

Operationalising The Habits Of Mind: A First Step To Self-Assessment

Lead students to success by starting with a clear picture of their goals.

While talking with students about the value of persisting, one young man raised his hand and said, “I’d love to persist, but no one has ever taught me how.” We assume that students understand classroom instructional terms, goals, behaviours and vocabulary. However, some terms remain vague until we help students clarify and hold visions in their minds of what the Habits of Mind look like, sound like, or feel like.

Defining Operationally

“Operationally” means that a vague name for an action is translated into observable, tangible terms that can be experienced through one or more senses. Invite students to define operationally by thinking back to a time when they had to use clear and precise language, when they really listened or were listened to, when they solved problems successfully or when they found humour in a situation. Ask students what they would see a person doing or hear them saying if they were thinking flexibly, listening with understanding and empathy, and striving for accuracy. Students can easily “operationalise” these Habits of Mind by supplying rich examples from their experiences.

Students and teachers of Thomasville Primary School in Thomasville, North Carolina in the United States developed these operational definitions:

Persisting

- Staying on task a reasonable length of time
- Looking for multiple ways to accomplish a task
- Analysing and evaluating tasks by seeking new knowledge while verifying results
- Demonstrating diligence despite obstacles

Creating, Imagining, Innovating

- Exploring educational resources
- Trying to complete tasks in imaginative ways
- Analysing ideas in new ways using fluency and flexibility
- Reflecting on products and ideas by analysing and evaluating

Finding Humour

- Creating things that are funny
- Using humour to entertain, delight, and surprise others
- Recognising, creating, and evaluating whimsical ideas/situations

Criteria

When collecting examples of operational definitions, adhere to certain criteria. If the statements do not meet these criteria, continue to probe and clarify.

Statements must be observable.

Sometimes students will say such words as, “empathy means be nice to each other.” But what does it look like to “be nice”? How would we know that someone is being “nice”? You might have to probe more deeply to achieve a statement that is in observable terms. Students might say, “Being nice means saying things like ‘thank you’ and ‘please’.”

Statements must be positive.

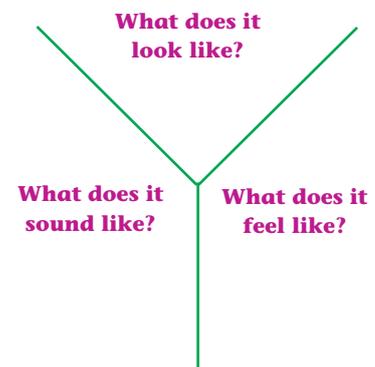
Students might contribute negative examples. They might say that an attribute of good listening is “NOT” interrupting. However, it is impossible to see or collect evidence of the absence of performance. Probe more deeply. Say, “If a person were NOT interrupting, what would they be doing?” One student told us, “You’d see only one pair of lips moving at a time.”

Statements must be feasible.

Operational definitions must be feasible for a student or group. We often expect students to demonstrate that they are listening by establishing eye contact with the speaker. In some cultures, however, this would be an affront and students would be admonished for being disrespectful. Age makes a difference. To expect very young children to paraphrase another’s idea is beyond their capability at such an egocentric stage of development.

Y Charts

Y charts are powerful in helping students develop operational definitions. The process for building Y charts is to ask students to consider what a Habit looks like, sounds like and feels like in real situations. The teacher may talk about a student sitting in class persisting to finish a piece of writing before the end of the lesson. Ask students to describe the facial expressions on the student’s face, his or her body language or how the student is behaving in relation to others. Again, encourage the students to be as specific as possible and to explain their choices. Saying the student looks like he is concentrating doesn’t go far enough. Instead, ask them to state what tells us he is concentrating: a wrinkled brow, the ▶



chewing of a pencil, the head down whilst others are off-task. What might a person say if he/she were persisting? "Don't bother me, I want to complete this assignment" or "I think I see another way to approach this problem. I'm going to keep trying different ways until I get it!" And what might it feel like? Frustration when their strategy doesn't work; jubilation when it does!

" Ask students what they would see a person doing or hear them saying if they were thinking flexibly, listening with understanding and empathy, and striving for accuracy."

to a checklist for their group. The teacher might ask them to rate themselves and others. Students could then compare ratings and see how accurately they perceive themselves. The teacher might also give feedback with specific, positive examples.

