

IDEAS

Theory of Knowledge

Two-year course helps international diploma candidates see learning in broader perspective

By Jim Benclvenga

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ALBERT CAMUS and Jean-Paul Sartre make more than guest appearances. Warm greetings are extended to Alfred North Whitehead, Spinoza, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Aristotle's entelechy - the essence in you - and Martin Buber's "I and Thou" depart as Nietzsche's "will to power" rears its fascist head.

At 8:45 on a Monday morning, this is not "Welcome Back, Kotter!"

And appearances to the contrary, it is not a philosophy class. A unique course of study required on the road to the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma, the "Theory of Knowledge" program helps students place their learning in a larger perspective and at the same time understand themselves as knowers.

"Higher knowledge is always when you can explain, not just describe," says Sue Bastian to the juniors in her class at the United Nations high school in New York. It is the 12th year this native Kansan, who was educated at Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, has taught the "Theory of Knowledge" sequence. She is considered by sponsors of the IB in Geneva to be the best of the best teachers who teach the IB's most original curriculum. "Even the French admit to her talents," says A. D. C. Peterson, a founder and former director general of the IB in London.

The IB is a pre-university diploma program

EDUCATION

geared to the academic needs of motivated and often gifted students. The curriculum aims to develop competency in writing, mathematics, and a foreign language during the last two years of secondary education. At the same time, it gives students a sound introduction to the liberal arts - the humanities, social science, and laboratory science.

Six courses are studied, three for two years each and three for one year each. Required subjects are two in language, one's native tongue and a second language ("You can't really study one language alone and say you know a language," says Dr. Peterson); the "Study of Man in Society" (which includes history, geography, economics, philosophy, psychology, and social anthropology); experimental sciences (chemistry, biology, physics, physical science); mathematics; and an elective,

which might include art/design, music, computer science, Greek or Latin.

In addition to these six subjects, a diploma candidate must take a "Theory of Knowledge" class. The course, a key element in the educational philosophy of the IB, is a two-year study linking other subjects into a unified intellectual experience. For many students, it provides the missing link, says Elizabeth G. Vermey, director of admissions at Bryn Mawr College, enabling them to think across disciplines.

"We have to write at least one 500-word essay a month," says Tanya Byker, a junior in Ms. Bastian's class. "One of the reasons I like TK ["Theory of Knowledge"] so much," she says, "is that she presents us with a question that has no answer."

The class meets for an hour twice a week.

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WILLIAM GOODELL

Students in UN high school's 'Theory of Knowledge' class must write at least one 500-word essay each month, on questions that have no easy answers

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During Tanya's two years in the program, she will write at least 5,000 words as she grapples with epistemological distinctions, various "isms" (such as empiricism, rationalism), great – and not so great – thinkers, and debates more than a few topical subjects. One trap she will be encouraged to avoid is simply looking at knowledge as a cluster of methodologies.

Instead, this course asks students to realize "there is no immaculate perception," says Bastian. "Evidence is not always self-evident. It does not always announce itself."

Bastian is not a proponent of an intellectual creed of relativism, or neutrality, however. She seeks to instill in her students one of the highest joys she feels a teacher can offer, that

"evidence and knowledge are a triumph," she says, as she writes on the board one of her favorite equations: $K=JTB$ (knowledge equals justified true belief).

The idea of teaching how morals and religion shape thought suggests how great a task the IB sets for itself in the "Theory of Knowledge" course, says Peterson. "It is not easy to put into place, you need top-quality staff in

all the domains," he says.

Students are helped to see the limitations that arise if each discipline thinks it discovered truth, rather than deducing knowledge along its own line of reasoning, its own definitions, Peterson says. In standard secondary school programs, "students didn't understand the relationships between the subjects in school, why different ways of knowing affect what it is that is known," he says. "Students did not understand the past as historical truth, or scientific truth or mathematical truth or moral truth." So the IB planners created the "Theory of Knowledge" course, he says.

Asu Kirdar, a senior and Turkish national enrolled in one of the three classes Bastian teaches, says simply, "She's wonderful." With plans to attend university in Europe and possibly major in history, Asu is "much more conscious of what historians do

as historians," she says. "I have much distance, more objectivity from the course."

All this may sound heady for high school students, but Sue Bastian sees immediate benefits. Some students would argue that the existence of God had been disproved by science, she says. But then they would realize that this contradicts the collective experience of many

In 'Theory of Knowledge,' students are helped to see the limitations that arise if each discipline thinks it discovered truth.



Sue Bastian: evidence and knowledge are a triumph.

classmates who came from different backgrounds. She informs her students that intellectual honesty requires them to resolve so fundamental a difference of opinion.

The way to start, she tells them, is to think like a scientist, then compare that to how a theologian thinks and see what each has to say to the other.

Jim Bencivenga is the Monitor's education editor.