

Where do the Habits of Mind “Fit” in the Curriculum?

A Curriculum Storm

School curriculums are constantly being stretched to accommodate new areas of knowledge. They are being crowded full of new learning and being challenged to accommodate “21st Century Skills”.

Around the world curriculums are being redesigned, redrafted and reinvented to include thinking skills, key competencies, essential skills, learner profiles and other such qualities in an attempt to ensure learners are prepared for a world where the only certainty seems to be uncertainty.

In this sea of change, state and national bodies introduce Common Core Standards, National Curriculums and standardized testing to try and bring order to curriculums that are bursting at the seams.

Why, when curriculums are already under so much stress, would we try to add something extra? Something new? Where do Habits of Mind “fit” within this context?

The short answer is that the Habits of Mind are neither something new, or something extra. They represent the dispositions that teachers, parents and employers have always valued and tried to instil in students – but they haven’t always appeared in curriculum documents. In the past, we’ve referred to the Habits of Mind by other vague names such as “work ethic” or recognised “good students” as engaging in the Habits of Mind.

Recognising the Habits of Mind in this way is the first step to bring clarity to true purpose of the curriculum. Understanding the relationship the Habits of Mind have to other parts of the curriculum also helps to bring focus and calm the storm of change that regularly sweeps through schools.

An organising framework

Although different states and nations will frame their learning in different ways, it can be useful to consider student learning under four broad areas: Content, Thinking Skills, Habits of Mind and Values.

- ***Content***

The Content of our curriculum includes all the knowledge and skills that are traditionally described in curriculum documents. These are typically divided into subject areas and differentiated across year levels. These knowledge areas are often the subject of standardized tests, and in some parts of the world have been atomised into a multitude of discrete outcome statements.

- ***Thinking Skills***

Thinking Skills are the cognitive strategies we use to interact with the content. They are usually broader than a single content area and are generally considered transferable skills.

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the Thinking Curriculum. This includes tools and strategies such as Thinking Hats, Thinkers Keys and graphic organizers and much more. In this context we also include more traditional cognitive

skills such as logic, creativity, comparison, evaluation, prediction and the like – it doesn't have to have a book, an acronym or an image to be a thinking skill.

- ***Habits of Mind***

Habits of Mind are dispositions. They are broader again than Thinking Skills. They describe an inclination towards behaving in a particular way and they span age levels and curriculum areas.

A Habit of Mind includes the capacity to engage in the Habit, as well as the alertness for when it is required, a valuing of the outcomes achieved when it is used, as well as an ability to evaluate and self direct the development of the Habit.

For example, although a student may have mastered a range of questioning skills, unless they have a disposition towards questioning, these skills may not be used. Developing the disposition includes understanding what questioning is, how to do it, when you should and shouldn't do it, knowing and appreciating the benefits that have arisen from engaging in it so you choose to use it, and finally being able to evaluate your abilities accurately and set goals for personal development.

- ***Values***

The larger role of education is to impart to students the values that allow them to live full and happy lives and to contribute positively as part of the community. These are captured variously as broad beliefs, visions, virtues, character or other such statements. They more often form the fabric or culture of our schools rather than being taught directly as outcome statements in lesson plans.

The Relationships Between the Parts



As mentioned earlier, our curriculums are typically overcrowded which would suggest we need to reduce or at least focus the content covered in classrooms – but we shouldn't abandon content.

Apart from needing something to think about, to exercise our cognitive skills, schools have an important role in passing on key understandings and experiences to students. Schooling would fail if it didn't pass on key elements of our history and culture.

Students need to understand concepts in the mathematics and sciences that relate to how our world functions in order to participate fully in society. A broad exposure to a full curriculum including the arts, literature, history, the performing arts, technology and sport, helps all students discover their own passions and interests.

Merely covering content is not enough if students aren't also able to interact with that content. The teaching of Thinking Skills allows students to interact with what they are taught, to analyse, create, evaluate and reorganise their understandings. Knowledge without the cognitive skills required to interact with it is of limited value.