Self-evaluating

Evaluation, the highest level of Bloom's Taxonomy, means generating, holding in your head and applying a set of internal and external criteria. The intent of assessment, therefore, should be to support learners in becoming self-directing -- increasingly more able to self-assess. The Habits of Mind provide a perfect opportunity to foster the capacity for self-evaluation. Following are some examples of operational definitions translated into "I" statements:

Listening with Understanding and Empathy

1. I wait until someone is finished before I take my turn to speak
2. I show respect to the speaker by facing them.

3. I show that I am listening by making eye contact with the individual who is speaking.
4. I show that I am listening by nodding and shaking my head.

Checklists

Checklists develop indicators that can guide self-assessment. Ask students, "What would it look like if a person were a good listener? What would it sound like if a person were a good listener?" Guide students as they generate a list of positively stated, observable behaviours. For example, in the "looks like" category, students might say, "maintains eye contact" or "nods head when agreeing." In the "sounds like" category, they might say, "builds on the other person's ideas" or "clarifies when does not understand." Students may self-assess using a format like the one below.

As students become more familiar with observing these behaviours, they often shift

Keeping an inventory such as a checklist during class interactions, when solving problems, and after interacting with others can help individuals and groups gather valuable data upon which to self-reflect and plan for learning as they self monitor more effectively. A class meeting might start with a facilitator drawing criteria from the class as a reminder of how to work successfully as a group. During a class discussion, students monitor their own behaviours and are aware of each other's performances. Before the end of the work, the teacher asks the students to reflect on the group's interaction and to describe how they did or didn't meet the criteria. They explore feelings and note indicators of how the team is working together more synergistically. Teachers may pose such metacognitive questions as:

- What decisions did you make about when and how to participate?
- What metacognitive strategies did

When I am Persisting I...	Often	Sometimes	Not yet
Know what I need to do to finish a task			
Know what to say to my friends so they won't distract me			
Know who to ask for help			
Move somewhere so I can concentrate			
Know when I need the help of someone else			
Say encouraging things to myself to stay on task			
Look forward to feeling pleased with myself when I'm done			



you employ to monitor your own listening skills?

- What were some of the effects of your decisions for you and others in your group?
- What signals will you look for in the future to alert you to the need for these good listening skills?
- As you anticipate future team meetings, what commitments might you make to strengthen the groups' productivity?

Building Rubrics

Involving students in the development of rubrics is another way for students to self-assess their performance. Rubrics differ from checklists in that they require a quality determination. Checklists ask about frequency or simply whether there is evidence of the behaviour or particular criterion in the work. Rubrics require a judgment about the quality of the work. Providing rubrics serves several purposes:

1. They remind students of the agreed-upon criteria for excellence.
2. They provide a systematic way to chart growth and improvement.
3. They define the explicit criteria for excellence so that students can rate themselves and then set goals and strategies for personal mastery.

Rubrics can show stages of development. Each category should be sufficiently clear so that students can learn from the feedback about their behaviour and see ways to improve. For example, in the rubric here, we have used the language that signifies the development from novice to expert. We have found that students respond to this language favourably. Rather than thinking of themselves as failures, they think of themselves as learners. Everyone is a novice at something.

Why is self-evaluation so valuable?

The ultimate purpose of evaluation is to have students self-evaluate. The student who writes a paragraph and then asks the teacher "Is this OK?" is a student who is not self-evaluating. How will this student cope when presented with an extended piece of writing or complex problem to solve? He or she is still in the habit of relying on others to approve, to judge to value. Self-evaluation moves some of this responsibility to the student. We want students to be committed to a lifetime of self-managing, self-monitoring and self-modifying. If students graduate from our schools dependent on others to tell them what is good, adequate, or excellent work, then we have failed them. They must judge for themselves. 

CREATING, IMAGING INNOVATING RUBRIC FOR PRIMARY STUDENTS

Expert	I always think of my own ideas and can explain how I got them
Skilled	I usually think of my own ideas and can sometimes say how I got them
Apprentice	I can sometimes think of my own ideas and don't need much help
Beginner	I am beginning to come up with new ideas; sometimes with help