A Journey of Continuous Growth
With Habits of Mind

Developing our Habits of Mind is a lifelong journey:

- a journey in which we continually explore and deepen our understanding of the habits;
- a journey of continuously becoming more attuned to situations in which the habits would benefit our own behavior as well as the behavior of others;
- a journey of a growing capacity to be more skillful and strategic as we use the habits;
- a journey of developing our ability to critically self-reflect as we focus on our own behavior and the behavior of others.

As we observe students in our schools and classrooms, we quickly recognise that some are more adept, more skillful, and more effective at applying one of the habits than are others. As we observe students over time, it is our desire that they move through schooling and into adulthood getting better at employing the habits.

A description of exactly how this journey takes place may be quite elusive. Until now we may have lacked a clear guide to and description of the development and improvement in the Habits of Mind.

Following are descriptions of five dimensions within which learners can grow in relation to their Habits of Mind. An understanding of these dimensions allows us to plan curriculum designed to develop the Habits. They also guide our efforts in assessment and suggest effective pedagogies in which teachers might engage learners to facilitate their growth of the Habits of Mind.

Five Dimensions of Growth

1. Exploring Meanings
This dimension deals with a students’ ability to articulate the meanings of the Habits of Mind. As students explore meaning they develop a greater capacity to articulate more sophisticated definitions and acquire more concepts associated with the Habits. They develop a basic literacy around the language of Habits of Mind. They are able to draw upon a greater range of examples and build more complex analogies and they begin to connect them to their own experiences and recognise them in others. They become able to reflect on times when they have (or should have) used a particular habit.

For example, in the early primary years a student may define Persistence as “Sticking to it, and not giving up”. They may cite the examples of such books as The Little Engine that Could. They might reflect on times on when they play games or do their homework when they persisted. However, as they are exposed to more experiences, and develop a deeper understanding of Persistence, we would want to see and hear them deepening their meaning. They might define Persistence in terms of keeping goals in mind, identifying blocks towards achieving these goals and finding effective ways around them. They might cite more contemporary examples from the media, raising questions about their observations of persistence in others and becoming even more fluent in using synonyms and analogies for persistence.

2. Expanding Capacities
As students learn and practice the Habits of Mind, they should become more skillful. They develop a large repertoire of strategies they can call upon. As the skills and tools are repeated, students also grow more adept at selecting the most appropriate strategy at the appropriate time. They refine their ability to apply each of these skills and strategies in complex and sophisticated ways.

Learners begin to develop internal, meta-cognitive strategies and ‘self-talk’ for employing the Habits when confronted with problems, decisions and ambiguous situations. Further, as students expand their capacities in regard to the Habits of Mind, they are able to call upon different habits in sequence and employ them more effectively and strategically.

Persistence, for example, is not just a word. Rather, it is found to be a composite of numerous skills and strategies. The learner employs techniques that help them stay with a task in the face of uncertainty. When it is difficult to complete a task, learners develop new ways of encouraging themselves to stick with it.
3. Increasing Alertness
In order to engage in any of the Habits of Mind, students must first be sensitive to cues from the environment. They must recognize that a problematic situation exists and that the opportunity for engaging one or more of the Habits of Mind has presented itself. Students must build some guiding principles or criteria upon which they become increasingly alert to opportunities to engage in the sixteen Habits.

Students will initially find it easy to engage in the Habits in very familiar, often simple contexts. However, over time we want them to be able to be alert to opportunities in new, novel and complex situations. Furthermore, students will often rely on external prompts from teachers or others to indicate when to engage in the Habits.

As they develop their alertness, they will become more self-directed and apply the appropriate Habits of Mind spontaneously. As the person’s competence for persisting increases, for example, there is a realization that persistence is not appropriate in every situation. Although it is important to persist to accomplish a task, it is not appropriate to persist with an argument in the face of contradictory and important evidence that does not support the argument.

4. Extending Values
As learners connect success to the effective application of the Habits of Mind, they begin to make predictions about when and why it might be appropriate to use a particular habit. In doing so they also deepen their valuing of the Habits because they can understand why using a habit would be important in these situations. They can reflect back upon the use of the habit and see that when the habit is appropriately used, it has led to greater success.

Continuous experiences in which the habits show real benefits for successful interactions with work and others creates a better sense of self-confidence. As a result, the individual not only values the habits but also makes a commitment to using them.

As learners extend the value they place on the Habits of Mind, they express a belief that the Habit is important not just in particular situations, but also more universally as a pattern of behavior in their life and they express a desire for the Habits of Mind to be adopted in the lives of others and in the community at large.

5. Building Commitment
Building a commitment to continuous improvement in the use of Habits of Mind occurs when learners increasingly become self-directed. Self-improvement in this dimension is recognized as learners become self-managing by setting goals for themselves, self-monitoring as they ‘observe themselves’ in action, and more self-reflective as they evaluate themselves, modify their behaviors and set new and increasingly higher standards for their own performance.

Self-evaluation moves from being the quantitative recognition of the use of the Habits of Mind in them to being increasingly more descriptive and qualitative. Movement through this dimension indicates significant improvement, but for many students the improvement stops after a period of time.

Internalisation
While the Habits of Mind are never fully mastered, as continuous learners, they are continually practiced, modified, and refined. If they are truly ‘habituated’ they are performed automatically, spontaneously and without prompting. They become an ‘internal compass’ to guide one’s actions, decisions and thoughts. When confronted with complex decisions, ambiguous tasks, challenging problems, or perplexing dilemmas, learners ask themselves (for example):

- “What is the most flexible thing I can do right now?”
- “What strategies do I have at my disposal that could benefit me now?”
- “What questions do I need to ask myself and others?”
- “Who else do I need to think about?”
- “How can I refine the problem to make it clearer?”
- “What intrigues me about this problem?”

This type of internalisation happens as individuals develop along each of the five dimensions outlined above and commit themselves to continuous growth in these dimensions. The point we strive towards when developing, improving, extending, and becoming more effective in the use of the Habits of Mind, is to become truly internalised and committed to continual growth in each of these dimensions.