about what the aims of TOK are, and why you're doing the course, then there is little hope your students will understand the point of it, and, in turn, be enfranchised by it. Make sure your course has a clear set of objectives (for a suggestion, see ours in the first part of our TOK Coordinator's Guide), and your team is able to explain its role within the context of the IB Learner Profile and the IB Approaches to Learning. Keeping your aims in mind - always - is vital as an effective TOK educator.

Clarity of content In addition to clarity of purpose, your teachers obviously need to be completely clear about the content of the course they are delivering. They should be able to explain the nature and role of the following aspects of the course:

- Knowledge questions (broken up into claims and counterclaims for the assessment tasks)
- Real life situations
- Areas of knowledge and ways of knowing
- How to consider the different perspectives of knowers;
- How to assess the implications of arguments

They should also know the assessment tasks inside out, and be able to link what they are teaching to the skills that will ultimately be assessed.

Making the most of the introductory unit on TOK

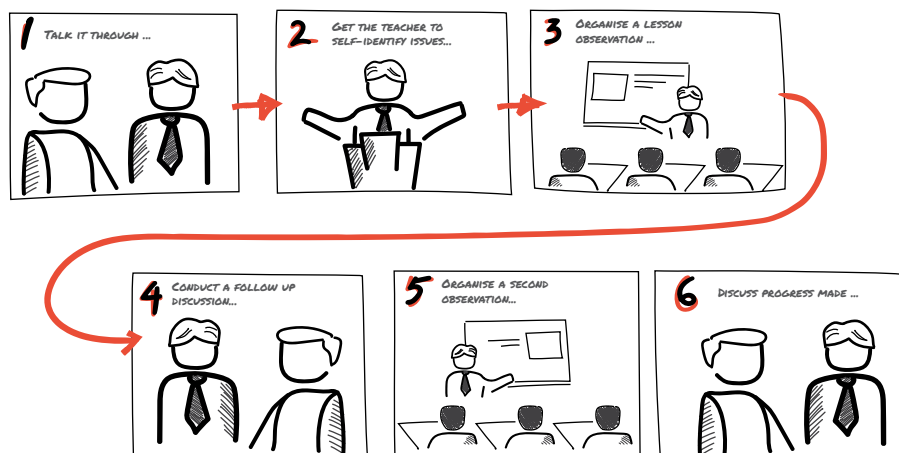
New students should be acclimatized to TOK slowly, over a period of at least a few weeks, and this gives new TOK teachers a breathing space in which they, too, can get used to this strange new course. We outline how this can be done in '[Acclimatizing students to TOK](#)'; basically this involves reviewing the structure of TOK, its aims, how it is assessed, and providing a first consideration of the nature of knowledge and how we acquire it.

Assessment

Given that the prescribed essay titles appear very soon after the academic year begins, it's advisable to allocate new teachers a first year group of students when they initially come to TOK, allowing them to move on to guiding students through the assessment tasks in their second year. However, if, for timetabling reasons this can't be organised, follow our advice in the Overseeing the assessment tasks section, make full use of ManageBac to monitor students' progress, and have regular meetings to ensure that your new teacher/s are following the right assessment procedure.

Crisis management

What should you do when it all goes wrong? When your new TOK teacher says they simply don't get it, and find it impossible to engage the students in their class?



1. Talk it through, referring in detail to the course structure and lesson resources, and basing your discussion on the assumption that a solution can - and will - be found
2. Get the teacher to self-identify issues that they want to resolve;
3. Organise a lesson observation, during which you focus on those specific problems
4. In the follow-up discussion, work together to put a plan in place, focusing on the issues identified in stage 2, (and possibly one or two additional issues that might have manifested themselves) and offering advice on how to overcome these issues
5. Organise a second lesson observation to take place several weeks afterwards
6. Discuss progress made, and whether the teacher now believes that implementing the suggestions from stage 4, and if they are on the right track

Supporting your TOK team

After you have successfully inducted your team into the subtleties and difficulties of TOK, the hardest job is done, but you will still need to support and oversee them as they deliver the course. This process should include the following:

Model good practice

The most important characteristic of an effective TOK leader is being available. This means always being contactable either in person or electronically in order to support your team as they deliver the course. Consider the following strategies and resources in order to achieve this:

- Having a specific place in which you work at school, ideally a dedicated TOK office, but alternatively a TOK classroom, or desk space within the staffroom
- Ensuring that all members of the team have easy access to each other's timetables so they know when conversations can happen (see below about meetings and collaboration time)
- Set up email groups to send out messages quickly and efficiently, and be efficient about replying to anything from your team
- Think about communicating as a group via WhatsApp, Messenger, Slack, or another communications app

Holding regular meetings

It's incredibly important to meet regularly with your team in person. Although technology can help you stay in touch and deal with issues more efficiently than ever, nothing can replace actually spending face-to-face time with your team, so it's vital that you have specific slots in your timetable for this to happen. The purpose of meetings can vary, and all heads of department have their own approach to running them, but here are a few aspects that could form the basis of department meetings:

- Debriefing the week's lessons, going over what went well, and what could be improved
- Introducing lessons coming up, focusing on anything challenging that the students will encounter
- Checking to see if specific concepts were understood by students
- Ensuring that students are on track with the assessment tasks

Observing lessons

Your school will have its own policy on lesson observations, and the role they play in the process of staff appraisal. However, we advise you approach observations in the following way:

- Encourage your team to have an 'open-door' approach to teaching TOK, and be comfortable about informal visits to their classrooms at any time
- This is something you should reciprocate, encouraging your team to drop in to your own lessons whenever they want

- Formal observations should never be imposed on teachers, and should be arranged at the convenience of your teachers
- Formal observations should serve as specific a purpose as possible, with teachers identifying the areas they'd like help with
- Formal observations should be well-documented (ideally filmed), with plenty of time given for feedback and discussion based on this afterwards
- Follow-up observations should be carried out to measure the success of implementing feedback and suggestions; again, based primarily on the specific areas identified by the teacher

Encouraging collaboration

Distinct from ordinary meetings, it's important that the team gets together regularly in order to jointly plan lessons, units, and the strategies used to oversee the assessment tasks. Finding time for collaboration can be tricky, so the following suggestions are offered:

- The best time for collaboration is at the beginning of the academic year, the start of term, or during INSET days. TOK can often be overlooked by the planners; be ready to fight your corner, and insist on time for crafting your TOK course
- Make full use of collaborative documents and the functionality of ManageBac to keep in touch with the ideas of your team electronically
- Use Google Docs and Slides for sharing lesson resources, and encouraging your team to share feedback

Offering professional development opportunities

TOK is a tricky course to teach, which means that there are many opportunities to participate in online and in-person workshops and courses. These are organised in terms of the complexity of their content, from Category 1 (educators who are "new to the IB"), to Category 3 (educators looking to "strengthen your understanding and mastery of a particular subject"). You can find out more about PD organised directly by the IB [here](#).

There are also many non-IB organisations and schools that are authorised to run IB PD courses, such as Ibicus (worldwide), UWC in the United States, and St Clare's in the UK.

b.

Integrating TOK

Designing an integrated course

It's well known that one of the key purposes of TOK, alongside CAS and the Extended Essay, is to integrate the different strands of the IB Diploma Programme. However, one of the most commonly discussed issues at IB Conferences, or other get-togethers by Heads of School and IB Diploma Coordinators, is how this integration happens. It is something that certainly doesn't happen by chance.

By integration, we mean both including a 'TOK approach' within the teaching of the other DP subjects, and also bringing in expertise of the subjects to the TOK course. This can be visualised on the diagram below.

The first, and most important, way of ensuring that integration happens is via the careful construction of a TOK course. Examples of what this means in practice are outlined below.

Unit titles that go beyond WOKs and AOKs

When you start off as a TOK coordinator, there is nothing wrong with basing your unit titles on the 4 WOKs and 6 AOKs that the IB recommends you cover during the course. This is a solid, reliable, and easy way of designing your first ever TOK course.

However, when you become more experienced, and are looking to infuse a little more originality and sophistication, you'll realise that this approach can be rather limiting when it comes to making TOK inclusive.

Instead, basing your unit titles on broader questions or statements that can be explored via a range of different WOKs and AOKs, will provide you with a much more effective method of integrating TOK with the other elements of the DP (and bring many other benefits to your course).

This is a one of the most important ways of bringing excellence to your TOK department, and we discuss it in a lot more detail here.

