ThinkingEngine

Socratic Dialogue Platform

10 Socratic Discussion Prompts for IB Theory of Knowledge

Critical Thinking Tools for TOK Teachers

þÿTen ready-to-use Socratic prompts drawn from real areas of knowledge þÿand real-world knowledge problems. Organized by TOK theme with þÿfollow-up questions and pedagogical notes. Structured for immediate þÿclassroom use with IB and AP students.

FREE RESOURCE

What's Inside:

- Classroom-ready Socratic prompts
- Teacher-friendly formatting
- Follow-up questions included
- No prep required - use with any curriculum
- Built for K-12 IB, AP & critical thinking

Ready to use these prompts with your class?

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Why Socratic Dialogue Is the Beating Heart of Theory of Knowledge

þÿTheory of Knowledge is the one IB subject that doesn't teach content. It teaches thinking about thinking. The IB's þÿsolution is the TOK Exhibition and the TOK Essay. Both ask students to do something deceptively hard: show how they þÿknow what they claim to know. That means identifying assumptions, weighing competing knowledge claims, and saying þÿsomething true about the nature of knowledge itself - not just demonstrating knowledge of a subject.

þÿNothing builds that skill like Socratic dialogue. Not lecture. Not reading comprehension. Not a worksheet. Direct, þÿstructured dialogue where a student has to defend a claim, qualify it under pressure, and revise it in real time. Each þÿprompt below is organized around a TOK theme area with the prompt, why it works, and a follow-up question to deepen þÿthe dialogue.

1. Knowledge & the Knower

> PROMPT
> If you grew up in a completely different culture, would you still believe the things you believe now? How would you know?

þÿThis question surfaces the distinction between knowledge that is genuinely justified and knowledge that is locally þÿconditioned. Students quickly distinguish between things that feel universal ("murder is wrong") and things that feel þÿculturally relative. That distinction - between the necessary and the contingent - is exactly the kind of thinking the þÿTOK essay rewards.

> FOLLOW-UP
> You just said [X] is a universal truth. What would it look like if that belief were genuinely culture-specific? Can you imagine a context where it wouldn't hold?

2. Knowledge & Technology

> PROMPT
> Wikipedia is more accurate than any individual encyclopaedia - but does that mean we know more than people did before Wikipedia? What's the difference between more information and more knowledge?

þÿStudents assume the internet has made us smarter. This question forces them to distinguish access to information from þÿthe development of understanding. Many students realize that "knowing more facts" and "knowing better" are different þÿthings - and that the conditions for knowledge include things technology doesn't provide: judgment, context, the þÿwillingness to sit with uncertainty.

> FOLLOW-UP
> You said knowledge requires understanding, not just facts. Can an AI have understanding? How would you test for it?

3. Knowledge & Language

> PROMPT
> Some concepts in physics - 'force,' 'energy,' 'mass' - don't translate cleanly into most languages. Does that mean speakers of those languages have less access to knowledge of physics?

þÿThis is a direct entry point into the relationship between language and knowledge, one of the core TOK knowledge þÿframeworks. Students who initially say "physics works the same everywhere" are pushed to articulate what they mean by þÿ"works" - and what they find involves more than operational success.

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4. Knowledge & Society

PROMPT
Whose knowledge counts as knowledge in a democracy? And is that the same question as 'whose knowledge is most useful'?

þÿThis connects the human sciences framework to questions about power and knowledge. Students see that democratic
þÿsocieties don't distribute epistemic authority equally - experts are granted status that non-experts don't have - and
þÿthat this is both necessary and potentially problematic.

FOLLOW-UP
Are there cases where a democracy should defer to expertise even when the majority disagrees? Who decides when that's appropriate?

5. Knowledge & Ethics

PROMPT
If a neuroscientist could prove that free will doesn't exist, would that change anything about how we should treat criminals? Why or why not?

þÿThis question sits at the intersection of natural sciences, ethics, and the knower. Students who say "no, we should
þÿstill punish crime" must articulate what their moral reasoning depends on. That often surfaces assumptions students
þÿdidn't know they were making.

FOLLOW-UP
You said [X] would still matter even if free will doesn't exist. Where does that sense of [X] come from - reason, intuition, social agreement? And if it's from one of those, does it survive the neuroscientist's proof?

6. Knowledge & History

PROMPT
We can never know the past directly - only through traces and interpretations. Is history a knowledge discipline, a humanity, or something else? What does it need to be in order to count as knowledge at all?

þÿThe status of history within the TOK framework is genuinely contested, and that's the point. Students who uncritically
þÿtreat historical knowledge as certain discover this question is harder than expected. History is both evidence-based
þÿand interpretation-dependent.

FOLLOW-UP
You said history can be knowledge if it meets [certain criteria]. Who gets to decide whether those criteria are met - historians, philosophers, the public? And does the answer change depending on who decides?

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7. Knowledge & Mathematics

PROMPT
Mathematical objects - triangles, prime numbers, pi - existed before humans did. Does that mean mathematics is discovered, not invented? If so, where do mathematicians 'go' to discover them?

þÿThis question cuts to the heart of the deepest disputes in the philosophy of mathematics: platonism versus þÿconstructivism. There's no comfortable position here - which is exactly right.

FOLLOW-UP
You said [math is discovered/invented]. Then if an alien species existed, would they have the same mathematics? What does your answer imply about the nature of mathematical truth?

8. Knowledge & the Arts

PROMPT
Can art communicate knowledge that other areas of knowledge - natural sciences, mathematics, history - cannot? If so, what kind of knowledge is it, and how would you know if it were true?

þÿThis question asks students to articulate what they think art is for, which is harder than it sounds. Most students þÿhave strong intuitions about art's value without having thought carefully about whether those intuitions are epistemic þÿ(about knowledge) or purely aesthetic (about experience).

FOLLOW-UP
You said art can show us [X]. But can it prove X? What's the difference between showing and proving - and does that difference mean art is less valuable, or just different?

9. Knowledge & Natural Sciences

PROMPT
A scientist runs the same experiment twice and gets different results. She blames measurement error. A humanist says: 'maybe there's no error - maybe the phenomenon itself is indeterminate.' Who is right, and how would you

þÿThis question introduces students to measurement uncertainty and the philosophy of science, connecting to statistics þÿand quantum physics. It's a productive anchor for discussing what scientists mean when they say they "know" something.

FOLLOW-UP
You said [the scientist/the humanist] is more likely to be right. But what standard of evidence are you applying? Is that the same standard the natural sciences use? Is it the same standard that works in other areas of

10. Knowledge & Politics

PROMPT
During the pandemic, different countries knew different things about COVID - not because the science was different, but because their governments chose which knowledge to distribute. Is political knowledge a real

þÿThis connects to core TOK concerns about the social dimension of knowledge: who decides what counts as legitimate þÿknowledge, and whether that decision can be separated from power. Students immediately recognize that governments make þÿknowledge claims - but whether those claims are epistemically legitimate requires careful analysis beyond "it's all þÿpropaganda."

FOLLOW-UP
You said [some political knowledge claims are legitimate, some aren't]. How do you tell the difference? Is that distinction itself politically neutral, or are you just applying one ideology's standard?

Facilitation Tips for TOK Teachers

âœ Start with written reflection, not spoken discussion. Give students 3-4 minutes to write a one-sentence response

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