



The Principal's Desk

Reflections on the Theory of Knowledge

Let me acknowledge the fear most of you have about Theory of Knowledge. Whether your child is currently in grade 11 or 12, or will be in the year to follow, many of you sat among fellow parents who shared their woes and worries about ToK.

That is the unfortunate myth that surrounds this course. I, personally, happen to disagree with it. ToK is not difficult. It is, however, designed to encourage critical thinking and questioning, which can be viewed as difficult. This is especially true in a culture that seems to have abandoned inquiry and critical thinking and has resolved itself to becoming a conforming, cookie cutter society, follow-the-norm society. What ToK offers us is the opportunity to immerse ourselves into intellectual thought and to ask more questions than give answers. ***I often tell my students, you should have more questions than answers at the end of a class (and it is ok if you have a headache from all the questions!)***

According to the IB, Theory of knowledge is the study about knowledge and its production. So in ToK students do not examine the atomic theory, or Freud's work in psychology per se, but rather look at how knowledge is constructed in those fields; what methodology is used; how historical developments in a field affect the production

'What is written without pain is read without pleasure.'

SAMUEL JOHNSON, 1709-1784

of knowledge, and the relevance of this knowledge to individuals. These questions are examined through the knowledge framework.

Does this sound difficult? Of course it does. The more time I spend reading and preparing for my ToK classes the more questions I have about knowledge itself. (one could say I have a constant headache).

The truth is, as parents, you may feel helpless. You may also feel frustrated about ToK, because it does not seem to have a clear formula. That is understandable, after all, when was the last time you have taken a course in epistemology or philosophy for that matter. How many of us pick up Plato's Republic to read before going to bed? Or contemplate the question *how we know what we know?*

I admit that the school has had its fair share of challenges with ToK in previous years, but since May 2016 we have taken solid steps to change that. Our short term goal is to address the class of 2017 immediate needs and to learn from past years. Our long term goal is to become an expert school in ToK and to have at least one or two of our teachers as certified IB examiners in this subject by the beginning of academic year 2019.

As we embarked on this journey for change and we began to converse with

colleagues in Amman and New York, we found ourselves in good company, with many common challenges. But we were also able to find many answers.

Since May 2016 we have taken the following steps to improve ToK:

- 1- IB Certified ToK workshop completed online by principal in collaboration with Fadi Abu Nimeh.
- 2- Consultation with Sue Bastian, a seasoned ToK teacher, chief assessor, and ToK consultant based in New York.
- 3- A thorough reading of the ToK subject report for the May 2016 session.
- 4- Consultation with other colleagues who teach ToK at International Amman Academy, and plans for a joint workshop for FBS grade 12 students in February 2017.
- 5- A unified course outline for grade 11, with unified exercises (sent to parents October 5, 2016)
- 6- A midyear evaluation of our experience in grade 11 with key adjustments made to the materials and how the course is taught to become in effect beginning of second semester January 24, 2017.
- 7- A unified essay guide for all grade 12 based on the consultations mentioned above. (sent to student January 4, 2017 and can be found [here](#))
- 8- A unified set of notes for the Prescribed Titles for the May 2017 session (shared in class or via email with Grade 12 students).

And we will be doing much more including preparing students for ToK earlier in their career, through ethics classes in grades 6 to 10.

You might wonder, why has the principal taken personal interest in teaching ToK? Frankly, there are several reasons, including previous experience in teaching a similar class at the university level. But most prominent of all reasons is ***that a teaching principal possesses one of the best diagnostic tools to assess academics, and that is the classroom itself.***

Since we are seriously committed to the development and improvement of academics, teaching a course that serves as the common intellectual experience students have in their DP years seemed to be a good place to start.

Today, I am asking for your support. I also request that you make sure that your 12th grader abides by the instructions sent to them and that you encourage them to seek our help. We are available to discuss the titles, to answer questions, and to guide them through this journey.

Parents of grade 12 students a follow up letter will be sent to you in the coming few days to address specific issues facing your children in ToK.

Dr. Riyam Kafri
Upper School Principal
ToK Teacher
rkafri@rfs.edu.ps