Focus on concepts and thinkers who are easy to apply to other subjects

In order to allow other subject teachers a way into TOK, you need to provide them with recognisable content. This means drawing extensively on concepts, ideas, and thinkers who are well established and recognised in the aspects of the course that dovetail with the DP subjects. In addition, you need to ensure that you share details of this content with the relevant teachers working in your school. Here are a few examples of ideas and thinkers you can include in your course that will link easily and naturally to other departments:

- Link up with the history department to get across the concept of **historical revisionism**, a key part of the way historical knowledge develops over time
- Link up with the science department, and consider **paradigm shifts**, a theory advocated by Thomas Kuhn, arguing that scientific knowledge develops via 'violent revolutions' that throw off previously accepted knowledge about the natural world and universe
- With the geography department (or anthropology if you offer it), look at the **observer/Hawthorne effect**, in which the presence of someone gathering information can affect the data collected
- The work of the novelist **Elif Shafak**, who may feature in literature classes, is very helpful in showing that [imagination](#) is one of the key ways in which we acquire new knowledge
- **Antonio Damasio**, a neuroscientist, whose [theories on how the brain works](#) have changed the way we understand the relationship between emotion and reason, and should be well-known to any psychology department
- **Cedric Villani**, one of the world's best known mathematicians. [Here](#) he discusses the key ways of knowing in producing mathematical knowledge
- **Elizabeth Loftus**, whose work should feature prominently in any psychology course, has shown us how malleable the knowledge provided by our [memory](#) can be

Using RLSs that can be discussed in other subjects

As well as using well-established ideas and thinkers as central elements of your TOK course, you should also use regularly-updated real life situations that can be discussed and analysed in other subjects. Again, make sure you inform other teachers that you are using these cases. A few examples are shown below:

- [An article](#) on how mathematics can (arguably) be used to assess the quality of a work of art - a great discussion point for an art or mathematics lesson
- [The announcement](#) by a famous celebrity has decided that she will not vaccinate her unborn baby - very transferable to a biology classroom
- [Analysis](#) of a recent political summit, pointing out that judging its success depends on our own personal biases, a great topic for discussion in any politics lesson

- [A detailed consideration](#) of how one country is dealing with its troubled past, showing how we interact with the past, and perfect for a history class
- [The re-evaluation](#) of a famous psychology experiment, showing how knowledge is questioned over time, and great for psychology

Create opportunities for students to support ideas with personal learning experiences

Your TOK course should be well prepared and developed, with all lessons carefully planned in advance. However, you should also ensure that there is scope to allow students to bring in their own experiences, many of which should come from what they encounter in their DP lessons and the two other core elements of the IB Diploma - CAS and the Extended Essay.

Not only will this provide them with a familiar context in which to understand aspects of the TOK course, but it will also set them up well for the presentation and essay, both of which require students to reflect on first-hand experiences as knowers.

This can help you to begin dialogues with other departments on TOK-related issues, thus raising the profile of the course, and helping non-TOK teachers to grasp what's covered during TOK lessons.



Keeping staff in the loop



In theory, all the DP teachers in your school should be regularly referring to TOK during lessons, and helping students to make explicit links to what they are covering in TOK classes. In practice, it's easy for teachers to overlook TOK, and fail to incorporate its aims as they meet the demands of their own subjects.

One of the essential jobs of a successful TOK coordinator is therefore to communicate what's going on in TOK, keeping other members of staff up-to-date with what you are covering, providing them with resources that they can use in their lessons, and even training them to bring TOK ideas into their classroom. Here are some ideas about how that can be achieved.



Faculty meetings & emails

TOK should have a central place in your faculty meetings, with a regular slot being given to the TOK coordinator to keep everyone up to speed with what's being covered. This means referring to unit titles and AOKs/WOKs, and how they might be reinforced by other teachers. You can obviously follow this up with emails summarising what you have said, and possibly links to the RLSs you're looking at.

TOK noticeboard

It's also helpful to have a TOK noticeboard in your staff room, serving a similar purpose to above. Given the frequency with which you move through different questions, topics, and concepts, a whiteboard is the most practical (not to mention most ecological) type of noticeboard to keep people up-to-date.

Pre-unit outline

Before each unit, it's helpful to send out an email to announce a change of topic, and explain how the question or unit topic under consideration could integrate with other subjects. As we've discussed in the Structuring your TOK course page, this is where it pays dividends to create a structure for the course that is accessible by all teachers at all times. Structuring a course that is based on the AOKs and WOKs means there is only a limited amount of time teachers can offer anything of relevance, whereas following a question-based approach to units means everyone can offer input.

Newsletter

One resource that you can offer other teachers that will help them to bring TOK into their classroom is the monthly newsletter published by theoryofknowledge.net. There are two versions of this:

- The free version, offering 8 different RLSs, one of which is presented in an 'unpacked' form
- The premium version, with 15 unpacked RLSs, and five further 'quick' stories

RLSs are linked to relevant AOKs and WOKs, allowing teachers to quickly identify which ones could be incorporated into their lessons. KQs are also offered, helping teachers to direct discussion and get students thinking along TOK lines.

Workshops

At the beginning of the academic year, you should be provided with an opportunity to deliver a TOK workshop for teachers who are unfamiliar with the course (or the DP in general). This workshop could focus on the following key aspects of the course:

- The philosophy behind TOK, linking it specifically to the IB Learner Profile
- The aims and structure of the course
- How TOK is designed to integrate the different strands of the DP
- The two forms of assessment in TOK
- The role of KQs and RLSs in the course

You should also aim to follow this up later in the year by deepening teachers' understanding of the last of these points, specifically, the concept of second order KQs.

In addition, you could also provide separate departments with subject-specific 'mini' workshops, that discuss how to incorporate TOK approaches and content within the context of their subjects.

Dedicated DP integration resources

Theoryofknowledge.net now produces a '[DP Integration Tool](#)', which provides all DP teachers with the means to bring TOK ideas into their classes. It does this via links to articles, quotes, TED talks, and an outline of TOK concepts relevant to their subject.

Drafting non-TOK teachers

We discuss how non-TOK teachers can be used as a key resource in the delivery of TOK in our [Getting Started](#) section. Here we think about how this also promotes the integration of TOK with other DP courses.

As guest speakers

Asking teachers to step into your TOK classroom to provide a lecture or workshop-style lesson on a specific theme, topic, or question is a great way to integrate TOK with other DP subjects, and encourage non-TOK teachers to bring in content from their specialist areas. The more controversial the topic, the more engaging this can be, for students and for the teachers! For example:

- Ask the Mathematics department to discuss the extent to which knowledge in their field can be considered subjective.
- Science teachers can help you assess whether, ultimately, the sciences are about having faith in experts whose ideas we can never fully understand.
- The Economics department could help you explore the extent to which human science predictions are always doomed to failure.
- History could help you consider whether historical knowledge is always a matter of perspectives, and we will never be able to access the 'truth' about the past.

To convey TOK ideas and concepts

If teachers are reluctant (or simply too busy) to run a session in your classroom, try to get them delivering TOK ideas in more depth and detail in their own classroom. The more specific the topic you ask them to deal with the more successful this is likely to be, and if you can provide them with resources, such as a link to a great article or video, even better. This is often a very successful way of getting across a tricky concept or topic, which you can follow up later.

Support the writing of essays and presentations

With a little bit of care, non-TOK teachers can play a useful role in helping students to create effective essays or presentations. Whilst they can't provide any written or editorial advice, and shouldn't venture too far out of their own subject, they can, for example:

- Advise on suitability of claims and counterclaims;
- Evaluate whether selected RLSs are well regarded;
- Provide quotes and opinions that students can use.

TOK & university

As we discuss in [the aims of TOK](#), the course is highly regarded by universities, who greatly value its content, and, even more so, the skills it hones, such as critical thinking, autonomous learning, and interlinking different knowledge contexts. As Dr. Jamie Hampson of Exeter University in the UK, puts it, "TOK students tend to be more adept at understanding different perspectives, and effectively evaluating different knowledge claims. We value IB Diploma students highly, as they seem particularly ready to take part in discussion and debate".

It's worth playing up this point, and really emphasising what students have gained from undertaking TOK, because not everyone has the privilege of drawing on this fantastic course in order to promote themselves. Here are some suggestions of how students can signpost their TOK learning, for inclusion in applications and interviews for university.

Inspiring thinkers

Your TOK course should feature a plethora of inspiring thinkers - from the past, and still working today - whose ideas have shaped the way we view and understand the world. Students can pick out a handful who they have found particularly interesting, be ready to discuss their main theories and approaches to knowledge, and why they found them particularly engaging or surprising. A few examples of interesting thinkers (and one of their key ideas) include:

- [Paul Bloom](#) (the role of empathy in generating ethical knowledge)
- [Molly Crockett](#) (how language can be used to mislead us)
- [Richard Feynman](#) (how to detect pseudoscience)
- [Beau Lotto](#) (how visual illusions show how we process sensory perception)
- [Naomi Oreskes](#) (the role of faith in scientific knowledge)
- [Socrates](#) (confusion is the beginning of wisdom)

See also the examples we suggest of thinkers that are applicable to other DP subjects.

