

What Are Habits of Mind?

Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude.

—Thomas Jefferson

Dispositions for Success

A key purpose of schooling is to prepare our children for successful adult lives—to give them the knowledge and skills they will need to be productive and prosperous citizens. As you learned in Module 1, however, it is increasingly difficult to know what exactly our current students will need to know 10 or more years from now. What skills will be most relevant to them? What factual knowledge will they need? What ideas that we hold important today will still be important when today’s students are in the workplace?

Because we cannot know these things for certain, perhaps the most important thing we can do for our students is to instill in them a love of learning—a deep curiosity about the world around them and beyond them—along with the skills needed to pursue learning on their own after they have left formal schooling.

“We are all seekers after meaning,” writes John Barell in *Developing More Curious Minds* (2003, p. 37). “We are all curious folks, wondering and speculating, searching for answers to questions we find fascinating, amazing, and perplexing.” School can—and should—be the setting in which our students’ curiosity is ignited.

School can also be a place where students learn that they’re responsible for their own behavior—and where they’re given the tools they need to manage that

behavior. Fostering student responsibility for self-management allows students “to contribute to the good functioning of the classroom,” write Robert J. Marzano, Jana S. Marzano, and Debra J. Pickering in *Classroom Management That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Every Teacher* (2003, p. 76).

Learning as a Behavior

When we talk about classroom behavior, we often limit our definition to classroom courtesy: staying in one’s seat, speaking only when called on, doing one’s own work, respecting the work of others, and so on. And these behaviors are crucial if the classroom community is going to function. In fact, it is on our behavior that most of us are judged most of the time in life.

However, there are intellectual or academic behaviors that need to be cultivated just as much as the social ones that allow students to work together in a classroom. If we want students to be inquisitive, curious, analytical, and creative throughout their lives, we need to model, teach, and support these behaviors every bit as explicitly as we do social behaviors. In fact, we need to do much more; we need to help students make these behaviors into habits (Sizer, 1992).

A habit is a behavior that has been expressed so often that it becomes routine or automatic. Parents want behaviors like brushing teeth to become habitual so that they don’t have to keep reminding their children to do them. And the only way for a behavior to become habitual is to practice it and repeat it until the procedural memory becomes so deeply reinforced that it no longer requires conscious thought.

What intellectual habits do we want to cultivate in our students? For answers, we can look to the people in our lives, or throughout history, who stand as exemplars of thoughtfulness, curiosity, and intellectual rigor. We can read biographies or memoirs of figures from varied backgrounds and disciplines, such as Benjamin Franklin,

Frederick Douglass, or Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Albert Einstein, Gerogia O’Keefe, or Edward Said. What intellectual habits do the people you admire display that have allowed them to ask questions and pursue answers to a deeper degree than others have dared?

Habits of Mind: One Framework

Encouraging students to be relentlessly inquisitive may seem at odds with an emphasis on teaching students how to regulate their social behavior, because so much of social behavior is about conforming to a set of norms, rather than pursuing an individual agenda. But both mind-sets are important, and young people must learn to manage both. Both should be taught explicitly, writes Sue Gunningham in *Habits of Mind: Developing the Whole Child* (2004).

According to Gunningham, students need to be learn explicit skills to help them handle the wide variety of challenges and crises that life will throw at them. They need to learn a variety of ways of thinking about problems and looking at the world.

These “habits of mind,” or intellectual dispositions, do more than help students solve academic problems in school. In fact, they can arm students to face a wide variety of ethical, moral, and spiritual challenges throughout their lives. They encourage students to become active and inquisitive in the face of challenges, rather than passive and accepting (Boyes & Watts, 2009).

Authors Arthur Costa and Bella Kallick (2000) have worked with this idea of habits of mind for years and have settled on 16 habits that they feel are absolutely crucial for developing an active, inquisitive, and curious stance toward the world. These habits include

1. **Persisting.** Stick to it. See a task through to completion, and remain focused.

