Five Habits of Mind

The Mission Hill Habits of Mind are an approach to both the traditional academic disciplines (math, science, literature and history) and the interdisciplinary stuff of ordinary life. They are what lead us to ask good questions and seek solid answers. They are our definition of a well-educated person.

1. Evidence: How do we know what’s true and false? What evidence counts? How sure can we be? What makes it credible to us? This includes using the scientific method, and more.

2. Viewpoint: How else might this look like if we stepped into other shoes? If we were looking at it from a different direction? If we had a different history or expectation? This requires the exercise of informed “empathy” and imagination. It requires flexibility of mind.

3. Connections/Cause and Effect: Is there a pattern? Have we seen something like this before? What are the possible consequences?

4. Conjecture: Could it have been otherwise? Supposing that? What if...? This habit requires use of the imagination as well as knowledge of alternative possibilities. It includes the habits described above.

5. Relevance: Does it matter? Who cares?

None of these five habits stand separately. And the way we use such habits differ if we are studying a mathematical proof, a scientific hypothesis, an historical dispute, a debate over economics, the appreciation of a piece of art, a critique of a novel, the telling of a myth or narrative, or the settling of a playground dispute.

The Mission Hill Habits of Mind are supplemented by Habits of Work: the habit of meeting deadlines, being on time, sticking to a task, not getting frustrated quickly, hearing out what others say, and more.

Both sets of “habits” are developed in the process of gathering appropriate knowledge and skill in school and out. The best test is whether students use such habits in the course of their work. And again, not just in school. Knowing “how-to” is no substitute for having good habits. Who cares if you could drive well, if you’re not in the habit of doing so? Who cares if you could be on time, if you never are?