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## Preface

When my brain becomes overwhelmed and overcrowded, I know it's time to write. Over the past year, my brain has been both: it has been swirling with ideas, thoughts, and questions about pedagogy, metacognition, Reading Power, books, and the learning-thinking lives of the children I teach. But the most significant swirl of thinking eventually led me to this question: *How do we encourage students to participate more in their own learning, to think about rather than simply accept ideas?* In 1919, Albert Einstein said, "Education is not learning the facts, but training the mind to think." Only now, almost 100 years later, have we started focusing on this training process.

It's hard to believe that Reading Power is more than ten years old—ten years of teaching, talking, sharing, demonstrating, and lecturing about the important shift we need to make from a literal question-and-answer-based concept of reading comprehension to a more constructive, interactive approach. Witnessing this shift in classrooms has been, without a doubt, the most rewarding experience of my career: students reading text from a position of meaning-making rather than from a position of searching for "the right answer"; teachers being facilitators of thinking rather than messengers of content. Reading Power strategies have been widely embraced by many teachers across many school districts. In the school where I teach in Vancouver, Reading Power continues to be visible in every classroom.

However, while this transformation in reading instruction in classrooms has been rewarding, about a year ago I began to ask myself, "Now what?" Now that we have established a strategic, metacognitive approach to reading, what's next? How can we take this thinking into a place of deeper understanding? It is no longer enough to have students make connections or ask questions when they read. It is time to explore how we move forward to a place where students are able to not only apply these strategies to the texts they are reading, but also apply this way of thinking and knowing to their entire learning lives.

Reading Power tapped into what I perceived as a missing piece of reading instruction: teaching students how to think while they read. Creating a concrete visual (the Reading Power Model) and a common language for thinking and talking about reading was, for many teachers, incredibly helpful for moving their students from being master decoders to becoming strategic readers. But while Reading Power filled a huge hole in reading instruction for many, after ten years of living and breathing it I started to feel that there was more I could do to help students develop, not only as "thinking readers" but more as "thinking learners." In a way, this book is the second step after Reading Power. Certainly, I still believe that we must first break down thinking down into small, manageable pieces and give it a language so that students can "see" and "hear" what thinking looks and sounds like while they engage in text. But the more I thought about

it, the more I came to realize I wanted to move beyond comprehension instruction for *reading* to transformational instruction for *learning*. I wanted to explore teaching students how to recognize that deep understanding evolves from the connections, questions, and inferences we make to the reflective “aha!” moments that develop after we read and learn.

This book is intended to be a starting point for teachers to explore ways to integrate strategic and critical thinking to deepen students’ understanding. The Powerful Understanding model I have developed is intended to help teachers integrate thinking into everything they teach—from social responsibility, to immigration, to life cycles. Through this Powerful Understanding approach, my goal is for students to become more thoughtful and more reflective learners, for them to develop the thinking skills to move them from a retelling stance to a rethinking one, for a shift in emphasis from learning content to finding meaning.

— Adrienne Gear, 2017

## Introduction

The “busy brain” model of comprehension in *Reading Power* was well received, I believe, because it was a way of teaching comprehension that teachers could adapt to any grade level and use with any book.

Writing a book about deep thinking for elementary teachers is a challenging task. The fact is that students think in every grade level and every subject area. I wanted to develop a model that was not subject- or grade-specific, but that could be adapted to any grade level and used for any subject you are teaching. But the challenge is gearing a book (pardon the pun!) for a wide audience. One glance at a Table of Contents that included a chapter on Life Cycles, Immigration, and Electricity would lead teachers to say, “Nope! Not buying it! I don’t teach those subjects.” One big task was to show the Powerful Understanding model in action, in a way that would appeal to a wide range of teachers at different grade levels.

Another task was ensuring Powerful Understanding is understood not as a process, but as an approach, and that the approach be placed in context of inquiry. Currently there is a lot of talking and writing—and misunderstanding and misinterpretation—around inquiry-based learning. To see inquiry as simply students doing independent projects is to miss the importance of the reflection on their experience that leads to extended thinking and deeper understanding. Similarly, Powerful Understanding is dependent on students’ connections to and understanding of other people and the world around them leading to a transformation of their concept of self.

