

Habits of Mind

In education today, teachers are trying to get their students to be better thinkers. This "thinking curriculum" has been developed with the desire that students develop some important skills such as the ability to reflect on their learning, problem solve and work collaboratively.

In looking at some changing curriculum models it struck me that many of the concepts that educators use also have applications in umpiring.

Professor Art Costa, Emeritus Professor at California State University has defined 16 HABITS OF MIND that people use when confronted with problems, the solutions to which are not immediately apparent.

1. Persistence...

Never give up. The road to becoming an AFL umpire is a long and arduous one. Footballers can be drafted at 18 and play AFL at the same age. Most AFL field umpires don't make it to the AFL list until they're in their late 20s, most having endured many setbacks.

The same applies at any level. All umpires should strive to achieve excellence and should constantly be looking at self-improvement such as reading the Law Book, seeking advice from experienced umpires, asking someone to be your mentor.

2. Managing Impulsivity...

We can make mistakes by "jumping at shadows" and over reacting to certain situations. I've always had the theory that all umpires have this little bug that tells them to be over officious when they don't really need to. When the heat intensifies in a match, stay calm, take a deep breath and take the appropriate course of action.

Hold back on the whistle. Once you've blown it, you've blown it (maybe literally and figuratively). Waiting a fraction of a second can make you process what you've seen more effectively.

3. Listening to others with understanding and empathy...

Pay attention to what your coaches say and what experienced umpires tell you. After a while, you'll soon work out which advice is worth listening to and which is not.

Also, empathise with players. If they question you in an appropriate manner, it is your duty to respond appropriately at an appropriate time.

4. Flexible Thinking...

Not everything is black and white. How true is that with the Laws of Australian Football?

There are so many different scenarios that can lead to us deciding whether we're going to pay holding the ball, call for a ball up, pay a free kick to the player in possession or call play on.

5. Metacognition: awareness of our own thinking...

In assessing your own performance, you need to be able to identify why you may have improved with certain skills or techniques. e.g. Your stronger fitness might enable you to have a better chance of getting side on to contests and thus making the right decisions.

There are preferred learning styles. It's important to develop an awareness of how you process information to make it most meaningful. What implications does this have for you as you progress with your umpiring career?

6. Checking for Accuracy & Precision...

It is unacceptable that many umpires have such a poor knowledge of the laws of Australian Football. How many times a year do you look at the rule book? I reckon there are about 20 "quirks" in there, things that might only occur once a year. But what happens if it's in a Grand Final and you don't know what to do?

Do you know what to do if one ruckman isn't in the centre circles when you commence your approach for a centre bounce?

Do you know what to do if a defender marks in the last line of defence, goes over the scoring line between the goal posts and then enters the field of play between the goal and behind posts?

7. Questioning & Problem Posing...

Keep questioning your coaches.

Don't just accept something you're told. Keep asking why.

8. Drawing on past knowledge & applying it to new situations...

Just as I'm doing now: I'm using educational theories and applying them to another field.

What skills that you use in your profession will help you to become a better umpire?

If you're an ex-player, how can you use your experience to make you a better decision maker or how could it help the group as a whole?

9. Precision of Language and Thought...

A lot of football supporters hate it but I love listening to the umpires, especially Steve McBurney who is so precise and accurate with what he says.

Listen and learn. If you tape the VFL matches, you will hear that the umpires there are constantly talking, e.g. after being tapped through, "no holds in the 50", after the ball spilled after a marking contest, "please give it back on the full".

I was rapt to hear Matt Pryor last year at a field bounce near the goal line tell the defending Caulfield Grammarians ruckman not to punch the ball through on the full or it would be a free kick for a deliberate rushed behind.

With each free kick you pay, use the language of the infringement. Don't say "you're scragging him", say "it's holding the man". Don't say "no eyes for the ball", say "pushed him out of the contest". Don't say "you stepped out of the square" at a kick in, say "you stepped on the line".

10. Using all senses...

Probably not that relevant to umpiring but let's just focus on OBSERVATION. Sounds obvious but how good are our observation skills when we're not in control of the play? Do our minds wander? Mathew James used to pinch himself on the wrist when he thought he had made a bad decision to remind him to switch on.

How can we stay focused during periods of inaction... or is there really such a thing in umpiring as a period of inaction?

11. Ingenuity, originality & insightfulness...

Football is an evolving game. Are we students of the game who think about and discuss team tactics with our fellow umpires?

12. Wonderment, curiosity, inquisitiveness & the enjoyment of problem solving...

Einstein said that "the most beautiful experience in the world is the experience of the mysterious".

You may not be the sort of person who finds beauty in a sunset or marvels at Fibonacci numbers but I would hope that all umpires are constantly seeking to improve their knowledge of football and umpiring and the VAFA and the VAFAUA and whatever else will assist you in becoming a better person.

13. Taking Responsible Risks...

Have a go. How far can you push yourself? Can you run in the front group at training? Will you turn up to training on the coldest, wettest day of the year?

Will you keep pestering your coach about wanting to know more?

14. Finding Humour...

If you take yourself too seriously, you won't last.

15. Thinking Interdependently...

We must work together as a team on the field and off the field.

What about having a feedback session with your "team mates" after the match or at all the breaks?

16. Learning Continuously...

"Insanity is continuing to do the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Einstein.