Learner Analysis: Deliberate Diversity in and International School

Analysis of a group of Theory of Knowledge Students at an International School in The Netherlands
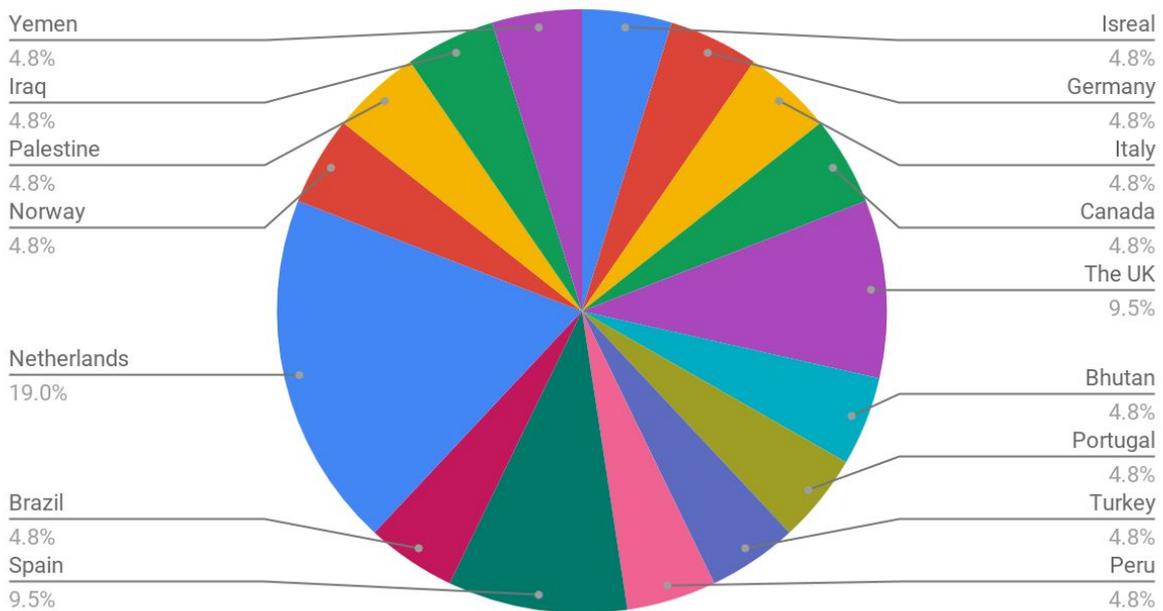
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Context

The context for this learner analysis is United World College Maastricht (UWCM) where I work as a Technology Integration Coordinator and Theory of Knowledge (TOK) Teacher. As an international school we offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) in the final two years of secondary school and are part of the United World College (UWC) movement that aims to identify students of promise and potential globally. Students who have been identified are placed at one of the 17 UWC schools and receive scholarships based on financial needs. UWCM is one of 17 not-for-profit UWC schools that operate around the world. Deliberate diversity is part of our DNA and is reflected in the more than 100 cultures that make up our student and staff body. As a subject Theory of Knowledge is a core component of the IBDP and successful completion is needed to receive the diploma. This analysis will focus on one specific TOK group that I currently teach and have been teaching for the past six months.

Learner profiles

The TOK class meets twice a week for an hour each session. The class is made up of 22 students with 14 female students and 8 male students. All students in this group are between 16 and 19 years of age. 78% of students are bilingual or trilingual with only 5 students being English only speakers. The English proficiency level of students is quite high with 80% plus having native or near native English levels. The 20% of students that are considered English Language Learners (ELL) still has a intermediate to high intermediate level of English. The class is made up of 64% residential students and 36% day students. The most rewarding and challenging aspect of this group is the fact that 16 different countries and cultures are represented in this one class. See figure 1 for the cultural representation of the class. Our students are additionally split into residential students, who live relatively independently on campus, and day students who live with their families in the Maastricht region. The residential and day students distinction is an important aspect within our context and in my class as the home versus residential life has varying impacts on the learners' experiences. Day students have home/family support while residential students live on campus with one residence mentor supporting 24 residential students who live together 4 people to a room. This deliberate cultural diversity within the residences comes across as both challenging and rewarding as students need to navigate individual versus group expectations, study times, routines, approaches to their studies and academic focus. It is also important to note that students of promise and potential were identified and selected as residential students to attend UWC by national

committees in their home countries. The day student population draws from the expatriate community living within the Maastricht region. An assumption often made is that the residential students are higher performing students due to the selection process. This is not necessarily true as academics is not the main criteria for selection. Another possibly unique aspect of this learning group represents itself in the form of social emotional well being as two residential students come from conflict zones (Palestine and Yemen).

Figure 1: TOK Class Cultural Representation

Yemen 4.8%	Isreal 4.8%
Iraq 4.8%	Germany 4.8%
Palestine 4.8%	Italy 4.8%
Norway 4.8%	Canada 4.8%
	The UK 9.5%
Netherlands 19.0%	Bhutan 4.8%
	Portugal 4.8%
Brazil 4.8%	Turkey 4.8%
Spain 9.5%	Peru 4.8%

Teaching & Learning Strategies
We are a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) school so each learner has a laptop as part of their learning toolkit. In my capacity as TOK teacher I make use of a blended model of teaching, utilizing the capacity of Google Suite for Education, especially Google Classroom and face to face interactions with this learning group. An assumption that I held at the start of the course was that all students were willing and able to learn with technology and all had basic competence with laptops. This assumption hindered progress initially as digital submissions of work did not meet expectations as only 30% of students were able to submit the first assignment in the format and within the digital system as expected. After feedback and discussions it became apparent that some training on systems and expectations within a digital learning environment was needed. Devoting time to develop digital competency and training with the use of digital tools has proven useful to learners and other teachers also reported improvement in digital competency. Class time is very much discussion based relying on student interactions and contributions to develop different perspectives on knowledge

acquisition. Feedback from students indicate that they appreciate and learn from a discussions approach, however I have noticed that students from certain educational backgrounds find expressing themselves during class time challenging. Students coming from teacher centered educational models initially prefered responding in written form rather than orally. Adapting my approach to small group discussions followed by an individual written responses to a central question seems to work for most of the students.

In terms of motivation, I assumed that students with scholarships would have higher levels of intrinsic motivation compared to day students. The reason being that scholarship students came through a vetting process and made a choice to be here, while day students had less of a choice. So far it does not seem that there is a significant difference in the intrinsic motivation levels. TOK is challenging course as students are expected to think critically about knowledge and how knowledge is developed within certain areas of knowledge. I find that some students need scaffolding in order to break down or critically think about knowledge and students needing this scaffolding are not just academically weaker students, but especially students coming from traditional education systems based on rote memory. Assumptions are challenged and justification needs to be provided for knowledge claims made. Knowing and understanding the students' religious background, cultural identity and prior learning is essential to create a safe learning space. An example of this would be when Religious Knowledge systems and faith as a way of knowing is discussed as the potential for conflict within such a diverse group is high and needs prior knowledge and understanding from the educator.

Conclusion
Deliberate diversity is challenging in a teaching and learning space and knowledge about learners is essential to guide students in a TOK class. By analysing this TOK group it became clear that prior to course learning students need to be shown explicitly how learning will take place. Assuming that students are digitally competent and technology fluent hindered learning and progress more than any other barriers to learning. Both the 'what' we will learn and the 'how' we will learn is essential in this context.