

The Way We Teach: Out of Our Heads

There is chatter as class begins. “Who is leading the discussion?” “Did you finish the analysis sheets?” “What analysis sheets?” “Has anyone ever thought how it would feel to wake up without language?” The student’s face is full of inquiry, and he continues, “Would it be our worst nightmare or a relief...you know...we would be unencumbered by language.” Other students pause and seem to be pondering the dilemma. Rose, the teacher, appears, and today’s session of the Theory of Knowledge (TOK) begins.

Sometimes referred to as both the most challenging and most loved course in the International Baccalaureate Programme, TOK asks students to reflect on the nature of knowledge and on how we know what we claim to know. It is, in the words of one student, “very, very challenging” and also mandatory for all students enrolled in the IB Diploma Programme.

Today’s focus is on language, and the slide projected on the whiteboard reads “Reading critically allows us to recognize perspective.” The questions begin. Rose: “Language is a way of knowing—of sharing knowledge, but how do we get language? What are the sources?” Students respond, “What about body language?” “Language forms the basis of all other ways of knowing.” Rose broadens the frame: “IB started with four ways of knowing; now there are eight.” We make a note to research the ways of knowing and later learn that Language, Senses, Emotion, and Reason are the original four ways and Imagination, Faith, Intuition, and Memory were added later.

Students continue to share thoughts, and then Rose says, “Remember the prismatic qualities of diamonds.” A student responds, “Using imagery with two perspectives—the sparkle from diamonds can be about manipulating light (negative) or about a rainbow (positive).” The discussion moves forward to SELECTION, which now appears on a slide on the whiteboard. We listen intently to Rose to catch the gist: Out of all that could be reported, what has been selected? How do we know we are getting the whole picture when something is reported? Rose’s point, as she hones in, is “You must read critically; if not you can be hornswoggled...always know the sources being used...look for corroboration for what is asserted as being true.” (Our minds stray to the current landscape in journalism and the media, and we decide this lesson is very, very important for young people who will be in charge in fewer years than we think.)

Rose is now on to a new analogy: “When you have your first car accident, your mind will probably go blank. You will need to rely on the perspective of others.” With a look that signals Brain at Work a student says, “Perspectives will come from others in the car, from those ahead and behind, from pedestrians passing by—everyone will have a different story.” The point: accidents, like books, can have many interpretations.

Change in slide: EMPHASIS. Rose begins: “When you read an article what do you look at first?” Answers tumble out. “Headlines?” “The first sentence?” Rose doesn’t hear what she is looking for. “Let me ask again,” she says, leading them to reconsider. “You are short on time...you are in a rush...what do you do?” She scans the faces, and then a student says, “You read the first paragraph?” “Yes!” exclaims Rose, “because what is emphasized there will inform how you read the rest of the piece.” Suddenly a student makes a connection. “In scientific writing the passive voice is used to highlight cause and effect.” A new slide comes up, and the discussion moves to COLORING. We read in the handout about how emotions or values can color the use of language. And about what the choice of words tell us about the perspective of the writer. A lively discussion unfolds, then on to a new focus.

RELATIONSHIP OF PARTS, announces Rose. When you read a news account, are the parts of the story sequenced in logical ways? Or are they arranged to imply meaning through juxtaposition? (Our brains are spinning.) Rose continues, “Is language a form of brainwashing?” “That’s a strong word,” says one student, and another joins in, “But language is a tool and can be used to brainwash—think of articles on Hitler.” Another classmate counters, “But using language simply to convince is not the same as brainwashing.” Yet another classmate finds middle ground: “The goal is to find the balance.”

Time is getting short, and a new slide appears: FRAMING IN CONTEXT. Rose shares two headlines about a single story. The first, “Troops Abandon War-Gutted Iraq,” accompanied by a photo of bombed-out buildings. The second, “Joyous Families Welcome Troops Home,” with photo of family members hugging each other. Studying the slide, a student says, “Abandon”—that is a very powerful word.” Another student, “So is ‘home.’” This is “framing,” says Rose, and it can expose bias. She continues on, “What is the deeper message here?” No one speaks up. “I know I ask big questions, and by that I mean questions that can have a lot of right answers.” Silence. Then from a student, “We should develop a healthy level of skepticism and recognize that we can be influenced by what we read and know that we can write in a way to influence others.” Rose smiles.

