

THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE NETWORKING SESSION

Meadowbrook High School

Carolyn Henly, IB Coordinator

4901 Cogbill Rd., Richmond, VA 23234

Telephone: 804-743-3683

Fax: 804-743-3683

*Date of Networking: **Monday, November 5, 2007***

*Time: **9:00-1:00***

Attendance—See attached roster

Overview of Course Curriculum Changes

We spent some significant time on this, but most of the discussion is encapsulated in the handout. Primarily: changes are not intended to alter the substance of the course, but rather to redirect attention to the elements that were originally intended to be stressed. General feeling of subject area revision committee was that the old criteria allowed for an oversimplification of knowledge issues into skepticism and encouraged students to dichotomize answers—“reason is good”; “emotion is bad.” Students’ own perspective is intended to be the center of the course—the examination of what they think and know and how they have come to know it—rather than any formal tour through the history of Philosophy. See handout for details.

Essays from the examiners’ perspective:

- Examiners do get some additional input on how to interpret and apply the scoring criteria. (At least they did with the old criteria!)
- Examining very helpful to a teacher in terms of giving greater insight into the kinds of problems students struggle with, pitfalls of particular topics, and the difference between a truly personal perspective and a more slick review of information from other sources, regurgitated for the occasion.
- Problems with essays from examiners perspective: Subject Area Report is a great source of information for this. Available on the Online Curriculum Center.
- If you’ve taught three or more years, this year may be a good year to become an examiner; we may get more input into how the new criteria are to be interpreted, as this is the first year. (Speculation on the part of participants only; not the result of inside information!)

General advice on how to approach the course:

- Guest speakers: really helps make a wider variety of knowledge problems more relevant to real-world situations, and more accessible to students. Keeps the course from becoming too teacher-centered. Example: a woman who has struggled with schizophrenia.

- Readings: choose good readings and discuss them in terms of knowledge issues; terminology and philosophical viewpoints will come up naturally as needed.

Strategies used to prepare for writing the essay:

- Journal writing used by several schools—some use guided topics: consider examples from science class, art class, or other areas to try to help them come up with better examples for use in their essays.
- Summer assignment: 10 experiences from their personal life related to any of the prescribed titles.
- Students use Yahoo groups and post to the bulletin board examples of where they see TOK at work out in the world Grading criteria: “Be brief, be relevant, be clear, be sincere.” May require quite a lot of control by teacher—specific topics, monitoring of postings. One school uses a schedule: half students required to post and half required to respond to other posters.
- Other systems: edublog; that requires teacher to approve the posting before students’ posts go live.
- Yahoo groups won’t clear filters at schools; edublog might.
- Create a Wikibook using questions from the curriculum. This is available through Wikipedia.
- Give students actual practice questions from old lists of Prescribed titles; grade each other’s questions using the rubrics.
- Teacher, at least, needs to review the prescribed titles early in the year in order to look out for any concepts that might not ordinarily be covered in the curriculum—or only by chance. Examples from 2008: “intuition”; “heresy” and “orthodoxy” in subject area framework (essentially paradigms and paradigm shift).
- Focus students’ attention on the specific language of the scoring rubric. See powerpoint.
- Turn the papers back to the students and make them score their own before they can see the teacher’s score. Or have them score the paper before they turn it in.
- Spend time actually focusing on each of the prescribed titles—what is it asking? Do you have enough knowledge about this topic to actually answer this question? Is it a good question?
- For first practice essay: Personal experience essay in which students identify a time when they were confused or wrong, and trace back all the many threads of knowledge (and lack-thereof) that led to that moment of confusion. Then assess how the confusion was resolved or, if not resolved, why not. (This does tend to focus more on “problems of knowledge” and should be considered only a first step toward learning to apply TOK issues to oneself. Should be useful practice in developing effective personal examples which are explored in-depth rather than “analyzed” in a sentence or two.
- Recommend that TOK teachers try to write one of these essays; they are extremely difficult, and one of the most difficult tasks is trying to balance the need to explain sufficiently and to stay within the word limit.
- Ongoing comparison/contrast chart linking all the ways of knowing with each other and with all the areas of knowledge (which are also then linked with each other). See handout.