2. **Managing impulsivity.** Take your time. Think before you act. Remain calm, thoughtful, and deliberate.
3. **Listening with understanding and empathy.** Seek to understand others. Devote mental energy to another person's thoughts and ideas. Hold your own thoughts in abeyance so that you can better perceive another person's point of view and emotions.
4. **Thinking flexibly.** Look at a situation another way. Find a way to change perspectives, generate alternatives, and consider options.
5. **Thinking about thinking (metacognition).** Know your knowing. Be aware of your own thoughts, strategies, feelings, and actions—and how they affect others.
6. **Striving for accuracy.** Check it again. Nurture a desire for exactness, fidelity, and craftsmanship.
7. **Questioning and posing problems.** How do you know? Develop a questioning attitude, consider what data are needed, and choose strategies to produce those data. Find problems to solve.
8. **Applying past knowledge to new situations.** Use what you learn. Access prior knowledge, transferring that knowledge beyond the situation in which you learned it.
9. **Thinking and communicating with clarity and precision.** Be clear. Strive for accurate communication in both written and oral form. Avoid overgeneralizations, distortions, and deletions.
10. **Gathering data through all senses.** Use your natural pathways. Gather data through all the sensory paths: gustatory, olfactory, tactile, kinesthetic, auditory, and visual.
11. **Creating, imagining, and innovating.** Try a different way. Generate novel ideas, and seek fluency and originality.
12. **Responding with wonderment and awe.** Let yourself be intrigued by the world's phenomena and beauty. Find what is awesome and mysterious in the world.

13. **Taking responsible risks.** Venture out. Live on the edge of your competence.
14. **Finding humor.** Laugh a little. Look for the whimsical, incongruous, and unexpected in life. Laugh at yourself when you can.
15. **Thinking interdependently.** Work together. Truly work with and learn from others in reciprocal situations.
16. **Remaining open to continuous learning.** Learn from experiences. Be proud—and humble enough—to admit you don't know. Resist complacency. (Costa & Kallick, 2000, p. xvii–xviii)

Costa and Kallick began working on the idea of habits of mind in the mid-1980s, studying the attributes of intelligent, successful problem-solvers in many walks of life and drawing on the work of Robert Sternberg, David Perkins, Reuven Feuerstein, Alan Glatthorn, Jonathan Baron, and others. They began with 7 discrete habits and eventually grew their list to 10, then 12, and finally 16.

Teaching the Habits of Mind

A school that teaches these habits, according to author Ted Sizer (1992), is a mindful school, a school that values the same things that the larger world values and takes care to embody those values in all of its actions.

Teaching habits of mind requires a number of different strategies and approaches. Habits of mind are not simply facts to be learned. As Arthur Costa puts it, educators need to find ways to approach the teaching “*of* thinking, *for* thinking, and *about* thinking” (Richards, 2007, p. 318).

In coming modules, you will learn specific strategies for teaching each of the 16 habits of mind. For now, think of the 16 as a complete set. What does it mean to

teach and cultivate habits such as these in a classroom? How should a teacher even begin?

Costa and Kallick (2009) provide a list of suggested actions for implementing a habits-of-mind orientation in the classroom. Among those are

- Raising habits of mind to the conscious level.
- Determining what skills and processes students need to know.
- Developing a nurturing culture.
- Positioning the teacher as a collegial learner.
- Using teachable moments positively.
- Integrating the habits directly into curriculum and instruction.

Although many teachers will focus on the last point, because it seems most directly related to instruction, the idea of process is key in thinking about how to teach these intellectual dispositions. In many classrooms, product is king: all that matters is getting the correct answer. However, in a classroom that is emphasizing habits of mind, the way in which students talk about, think about, and approach problems may be more important than the correct answer. As Costa and Kallick (2000) say, “We are interested in not only how many answers students know, but also how students behave when they don’t know the answer” (p. xv). Students must learn “what intelligent people do when they are confronted with problems, the resolutions to which are not immediately apparent” (p. 21).

Students who learn these skills and display these habits in school may be less likely to shy away from unusual or unpredictable questions or challenges as adults.

References

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