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Theory of knowledge

Knowledge claims

Here are some examples of first-order knowledge claims (not necessary true!) and first-order questions that you might see within your subject specific classrooms:

AOK	First-order knowledge claim	First-order knowledge question
Arts - Literature	'The Red Wheelbarrow' is about Williams emotional state at a particular time.	What is William Carlos Williams' poem 'The Red Wheelbarrow' really about? (Literature)
Languages	Bullfighting is crucial to Spanish identity	How important to Spanish culture is bullfighting?
History	The First World War was caused by the economic situation in Germany at the time	What were the primary causes of the First World War
Economics	A socialised health care system helps individuals avoid the financial burden of illness	What are the financial benefits of a socialised health care system?
Biology	Photosynthesis slows down during the winter	What is the effect of sunlight on photosynthesis?
Chemistry	Tennesine was first discovered in 2010.	How many more fundamental elements will be found with new technology?
Mathematics	The largest known prime number is over 17 million digits long.	Is there a greatest prime number?
Arts – Music	Beethoven's opening sketches in his 'Ninth Symphony' foreshadow the development of the entire composition.	What are the major themes and motifs of Beethoven's 'Ninth Symphony'?
Ethics	Withdrawing life support can shorten otherwise long-term misery of the patient.	Is euthanasia acceptable on Consequentialist (or any other theory's) grounds?
Politics	Even in liberal countries, some material is only available legally to adults.	Should governments allow free access to knowledge?

In each of the cases in the table, both the knowledge claim and the knowledge question is first-order because they are claims and questions about objects or concepts in the world and finding the answer depends on using the methods and processes that the relevant subject teaches.

Second-order questions, on the other hand, are not out to seek answers *within* the subject, but are questions about *how that subject goes about answering* the questions it asks. They are questions about the processes of constructing knowledge, and what counts as knowledge in that field, not questions about the knowledge itself. For instance, I might ask a first-order question about whether or not UFOs exist, but I would ask a second-order question if I wondered whether the testimony of my Uncle Bob is enough to persuade me on the matter. The first question is about things in the world; the second question is about the rules of creating knowledge about those things.

Before you read on, see if you can identify a second-order question related to each of the 10 questions in the table.

Below is a list of possible knowledge questions related to the ten first-order questions in the table. Each is only one possible KQ, you might have come up with others.

AOK	Second-order knowledge claim	Second-order KQ
Arts - Literature	To be a reliable interpreter of art, one must have been trained at university.	How can 17-year old's interpretation of poetry be as reliable as a university professor's?
Languages	Some concepts in a language cannot be fully understood unless you've grown up in that culture.	How does not living in culture make it difficult to understand about the importance of traditions within that culture?
History	Historians sometimes use their own values as lenses to explore the past.	How can we weigh up various 'causes' of an historical event to determine its importance?
Economics	Different economic models suggest different outcomes in relation to policy changes.	Is the concept of 'benefit' too qualitative to be measured effectively?
Biology	Technology needs to guarantee that data is reliable.	How can we be sure that the technology used to conduct experiments is reliable?
Chemistry	The Periodic Table models how elements are related to one another in terms of atomic weight.	What role do models play in developing new knowledge in the natural sciences?
Mathematics	Mathematics makes extensive use of deductive argument.	When is trial and error an appropriate method to construct mathematical knowledge?
Arts – Music	Being educated in music teaches you to search for and appreciate patterns and development in musical structure.	How does one become an 'authority' in making aesthetic judgments?
Ethics	It is sometimes a challenge to predict just what will happen in medical treatments.	How might the role of emotion in Consequentialism make objective ethical knowledge impossible to develop?

Politics	Some knowledge is inappropriate for certain people.	In what ways does the limiting of knowledge by authority help or hinder the progress of knowledge?
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Hopefully in each of the examples above you'll be able to see how the focus of the inquiry and the questioning has shifted from knowledge about the world to knowledge about knowledge.

Knowledge questions are also clearly concerned with a number of concepts having to do with *reliability*, *credibility*, *justification* and *source* of knowledge.

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