Inspiring ideas

In addition to the theories put forward by specific thinkers, TOK is packed full of big ideas and concepts based on shared knowledge. Some of these go back centuries; others define the time we live in now. Being able to mention a few of these proves not only that students have been engaged by the course, but also that they have a stake in the intellectual world. Here's the sort of thing that would work:

- [Rational and empirical approaches](#) to understanding the world in general, and within different areas of knowledge
- [Deontologicalism versus consequentialism](#) when it comes to producing ethical knowledge
- Whether it's ever possible to produce objective historical knowledge that isn't [determined by our perspectives](#)

- The extent to which knowledge from one field can be used to generate knowledge in another - for example, using scientific methods to understand art, or whether valid historical knowledge can ever be 'imagined' as it might in literature
- How unconscious biases shape the way we produce knowledge
- Whether language as a method of reliably conveying knowledge is being undermined by social media

Real life situations that resonated

If your course is built carefully around engaging, up-to-date, RLS-centred lessons, then students should have come across many events, issues, and experiences that resonated with them. The more significant and contemporary these are, the better, as they form the perfect talking point in a university-admission interview. Examples of recent news stories that are particularly well-suited for TOK include the following:

- Whether there is sufficient [scientific evidence](#) to say that mobile phone-use can be dangerous to our health
- The [resurgence of the Maori language](#), te reo Māori, in New Zealand
- The present relationship between knowledge generated and shared within [philosophy and science](#)
- Why debunked theories - such as the [earth being flat](#) - are being embraced by knowers
- Whether social media is [shaping our emotional responses](#) - and how we can measure this
- How the online age is [challenging the role of critics](#) as sources of expert knowledge about the arts

How the TOK course changed your students

TOK should force students to challenge their own assumptions, reevaluate experiences they have had, and arrive at profound realisations about the sources and uses of their knowledge. In short, TOK should change the way students think, and being able to refer to that, and assess its significance. This represents an immensely impressive attribute during the process of application. Students could ask themselves these questions in preparation for a discussion about the value of their DP education:



- What aspects of TOK made you realise that there can be more than one approach to understanding the world?
- How did the course help you to understand that by 'thinking differently', new knowledge can be produced more effectively?
- How did TOK help you to assess the importance of knowledge, and the implications of not accessing reliable data and information?
- What did you learn about the role of different perspectives (including your own) during the course?
- What personal experiences were you able to draw on and re-evaluate during the TOK course?
- What aspects of the course did you find challenging in terms of forcing you to alter the way (and what) you think?

Note that several of these points link back to the aims we identified for the TOK course. If you've built your course around a realisation of these, then this will support your students as they reflect on what they've gained from TOK at the end of the course.

How TOK enriched their DP subjects

Elsewhere in this guide we've looked at how TOK integrates with the rest of the DP, although we've approached this mostly via the perspective of a teacher. Your students, also, should be able to talk extensively about how TOK has enriched their understanding of their other subjects. Aspects they could be ready to talk about include:



- Does your study of TOK make you think knowledge in your different DP subjects is more or less subjective?
- How much overlap of knowledge (in terms of the content itself, and how it is generated) is there between your DP subjects?
- What constitutes an expert knower in your different DP subjects, how does this differ between them, and when can you call yourself an expert?
- How has knowledge developed over time within your different subject - and does this indicate that knowledge is only ever provisional and uncertain?
- How does the way knowledge is represented alter its meaning in your subjects?

Using their essay and/or presentation as a central feature of their application

Many universities ask for a portfolio of work to be included in applications. TOK essays and presentations are ideal for this purpose, obviously assuming that students have worked hard to create something effective. Students should include a rationale of why they included their work, perhaps explaining how it explores one or more of the questions we've posed above.

c.

Marketing TOK

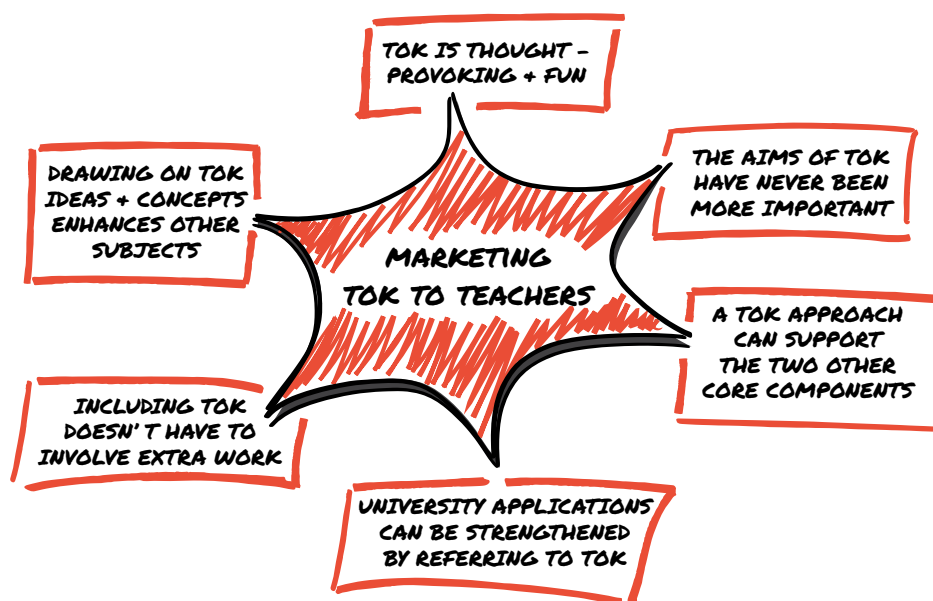
Marketing TOK to teachers

In theory, all IB Diploma teachers are also TOK teachers, and the course should be drawn on and explored in each and every DP class. In practice, there are few non-TOK teachers who could properly explain what a knowledge question is, list the different ways of knowing and areas of knowledge, or describe the features of an effective real life situation. Teachers will likely be aware that students write an essay in TOK, and deliver a presentation, but they may have little understanding of how these assessment tasks are marked, or how they might assist in supporting students carrying them out.

TOK is unfamiliar, conceptually challenging, nebulous, and can involve (although doesn't have to) extra planning and work for teachers. Part of the job a TOK coordinator is to persuade teachers it's worth the bother, and try to show them that the bother isn't too onerous. Below we look at how you can do this.

Note that this section discusses what to market to teachers, rather than how to market it; you can find a consideration of the methods of delivery in other sections, such as [Keeping staff in the loop](#), and [Drafting non-TOK teachers](#).





TOK is thought-provoking and fun

The TOK course poses a series of compelling questions which should not only engage your students, but draw your teachers in as well. Publicise key questions that you are covering, in order to elicit responses from your faculty, and provide students with a wider range of perspectives. These questions might include:

- How and why does knowledge change over time?
- What makes an expert knower?
- How does our understanding of the world depend on the way it is represented?
- Do our perspectives shape the way we view the world?
- How do we know when to trust our knowledge of the world?

Drawing on TOK ideas and concepts enhances other subjects

TOK will only serve to enrich and deepen a study of each subject, making lessons more stimulating, and therefore successful. Offer teachers examples of concepts that are covered in TOK, that could be explored in more detail within their classes. For example:

- The role of perspectives in defining our historical knowledge
- The extent to which mathematical objectivity means the subject is not prone to development
- The extent to which science's 'provisional' nature means it is always subject to development
- Who is qualified to make judgements about art, music, film, and literature
- Whether accurate predictions can really be offered in economics
- How psychological theories can be properly tested
- Whether the language we speak defines the way we view and understand the world

Including TOK doesn't have to involve extra work

In addition to stressing that including TOK will make teachers' lives easier because it will help to make their classes more effective, it's important to reassure teachers that including TOK in their lessons doesn't mean they have to put in more work. Consider offering the following arguments and support:

- The likelihood is that they are already dealing with TOK ideas; all that is probably required is for them to make this more explicit. When teachers are shown the key elements of TOK, they will almost certainly realise, "I'm already doing that!", and will appreciate a clearer framework in which to express their ideas
- If they want to promote more TOK discussion in their class, help by providing them with regular real life situations and knowledge questions, which can be linked to what you are currently covering in TOK. These could come from the TOK newsletter, from the emails you use to update staff on what's happening in TOK, or just from conversations you have in the staffroom
- If teachers tell you that they'd like to include more TOK, but simply aren't sure how to do it - and haven't got the time to figure it out - offer to drop into their lessons to do small (10 minute) segments of TOK. You can make this either closed-ended activity, or set it up for the teacher to continue

A TOK approach can support the two other core components

Done properly, both the EE and CAS should link very closely to TOK (and vice versa). Explain to teachers who act as EE supervisors, or help run the CAS course, that they should 'think TOK' when it comes to writing reflections. For example:

- How has the experience changed their perspective?
- How has their knowledge of a topic or field developed as a result of their work?
- Do they feel that an empirical (experiential) or rational approach to finding out about the world is more effective?
- What is the relationship between increasing one's understanding of something, and being able to communicate that understanding to others?

University applications can be strengthened by referring to TOK

All teachers share the aim of ensuring their students end up in a university of their choice, studying a course that will help them to forge their future careers. TOK is an immensely appealing element of a student's resume when they come to apply for university, so it is definitely worth stressing this to other teachers as you seek to get them on board. We look at this in more detail in Section B: Engaging your students of Part 1.