This led me to an area of teaching that requires more and more of our attention: social and emotional skills. While our students’ tech skills are advancing at a tremendous rate, their personal and social skills are not. In fact, it feels as if there is less tolerance, less kindness, less social interaction, and less respect for self and others in schools than there was ten years ago. Many of us notice students coming to school with fewer and fewer social skills, and this results in more and more time in our classrooms working on such things as mindfulness, kindness, and self-regulation. Social and emotional skills are being emphasized across all grade levels in many provincial curriculums. Too often, I hear teachers telling me that they “don’t have time” to fit everything in, so choosing to integrate the Powerful Understanding Model into something we are already teaching is more likely to result in teachers using it.

My goal is for students to learn how to think deeply and more reflectively through the Powerful Understanding model, while at the same time reflecting on what it means to be kind, respectful, and compassionate human beings. The lessons I have designed are intended to provide many opportunities for students to apply the model as they develop a deeper understanding of themselves, others, and the world. As with my previous books, children’s literature plays a pivotal role in anchoring these lessons. Teachers can use the suggested books as a starting point for reflective reading, thinking, responding, and reflecting. The lessons presented are not meant to restrict, but rather to illustrate how this model can be integrated into any unit of study.

Unlike my other books, this one evolved while I was writing it. With previous books, I had a clear vision of “the forest” and developed “the trees” as I wrote. With this book, my trees were already planted and in full view, but I couldn’t quite see the expanse of the forest. Through teaching these lessons in my school, engaging in many conversations, asking a lot of questions, thinking, and reflecting, this forest has become clear. To “train their minds to think,” give students a clear and concrete model and language for deep understanding and provide them with purposeful classroom opportunities to practice, so that they can learn to think more deeply, learn more widely, and develop a more powerful understanding of what it means to be a responsible and compassionate person. A tall order, perhaps, but I hope that this book is a starting point for reaching that goal. I hope this book helps you to guide your students through the trees so they can see their own forest.

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# 1 The Components of Powerful Understanding

## Developing Powerful Thinkers

Over the last ten years, since my book *Reading Power* was released, I have been spreading the word that teaching reading is not only about the teaching of letters and sounds—the code of the text—but also the teaching of specific comprehension strategies that can help readers make sense of that code. Reading is both mastering and understanding that code: both achievements are of equal importance and both deserve equal amounts of instructional time in a balanced reading program. Yes, I am a strong advocate of children having daily positive encounters with books, daily independent reading time, and choice in what they are reading, and that they not be preference-deprived by a level or a color. But I am also a strong advocate for teaching reading: ongoing, explicit instruction to help children move forward as readers, regardless of the grade they are in or the reading level they may be at. Code alone does not determine proficiency. Just because a student can decode does not necessarily mean they comprehend with the same degree of competency: a master decoder may not necessarily be a master thinker. And I have learned that a struggling decoder is not necessarily a struggling thinker.

I am a strong believer that teaching reading is a responsibility no longer placed solely on the shoulders of early primary teachers. No matter what grade we teach, we are all responsible for supporting our students as readers and thinkers. While primary teachers spend many instructional hours teaching students how to decode, many intermediate teachers are not investing the same amount of instructional time into the “thinking” part of reading. In fact, ten years ago, there wasn’t a lot of reading instruction going on in intermediate classrooms as a whole because many teachers, myself included, believed that students who walked through our doors in September already “knew how to read.” Our job, therefore, was not to *teach* reading but to *do* reading. And “doing” reading often meant providing students with passages to read and questions to answer. But something was missing. And that something, as it turns out, was instruction.

