

Lesson 14: A Show of Hands

Context

This lesson can be used as an introduction to TOK work on perception, since it addresses the following questions.

- How far do we trust and rely on our sensory perceptions?
- How does our knowledge change when our perceptions are shown to be wrong?

Aims

- To examine the nature and reliability of knowledge gained by perception.
- To examine the relationship between perception, knowledge and belief.

Class Management

Students should not be forewarned of this activity. Total time should involve no more than 30–40 minutes including 5–10 minutes to photocopy hands and retrieve the copy. The remaining 25–30 minutes should be used for class discussion.

Focus Activity

Take the class to an available photocopier. Have the students remove all rings and bracelets. Photocopy the right hand of every student. Work out some method of identifying (only for the teacher) which copy belongs to which student.

Move back to the classroom. Lay out the copies on desks in a random order and allow the students five minutes to identify and retrieve their hand.

Lead the class in a discussion of what led them to think that they had identified the correct hand as their own. Reserve the correct identification until after students have had some time to explain why they feel they have identified their own hand. Reveal the correct and incorrect choices, then discuss how their perception was correct or faulty.

Discussion Questions

- How did you form your hypothesis about which copy was yours and which ones were not?
- What factors influenced your final decision?
- Was your final choice a matter of picking what was left after eliminating all the obviously incorrect, or was a different process at work?
- What different types of perception were involved in your choice?
- What types of evidence were involved in your choice?
- If you picked incorrectly, how and why was your knowledge false? Is there such a thing as false knowledge?
- What does this exercise suggest about the knowledge gained from perception? How reliable is it? Is something more than perception necessary for knowledge to be gained?

Links to Other Areas of TOK

Perception

- In which areas of knowledge is perception essential for the acquisition of that knowledge?
- Is there such a thing as knowledge which is independent of perception? If so, what sort of knowledge would it be?

Knowers and Knowing

- What, if anything, is the difference between believing and knowing?

The Arts

- What kinds of accurate and informative statements do images convey?

From Other Times and Places

Plato's *Cave* (c350BCE) examines the question of image and reality—what is real and what is merely a shadow of what is real. Well-known visually ambiguous illustrations, by Escher, for example, could be used to reinforce the aims of the lesson.

As technology and multimedia become more prevalent in education and in students' lives, will there be a parallel increase in relying on graphical information to make judgments?

Quotations

To know and yet think we do not know is the highest attainment. Not to know and yet think we do know is a disease.

Lao-Tzu

All human knowledge is uncertain, inexact and partial.

Bertrand Russell

He walked toward the sheets of flame. They did not bite his flesh, they caressed him and flooded him without heat or combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him.

Jorge Luis Borges

References

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Discovering Psychology Series, Film 7, *Sensation and Perception*

National Geographic Video, *The Invisible World*

Gaarder, J, *Sophie's World*, (1996) Boulevard (Mass Market), ISBN 0425152251