



SUSTAINING OUTSTANDING SCHOOLS: SOS

By Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D.

Over the past year, the focus of this column has been on the work of Art Costa and Habits of the Mind. The first column introduced a framework for understanding and using the Habits of Mind approach. The remaining columns presented a focused look at specific habits and how to implement them within the classroom. This column, the last in this series, is focused on Intellectual Risk Taking.

Exploring Habits of the Mind— 21st century learning skills and engaging in Intellectual Risk-Taking

People who engage in Intellectual Risk-Taking “push themselves past where they feel comfortable to achieve goals.” These individuals view setbacks as “interesting challenges that help them find out more about the way they learn.” They are curious about learning and are willing to share their thoughts, ideas and insights, even at the risk of ‘not being correct.’ These are the individuals who accept that “failure is part of learning.” It is through risk-taking that these individuals become aware of which risks are worth taking and which are not. This can lead one to new discoveries about ideas and concepts and help make learning connections with other content.

Factors impacting Intellectual Risk-Taking

Although Intellectual Risk-Taking can be a valued tool in learning, there are several observations to keep in mind when thinking about the development of this particular Habit of the Mind.

One observation is that Intellectual Risk-Taking decreases as students get older. In a study of elementary school students, Beghetto (2009) found “in general, as students get older they become less likely to take intellectual risks, such as sharing their tentative ideas.” All one has to do is to observe the differences between a kindergarten and upper-grade classroom. Kindergartners will share ideas (any idea!) with reckless abandon while the upper grade student is adverse to share anything unless guar-

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anteed that it is the correct answer. Somewhere, a strong process develops that socializes students to be hesitant in taking those intellectual risks.

Another observation is related to the role of gender on the development of this habit. Byrnes et. al. (1999) suggests that although the gender gap might be closing, male students are more likely to take intellectual risks as opposed to female students. There are some powerful classroom forces that must be occurring that have not fostered the Intellectual Risk-Taking for females at the same rate as it does for male students. Ascribing blame is not important here. However, being cognizant of this observation can help classroom staff become more sensitive to this issue.

Steps for implementing

The mantra in many classrooms is “the only dumb question is the one that isn’t asked.” While the intent of this statement is laudable, classroom practices supporting this adage should be scrutinized. First, is the classroom

environment set so that students feel safe enough to risk? Are eye rolling and other impatient behaviors re-directed when students are engaged in taking an intellectual risk? Environmental factors can either promote or prohibit the development of this particular Habit of Mind. Setting clear behavioral norms supporting the engagement in this Habit can help create an environment where this kind of thinking is valued and, therefore, demonstrated. Second, are there enough ambiguous, problem-rich instructional activities provided that offer students opportunities to foster Intellectual Risk-Taking? These are activities where clear answers to problems are not readily apparent and require students to ponder problems and formulate hypotheses.

Pitfalls to avoid

When thinking about fostering Intellectual Risk-Taking, there are several issues to avoid.

Forgetting to observe yourself

How do you foster intellectual risk-taking in yourself? It is very difficult to encourage this disposition in others when you are not fostering your own development in this area. Reflect on your own problem solving and observe how you take intellectual risks. Determine how you can take more of these kinds of risks.

Forgetting to stop and smell the roses

Sometimes, there is such an emphasis on the final answer that we

forget to enjoy the process. This is especially true for intellectual tasks. For some, tolerance of ambiguous situations, such as problem-solving, can be painful (at first) and therefore, students will provide quick answers to end the thinking situation. Reminding students of the other Habits of Mind (such as *Persistence* and *Responding with Wonderment and Awe*) can help them to take that first step.

Unintended cues

Inadvertently giving non-verbal cues that might not honor a student's response can also prohibit students from engaging in this Habit of Mind. Too much hesitation or an inadvertent facial gesture may suggest to the student that there is something "wrong" with the answer that he or she is providing. This ultimately will dissuade students from taking further intellectual risks. Becoming aware of these micro behaviors will help foster Intellectual Risk-Taking in students. Peer observations by colleagues can be very helpful in providing critical feedback in this area.

Implementing together

Suggestions for schools:

- Read and discuss the SOS article and support materials at a faculty or team meeting. To help with this process, use the Teacher Learning Team cycle described in the SOS column (http://www.luc.edu/ccse/pdfs/Jan09_SOS_Using_Learning_teams_to_implement_the_high-yield_s.pdf).
- Become aware of the Habit of Mind of Intellectual Risk Taking and name it and observe it in practice. This can be helpful when you are engaged in solving a complex problem or in a meeting situation.
- Audit classroom tasks to increase number of tasks where answers are not readily apparent. This promotes complex think-

ing. In this audit, document the times that you allow students to engage in reflection. Explicitly cue students to engage in taking intellectual risks and honor those attempts. Discuss with students the factor(s) that prohibits or encourages them to take intellectual risks.

- Engage in peer observations to help gain critical feedback in this area. Share this feedback with your colleagues in collegial discussions and develop strategies to increase a focus on Intellectual Risk-Taking. Observe again to see if these strategies have produced the desired impact on student achievement. ❖



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Author's Note

Thank you for the positive feedback regarding this year's topic: Habits of Mind. The Sustaining Outstanding Schools column will highlight a new topic next year: Making Instructional Adjustments to Address the Needs of Struggling Learners.

Additional materials related to the Sustaining Outstanding Schools columns are located at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness website (www.luc.edu/ccse). Also, you can join a conversation about this topic or many more at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness Group Site on LinkedIn (linkedin.com) or follow the author on twitter (@mjboyle3).

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