

Theory of Knowledge, often abbreviated as TOK, is a class in the IB Diploma Programme (DP) which focuses on tackling the nature, scope, and origin of knowledge. While most classes are not mandatory and can be selected from a list of options, TOK is one of the few which is required for all DP students. TOK is unfortunately also one of the most difficult courses for DP students to grasp. DP Students often struggle to ponder advanced epistemological questions such as “How do we know what we know?”. Yet, while the curriculum allows for some deep, critical thought, many flaws also exist within TOK as a whole. This article is intended as a critique of the TOK curriculum, and not of any class or teacher specifically; it attempts to question whether TOK is serving its intended purpose, and if the IB should really continue to require it in its current form.

It is important to understand that it is justified to question the course based on its own stated principles. The stated purpose of TOK is “providing an opportunity for students to reflect on the nature of knowledge, and on how we know what we claim to know” ([ibo.org](https://www.ibo.org)). In line with this sentiment, we aim to consider how it is that we know the truths taught to us by TOK itself, as well as the way that they are taught to us. It is our belief that the course, while well-intentioned, fails to live up to its promise due to the fact that the way in which it is taught—as in compelling students to accept statements with wide-ranging implications without justification—is fundamentally incompatible with the purpose of the course itself, which asks that we interrogate how we acquire knowledge.

First and foremost, one of TOK’s most blatantly prescriptive assumptions is of the nature of knowledge itself. The nature of knowledge is especially important because all further questions about knowledge, which are ubiquitous in TOK, must consider its answer. In my personal experience with the class, I was first asked to explain our opinion on the matter, and

then to debate the different views. I fully support this approach. I was then, however, after a time debating, informed that the correct answer, or at least the best available, is that knowledge is “justified true belief”. While perhaps a decent definition of knowledge, this does clearly have some flaws, such as the vagueness of “justification” and “belief”, and the fact that it is never truly possible to determine with certainty whether something is true or not, and therefore to be certain of knowing anything under this definition. However, I was not told why this system is better than the alternatives, nor even of any alternatives; rather, the class moved on to the next unit. Thus, while I am told to question why I know things in history, or science, for example, I am evidently not to question the underlying, fundamental assumption of what knowledge actually is.

Still, to give some more recent examples of this phenomenon, there were several statements which I was told to accept during our “History and Ethics” unit from this trimester. For example, I was told **“without ethics, our actions would be random and aimless”**. To me, this statement seems dubious; while ethics doubtlessly guide people’s actions, they are hardly the sole factor influencing decisions. If ethics were truly the sole thing guiding our actions, we must ask what was it that led us to develop ethics in the first place? Further, we can observe that other animals, which we were told do not have ethics, can accomplish nonrandom tasks. Nevertheless, the TOK curriculum would have me treat this statement as the unquestionable truth, and at most discuss *why* it might be the case, or its implications on the world, never questioning the validity of the statement in the first place.

Another example of a statement we were told to accept in this unit is that **“a flaw in our ethics will reduce our ability to be successful in our endeavors”**. To me, this statement seems at least to be an overgeneralization, since the primary purpose of ethics usually has more to do

with determining which goals we should seek to accomplish and how we should accomplish them in a moral way, rather than helping to actually accomplish them. For example, when society's objective was to prevent the spread of polio, society was able to accomplish this by using branches of natural sciences such as epidemiology. Meanwhile, ethics did not help us accomplish this. Rather, it enabled us to deduce this disease ought to be controlled to build a better society. Further, ethical systems, if multiple are held, can cause goals to be harder to accomplish if the ethical systems conflict. Moreover, determining what exactly constitutes a “flaw” in ethics is nearly impossible, unless we assume some particular ethical system to be correct, which of course there is no way of doing, as ethics are constructed. Overall, this statement is prescriptive, non-verifiable, and overly generalized. That TOK assumes it should, at the very least, lead one to question its approach to fulfilling its purpose.

