IB update
MARCH 2018
www.hoddereducation.co.uk/ibreview

TOK at the Winter Olympics

The PyeongChang Olympic Games raised a number of TOK knowledge questions (KQs). As TOK presentation season looms, **John Sprague** explores a number of real-life situations to model how to extract good KQs

Michela Moioli won gold in the snowboard cross

TOPFOTO

Aside from all the competitors, the real winner at PyeongChang 2018 was gravity. Without gravity you'd never have seen Michela Moioli's winning snowboard cross descent, or Ester Ledecká's dramatic and surprising win in the Super G downhill. Competitors are at the mercy of gravity in these events; it serves as the engine of the event, and competitors fall into its embrace.

However, there is a long list of other events that are designed as direct challenges to gravity. Take figure skating and snowboard slopestyle — these competitors regularly attempt to ignore the constraints of gravity as they fling themselves into the sky, and then, while there, they perform all sorts of twists, flips, kicks and turns, all seemingly in an attempt release themselves from the binds of physics to float away, ever-spinning towards the horizon.

Skating and scoring

In snowboard cross or alpine skiing, however, the 'best' competitors of the day are easy to identify — it's the person who crosses the finish line first. This is an objective and uncontestable measurement. It's not nearly as clear with slopestyle or figure skating, and a system of judges and points has been developed to decide who is 'better' on the day. But with all that spinning, twisting and artful falling, one wonders whether any of those point scores make any real sense? Do the scores reflect anything other than 'we liked it' or can they legitimately judge objective features? In figure skating the judging system has dramatically

Next page

Ester Ledecká

changed the sport. The judging criteria have in recent years guided the athletes into developing certain types of routines.

In the case of figure skating, where there are points awarded for technique and artistry, the technical skills are where the sought-after points are found because the system rewards those skaters who test themselves by attempting far more challenging skills, even if they perform them imperfectly. For example, Mirai Nagasu's imperfect triple axel earned her two more points during her routine at the US Championships in 2018 than Bradie Tennell's flawless double axel (although it was Tennell who ultimately captured the gold).

Nagasu made Olympic history in Pyeongchang by landing (nearly perfectly) the triple axel in competition. Since the triple axel is objectively more challenging than the double axel, actually attempting and landing one is a way of showing who is the better ice skater. It seems that in this case the criteria for judging is pushing the artistry of the sport as the competitors become more and more technical.

You might feel that when you learn, you are more worried about the assessment criteria than your own knowledge. How might the various assessment criteria offered in your IB subjects limit or constrain genuine brilliance that you'd otherwise be free to express?

Subjective scoring?

Snowboarding slopestyle's approach to judging is a minefield of subjective and objective features. Similar to figure skating, there are elements of objectivity: judges can make some distinctions between how challenging a trick is and whether or not an athlete sticks it. However, both sports also recognise that subjective judgements impact the scoring, which is why they judge in groups. This is something like an element of peer review — the other judges are there to gauge whether one judge is completely off base.

In both sports the outliers (the highest and lowest scores) are removed, leaving something of a crowd-sourced judgement. Another element of objectivity is just who gets to judge. I sit amazed at nearly everything these athletes do, but the judges, who are competent in a way that I will never be, have what it takes to be reliable and listened to.

Given the timing of the Winter Olympics, it's hard not to watch them with a TOK hat on, finding all sorts of interesting knowledge questions lurking just beneath the snowy surface.

Questions

1. How can we make judgements regarding better or worse performances?
2. How does our criteria for judging excellence in some fields change the behaviour being judged?
3. How do methods of knowledge construction constrain the knowledge that is constructed?
4. In what ways is a community of knowers more reliable than individual knowers?
5. How and to what effect does agreement lead to more reliable knowledge?
6. What are the differences between experts and non-experts in an area of knowledge?