SUSTAINING OUTSTANDING SCHOOLS: SOS
By Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D.

Over the past several years, this column has focused on exploring an instructional approach and providing practical strategies on how to implement them within Catholic schools. This year, the focus will be on Art Costa’s Habits of Mind and how to implement them within the classroom.

Exploring Habits of the Mind—Helping 21st century students address complex thinking tasks

In order to prepare students effectively for 21st Century learning, schools need to fortify students with the ability to “know how to act on information, know what questions to ask … and be able to think critically about content and origin. (Costa, 2000).” Costa describes a constellation of dispositions (or attitudes), referred to as the Habits of Mind, that provide a useful framework to describe these behaviors that shape effective inquiry and encourage independent learning. Habits of Mind are not necessarily thinking strategies; rather, they are a set of attitudes or dispositions that “incline one to adopt a thinking tool or strategy.” A table describing 16 Habits of Mind appeared in the September 2010 issue of NCEA Notes.

The use of this framework helps to create a set of commonly agreed upon dispositions or attitudes that can help to address the passivity in learning observed by many school personnel. Schools can use this framework systematically to create supports and structures to foster the development of these dispositions.

A concern mentioned by many school personnel is the lack of persistence that many students demonstrate, especially when engaged in complex thinking tasks. Students are quick to give up if an answer is not readily apparent and students can seem easily frustrated when the answer is not discovered in quick fashion. This can fuel a helpless-like behavior, as students often will quickly seek adult intervention to resolve this conflict.

Through technology, the search for information can often be accomplished in a short period of time. Students have unprecedented access to a wealth of information at their fingertips, delivered to them at lighting speed. Google will even indicate how quickly (often measured in milliseconds) a search is completed. Although students often are encouraged to not view technology as the answer to a question but as a tool to help gather information to help solve a problem, they seem to be overly-reliant on the “quick answer.” This further seems to weaken the resolve to persist in solving problems that are complex.

A factor that helps to promote persistence is exposure to classroom tasks that are rich in complexity and ambiguity. By engaging in tasks that are not solved quickly or where answers are not readily apparent, students can increase engagement in thinking and the disposition toward persistence can be promoted. Too many classroom tasks that are focused only on acquisition of facts reinforce the tendency to engage on a surface level answer-giving and avoid being persistent.

Steps for implementing
The framework for incorporating Habits of Mind within a school relies on the mode of enculturation, making the focus on dispositions a part of the culture of the school. To this end, Costa and others suggest the following factors to consider when using this approach.

Placing personal value on this framework
Before introducing these concepts to students, teachers need to engage in self-reflection to determine how these habits apply to their lives. Teachers need to engage in critical reflection to look at the role of persistence in their own thinking lives. Identifying which kinds of thinking tasks are enjoyable and which ones are difficult to sustain can provide valuable insights for school personnel.

Teachers can promote the personal meaning of persistence by asking students to reflect on the presence (or absence) of this disposition during a given thinking task. After engaging in such tasks, ask students to self-evaluate on the role of persistence in their thinking. “When did you feel like giving up in the task?” and “What kept you going?” are questions that help to provide some valuable insight.

Models/connections to real world
In order to support the development of the Habits of Mind, it is important for both students and staff to see how the dispositions can impact real-world decisions. The study of the biographies of eminent people and investigating how Habits of Mind impacted their life decisions can provide valuable examples.

Costa offers the story of Freidrich Kekule and the discovery of the benzene ring. As Kekule struggled with conceptualizing the molecular structure of benzene, he pondered for a great deal of time. Then, in what Kekule describes a “waking dream,”
he was struck with the image of two snakes biting their tails, which helped to solve the problem. In fact, this visual representation strongly resembled the structure of benzene. Instead of just giving up, Kekule continued to think about this complex problem and this persistence yielded a positive result. By examining stories like this, students can see how this disposition can facilitate positive results.

**Explicit language**

Naming and concretely describing the dispositions can provide a common nomenclature for the class and schools. Naming each disposition and pointing to it by name when it's seen in action in a learning or life situation moves the Habits of Mind from an ambiguous list of characteristics to a set of behaviors that can be observed and therefore fostered.

For the disposition of persistence, have students brainstorm synonymous phrases. "Sticking with it" or "Don't give up" can be useful translations of persistence and help students to identify this in their lives.

**Cultural artifacts/cues**

A culture usually is marked by a set of artifacts: sign, symbol and ritual. Creating artifacts that support the development of the Habits of Mind can be useful in moving this approach forward.

It would be beneficial for students to create posters "advertising" the need to engage in persistence in thinking. Developing these sets of posters can become powerful reminders to engage in persistence, especially when tempted to "give up."

**Pitfalls**

In considering moving to this approach, there are several pitfalls to avoid.

**Not providing enough practice with complex thinking tasks**

Often, given the pace of curriculum coverage and the press to accomplish certain learning goals for standardized assessments, students may not get opportunities to engage in higher-order thinking tasks. It is critical that teachers constantly audit their instruction to examine for the presence of complex thinking tasks. Reflecting on lessons and units to see if there is an overabundance on pure recall can help teachers become more aware of the need to increase higher level thinking tasks.

**Not providing enough time for critical reflection**

Again, time can be an enemy to development of effective thinking dispositions. After engaging in complex thinking tasks, it is critical that staff guide students in reflecting on the use of the dispositions. By engaging in this kind of facilitated discussion, students will start to internalize a script that will help to promote the development of this skill.

**Frustration with the process**

Engaging in worthy and complex thinking activities is not something that fits into discrete packages or periods of time. Dealing with these issues can take some time, which might be in opposition to the press of the clock. Sometimes, people will cease to engage in these tasks for the sense of expediency ("Let's just get this over—we've spent too much time on this"). Think about the last complex issue that was discussed at a faculty meeting! It is critical that teachers help to monitor frustration with the process and help to promote the engagement by re-focusing on persistence.

**Implementing together**

Suggestions for schools:

- Read and discuss the SOS article and support materials at a faculty or team meeting.
- Become aware of the Habits of Mind and name and observe them in practice. This can be helpful when you are engaged in solving a complex problem or in a meeting situation. Reflect on which Habits of Mind were present in solving the problem or which ones were not.
- Audit classroom tasks to increase number of tasks where answers are not readily apparent, and promote complex thinking.

Using the observation protocol and student self-assessment rubrics to collect data on the implementation of thinking dispositions within the classroom. These can be found at (http://luc.edu/ccse/nceanotes.shtml).

**References:**


**National Catholic Schools Week**

**Catholic Schools: A+ For America**

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