This topic seems to capture everyone’s attention. A student asks classmates, “Can I take advantage of you with a single word or a snippet? Or do I need full sentences?” A classmate jumps in with a comment about the role of jargon. Now the synapses are firing. “Hm...math is a language...as is science.” A light bulb: “We’re actually studying language in every course!” The upcoming elections come to mind and prompts one student to note the importance of “reading in depth on both sides of the issue.... Only then can I know what to do.” With impressive insight, a classmate acknowledges that when we read something we are often already predisposed in one direction or another and, therefore, we don’t read as critically as we should.

The class is drawing to a close, and Rose begins to describe the map assignment. We check the study materials and follow along as she explains that students are to pretend to be the president of a European country who wants to do nuclear testing in the South Pacific. “Before starting your testing,” Rose says, “you want to persuade Europeans that testing so far away will not cause damage or harm to Europe. With that goal in mind, how will you design the map you will use to persuade the citizenry?” Seeing puzzled looks on students’ faces, Rose explains that not all maps are geographical. There are other kinds. “Perhaps we want to put the South Pole at the top or design a map to show where people make the most money.” Then she reminds the class what the conversation has been about today: Selection, Emphasis, Perspective, Emotional Coloring, Framing. “All these factors can be applied to designing maps...it depends on what we want the map to communicate.”

Heads nod. Assignment is understood, and Rose suggests we spend time with the students alone to learn more about what they think of TOK. “It’s more challenging than I thought...it’s intense.” “I wondered if my brain would work this way.” We looked confused. “What I mean is I am having to think of so much I have never thought about before.” Another student chimes in, “That’s it... This class makes us think.” Now we have hit upon a topic of great interest. From the other side of the table, “Even if you are not used to thinking, Rose will pull it out of you. She keeps saying ‘Think deeper.’ ‘Why?’ ‘More!’ ‘Why?’” As though summing it up, a student says soberly, “We think the most and the deepest here.”

And, we think we are finished and begin to close notepads when we hear, “Epistemology gives me an existential sense of dread.” We believe those words never came out of our mouths when we were 15 but we want to know more and ask for an explanation. “It’s the way knowledge is deconstructed—we’re used to how we think, then it all gets deconstructed.” We sit back down and open the note pad as another student begins to talk about “cubes.” “We look at every side of the cube, then we cut up the cube and examine every side of each of those new cubes.” Another summation: “This class moves us out of our own head to question... everything.”

As we leave we’re thinking of Imagination—one of the ways of knowing. This class leads us to imagine what the world will be like when these students are in leadership roles and thinking critically about the decisions that will affect others. Students, we are optimistic.

“This class moves us out of our own head to question... everything.”

“...I am having to think of so much I have never thought about before.”

Jeanie Norris

Rose Barnett teaches Middle School Humanities and Global Politics, another IB course, in addition to TOK and has been at MSR for 7 years.

Sources:
<https://www.ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme/curriculum/theory-of-knowledge/>
<http://www.lanternaeducation.com/ib-blog/theory-of-knowledge-ib-guide-part-4/>

Thanksgiving Table Discussions Courtesy of IB

Need thought provoking questions should there be a lull in conversation at the Thanksgiving dinner table? You may want to have these handy. According to the International Baccalaureate website, they are past and upcoming questions for the required essay that is part of the Theory of Knowledge class.

- To what extent are areas of knowledge shaped by their past? Consider with reference to two areas of knowledge.
- There is no reason why we cannot link facts and theories across disciplines and create a common groundwork of explanation. To what extent do you agree with this statement?
- There is no such thing as a neutral question. Evaluate this statement with reference to two areas of knowledge.
- The task of history is the discovery of the constant and universal principles of human nature. To what extent are history and one other area of knowledge successful in this task?

(Don’t everyone talk at once. :-))

Source: <https://www.ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme/curriculum/theory-of-knowledge/example-essays/>

Staff Profile: Kevin McLean Earns Principal Certification

This past summer Kevin McLean, Curriculum Coordinator for the Middle and Upper Schools, completed his Post Master’s Certificate in Educational Leadership through the College of New Jersey. (Kevin’s other degrees are in Education and Biology.)

While requiring all of the coursework for a Principal’s Certificate, the post master’s program has an international lens that matches the mission and vision of the International Baccalaureate Programme. According to Kevin, the program focused on strengthening knowledge and skills that school leaders must have to understand and successfully confront the multiple educational challenges posed by twenty-first century conditions and contexts. Those challenges were well represented in the Advanced Leadership course that examined policies and practices in the context of knowledge and inquiry, best practice, multiculturalism diversity, inclusion, multiple context and communities, and leadership and advocacy.