The aims of TOK have never been more important

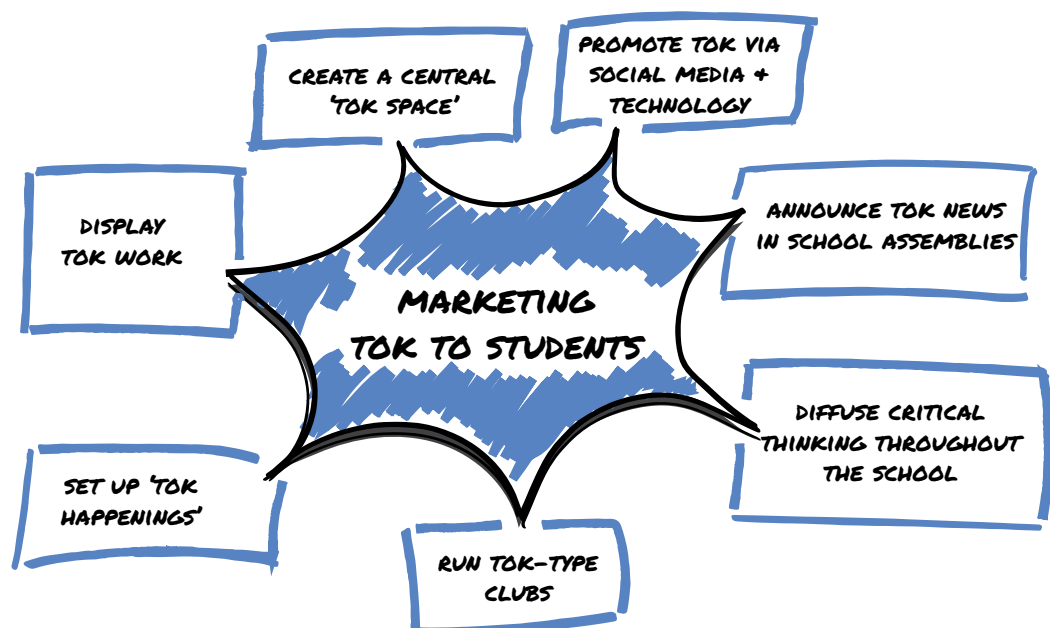
We live in a world of unprecedented information overload, in which public figures claim that 'truth isn't truth', and the media is widely accused - sometimes justifiably, sometimes definitely not - of being purveyors of 'fake news'.

Students can be forgiven for thinking that this environment is confusing, hostile, and insecure, and wondering what information they should trust to try to make sense of reality. TOK is arguably the best course in the world to help them prepare for this challenge, and will help them not only to think critically about events and issues, but also develop more tolerance, and creativity. We explore these aims, and skills required to achieve them, here.

Marketing TOK to students

TOK is an unfamiliar course that DP students have to take, and which they must pass in order to be awarded the IB Diploma. They are assessed in a demanding way - no exam, but a challenging essay and presentation - and have to deal with content that is conceptually tricky and not based on a 'set' curriculum. It's easy to see how their natural inclinations may push them away from the course, rather than encourage them to get onboard.

Having said that, if you have designed a great course, they will quickly realise what a fantastic learning experience TOK can be. We offer a few tips in our 'Engaging your students' and 'Enriching the TOK course' sections how this can be done, but below we consider how you can raise the profile of TOK to the whole student body, so that not only DP students feel connected to the course, but everyone knows exactly what this marvellous subject is all about. One of the many advantages of this is that when students begin the course, they'll know a lot more about what it is, and hit the ground running.



Create a central TOK 'space'

We discussed in *'Keeping teachers in the loop'* the idea of a TOK noticeboard within the staff room. You can also set up something similar for students, by creating a 'TOK space' in a prominent spot in the school, where you can showcase various things, such as:

- News and events going on in the department
- Topics (areas of knowledge, ways of knowing, questions, etc.) that you are covering at the time
- Key thinkers you cover in TOK - perhaps with an outline of their major ideas, and why they are influential
- Interesting real-life situations, the more up-to-date the better
- The prescribed essay titles of the current session, perhaps challenging other students with a heading such as, 'Could you write a TOK essay?'

Display TOK work

Apart from a main, central TOK space, it's great to display the work that you've done in your classroom, particularly if other groups use it. This will enable you to promote some of the most engaging ideas and concepts of the course, as well as outline the structure and aims of the course. Encourage your TOK team to do the same, so that you have TOK terminology, thinkers, and ideas in as many classrooms around the school as possible.

Set up TOK 'happenings'

We discuss big 'TOK events' separately, and they are a great way of marketing the course and your department. Consider, also, smaller TOK 'happenings', which might involve just posting a thought-provoking question or quote around the school that is addressed in short lunchtime or afterschool sessions, or resolved in the TOK space. Alternatively, you could get students to submit responses, the best ones of which could get highlighted in the school bulletin. Anything to get students thinking would work; it doesn't have to be strictly aligned to TOK. For example:

- Is seeing believing?
- Does art imitate life, or does life imitate art?
- Does truth exist?
- Does the Internet cut us off, or connect us to, different perspectives?
- Is social media dictating the way we express ourselves?
- "The unexamined life is not worth living." Do you agree with Socrates?
- "Learning happens in the minds and souls, not in the databases of multiple-choice tests." (Ken Robinson) Discuss!

Promote TOK via social media and technology

Does your TOK department have its own Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Google Classroom page? This could be a great way of conveying to the student body what you are doing, and allow them to comment on, and interact with, what's happening. Link it to 'TOK happenings' (see above) to allow students to view the responses of others, and try to provoke debates and discussions.

Your school probably has a social media manager - make friends with them, and get TOK events publicised. Not only will this promote your department, it will also help to brand your school as a hub of critical thinking, so everyone wins.

Announce TOK news in school assemblies

If your school holds regular assemblies, is there scope for you to publicise events going on in TOK? The more you provide regular news, and refer to TOK concepts and language, the more students will absorb it subconsciously, and accept it as an integral part of the school.

Diffuse critical thinking throughout the school

Whatever the programme you offer before students begin the DP, TOK shouldn't be the first time students come into contact with (explicit) critical thinking. It may be that your school has a specific critical thinking coordinator, or it may be that heads of departments are responsible for ensuring that it is going on (this will certainly be the case if you run the MYP, which specifies 'critical thinking' as an Approaches to Learning skill that has to be developed); whichever of these is the case, try to contribute to the diffusing of critical thinking further down the school. Encouraging the use of TOK terms and language is a great way of doing this, with students getting to grips with concepts such as perspectives, claims and counterclaims, real-life (rather than hypothetical or anecdotal) evidence, and implications.

You could go further with students on the verge of starting the IB Diploma, getting them to understand rational and empirical approaches to knowledge, the difference between induction and deduction, different concepts of truth, and perhaps even how we can divide our understanding of the world into ways of knowing and areas of knowledge.

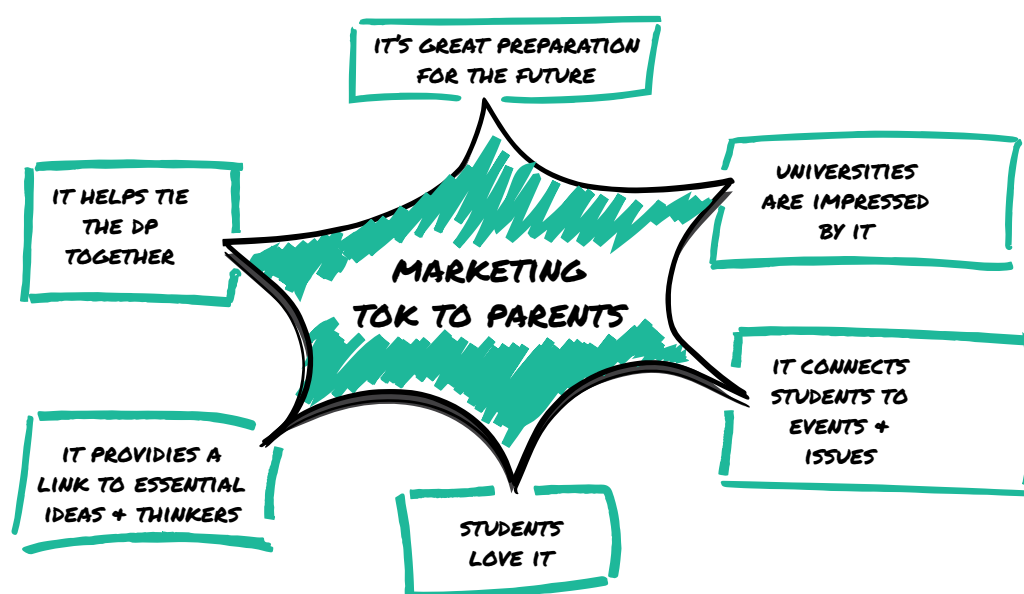
TOK-type clubs

It may be worth setting up a club or activity in your school that meets during lunchtime and/or after school to promote critical thinking and epistemology. This could have a focus on the news in general or a particular aspect of the news (science, politics, the arts); perhaps you could get together to watch thought-provoking films. Alternatively, you could link up with a club that promotes skills related to TOK, such as ones centred on history, journalism, politics, or science - there's not much that can't be related to TOK!

Marketing TOK to parents

Given that TOK is one of the unique elements of the IB Diploma, getting parents on board with TOK is a major way of selling the whole of the programme to them. When the stress and demands of the second year kick in, it's vitally important that parents believe in what their children are doing, in order to support them and spur them on. During any open day or evening to introduce the DP, therefore, TOK should play a starring role.

We've already sung the virtues of TOK extensively, so all we'll do here is summarise six of the "unique selling points" of the course, with links to where they are discussed in more detail.