Discussion of May 2008 titles:

- Pitfalls:
 - Students need to be alert to what the topic is asking. If it asks for “novels” (Title 8?), then they mean “novels,” and not “literature” or “plays,” or non-fiction.
 - Students need to be aware of whether they know enough about the content of the question to write an effective essay—or, if they don’t know enough when they start, whether they are willing to do the work necessary to learn enough. The question about work that supports convention vs. ground-breaking work in Natural Science and the Arts requires that students know what kind of work is being done (or has been done) in those fields and which of that work is conventional and which ground-breaking.
 - Defining of terms needs to be in the students’ own words and in terms of their own understanding. Dictionaries are not forbidden, but the use of dictionary definitions is a red flag that this is an essay by a student who is not writing from his or her own “knower’s perspective,” but who, rather, is trying to get answers about the topic from outside resources.
- Unpacking topics: means discussing each topic in detail and evaluating what it is asking and what knowledge is necessary in order to write an effective essay. Can also help establish what structure might work for presenting the essay.
- Analysis: the essay task is essentially an analytical task. Students are supposed to write from their own perspective, but that does not make this an opinion essay. They need to be able to present their own perspective and then assess its strengths and weakness, as well as to identify the sources of that knowledge.
- Timing—spread out over how much time? Multiple drafts over a week? In class? Write it now, put it away for a month? One school has students prepare and then come in and write the first draft on the computers in class. They started generating more words that way, and, because focused in class, started generating better ideas than when left on their own at home.
- Grading—do you count this for the school grade? Concern was expressed that there might be repercussions if the teacher grade was different from the eventual IB grade. It was acknowledged that this is a problem of grading in general in every IB situation and is not particular to TOK. It was further acknowledged that the whole murky question of what constitutes a grade—the course grade is not the same as the grade for the two assessments, and so a student might get an A in TOK for IB, but still get a C or D for the TOK class, because that class grade includes many other contributing factors—is a general problem that applies to all situations in which grades are given.
- There is nothing in IB policy that says you cannot grade this essay for your class. Your grade, if given, bears no weight in the score that is given toward the IB diploma. This is a completely externally assessed component.
- Turnitin.com is a useful resource for keeping plagiarism at bay.

- Grading with four different inputs—two teachers, student, peer. All four grades averaged together.

The Presentations—Notes from the Special Subject Seminar

- The rubric for the essay compared to the rubric for the presentations: the latter are very broad. They lack specific terminology to help guide the teacher and student to successful presentations.
- Points are doubled up—difficult to tell the difference between a 1 & a 2 or a 3 & a 4. The language of the criteria doesn't differentiate. Example: "Treatment of Knowledge Issues" and what is the difference between "some" and "adequate"? Also: what is the difference between a 3 adequate and a 4 adequate?
- Liked the planning document which is now required.

More on presentations:

- Sample presentations on OCC with support materials. Sound quality might not be good enough for whole class use, but they are quite helpful for teachers. The plastic surgery presentation is a particularly useful one for demonstrating how to take a topic and arrange it around a knowledge issue.
- Presentations are very similar to the essay, except that the presentation is meant to be one example explored in great depth, while the essay explores a broader issue across several contexts.
- One school has students write a paper before they make the presentation.
- Use of creative formats—criteria calls for knower's perspective; if role-playing, must find a way to demonstrate personal perspective (step out of role? Give introduction? Give conclusion?)
- Use of PowerPoint: students need to be trained to make effective PowerPoint presentations, and not those which are simply slides full of text which is then read aloud to the audience.
- Timing of presentations: guideline is about 10 minutes per student, no longer than 30 minutes, even for a group presentation with five students. There was considerable discussion about whether follow-up questions ought to count as part of the time; this is handled differently in different places. One determining factor is simply the logistics of giving the presentations. In some schools, students are given the full responsibility for running a class, and the presentation grade comes from a segment of that. In one school, there are two teachers, so they split the students in half, and each teacher watches half. That allows for more time per student (including follow-up discussion). In one school the presentations are done after school for an invited audience, and practical limitations suggest that with four presentations per day, about 15 minutes per student, including questions, is about all that is manageable.

We did not get to the Math/Science item on the agenda; however, there is a packet with ideas and several of the handouts that were presented in hard copy provided sample lessons for Math.

Other Recommended Resources:

- Feynman: “Seeking New Laws” in *Character of Physical Law*; this is a book of collected lectures from a series at UC Berkeley.
- *The Heart of Mathematics; an Invitation to Effective Thinking* by Edward Burger and Michael Starbird, Key College Publishing, ISBN: 1-55953-407-9
- *Theory of Knowledge Course Companion* Oxford University Press by Eileen Dombrowski, Lena Rotenberg, and Mimi Bick.
- *Do You Think What You Think You Think*, by Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom. ISBN 978-0-452-28865-2 This is the book from which the excerpt “Philosophical Health Check” (passed out in hard copy at the networking session) comes. Also recommended is another book by Jeremy Baggini: *The Pig That Wants to be Eaten*.