

By Daniel Vollrath within a special education teaching and learning environment. Daniel Vollrath (@HabitsOfMindInc) is a special education teacher at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey, and a United States Professional Development Trainer for the Habits of Mind Institute, with a strong passion for developing curriculum, classroom culture, and mindfulness based on the Habits of Mind. Over the past five years, Daniel has gathered student reflections with the Habits of Mind which has led to a better understanding in reference to a blend of learning and dispositional thinking.

Daniel will be presenting selected reflections within a monthly series. This blog is part 1 within the series.

The Power of Reflection - Metacognitive Awareness (Part 1)

For students with learning disabilities and special education teachers, it is well known that the delivery of instruction needs to accommodate the learning ability. As students with learning disabilities progress through school the goal is to develop successful habits that are necessary to compete in the 21st century. As for teachers, their role is to instill, model, and build a culture of the Habits of Mind within a teaching and learning environment. A significant procedural piece involves reflective practice that needs to be implemented into the classroom. When students with learning disabilities are exposed to the Habits of Mind, and reflect upon them, the more prone they will be to apply them spontaneously within their life in and outside of school.

Throughout five years of utilizing the Habits of Mind philosophy within the classroom, I have found significant development and success within students in an English resource room setting. One area of growth has been students ability to be metacognitively aware of the Habits of Mind within their learning. Metacognitive awareness is defined as “being conscious or aware of the habits of mind”. Branching off of metacognitive awareness are sub-categories that became apparent and exemplified within the classroom. These sub-categories for meta-cognitive awareness are: attentiveness, thinking before acting, habit recognition, and attitude change. Each sub-category has been exemplified through student journaling within my classroom throughout a five-year time frame. The journals selected provide the most detailed and insightful reflections in relation to the Habits of Mind.

Being metacognitively aware

One student throughout the school year was consistently trying to better their habit of *communicating with clarity and precision*. Making sure to communicate effectively during presentations was important for this student. Many reflective journal pieces from this student expressed the importance of being mindful in making sure to be clear and precise with words, not just during presentations, but within general conversation. Here is a journal that speaks to the idea of this student being metacognitively aware of their Habit of Mind goal:

During this past week in class, I used *thinking and communicating with clarity and precision*. I used this when I was doing a presentation on one of the topics, I explained it well so that everyone could know what I was talking about because they didn't really hear all of the important things about the topic. It is so important that people understand what I am saying in class. I make sure all my words are clear, ideas are making sense, and my pace is perfect. During the presentation I made sure that I was taking my time and not worrying about rushing through it, my focus was on how well I was communicating my ideas. It worked out great.

It is transparent that this student met their goal of utilizing *thinking and communicating with clarity and precision* within the classroom. This journal speaks truly to the idea of being "aware" of behaviors and thinking which ultimately led to success. As the year progressed it was amazing to observe the growth in confidence, clarity, and self-improvement within this student's ability to produce effective and focused communication.

Attentiveness

The ability to focus and concentrate always showed to be a common concern for students within my class. When students were introduced to the Habits of Mind, the purpose was meant to develop a metacognitive awareness with sixteen dispositions, which would ultimately guide them to success within the classroom. Many students exhibited more attentiveness towards certain dispositions than others. For one student, their ability to be attentive to a particular habit was exhibited through mental focus. This student journaled:

Lately I've been zoning out during class and always missing out on all of the information causing me to become completely confused when I start my work. I decided to pay more attention in class and listen to the teacher as best as I can. This helped me focus more and get my class work finished. Almost every class I find myself missing so much information, I really feel like my mind is wandering off into space. Then when an assignment or quiz happens, I have no clue what to do. This past week I really tried to be focused on *listening with understanding and empathy* more in English. My focus was on what the teacher was saying, and I noticed that he was more talkative with me during his discussions, I guess he feels like I am really trying now. I recognize that makes him happy and allows me to learn more. Now I am getting so much work done and really thinking about staying alert every class. It is helping me a lot.

It was apparent that this student used *listening with understanding and empathy* within my English class. Knowing that “wandering off into space” was an issue, and that it was affecting their success within class, this student made a conscious effort to utilize *listening with understanding and empathy* in order to focus more intently and complete work. The *empathy* part was interesting....it seemed that student recognized that I was negatively affected by their action of not respecting my rules within the classroom, that being “listening and focusing on what other have to say”. Determination to stay focused seems to be enhancing the student's ability to be successful.

