Habits of Openness

may my heart always be open to little
birds who are the secrets of living
whatever they sing is better than to know
and if men should not hear them men are old

e.e. cummings

The Beginner’s Mind

We speak so often of the need to develop expertise in our students that we
sometimes forget the benefit of having a novice’s point of view. Far too often the
accumulation of expertise can shut our eyes and ears to new ideas and new
experiences, because we think we know all that we need to know. As researchers
have discovered, however, the mark of a true expert is an openness to new ideas
and the ability to consider and assess new information (Bransford, et al., 2000). The
mental schemas of experts are not fixed or unchanging; in fact, they are flexible
enough to adapt, accommodate, and assimilate new learning. Those with rigid
thinking on a subject risk getting left behind and considered passé, out-of-date, no
longer relevant.

The challenge is to develop expertise and competence without losing the essence of
what Zen Buddhists call “the beginner’s mind,” a sense of eagerness, openness, and
lack of preconceptions (Suzuki, 1970). Experts will ultimately assess new information
in terms of prior knowledge and existing concepts, but they must not let those
preconceptions block them from ever hearing, seeing, or thinking about something
new.
Gathering Data Through All Senses

All information gets into the brain through sensory pathways, including the tactile, kinesthetic, auditory, and visual. Costa and Kallick (2000) suggest, however, that some students "go through school and life oblivious to the textures, rhythms, patterns, sounds, and colors around them. Sometimes children are afraid to touch or get their hands dirty" (pp. 31–32). Teachers, they suggest, should help students learn to use all their senses when encountering new information.

Sue Gunningham (2004) agrees, stating that if you want to really know a food, you have to eat it. You cannot really know the essence of a thing just by studying it theoretically, or at an intellectual remove.

This is not simply a more engaging and entertaining way to learn; it is a more efficient one as well. The more regions of a brain that store information about a subject, the more deeply and broadly that information is encoded and reinforced, and the easier it will be for students to retrieve that information when they need it. To plant something as firmly as possible in the brain, you should make sure it is repeated until the memory is encoded, and then make sure it is cross-referenced to multiple areas of the brain (Costa & Kallick, 2008).

The bottom line for teachers is this: Offer a variety of activities that allow students to call on many of their senses as they gather information and engage with the content.

Some strategies for reinforcing learning across the five senses include

**Vision**
- Having students focus on 10 different objects in 10 seconds by scanning the room. Then ask them to list as many objects as they can remember, in the order they saw them.
• Using color- and shape-coding to help students classify and group information. We often do this for younger students, but there is no reason to stop when students grow older. Even adults use color-coding to help them organize and keep track of information.

Touch
• Having students feel a variety of textures with their eyes closed and then write down a detailed description of what they are feeling. Have other students read those descriptions and connect them to the appropriate textures.

Sound
• Having students close their eyes and listen to the ambient sounds in the room or a recording of a musical composition featuring multiple instruments. Ask them to focus on one sound and practice filtering out all of the other sounds to sharpen their listening and attention skills. We take in a lot of information aurally, but much of what we hear, we lose.
• Encouraging students to create rhymes or songs as review guides. Rhythm and rhyme are powerful memory aids.

Smell
• Having students sample a variety of fragrances, such as perfume, cinnamon, cloves, wintergreen, and eucalyptus. Have students describe each smell in detail and share their descriptions with other students.
• Using a variety of pleasant fragrances in the classroom to help students connect those sense memories to specific topics being studied. Smell can be a powerful memory trigger, and positive emotions linked to learning events can also enhance memory.

Taste
• Having students taste a variety of different flavors slowly and carefully, writing down descriptions of all of the tastes and textures they are experiencing. Many students, especially teenagers, eat food that is either bland or heavily
seasoned in one direction, with no nuance of flavor. They also tend to eat very quickly, barely giving themselves time to taste what they are putting in their mouths. As with the other sensory exercises, this one also has the benefit of slowing down our hurried students and giving them a chance to experience something fully.

(Costa and Kallick, 2009)

Responding with Wonderment and Awe

When we talk about the joy of learning, it’s easy to make the mistake that joy comes only from making learning into a game. When we do this, we inadvertently communicate to students that learning, by itself, is not joyful. And yet, lifelong learners are those who pursue new knowledge and new skills for their own sakes—simply because learning new things is fun.

Learning can be hard work, and it’s wrong for teachers to pretend otherwise. New skills and new ideas change the brain of the learner, and the work that a student has to do to move from exposure to true understanding is real, actual work. But there is joy to be had in that work. There is real satisfaction in solving a puzzle, cracking a code, or understanding something complex. Mental accomplishment is no different from physical accomplishment in this regard; one moves from an attitude of “I can’t do that” to the proud and joyful discovery that, “I did it!”

To get students to engage in the world around them, we need students to be curious about it—the physical world, the social world, and the world of ideas. We need them to be curious about the world that came before them, and the world that may someday be.
More than that, we want students to have the sense of awe and wonder that humans experience when confronted with beauty—the beauty of nature and the beauty of the world created by humankind.

Our era is marked by cynicism and jadedness more than by awe. In fact, many people in our age would look askance at words like “wonderment” and “awe” and assume that anyone feeling those feelings was simpleminded or childish.

