

Ground Rules for Participation in Theory of Knowledge (ToK) Discussions

What is expected?

ToK classes adopt different techniques to communicate what is to be learned throughout the course. These include lectures, small and large group discussions, student presentations, simulation games, videos etc.. An underlying notion is that you and others, primarily teachers and fellow students, are responsible both as learner and as teacher. Emphasis is given to both course content and process. Teachers are not the founts of knowledge, but coaches in the quest for knowledge. There is a set of topics, which are introduced in a structured way. These are explored together. An objective of the class is to develop skills of discussion, debate, argument, reason; and imagination, discovery and intuition. You are assessed on the application of those skills rather than on any particular content you have learned. ToK is a thinking course that attempts to reflect on the acquisition of knowledge rather than on the accumulation of more information.

There must be mutual respect

During discussion different positions and opinions are expressed. There should be mutual respect between students and between students and teacher. You must learn and practice good judgement. Remember that to maintain a friendship is more important than winning an argument. When disagreeing with someone, do not gloat over winning an argument, or consider someone to be foolish or inferior for having different information or another point of view. Accept differences. Each one of us is on a personal journey of growth and discovery.

There will be disagreement

Many of the topics raised in class are deliberately controversial and open to question and debate. If your point of view differs from what is said in class, it is your responsibility to make your point of view known to the group. What you think is important and we all should hear your views. Do not whisper to a neighbour or keep it to yourself. Any discussion should be heard by all.

There needs to be tolerance and acceptance

We may perhaps discover points of view that are mutually exclusive and contradictory. We should accept the principle of the possible validity of other points of view. We must allow alternative interpretations to be voiced and explained. In this sense there is no “right answer”. No one can force you to think in a certain way. Therefore, be observant of yourself in class – can you identify any body language that discourages others to talk or express their point of view? What encourages greater participation in class discussion?

There needs to be openness

Disagreements must be allowed within an atmosphere of trust. We must be honest without being hostile. When you hear a new idea, or new way of looking at something, keep any scorn out of your voice when you seek clarification. Behaviour consistent with an open, not closed mind, makes for good discussion in ToK.

If you don't understand, that's okay

If there is something said in class that you do not understand, it is your responsibility to ask for clarification. Raise questions! Likewise, when you make statements, expect to be asked for clarification or to justify your position. There is always something more to learn. Have the courage to try to identify what is not clearly known, and what is speculation.

You may change your position or opinion

As new information, new perspectives, new ideas, or new methods of thinking are introduced, you may change your view on a certain matter. What you do not believe today, you may believe tomorrow, or vice versa. Talk about any changes of position that you make during the course. This is to be applauded. It is a sign of maturity of thought. A point of view that may appear wrong, silly, or misguided when first heard, may acquire validity after it has been given a fair hearing.

Everyone should participate

There is “the time for silence and the time for talk”. Sometimes it is more appropriate to sit and listen. Do not feel uncomfortable when there is silence during discussion. We can learn during silence. There are often two general types of students in the classroom – the outgoing person who likes to talk (extrovert), and the person who likes to sit back and let others do all the talking (introvert). If you belong to the first type, contribute to discussions and take the initiative to invite others to talk. Learn to listen with understanding. If you belong to the second type, do not be passive as though you were watching television, speak up even when you do not feel like it. Be aware of each other's personality and remember each member of the class has something valid to say. If English is not your first language, take the initiative to stop the discussion at any point and ask for clarification.

Encourage debate

Do not be afraid to debate a topic. Your participation in a discussion helps you and others clarify what is heard and said. In ToK be reflective about knowledge, that is, think/reflect about public knowledge and understanding, rather than accumulate more new knowledge. The new ideas and new perspectives introduced in ToK are primarily in order to encourage thought about alternative ways of approaching what you have already learned and are continuing to learn elsewhere. Remember that the purpose of our discussions is not to win a debating competition, but to stimulate reflection about ways or forms of knowing.

This means we need to communicate

Classes are generally held in English. Good communication requires a continuing improvement of both sending and receiving skills. To reiterate, this is the class where you can debate, question, argue and make clear your opinions about knowledge and belief. At times we may compromise by trying to “synthesise” contradictory thoughts or points of view. What is important is that you know what you believe, why you believe it, how it influences your action, and learn how to thoughtfully communicate those beliefs and ideas to others.

“Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.” Martin Luther King.