Think before acting

Throughout a school day many events take place that bring forth opportunities to use the Habits of Mind in the classroom. As these events arise, practicing and modeling a habit can provide long-term positive effects. One action that occurs often is rushing to get something done, or talking over others in the classroom. For students with a learning disability, taking the time to think before you act can be a struggle. The habit of *managing impulsivity* has been a focus and goal for my students throughout the past five years. Although *managing impulsivity* has been a goal of action within my classroom, it has also been implemented across the board in many other classes. A student in my class journaled:

Every class I focus on *managing impulsivity*. Almost daily I feel like I need to say something right away in response to something, instead I make sure to *manage my impulsivity*. I use that habit of mind not just in English but in all my other classes. It helps out with my listening, understanding, and being anxious. I watch my calling out and instead raise my hand, it helps with letting me gather my ideas of what I want to say. The cool thing is that I use this in all of my other classes as well and am noticing more success and better grades. It is really not hard, I am becoming more of a thinker now than just saying something that might not be correct.

This student is obviously learning that thinking before acting, especially with the Habit of Mind of *managing impulsivity*, is beneficial to their learning and ability to communicate effectively within the classroom. As the year progressed, this student made incredible strides in minimizing their impulsive behaviors, and instead produced more effective ways of showing success.

Habit awareness

Although the significance of being mindful about the Habits of Mind in relation to a presentation/activity is important, being able to reflect and discuss these dispositions can be even more effective for students with a learning disability. The ability to see the “big picture” of what the Habits of Mind represent, how they affect behaviors, and the success obtained, can be influential and long-lasting for students with a learning disability. Throughout the years, several students expressed their general awareness about the Habits of Mind. Here are two journal responses that display the effects of truly being aware of all the Habits of Mind:

#1

Understanding how my mind works now, because of the habits, is really neat. Many times I don't recognize that I am using them but really I am. The journals that we write about our thinking and habits has really helped me become smarter and see how the habits are helping me become a better student and learner. My grades are better and I am more alert to what I need to do in order to get good grades and be successful.

#2

The habits are cool because you don't get graded on them. They are meant to help you out with learning and understanding your thinking process. All the time when I am in class the habits keep me focused and ready to learn. The more I think and write about them the better I get with using them and understanding how they work.

Clearly, the importance of being aware of the habits is interesting and important to these students. Both student's awareness of the habits seem to come after they use them. The reflection

aspect allowed both students' an opportunity to ponder the use of the habits and how they were incorporated effectively into what they were doing.

Attitude change

Many students begin to develop an attitude change with the Habits of Mind when working on assignments, in groups, and within their personal life. Being able to understand feelings and attitudes with the habits are imperative to gaining a full sense of how they affect and influence thinking. The journal reflection below is from a student who utilized *thinking flexibly* in order to change their mindset:

Once in awhile I get dizzy and feel sick in class. It just happens but I think a lot of it is mental on my part. I know I should eat more before class instead of hanging out with my friends. This past week I was not feeling well and realized that it was just my nerves. So I started *thinking flexibly* to change my mind into a different perspective of thinking. My thoughts were changed to positive thoughts. This mood change and *thinking flexibly* helped me feel better and calmer during class. I just need to change my mindset to positive thinking.

This student expressed the importance of generating an alternative and different perspective on how they were feeling while in class. By changing their thinking to positive thoughts and feelings, this student was able to go about the day feeling more at ease. The mindful-approach of *thinking flexibly* seemed to alleviate negative feelings, and instead alter their thinking in more positive ways.

Another habit that was helpful in changing an attitude of a student was *finding humor*. So often in class I find that if something goes wrong for a student, getting back on track and focused

takes a lot of effort. As a teacher, I often model the importance of finding humor in unexpected situations that occur, good or bad, to express the idea of “it’s okay”. The journal below shows how a student used finding humor to make for a better day, and class:

The habit of mind that I found to be very helpful this week was *finding humor*. I was having a really bad day. I got a B- on my English report and forgot to do my health assignment and also spilled coffee on my jeans. My friends in class knew that I was having a bad day and they were trying to cheer me up. I then said to myself, “I wasn’t going to let all these bad things bring me down”. So I decided to have some fun joking around about what happened. It made things better and allowed me to relax and enjoy learning in class.

Although this student was experiencing a day where everything was going wrong, the ability to reflect and find humor seemed to be a coping mechanism that worked to shift the student’s focus. It seems as if this student was able to reflect and consciously shift their perspective to have a more successful day.

What now?

As educators our interaction and connection with students goes far beyond just teaching and learning. By gaining an understanding of our students, and their thought process, the more insight we gain on who they are as learners. Through practice with metacognitive thinking on Habits of Mind, the more inclined students will be in successfully implementing these dispositions into learning. That being said, engaging in reflective practice brings forth metacognitive development, encourages deeper learning, allows the ability to adapt and adjust teaching, and most importantly, makes for a more personalized approach with students.