In addition to Advanced Leadership, Kevin completed course work in School Law, School Finance, and Educational Research and gained a practical, professional, and theoretical knowledge base that incorporates current research of effective practices and accepted standards. The program was conducted in Mallorca, Spain and hosted by Bellver International College. MSR’s professional development funds covered tuition for course work.



Did You Know?



MS/US Students Express Thanks

- Students in the Middle and Upper Schools take time every November to prepare notes of gratitude for teachers. With guidance from advisors, each student writes a note of thanks to a teacher who is admired and has touched that student’s life in a significant way.
- On the Tuesday before the Thanksgiving break, alumnae/i return to the school and speak to all middle and upper school students, reflecting on their time at the school and what they are grateful for. When alumni have finished, the oldest students come forward to share their thoughts and express thanks, and the process continues until even the seventh graders, the youngest in the room, have expressed their gratitude for some aspect of the school program and thanked teachers and peers.

Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others. Cicero (106-43 BC)

Resources for Parents



Articles of interest:

- [“Teens Sleeping Too Much, Or Not Enough? Parents Can Help”](#)
- [“A Dark Consensus About Screens and Kids Begins to Emerge in Silicon Valley”](#)
- [“Please Stay ... Here’s Why”](#) (Article addresses the benefits of staying in Montessori schools for kindergarten.)
- [“Seven Ways to Foster Gratitude in Kids”](#)
- [“Ten Ways to Raise a Grateful Kid”](#)
- [“Children Grow Up Happier When We Teach Them Gratitude”](#)

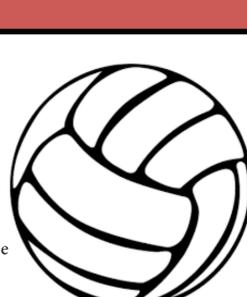
TIPS for Parents



In this edition of Spice Box, we share traditions of the Middle and Upper Schools for expressing gratitude. With our younger children, teaching gratitude is a key component of the curriculum and goes hand in hand with grace and courtesy activities. The goal always is to help children appreciate the interconnectedness they have with others. We begin early to teach girls and boys to say “Please” and “Thank you.” It takes years, however, to guide children in developing empathy and a true thankfulness for what they have been given by others. Here are tips for teaching children to be grateful.

- When your child excels in academics, sports, drama, etc., congratulate her and then ask her to think about who helped her be successful. (Her coach for teaching her skills? A teacher for cheering her on? A parent for driving her to practice?)
- At the dinner table once a week, suggest that everyone ask and answer, “What gifts did I receive today?” You might also suggest each family member reflect on “What trouble did I cause?” When children hear us express gratitude and contemplate our shortfalls, they learn to be grateful and self-reflective.
- Suggest to your daughter or son that she/he keep a Gratitude Journal. Once a week, or whenever something comes to mind, they can jot down the gifts that have come their way.

Applause for JV Girls Volleyball!



This fall saw the launch of our first-ever JV Girls Volleyball team, a group of courageous girls who played with heart and commitment. The team began with a wide variety of volleyball skills. There were novices who were practically new to the game, and experienced club volleyball players. All shared a passion for volleyball, but the athletes quickly learned that enthusiasm was only one of the components to the sport. Soon they discovered that it takes time, hard work, and many hours of practice to master this game and be successful as a small team.

With the help of dedicated coaches and parents, the girls absorbed information on setting, passing, spiking, and serving. They learned to work together as a cohesive team, helping one another both in practices and games and coming together as a unit to accomplish their goals.

Volleyball matches in the beginning were intimidating to some of our younger players. They often found themselves opposite older and more experienced opponents. But our senior leaders quickly stepped in to show younger players what they could accomplish with commitment and teamwork. Together they celebrated victories, worked hard to overcome losses, and returned to the gym after games to practice more intensely than before.

The level of improvement within this team was exciting to watch as a coach and fan of the sport. From the first day of practice to the final practice session, the advancements were amazing, and the team’s grace and poise inspired us all. We hope you can hear the clapping as you read this article because we are applauding the courageous and committed team members listed here who are our Future Varsity Stars!

Courtney Nutter, Athletic Director

The Team:
 Isabel Bitner 6th
 Gracie Felts 11th
 Abbey Krother 9th
 Diana Luther 9th
 Chloe Pignes 8th
 Nadia Stoltz 6th
 Elle Wiggins 9th