Being told to accept something in TOK is not restricted solely to instruction in class, but also to questions asked by TOK. **“Is the truth what the majority of people accept?”** is one of the questions that can be chosen as a subject for the TOK Exhibition. Yet, there is often a dogmatic characteristic in TOK, where students are told to adopt certain beliefs. For example, we are told that killing is ethically wrong, which is a belief adopted by most people around the world. However, there are still advocates for certain people’s deaths or, more popularly, the death penalty. How can one objectively say that their opinion is necessarily unethical if we are taught that ethics is **“the belief system communities adopt to make decisions”**? While we, as authors of this article, do not endorse or condone murder, in this case there is a clear community of people that have an ethical system that allows them to believe killing is ethically justifiable. Who are we to say, as critical thinkers, that there is an objective right or wrong to this controversial topic? We should not immediately dismiss these people’s claims as “unethical” when they are

clearly following their own ethical system. However, TOK forces upon the students of the IB the idea that the truth is in fact what the majority of people accept, even while it presents it as a question.

To continue upon this theme, one of the main two assessments in TOK is the TOK exhibition. During this exhibition, we were told to choose a “knowledge question” to explore (but not answer) with reference to three objects. One of the main issues we have found with this assessment, however, is that many of the questions were loaded, meaning that they implied answers to previous questions which they did not address. For example, one of these questions is **“How can we know that current knowledge is an improvement upon past knowledge?”**.

This question clearly implies that current knowledge *is* indeed an improvement on past knowledge, not giving students any opportunity to question whether this assertion is true or not. Instead, the question simply asks students to find examples to prove this question true.

Further, the question **“How can we distinguish between knowledge, belief and opinion?”** asserts that there is necessarily a distinction between the three and does not allow students to engage in critical thinking and decide for themselves whether they can distinguish between knowledge, belief and opinion in the first place. As discussed previously, knowledge is defined by the course as **“justified true belief”**, while opinion is defined as “belief”. Firstly, this means that all knowledge is also opinion, or knowledge is a subset of opinion. However, this is not necessarily true for the converse, so not all opinions are knowledge. Secondly, opinion can be considered knowledge, if axioms are created to support opinions. Most people already do this informally through the use of core values, thus making opinion true and justified based on their own standards. For example, if one thinks that chocolate tastes good, this can be knowledge rather than opinion to them based on their fundamental belief of what tasty food is; they know to

themselves that chocolate is a food they will enjoy eating. Despite knowledge and opinion not being so discrete, even according to its own definitions, TOK and its questions make arbitrary distinctions between knowledge and opinion.

Finally, let us consider two questions in tandem: **“Does all knowledge impose ethical obligations on those who know it?”** and **“What are the implications of having, or not having, knowledge?”** In this case, the former question clearly answers the latter question. The former question is loaded in the sense that it implies that some knowledge imposes ethical obligations on people, and therefore this can immediately be used to answer the following question, as having an ethical obligation imposed on you for knowing knowledge is clearly an implication of having knowledge. This shows that one can derive an answer true to the latter question that is, according to TOK, incontrovertible, even though the questions of TOK are not supposed to ever be directly answered. Overall, it is demonstrated that TOK does ask abstract questions. However, the answers themselves are not necessarily abstract, as TOK compels students to adopt preconstructed beliefs in order to answer said questions.

In conclusion, TOK is a class which sets itself up for success by creating opportunities for deep reflection from students, yet fails to live up to these high standards it sets for itself. While prompting critical thinking from students and asking its students to question knowledge, its refusal to scrutinize what may be described as “fundamental truths”, though they are merely assumptions deserving of questioning, nearly renders null these efforts to deepen students’ thinking. TOK’s dogma forces students to accept truths as indisputable to adequately participate in the class and attain acceptable grades. All in all, we find that TOK is promising in its concept, but flawed in its execution, and we hope that the IB will one day improve the class to truly elicit critical thinking by reframing questions, and interrogating its own assumption.