

Learning ABOUT Learning

Text by William Johnson | Dean of the Belle Époque

It's close to midday in Rome. The hot sun is beating in through the high windows at the Galleria Borghese as my heels tap the wood floors of the empty rooms. I poke behind Bernini's Aeneas and check the colonnade, places where she could easily have disappeared. At last, I find her tucked in a window ledge, staring up at a Caravaggio's David and Goliath and filling her notebook. Come on, it's time to go. Ms. Cooper is waiting outside.

For LAS seniors, Fall Culturals are just another week of ToK. ToK - Theory of Knowledge - has been a central component of the IB Diploma for decades, though explaining what it is can be challenging; so much of our education prior to university is based on a relentless acquisition of basic knowledge, be it about chemical reactions or irregular verb conjugations or dates in American history. ToK steps back from this ceaseless building process and asks students to reflect about their learning, and to consider the nature of knowledge acquisition itself. Students synthesize their learning in all other classes by asking the basic questions of what knowledge is and how it functions.

The expansive nature of ToK can be either a blessing or a curse for the teacher. How many times can we remember our teacher ending class with instructions like, "read Chapter 4 for homework and answer the questions?" There is no such ease for the ToK teacher since there is no ToK textbook.

Curriculum?

In History it might encompass 19th Century Europe or in Math single variable Calculus. But in ToK there is no limit to the topics that can be covered since the purpose is not at all "what?" but strictly "how?" and "why?." There is no standard for cultural literacy in ToK, no

university degrees in ToK, and no "quiz nights" asking ToK questions, even though the subject lies at the core of all we do in education. It takes a particular type of teacher to teach ToK, and a particular set of classroom experiences to make "learning about learning" effective. Fortunately, at LAS we have these teachers.

For several years, Patti Cooper and Daryl Hitchcock have been building a strong ToK tradition at the Belle Époque Campus. They are joined this year at Savoy by Hugh Kelly in continuing to challenge our students to learn about learning and reflect on their processes as students.

I knew that Patti and Daryl were using ToK to do something special from the moment that one of Patti's blindfolded students walked into me in the corridor. No apologies from either that student or the non-blindfolded one that was meant to be guiding, because that would have been against the rules. I followed the pair into the dining hall where I watched the "blind" and "deaf" student receive guidance in finding sugar cubes, carry them to a table, and use them to construct an impressive white ziggurat. And they cleaned up after themselves. Clearly what appeared to be a game became an effective talking point back in the classroom for our use of our senses in giving and receiving stimuli.

Another casual visit to our ToK classrooms revealed students engaged in a movie - not a Hollywood blockbuster, but a little-known Scandinavian film in which an elderly Swedish man sits in a high umpire chair in the kitchen of an elderly Norwegian man, observing day and night to test the latter's culinary efficiency. The students watched as the