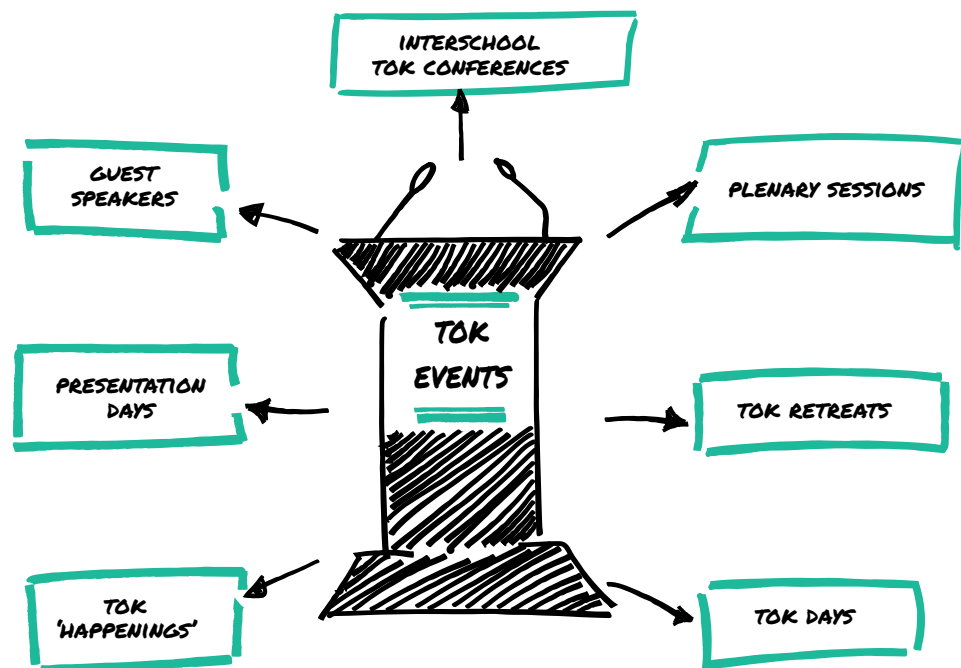
1. **It helps tie the DP together.** TOK ties together everything, by getting students to question the source and value of the knowledge they deal with, and this creates a much more integrated programme than other programmes in which subjects are studied in isolation.
2. **It's a great preparation for the future.** As mentioned above, there's no better preparation for high school students who are about to enter the 'post-truth' world.
3. **Universities are impressed by it.** More specifically that just preparing students for the future, the fact that TOK encourages critical thinking, autonomous learning, and a realisation that there are many routes towards producing knowledge means they'll be viewed in a very favourable light by universities.
4. **It provides a link to essential ideas and thinkers.** From Socrates to Schopenhauer, from Mill to Mitchell, from Kant to Kahlo, there's no end of brilliant thinkers and ideas to ensure that students receive a 'complete' education.
5. **It connects students to events and issues.** Students learn to analyse contemporary real-life situations, using them both as a source of knowledge, and a way of supporting their ideas.
6. **Students love it.** If delivered properly, TOK will engage, intrigue, inspire, and quite possibly infuriate students. TOK classes are typically alive with debate, passion, and wonder. And, isn't this the point of education?

TOK events

TOK events are becoming increasingly popular around the world, as schools fully realise the potential of the course, and use it as a way of promoting many of the skills the DP helps to develop, and getting together students from different schools, countries, and regions to explore big ideas and concepts.

However, TOK events don't have to be huge multinational conferences; they can be much smaller in scale, taking place during a lunchtime or after school, and involve just a handful of students. Basically, what we are talking about is any TOK-related event that takes place outside the classroom, involves students who are not necessarily involved in the course, and can be used as a way of promoting TOK and the TOK department.

Below we discuss different types of TOK events, offering them roughly in order of complexity and scale.



Interschool TOK conferences

We mentioned conferences in part 5 of '[Structuring your TOK course](#)'. These are probably the ultimate way of promoting TOK and your TOK department, because they not only provide you with an inter school (and possibly even international) context in which to celebrate the course. TOK conferences typically:

- Take place over two or three days
- Involve different schools from your area, country, or region
- Are based on a central theme or question, that support many smaller explorations of ideas and concepts to be made
- Offer a forum in which students can learn about different perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds
- Have a strong organisational involvement by students
- Offer both central get-togethers for all conference-goers, and break-out sessions, which may take the form of workshops and presentations
- Allow students who have made particularly commendable efforts to be recognised and rewarded for their achievements
- Offer tangible skill-development for those taking part
- Combine academic, TOK-related activities with rest and relaxation, for example, touristic and culinary experiences

Conferences are time-consuming and challenging to set up; however, done properly, offer a great experience for those who take part, and move TOK skills forward. They can even be referenced directly in TOK essays and presentations.

TOK retreats

TOK retreats (which we also looked at in '*Structuring your TOK course*') take students out of the classroom, and place them in a different environment. The more removed this is, the better: it doesn't necessarily have to involve an international trip, but it should take them somewhere unfamiliar, in which approaches to knowledge differ significantly from what they are used to. This might mean a different natural setting for students (mountains, coast, forest, jungle, desert, and so on), or a different societal set up (a smaller or larger scale society, a different cultural or economic outlook, a place where different languages are spoken, etc.).

Questions this might prompt us to explore include:

- How does our environment affect the way we produce knowledge?
- How does the purpose and value of knowledge vary in different settings?
- What role does language play in shaping how we acquire knowledge?
- Can we talk about 'different realities' when it comes to viewing the world?
- Is our understanding of the world determined by our perspective?

Retreats provide an excellent way of marketing TOK: they can be run in conjunction with other departments, they will probably involve taking other members of staff with you on the trip, and they offer great photo ops!

TOK days

Involving an entire DP year group (or both of them), and scheduled to take place over several hours, a 'TOK day' can provide students with the opportunity to explore a particular theme or question in a lot of detail and depth, work with people they don't normally come into contact with, and process unfamiliar ideas and approaches. From a marketing point of view, it's also a perfect way of extending the reach of TOK, and promoting the kind of ideas that form the basis of the course.

The key to a successful TOK day - a little like a TOK conference - is breaking up the activities carried out by students, and possibly sandwiching breakout sessions in between introductory and concluding plenaries. This final session could involve groups or individuals presenting the key findings of the day. In addition, you should ensure that activities are unified by a particular theme or question.

Presentation day

As we mentioned in step 6 of '*Designing the presentation*', some schools set aside a day towards the end of the TOK course in which students all deliver their TOK presentations. Doing it this way, rather than getting students to deliver the presentations over a more extended period of time, has the following benefits:

- Starting with the purpose of this section, a TOK presentation day allows you to offer to the rest of the school a tangible illustration of 'what we do in TOK', thus raising the profile of the subject. You could consider making the presentations public, and allowing teachers and DP1 students (assuming you do the presentations in year 2) to attend, and contribute to the Q&A session

- Having a specific, well-established 'TOK Presentation Day' will elevate this assessment task into a genuine celebration of the students' achievements, and create a distinct 'finale' to TOK, which sometimes has less of an end-point than other courses
- Carrying out all of the presentations on the same day means students won't be disadvantaged as they might if they were scheduled to deliver their presentations a few days or a week earlier than other groups
- Organisationally, it should be more convenient (albeit more intense) to process all the presentations, and upload samples, in a single go, rather than stretching things out

Guest speakers

Guest speakers are a great way of promoting the work you do in TOK. They can come from outside the school (perhaps recruited from amongst the parental body), or be teachers from another department; either way, they will help to raise the profile of the source, and give you an opportunity to include people in what's going on in TOK. It will help to have a course structure based on questions or themes, rather than arranged by WOK and AOK; this way you can invite people in at any point of the year. Real examples of guest speaker include:

- A filmmaker and editor, with experience in advertising, short films, and making a full-length movie, on how we can use the arts to explore ethical principles and issues
- A doctor, on the extent to which we use speculation in producing scientific knowledge
- A sociologist, on how having a framework of understanding can help or hinder us produce new knowledge
- A physicist, on how knowledge becomes more accurate over time
- A drama teacher, on how our understanding and use of art changes over time
- A mathematics teacher, on whether mathematics is entirely objective

For more consideration of this, see '[Drafting non-TOK teachers](#)'.

Plenary sessions

A fantastic way of timetabling TOK is to incorporate one lesson a week or fortnight in which the whole year group gathers together for a plenary session. This can allow you to either introduce or complete a topic, bring in a guest speaker, or offer some sort of 'experience' for the students. These sessions can be made public, to allow teachers and other members of the learning community a glimpse of what happens in TOK. We run over plenary lessons in a little more detail in 'A typical TOK class'.

TOK 'happenings'

Finally, as we discussed in our section on marketing TOK to students, running small activities, challenges, and questions, aimed at a specific year group, or at the whole school, will serve to raise awareness of your TOK department, as well as build engagement with the course and its approach to learning.

d.

Enriching your TOK course

Choosing the right unit titles

As we said in our section on integrating TOK, when you start off as a TOK coordinator, there is nothing wrong with basing your unit titles on the 4 WOKs and 6 AOKs that you'll be focusing on. However, when you pick up a little more experience, and are looking to infuse more originality and sophistication into your course, you'll realise that this approach can be rather limiting in a number of ways.

Instead, there is a great deal to be said for basing your unit titles on questions that cut across different ways of knowing and areas of knowledge, thus allowing you to explore multiple elements of the course at the same time. This also means that your course becomes instantly more accessible to non-TOK teachers, as they'll be able to contribute to any question, rather than just 'their bit' of the course (such as history, or the natural sciences, or the arts).

We won't go into too much detail about the content of units, but by offering some exemplar unit titles, you'll get a clear idea of how a question-based approach to TOK allows you to create a rich, engaging, interlinked course. The titles we've used here come from [theoryofknowledge.net's](https://theoryofknowledge.net/) 'Big Question' framework, which is now used by many schools around the world. The questions are designed to be explorable via any combination of WOKs and AOKs, so whilst providing a clear structure for the course, it doesn't do so in a prescriptive way.