Over the past fifteen years, the passive, question–answer approach to reading comprehension has slowly given way to a more interactive, strategic approach to understanding text. Students are being asked to think about the text rather than to find the right answer in the text; to construct meaning based on experience and knowledge rather than on a literal understanding. Instrumental to this shift was P. David Pearson’s research into proficient readers and the work of other leading educators in the field, including Stephanie Harvey, Lucy Calkins, Debbie Miller, Harvey Daniels, Cris Tovani, Leyton Schnellert, and Faye Brownlie. I developed *Reading Power* as a way for teachers to teach specific comprehension strategies that help students develop a deeper understanding of text. This meta-cognitive approach helped take the abstract concept of thinking and turn it into

something tangible. Teachers were able to show specifically what thinking “looks like” through the Reading Power Model and what thinking “sounds like” through consistently modeling, practicing, and integrating a common language of thinking into their classrooms

Through the use of Reading Power and other strategic approaches, comprehension instruction has made its way into classrooms and schools across the country. Many students are no longer asked a series of comprehension questions after reading, but are being encouraged to interact with the text, question it, connect with it, visualize, and make inferences. As a result of this shift in instruction, students have developed strategies they can use to interact with text and construct meaning. Students no longer respond to text with a literal *retelling* but are demonstrating their understanding by an inferential *rethinking*. Essentially, they are learning that the thinking they hold in their heads is equally as powerful as the book they hold in their hands.

Revising comes from re-visioning, seeing something anew.

*So, why this book?* you may be wondering. Why the need to go further when Reading Power appears to be alive and well in school districts across the country? Well I, for one, am the kind of teacher who is constantly thinking “How can I make this better for my students?” My husband once said to me, “It must be very tiring living inside your head.” And while it is both a blessing and a curse to be in a constant state of reflection, it is the driving force behind all that I believe to be true about my own teaching journey: reflection leads to better teaching for me and better learning for my students. When I speak to teachers at workshops, I encourage them to “reflect and refine” their practice: look for the gaps, the holes, the this-doesn’t-seem-to-be-working moments. This practice has certainly led me to re-evaluate, rethink, and revise my own teaching practice. Yes, it is rewarding to see how the old assign-and-assess comprehension questions have evolved into comprehension instruction. Yes, it is exciting to see teachers using Reading Power and other approaches to teach students how to connect, question, visualize, infer, and transform their thinking when they read. Yes, it is exciting to see and hear students interacting with and thinking about the texts they are reading. But is it enough? Is it enough to simply have students making connections to this book or asking questions about that book? There has to be more to it. How can we take this foundation of strategic reading to a place of deeper understanding in all areas of learning? How can students apply these strategies to deepen their understanding of themselves, others, and the world? These are the questions I have asked myself many times over the past year. A desire to explore the concepts of deep understanding, critical literacy, and the application of knowledge has led me to an exciting new chapter in my learning journey.

I am a direct product of the literal-comprehension generation. I learned to memorize and regurgitate information extremely well because I was given a lot of practice. I could label a diagram of a frog, name the capital cities of Canada, and get 10 out of 10 on my weekly spelling test. But if you asked me to tell you how I thought frogs could survive all winter under a frozen lake, or how it was decided which city would be the capital, or to spell a word I hadn’t memorized, I was done for: head down, no-eye-contact, don’t pick me. Thinking was not something I knew how to do. If the answer wasn’t directly in the text, I didn’t answer. This is not because I wasn’t capable of thinking; it is more that I had never been shown how to think, nor encouraged to do so. It was not the fault of my teachers, just the reality of the way things were taught when I was in school.

Thirty years later, the world is a different place. The Internet has transformed our world into a vibrating buzz of information—you tap a fact, swipe a summary.



There is no point in asking students what the capital of Manitoba is because, in a split second, they can find any answer instead of having to learn it. There is no point in having kids research the parts of a frog because they can watch a two-minute makemegenius.com YouTube video on frog anatomy and they'll be set. The world has changed. And so our teaching needs to change. Our role as teachers is no longer to deliver the content—if, in fact, it ever was. Our role is to help students explore, question, develop, and reflect on their own understanding about that content. Rather than getting all the answers right, the goal is deeper, wider understanding.

