

## Shared and personal knowledge

In many languages, the verb “to know” has two first person forms: “I know” and “we know”. “I know” refers to the possession of knowledge by an individual—personal knowledge. “We know” refers to knowledge that belongs to a group—shared knowledge. It can be useful in TOK to draw a distinction between these two forms of knowledge, as illustrated below.

### Shared knowledge

Shared knowledge is highly structured, is systematic in its nature and the product of more than one individual. Much of it is bound together into more or less distinct areas of knowledge such as the familiar groups of subjects studied in the Diploma Programme. While individuals contribute to it, shared knowledge does not depend only upon the contributions of a particular individual—there are possibilities for others to check and amend individual contributions and add to the body of knowledge that already exists.

Examples are easy to come by.

- Physics is a subject discipline with knowledge that is shared. Many have access to it and can contribute to it. Much of the work done is by teams of people building on existing knowledge. While individuals can and do contribute to this body of knowledge, the work of individuals is subject to group processes such as peer review and replication of experimental results before it becomes part of the corpus.
- The knowledge required to build a computer is also shared. It is unlikely that there is an individual who has the knowledge of building such a device from scratch (rather than simply assembling it from pre-constructed components). Yet we know how to make computers. A computer is the result of a complex worldwide cooperative effort.

Shared knowledge changes and evolves over time because of the continued applications of the methods of inquiry—all those processes covered by the knowledge framework. Applying the methodology belonging to an area of knowledge has the effect of changing what we know. These changes might be slow and incremental—areas of knowledge possess a certain stability over time. However, they could also be sudden and dramatic, revolutionary shifts in knowledge or paradigm shifts, as an area of knowledge responds to new experimental results, say, or advances in the underlying theory.

There might be areas of knowledge that are shared by all of us. The subjects studied in the Diploma Programme might fall into this category. Of course it is not the case that every IB student understands higher level biology or geography, but rather it is knowledge that is available subject to certain conditions.

We are all members of other smaller groups too. We are members of ethnic groups, national groups, age groups, gender groups, religious groups, interest groups, class groups, political groups, and so on. There might be areas of knowledge that we share as members of these groups which are not available to those outside, such as knowledge that is anchored in a particular culture or in a particular religious tradition. This might raise questions regarding the possibility of knowledge transgressing the boundaries of the group.

Here are some examples of such questions:

- Is it really possible to have knowledge of a culture in which we have not been raised?
- Are those outside a particular religious tradition really capable of understanding its key ideas?
- Does there exist a neutral position from which to make judgments about competing claims from different groups with different traditions and different interests?
- To what extent are our familiar areas of knowledge embedded in a particular tradition or to what extent might they be bound to a particular culture?

Thinking about shared knowledge allows us to think about the nature of the group that does the sharing. It allows international-mindedness into our exploration of knowledge questions.

## Personal knowledge

Personal knowledge, on the other hand, depends crucially on the experiences of a particular individual. It is gained through experience, practice and personal involvement and is intimately bound up with the particular local circumstances of the individual such as biography, interests, values, and so on. It contributes to, and is in turn influenced by, an individual's personal perspective.

Personal knowledge is made up of:

- skills and procedural knowledge that I have acquired through practice and habituation
- what I have come to know through experience in my life beyond academia
- what I have learned through my formal education (mainly shared knowledge that has withstood the scrutiny of the methods of validation of the various areas of knowledge)
- the results of my personal academic research (which may have become shared knowledge because I published it or made it available in some other way to others).

Personal knowledge therefore includes what might be described as skills, practical abilities and individual talents. This type of knowledge is sometimes called procedural knowledge, and refers to knowledge of **how** to do something, for example, how to play the piano, how to cook a soufflé, how to ride a bicycle, how to paint a portrait, how to windsurf, how to play volleyball and so on.

Compared to shared knowledge, personal knowledge is often more difficult to communicate to others. Sometimes it has a stronger linguistic component and is communicable to others, but often it cannot easily be shared. For example, an experienced tea taster who has developed their palette through years of experience of tasting different teas will have a complex knowledge of tea tastes. But the tea taster might find it difficult to describe the taste of a particular tea in words in a way that can be understood by others. The taster might use metaphor and simile to try to relate the experience of drinking this tea to others but the task is a difficult one. In this way personal knowledge is frequently characterized by this difficulty in sharing.

Personal knowledge also includes a map of our personal experiences of the world. It is formed from a number of ways of knowing such as our memories of our own biography, the sense perceptions through which we gain knowledge of the world, the emotions that accompanied such sense perceptions, the values and significance we place on such thoughts and feelings.

Like shared knowledge, personal knowledge is not static, but changes and evolves over time. Personal knowledge changes in response to our experiences. What is known by an 18-year-old could be quite different to what he or she knew at only 6 years of age. The various ways of knowing covered in the TOK course contribute to these changes.