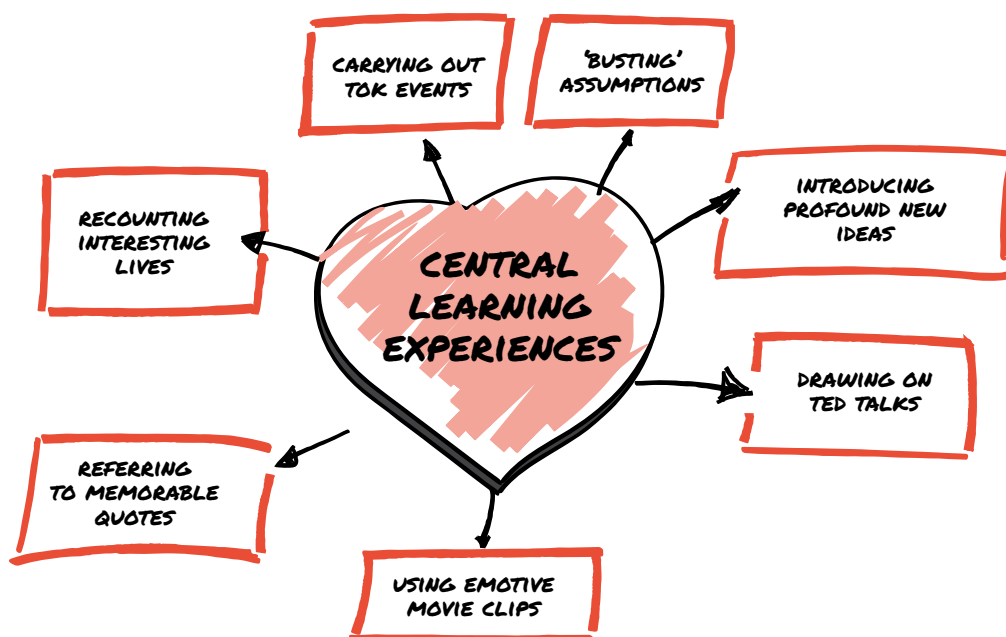
<i>Unit question</i>	<i>Overall learning objective</i>	<i>Possible WOKs/AOKs that can be used to explore the question</i>
1. Can we trust our immediate knowledge about the world?	Students should question their assumptions about 'seeing is believing', and also realise the 'reconstructive' nature of memory. But they should also be able to offer an explanation of why these WOKs operate in this way.	This unit could examine the knowledge provided by sense perception and memory - the two most 'immediate' WOKs - and assess how reliable the knowledge they provide us with is. This context allows use to be made of visual illusions, and why we are 'vulnerable' to them.
2. What is knowledge for, and how can we assess its value? 2. What is knowledge for, and how can we assess its value?	By using these two AOKs, students should realise that different societies have radically different ideas of what knowledge is for, and, partly as a result of that, contrasting ways of evaluating it.	This unit could focus on two contrasting AOKs - such as the natural sciences and IKS - to explore the different ways we use knowledge, and the value we place on it.

3. How do different ways of knowing and areas of knowledge interlink?	Overall, students should realise that there are huge overlaps between WOKs and AOKs - arguably to the point where different categories become meaningless. Students should see the different elements of TOK as working together in a 'network', particularly the ways of knowing.	The classic combination to look at would be emotion and reason: intuitively they seem antagonistic, but actually neither can function properly without the other. You could also look at a couple of AOKs, such as the arts and ethics, and think about how one can help us understand the other.
4. How does shared and personal knowledge shape our understanding of the world?	Students should realise the fluid relationship between shared and personal knowledge - each one feeds into the other, and helps to create it. This should prompt them to ask the question about what the ultimate source of knowledge actually is.	Many WOKs and AOKs lend themselves to a consideration of this key TOK concept; language is good (as it's simultaneously very personal and shared in nature); ethics could also work, as it is based on both systematic structures, and personal experiences.
5. How is our understanding of the world affected by the way it is represented?	Students should learn that the way knowledge is represented often determines how it is understood. Students should be able to cite examples when deliberately ambiguous terminology and ideas are used to try to mislead us.	This unit would work well with the human and natural sciences, allowing students (for example) to look at the difference between scientific and pseudoscientific ways of expressing ideas.
6. Is our understanding of the world determined by our perspective?	Students should understand that in most areas of knowledge, it's very hard to identify objective knowledge on which there is absolute consensus; rather, theories and ideas are understood and evaluated via our personal and societal perspectives.	Perspectives are probably best looked at via history, and/or the human sciences to consider how academic, generational, cultural, or other perspectives shape the way we view and understand the past. This should lead to a new conception of 'truth'.
7. How and why does knowledge develop over time?	Students should find out that even in AOKs dealing with objective knowledge, what we know is provisional, and is subject to significant change over time for a number of different reasons.	Virtually any WOK or AOK could be considered within this unit, although looking at the natural sciences will allow a consideration of concepts such as 'paradigm shifts', and Newton's 'standing on the shoulders of giants' analogy.

8. What makes someone an expert knower?	Students should understand that it's difficult to summarise what it takes to be an 'expert knower'. The answer depends on the area of knowledge under consideration, and may involve a combination of empirical and rational approaches to understanding.	The last unit could be used as a way of providing a 'TOK elective', in which the students themselves choose which areas of knowledge (or ways of knowing) to focus on. See more on this in our 'Building in choice' .
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× Central learning experiences

As well as creating great titles, and putting together effective content and activities, another consideration point is a one or more central learning experiences that will help to define and characterise each unit of the course.



'Busting' assumptions

Challenging students' assumptions is a guaranteed way of providing them with an experience that they will remember. We all possess ideas and opinions that we haven't fully evaluated and assessed, often inherited from unknown or forgotten sources.

Probing these (mis)conceptions will not only improve the integrity of the knowledge they possess, it will also demonstrate to them that the production of knowledge is an open-ended process that never really ends, and requires knowers to actively evaluate everything on which they base their understanding of the world.

Assumptions that you could challenge include:

- The reality we perceive is the reality that actually exists
- The way our society uses knowledge is the 'correct' way of utilising it
- Knowledge can be organised into separate, distinct categories
- It is possible to discern the truth about the world
- Society's understanding of the world is 'progressing'

Introducing profound new ideas

Providing students with an understanding of a big new concept or idea, or giving them a term that will help them to articulate and make sense of pre-existing knowledge, can be empowering and memorable. There are no end of examples in TOK of such things, but ones you will probably come across, and which would form excellent learning experiences, include:

- Deontological and utilitarian approaches to ethics
- Pseudoscience
- Paradigm shifts
- The concept of our 'umwelt'
- Deduction and induction
- Mimesis and anti-mimesis
- Causation and correlation
- Falsification
- Linguistic relativity and determinism

Drawing on TED talks

It is as if TED was made for TOK. There are a multitude of fantastic talk that relate closely to the course, and offer genuinely life-changing ideas and concepts. Watch short clips in class, and if you need to, get your students to finish them off at home. Examples of talks that are particularly brilliant are:

- [*The doubt essential to faith*](#): Lesley Hazleton makes us rethink the nature of this way of knowing by asserting that feeling doubt is integral to having faith
- [*The politics of fiction*](#): Elif Shafak demonstrates that one of the key purposes of imagination is to connect us with other people
- [*Go ahead - make up new words!*](#): Erin McKean shows how language develops over time, and encourages people to create their own words

- [*How reliable is your memory?*](#): a seminal TED talk in which Elizabeth Loftus shows the way in which our memory is like a 'Wikipedia page'
- [*Optical illusions show how we see*](#): students will be shocked by the illusions Beau Lotto creates, and they'll question the whole nature of sense perception
- [*Beware neuro-bunk*](#): a great talk on pseudoscience, in which Molly Crockett demonstrates how spurious terminology is used to push products and ideas on us
- [*Dreams from endangered cultures*](#): Wade Davis shows how radically different some cultures' approaches to understanding are
- [*The pursuit of ignorance*](#): Stuart Firestein will make you rethink what you assume you know about the role of the scientific method in producing knowledge

Using emotive movie-clips

There are plenty of movies that can aid the delivery of the TOK course, and although it's impractical to watch their full duration, selecting and playing movie clips is a great way of adding memorable content to your lessons:

- *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: any of the adaptations of the classic novel could be used to prompt an exploration about the relationship between language and thought
- *Insomnia*: see the scene in which Pacino asks the question, 'The end justifies the means, right?' for a nice introduction to consequentialism
- *The Imitation Game*: a wonderful movie that looks at reason, language, and mathematics, and how they were utilized to solve the ultimate puzzle
- *The Theory of Everything*: a memorable film about the life and work of Stephen Hawking, and the questions he sought to answer
- *Arrival*: a very moving film that explores the importance of language, and also the way in which we perceive time
- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*: an entertaining film on the role of memory, and what happens when we try to erase it
- *Ex Machina*: this doesn't, perhaps, link to any one aspect of TOK, but looks at the whole concept of human identity

Referring to memorable quotes

Great quotes are ones that give big insights via few words, and they can have quite an impact in the TOK course. Quotes make great starter questions, exit slips, discussion points, or as a route to understand the nature of an area of knowledge or way of knowing. Here are a (very) few quotes that work well in TOK, and could spur students on to remember the rest of a lesson or series of lessons:

- To imagine is everything, to know is nothing at all. (*Anatole France*)
- We inhabit a language rather than a country. (*Emil M. Cioran*)
- History will be kind to me for I intend to write it. (*Winston Churchill*)
- To know the history of science is to recognize the mortality of any claim to universal truth. (*Evelyn Fox Keller*)

- Philosophy is common sense with big words. (*James Madison*)
- Nothing we use or hear or touch can be expressed in words that equal what is given by the senses. (*Hannah Arendt*)
- Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions. (*David Hume*)
- In an eagle there is all the wisdom of the world. (*Lame Deer*)

Recounting interesting lives

Alongside the concepts and the quotes, don't forget to emphasise the men and women who were responsible for them. There are so many memorable characters in the history of ideas, you'd be wasting an opportunity to not mention the extraordinary lives they had, and stories behind some of their ideas. Examples might include:

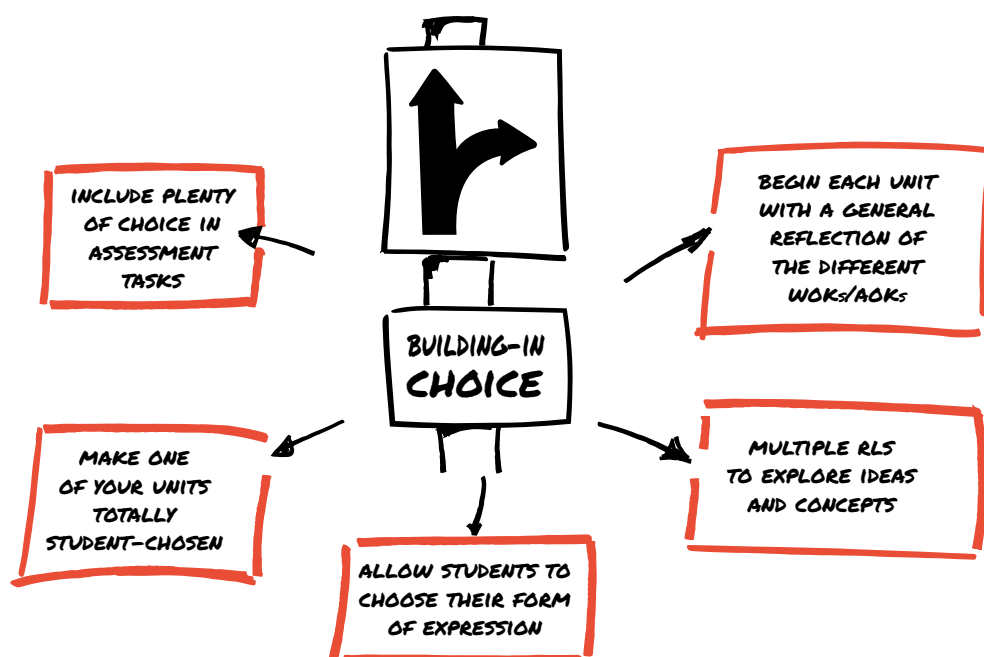
- Socrates's refusal to plead guilty for a crime he didn't recognise
- Charles Darwin's struggle to comprehend the implications of what he had discovered
- Marie Curie's (unmatched) ability to win the Nobel Prize in two different fields
- The impulse (Eichmann, and the need to explain how the Holocaust had happened) behind Stanley Milgram's infamous psychology experiment
- George Orwell's experiences as a homeless person in London and Paris, or his account of the Spanish Civil War
- Elizabeth Loftus's attempt to help a man convicted of assault due to false memories
- Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin

Carrying out TOK events

We looked at TOK events in a separate section, but any of these could work in providing students with a memorable learning experience.

✖ Building in choice

Choice should form a central element of the way all students learn, in every subject and level, and TOK should be no exception. Where you can, you should give students a choice of what to focus their learning on, and given that TOK is not based on a fixed curriculum assessed by a final exam, the potential for doing this is considerably greater than in other subjects.



Begin each unit with a general reflection on the different WOKs/AOKs

A great way to begin each unit is to get the students to choose (either individually, or in groups) a way of knowing or area of knowledge in which to consider the central idea or theme of your unit. Obviously, this works best if you are using question-based unit titles (see our section on this). To give a couple of examples:

- If you are looking at a unit on perspectives, ask students to consider the extent to which knowledge in a chosen AOK is subject to the interpretations of different perspectives
- If you are thinking about how knowledge develops over time, ask students to assess how much their chosen AOK has changed over time - and why

After they have worked on their own choice of AOK, they can exchange ideas with other individuals or groups in the class, and compare the different AOKs.

Multiple real-life situations to explore ideas and concepts

As we've looked at, TOK ideas and concepts should be supported via up-to-date and engaging real-life situations. But one of the things that will make them engaging is if the students themselves get to choose them. So if you can, offer students the chance to explore alternative RLSs in order to understand the idea being explored. Once again, get students to exchange their findings with other members of the class, so they are able to draw on more than one example to support their understanding.

Include plenty of choice in assessment tasks

When you design the assessment tasks for your students (such as practice presentations or essays, or journal-writing tasks) ensure that you give students a choice of questions or topics. Not only will this engage them in the task more fully, it will also provide them with better practice for the 'real' assessment tasks, in which selection is part of the process.

Allow students to choose their form of expression

Not only should you build in choice based on content, but consider also allowing students to express their ideas according to their own preferences. So if you're setting them a question or research task, allow them to create a presentation, or write a blog, or a video - or whatever suits their talents and interests.

Make one of your units totally student-chosen

As well as incorporating choice on the level of individual lessons, think bigger by offering your students the chance to explore a whole unit based on what they have chosen to do.

For example, in the unit titles we looked at on this page, the last question - "What makes someone an expert knower?" - lends itself particularly well to this 'elective' approach to TOK, with students potentially able to choose any area of knowledge, and research what qualifies a knower as being 'expert' or not. Just as with small activities, an exchange of ideas after students have reached their conclusion is vital: for example, peer assessment of presentations based on this question would be a great way to deepen understanding, as would question and answer sessions.

✖ Essential thinkers

Here's a (far from comprehensive) list of **TOK thinkers** who could play a starring role in the course. Although many of the names will be familiar, there are some less well known figures as well. But as the description of each person's key idea or ideas should make clear, everyone on the list can provide the basis for at least one effective TOK lesson - and most for significantly more than that.

Note that there are many other thinkers who could have made the list; we've included these thinkers because considered together they help students to understand a wide range of ideas, from the natural sciences to the arts; from faith, to language; from indigenous knowledge systems to mathematics.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Adichie's analysis of 'single stories', which she explores in a fabulous TED talk, is perfect for TOK, and will help students explore the concept of perspectives. Listen out for the word 'Nkali', which is also very helpful.

Chomsky, Noam

Chomsky believes that humans have an inbuilt 'language acquisition device' that helps us to learn the grammar of languages. Has also written a wide variety of other topics, and taken a provocative stance on ethics.

Crockett, Molly

Crockett is a neuroscientist, who specialises in moral decision-making. She has written and spoken widely on how 'neuro-babble' is used to misrepresent scientific knowledge, and manipulate us into buying products we don't need.

Damasio, Antonio

Damasio is a neuroscientist who studies the relationship between emotion and reason, and whose 'somatic marker hypothesis' is influential. He also provides a useful definition of 'emotion' which distinguishes it from 'feelin'.

Davis, Wade

Davis is the 'National Geographic explorer-in-residence', and argues (via various TED talks and books) that 'different visions of life making for completely different possibilities for existence'.

deGrasse Tyson, Neil

One of the great communicators of scientific knowledge, deGrasse Tyson argues that science, and scientific thinking, is the "pivot" of modern civilisation.

Descartes, Rene

Descartes, a French mathematician, mistrusted the senses, and said proof of our existence lay in the fact that we think, thus establishing the rationalist approach to knowledge.

Eagleman, David

Eagleman's amazing work is built on the fact that our brain does not care about the way in which sensory information is relayed to it - so he has enabled blind people to 'see' via other senses.

Einstein, Albert

Arguably the greatest modern scientist, Einstein advocated the importance of imagination in understanding the world and universe.

Gray,
John

Gray is a philosopher who is rather pessimistic about humanity's future. Look at his ideas alongside those of Steven Pinker, and try to figure out how two very smart people, who are, in theory, objective thinkers, can arrive at two completely different conclusions about society.

Hazleton,
Lesley

Hazleton is a writer and journalist, who has done extensive research into the life of early religious figures, such as Muhammed. She argues that doubt is an essential part of faith, which makes us completely question our assumptions about this way of knowing.

Kahneman,
Daniel

Kahneman is a Nobel Prize-winning psychologist. He has many ideas that are transferable to TOK; amongst them, the ideas that we have "experiencing selves" and "remembering selves", which perceive emotions differently.

Hoffman,
Donald

Hoffman's analogy of the computer 'operating system' for how sense perception works is a very helpful model to explain why we 'construct' reality, rather than see it how it actually is.

James,
William

James was an American philosopher, who advocated the 'pragmatic truth test' as a way of assessing the usefulness of knowledge.

Kant,
Immanuel

German philosopher, who argued that ethics should be approached in a deontological way - in other words, decisions or actions are inherently right or wrong, regardless of their outcome.

Locke,
John

One of the key 'empiricists', Locke believed that knowledge comes to us primarily via the senses, and that we begin life with a 'tabula rasa' or blank slate.