The big question is *How do we do that?* For some teachers, releasing authority is unfamiliar territory. It is difficult to switch from covering the content to helping students uncover it. For other teachers, the approach allows them to be facilitators of learning, giving students more time to explore Inquiry Based Learning, or IBL. To the casual observer, IBL might look like a bit of a free-for-all: kids researching their own topics and discovering their own learning, while teachers take on the role of facilitator. But behind the scenes of a successful inquiry-based classroom is an enthusiastic teacher who is triggering curiosity and a hunger to learn; a teacher who understands that the path to deep learning is complex and messy; a teacher who encourages students to find new perspectives on age-old ideas; a teacher who not only is facilitating the researching of a variety of topics, but is also carefully, intentionally planting seeds to help students make connections to all aspects of the curriculum; a teacher who knows the difference between a literal project and a transformational one. These transformational “aha!” moments of reflection need to be the driving force of an inquiry-based classroom, or else there is the danger of students simply taking literal information they have discovered and presenting it disguised by a fancy app on their tablet, but without having deep understanding of it.

*Reading Power* provided teachers with a model to help students develop deeper understanding of what they are reading. *Powerful Understanding* hopes to provide teachers with a model to help students develop a deeper understanding of what they are learning.

### A Model for Powerful Understanding

“The best teachers are those who show you where to look, but don't tell you what to see.” —Alexandra K. Trenfor

During the last several years, my provincial curriculum has gone through a complete redesign, has been “modernized to respond to this demanding world.” With consultations with educational experts locally and internationally, the curriculum was designed to prepare students for the future, making it more student-centred and flexible, and supporting deeper learning, while still maintaining a focus on literacy and numeracy. All areas of learning are based on a Know-Do-Understand model to support a concept-based, competency-driven approach to learning. Deep understanding and application of knowledge are at the centre of the new model, replacing the memory and recall of facts that previously shaped the educational model. Because information is now instantly accessible to our students, it is more important than ever that we teach them how to develop a different set of skills. Three core competencies have been identified as essential for all learners: Communication, Thinking, and Personal and Social. These core competencies are intended to support students becoming “educated citizens and life-long learners” (BC Curriculum).

"The most important thing in Science is not so much to obtain new facts as to discover new ways of thinking about them." — Sir William Bragg, 1915 Nobel Prize winner in Physics

Teachers across the province are in the process of navigating through this new curriculum, with its new emphasis on a student-centred, inquiry-based approach to learning. We are moving from teaching students what to think to teaching them how to think. As my wise friend and colleague Mary Cottrell recently said to me, "We want our teaching to extend their world rather than limit it." Many educators are comfortable in the belief that the content is there to be uncovered by the students, rather than having to be covered by the teacher. For others, however, the shift is more challenging. Teachers who have been grounded in a more traditional content-driven, question-answer approach are finding the more flexible, student-centred model difficult to grasp and put into practice. While many can see the importance of making this pedagogical shift, what it actually looks like in a classroom is proving to be a challenge to envision.

It was suggested by our district that, in the first year of curriculum implementation, schools focus on one of the three core competencies, rather than all three. When our staff met, we elected to focus on the competency of thinking, specifically critical thinking. It is through their competency as thinkers that students take subject-specific concepts and content and transform them into a new understanding. Thinking competence includes specific thinking skills as well as habits of mind and metacognitive awareness.

We agreed that the common language of Reading Power in our school has made a huge impact on student learning; therefore, developing a common language for thinking would be an important first step in creating a schoolwide focus. To teach students to develop independent thinking skills that could be applied to any area of learning, it was important to create a model that was simple enough for students of all levels to use, yet sophisticated enough to develop higher understanding. I took on the task of creating a new model that could be visible in classrooms and help build a common language of thinking in the school. Like the Reading Power model, developed as a visual framework for thinking while you read, the Powerful Understanding model is a visual framework for thinking while you learn. This model is based on three levels or phases of developing critical thinking: exploring, interacting, and developing. I included an interjection to help prompt students thinking at each phase.

### THE POWERFUL UNDERSTANDING MODEL

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