Awe and wonder are not childish responses to the world, but they are, perhaps, child-like. To be able to access the “beginner’s mind,” you must be able to see the world, from time to time, like a beginner—a novice—a wide-eyed child. Without that sense of amazement and wonder, there is no real point in learning anything.

Outside of school, people learn about the things they love—the things they feel passionately about. There is no reason school should be different. The key, as Costa and Kallick (2009) say, is to “enrapture students with awesome phenomena, intriguing situations, and jaw-dropping experiments” (p. 59).

Some strategies to encourage students’ sense of awe and passion include

- Inviting students to share their personal interests, and finding ways to connect those interests to the curriculum.
- Sharing your own interests and amazements; model for your students what a passionately engaged adult looks like.
- Avoiding easy answers in problems and discussions. Energize students with ambiguity and confusion. The world is vastly more interesting and complicated than a textbook problem set might imply.
• Including in the curriculum aspects of your subject area that professionals are still working on—puzzles that remain unsolved or cutting-edge work that engages and inflames the adults working in the field.
• Timing lessons and experiments so that solutions can’t be found by the time the bell rings: give students time to wonder and think about the answer to come.
• Helping enrich students’ vocabulary of superlatives. Give students new words to express a variety of levels of intensity of emotion.

(Costa and Kallick, 2009)

Finding Humor

Laughter is a fine thing, but what does it have to do with learning? Quite a lot, as it turns out. Scientists have discovered that laughter can lead to a number of physiological reactions, many of which create a more relaxed and healthy learning environment for students. These physical reactions include the dispersal of stress hormones, the relaxation of blood vessels, the dropping of pulse rates, and the boosting of immune systems. Laughter increases the supply of oxygen in the blood and produces secretions of endorphins into the blood stream (Costa & Kallick, 2008). Laughing makes us happier, healthier, and more open to learning.

Laughter has some interesting psychological effects, as well. Scientists have demonstrated connections between laughter and creativity, higher-level thinking, anticipation of future events, and an ability to perceive situations from different points of view. Being able to make a joke about something (an actual joke, as opposed to an easy, sneering, derisive comment), requires a slightly sophisticated understanding of the subject matter of the joke, the context of that content, and the general perception and understanding of that content. Students who laugh may be risk-taking and innovative with academic content and more willing to play with it and see what it can do, rather than simply taking it as given (Costa & Kallick, 2008).
Humor is connected to our larger theme of openness. Students willing to invent, share, and appreciate jokes about something are already engaged explorers and discoverers of content, rather than simply note-takers or test-takers. They enjoy digging into the details of a thing, if only to find out what's funny about it. Connoisseurs of comedy know that humor is often found in the details.

Some strategies for encouraging an appropriate and positive sense of humor in the classroom include

- Creating a bulletin board for cartoons, funny sayings, and silly pictures or photos tied to themes or subjects in the curriculum, and encouraging students to contribute.
- Cultivating a light and jokey atmosphere whenever possible during classroom discussions. This is not always appropriate, of course, but an atmosphere that allows for levity and joking is far more welcoming of participation than one that is dire and serious.
- Allowing room for humorous expressions in assessment projects or papers. Show students that they can fulfill rubrics and demonstrate content knowledge while being funny.
- Sharing examples of wit and wordplay, especially related to your subject matter. Find writers in your subject area who are masters of humor or wit.

(Costa & Kallick, 2009)

Obviously, humor in the classroom must be dealt with carefully. Some students equate humor with insult and respond to invitations to humor by finding targets for their derision. Other students, especially less mature students, may find it hard to maintain order and discipline in an environment that is less formal. Some younger students may take humor as an invitation for chaos. Classroom teachers know their
students best and must set the rules and guidelines that make them and their students most comfortable.

**Remaining Open to Continuous Learning**

There is nothing sadder than hearing students, on graduating from high school or college, announce with relief that they will no longer have to learn anything—that their education is complete. The mark of a truly educated person is the knowledge that education is never complete—that learning is a lifelong endeavor.

This was always true, but in our modern age, it is perhaps more true than ever before. The world changes at a rapid pace, and our storehouse of knowledge across many different disciplines increases year by year. How can learning stop if the world around us does not stop?

The habit of mind of remaining open to continuous learning depends on a certain amount of humility—an admission that we don't know everything. It is important for teachers to model this humility and show students that knowledge is not a product that you either own or lack but is, instead, a process.

Teachers also need to help students realize that exploration and uncertainty are OK and that making a mistake is not a badge of dishonor. In fact, one could argue that those who never make mistakes, never learn.

Some strategies for encouraging an openness to continuous learning include

- Admitting to students when you do not know something about a subject area, and encouraging them to look for answers.
- Modeling for students a thirst for knowledge and a desire to ask questions, probe deeply, and discover more.
- Showing students how the curriculum they are studying in school is used, challenged, and built on by professionals and others in everyday life—show them
how the education they are receiving is merely the foundation on which their lifelong learning will be built.

- Having students study master professionals within the subject area you are teaching—people with restless and inquisitive minds.

**Teaching Tools for Habits of Mind**

The “Tools You Can Use” section at the end of this module contains activities and materials you can download and use in the classroom to teach these habits of mind to elementary or secondary students.

**References**