The Habits of Mind are the dispositions that incline us towards using our cognitive skills. Without these dispositions thinking skills would be like so many tools hanging on the wall of a lazy mechanic's workshop. The skills to use the tools are present, but the disposition to do so is not.

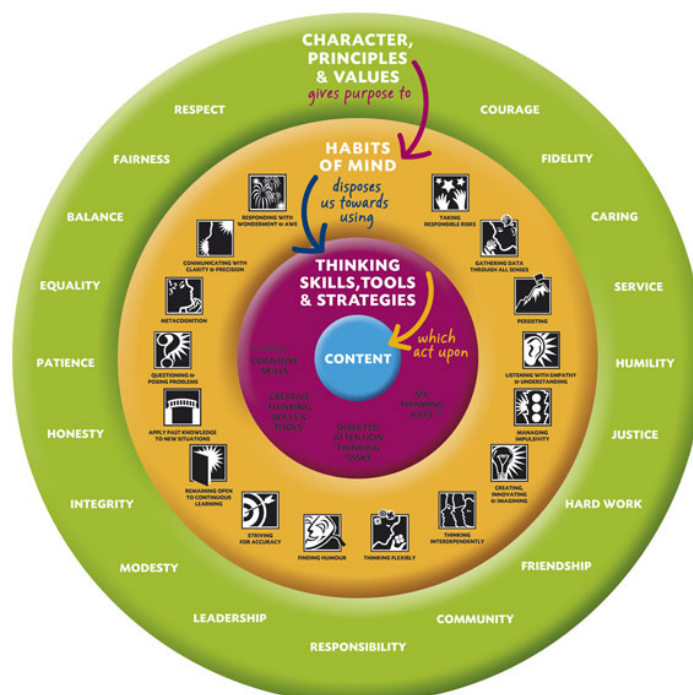
Well developed Habits of Mind help us be effective in our meeting challenges. Art Costa and Bena Kallick identified the Habits of Mind as being employed by characteristically successful people when confronted with problems, the solutions to which were not immediately apparent. They are the

patterns of behaviour that successful people are inclined towards.

The Habits themselves are value free. Although we might “value” the Habits of Mind as helping us to reach our goals, they do not tell us which goals to strive for. The Habits can be equally applied to anti-social or even criminal goals as they can be applied to the betterment of the community. And this, of course, is where values form such an important part of our school culture and curriculum.

The values we impart give students direction and purpose. They give them a framework in which to operate and choose the type of life they will lead. Knowledge, thinking skills, and Habits of Mind are directionless without the guidance of the values we instil in students.

Taken together, these four key elements are critical to how schools work. The content tells students what is important about the world. Thinking Skills enable them to interact with that knowledge. The Habits of Mind give them ways of working that are typical of successful people, and the values we impart give students a sound moral and ethical compass to direct their endeavours.



As curriculums change to accommodate new knowledge and discoveries; as new initiatives are introduced to schools to improve learning; as governments introduce new frameworks and testing regimes, the relationship of these 4 key components remain the same.

Understanding these relationships helps calm the storm of change that sweeps through schools. This year's focus on raising academic standards is really about the Habits of Mind of *Striving For Accuracy* and *Persistence*. Next year's focus on Global Citizenship is placing an emphasis on the values. The introduction of a new Thinking Strategy is just another way to enhance the cognitive skills of students.

One of the great benefits of this model, and the clarity the Habits of Mind bring to it, is that each of the new initiatives that rolls through schools can be subsumed within it. This year's new curriculum, or new initiative, is just a re-statement of these basic relationships. With these relationships in mind, the next "new" initiative is not new at all – it is simply a way of working towards strengthening one or more of these elements of the curriculum and the relationships between them.

NOTE: A poster of these relationships is available at www.habitsofmind.org/store