Loftus,
Elizabeth

Loftus is a psychologist best known for her work on 'false' memories. She argues that memory is constantly being reconstructed, and therefore works like a 'Wikipedia page'.

Lotto,
Beau

Lotto argues that 'context is everything', which means we construct our own sensory realities according to what makes evolutionary sense to us. His visual illusions have the power to genuinely shock and surprise students.

McKean,
Erin

Erin McKean's work shows brilliantly how language is constantly subject to evolution, and that everyone is the authority when it comes to words.

Mill,
John Stuart

Mill was a philosopher and economist, whose 'utilitarian' principle of ethics argued that we should calculate the rightness of an action based on the happiness it creates. This makes it opposed to Kant's deontological approach.

Oreskes,
Naomi

Oreskes is a historian of science, and her work - including some great TED talks - reveals how faith, just as much as reason, causes us to put our trust in the work of scientists.

Pinker,
Steven

Pinker has a lot to offer on cognitive psychology and linguistics. His ideas on how society has never lived in a more peaceful time can also be considered alongside those of John Gray, to highlight how academics can arrive at very, very different conclusions.

Plato

Plato defined knowledge as “justified, true belief”, something that all TOK students must grapple with at some point. He was also responsible for the ‘Allegory of the Cave’ to show how the majority of people exist, and see the world.

Robinson,
Ken

The brilliant Robinson argued that “Learning happens in the minds and souls, not in the databases of multiple-choice tests” - in other words, education is (or should be) a complex, personalised, profound experience.

Sagan,
Carl

The scientist and writer Carl Sagan maintained that we rely almost completely on science, but know almost nothing about it. He also advocated the importance (but not perfection) of the scientific method.

Selasi,
Taiye

In a brilliant TED talk, Selasi shows how the question of ‘where are you from?’ is meaningless, whereas, ‘Where do you feel a local?’ reveals so much about who we are.

Shafak,
Elif

Shafak is a writer who believes that imagination is the way of knowing that allows us to break through into other people’s realities, and connect with them.

Socrates

Socrates, the key pioneer of Western philosophy, argued that “the unexamined life is not worth living”. In other words, it’s always worth knowing the truth, regardless of the price you pay for that.

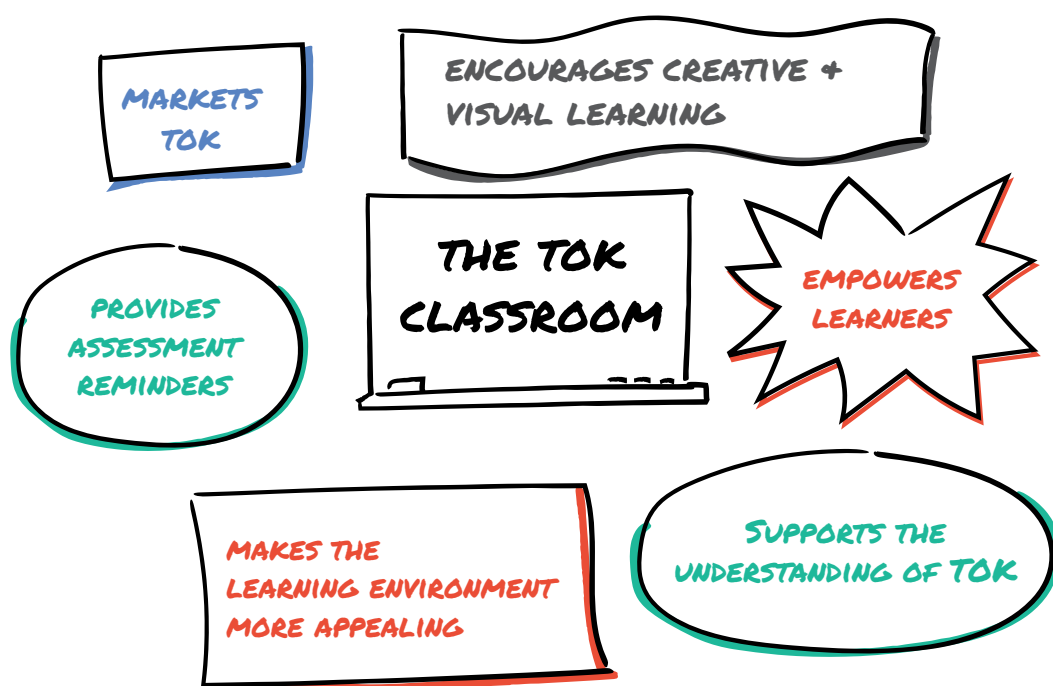
Villani,
Cédric

Villani is a mathematician who portrays this area of knowledge as an adventure and emotion, rather than one in which cold logic leads to the production of knowledge.

The TOK classroom

Having a dedicated classroom in which you teach TOK is a huge advantage for delivering the course, as it gives you the opportunity to display the work that your students create. Far from this being the preserve of younger children, decorating your physical learning environment with the ideas and musings of your DP1 and 2 learners is a fantastic way of enriching their TOK experience.

Ensure that you arrange work in a structured and organised way, for example, dividing up your room into different sections to correspond to the order in which you deliver the course. This will help to achieve the following.



Empowers learners

There are few simpler yet more effective (not to mention appealing low-tech) ways of empowering your learners than pasting their work to your walls.

Encourages creative and visual learning

Designing activities that lead to the production of a visual product guarantees that you'll come up with interesting, creative, and engaging learning activities.

Supports understanding of TOK

Decorating the walls of your classroom grants your students instant access to the ideas and concepts of TOK, its aims and structure, and key thinkers you use to enrich the course. It also helps you to link the different parts of the course - the different areas of knowledge, ways of knowing, unit themes, and so on. If you keep work on your wall, you'll also have great exemplars which the next year group can use as exemplars of effective work.

Provides assessment reminders

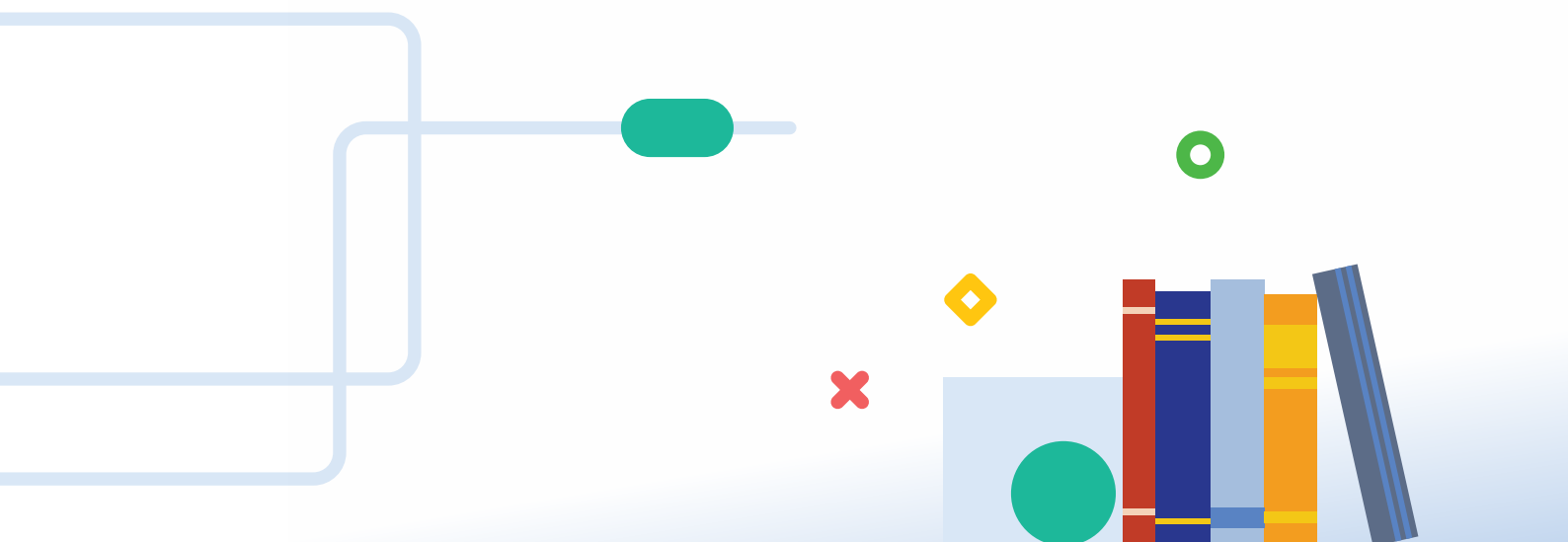
When students come to write their essays and presentations, they often find it hard to recall the key elements of the course in order to create their assessment tasks. Being surrounded by what they have learned over the previous year or two will allow them to recall their learning, and perhaps hone in on concepts, real-life situations, and thinkers, who they can incorporate in what they are designing.

Markets TOK

Having TOK displays on your walls is the clearest way of demonstrating to teachers, students, and even parents, what TOK is, as well as proving that the learning that goes on is thought-provoking, significant, and interesting.

Makes the learning environment more appealing

Classroom environments are often neglected, either because of time-constraints, or because there's a perception that it makes little impact of your students. However, there's plenty of evidence that creating a great ambience in your room stimulates learning, as well as demonstrating to your students that you care about their well-being. If you can find the time to turn those bare walls into a TOK-themed visual masterpiece, you'll be glad you did.





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