It's all about
thinking

Collaborating to Support All Learners

IN ENGLISH, SOCIAL STUDIES, AND HUMANITIES

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Dedication
To all those teachers who have taken a risk to work with colleagues.

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Introduction

Picture this scenario: a staff development consultant; eight secondary teachers; their first meeting; a 75-minute block of time to plan together before the consultant leads a class of grade-8 students in a demonstration lesson for another 75 minutes; and the lesson that has just been co-planned with the teachers. Following the demonstration, the teachers and the staff-development consultant meet together to discuss the lesson, consider what worked, what did not work, and what to do next. The consultant opens by asking, "What do you hope to learn today?" There is a moment of silence, then one of the teachers, with crossed arms, responds, "How long have you been doing this new kind of teaching?"

There is the rub. What is "this new kind of teaching"? What does this teacher expect is going to happen? When she signed on to participate in this professional-development sequence, what was the phrase that caught her attention?

We believe that this is a scenario that is common for many teachers. There is no shortage of good and great ideas to help us become more effective teachers. Opening publishers' catalogues, scanning conference programs, taking courses at university all offer a wide range of possibilities—learning strategies, differentiation, assessment for learning, backward design, inquiry, professional learning communities. What is the right focus? What makes the greatest difference? How do you choose? What makes one approach different from another? What is good teaching?

It's All About Thinking attempts to address these questions. We believe that the glue that holds our classes together is "thinking"—thoughtful teachers and thoughtful students. Teachers have to make countless decisions based on their knowledge of their students, their knowledge of curriculum, and their knowledge of instruction. Their ultimate goal is to help students develop as thinkers who use their knowledge to problem solve, to act wisely.

It's All About Thinking will show you ways to get to know your students. It will show you how to use this knowledge in planning your instruction. It

will show you ways to use the curriculum in Social Studies, Humanities, and English Language Arts, alone or together in grades 5 to 12, to nurture thinking.

Chapters 1 to 4 explain our big ideas and beliefs. These beliefs have been developed through our work in classrooms rich in diversity, in heterogeneous classrooms with students who have a wide range of abilities, and in classrooms that include many English-language learners. To best address the learning needs of these students, we believe in collaboration — teachers working together, co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing. We believe that it is necessary for teachers to develop a personal mental model of learning that they use to filter the plethora of good ideas available for their teaching.

Chapters 5 to 12 offer classroom scenarios. In each chapter, a teacher or teacher team presents a series of lessons or a unit of study. Woven throughout each lesson are instructional choices they have made. These include differentiated instruction, backward design, assessment for learning, open-ended strategies, gradual release of responsibility, cooperative learning, literature circles and information circles, and inquiry. No one chapter includes all the options, yet each includes Universal Design for Learning, assessment for learning, and open-ended strategies. This is the strength of our profession. Teachers making personal choices, based on their students, their curriculum, and their instruction preferences. There is no one right way. Teachers, too, are thinking. *It's All About Thinking* will help you browse conference programs and courses of study to make personal, professional choices that will have the greatest impact on your students' learning. How you put together your blend of approaches for your students is what creates the impact.

We invite you to use and adapt the ideas, units, and lessons we offer in this book. The scenarios described take place in BC classrooms in which teachers use the BC curriculum and BC Performance Standards. Although the curriculum and performance standards we mention may differ somewhat from those in your school district, consider them a jumping-off point.

Let us return to the scenario. After some questions and answers, we discovered that the teacher with crossed arms thought that we were "doing" *differentiation* that day and wondered if it was different from the *diversity* that they had "done" last year. We are not "doing" any approach. *It's All About Thinking* shows what happens when teachers draw different frameworks and approaches together in order to create the best of teaching — for them, at this time, with this particular group of students. Good luck with your teaching!

Chapter 1

Meeting the Needs of All Learners

> Nothing can be taught unless it has the potential of making sense to the
> learner, and learning itself is nothing but the endeavour to make sense.
> (Frank Smith 1978)

Teaching is complex and intriguing. Each semester and each school year
begins a new journey, often toward a familiar destination but never along
the same route. It is the learners who determine our route, who cause us
to revise our travel plans and detour toward unexpected surprises, to hurry
through known territory, and to linger longer in other areas. It is the learners
who help us visit known sights with fresh eyes and expand our horizons.
It is the learners who engage with our curriculum, who engage and develop
because of our relationship with them, who make teaching worthwhile.
Today's learners are more diverse than they have ever been. They hold the
promise of tomorrow, and they are today's challenge.

Who Are the Learners?

Today's classrooms are diverse. Yet students have *always* had different learning
styles and different rates of learning. In the past, to address different learning
needs, students were often segregated based on their differences. Students
who learned at a slower pace were placed in a class with similar students.
Students who had learning difficulties or disabilities may have been placed
in a separate class. Students who had difficulty with impulse control and
behaviour management could have been in yet a different class. Sometimes,
these classes were in the home school of the student; sometimes they were not.
Sometimes the placement was for part of a day; sometimes it was a full-time
placement. One of the challenges was Who is in and who is out, and what is
the cut-off? The intent was to better address the learning needs of all students
and leave the teacher with a more homogeneous and, thus, more teachable

group, but classroom teachers recognized that diversity still remained in their classes. There were still students who learned differently and at different rates.

In recent years, other groups of students have added to the diversity in our classrooms. One emerging group is made up of students whose first language is not English, those who may be learning English as a second, a third, or even a fourth, language. In the past, more students tended to share a common first language and a common culture. Canada's 2006 Census data show that one in five Canadians is born abroad, the highest foreign-born population since the Depression. Canada is now home to citizens from 200 different countries who still speak 150 different languages (Statistics Canada 2006). Children from all these countries arrive in our schools.

Within this group, there is wide disparity. Some of the students have attended schools, but some have not. Some students have been living in refugee camps for several years and might even have been born there. The experience of just entering a school building is new to them.

Another group of students whose unique learning needs are becoming more recognized are Aboriginal learners. From 1951 to 2001, Canada's population doubled; in the same 50 years, the Aboriginal population increased seven times. Although the Aboriginal population makes up 3.5 per cent of the population in Canada, 30 per cent of Aboriginal children live in homes on welfare; this figure is 50 per cent in British Columbia, and 80 per cent in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan (Calvin Helin, Rural Schools Conference, Vancouver, BC, October 2008). Across Canada, there is great disparity between the graduation rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. In BC, 80 per cent of non-Aboriginal students graduate but only 48 per cent of Aboriginal students graduate; across Canada, 71.5 per cent of non-Aboriginals graduate from high school, but only 57.7 per cent of Aboriginals graduate from high school. Not graduating correlates with poorer health and lower economic prosperity. We are failing this group of students. They, too, must be recognized and included in our discussions of diversity.

Finally, children of poverty make up a third group of diverse students. They often go hungry; they lack the background experiences that align easily with the curriculum; and they feel disenfranchised. To help break the cycle of poverty, they, too, need access to a quality curriculum. According to Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, British Columbia's Representative for Children and Youth, a recent study in that province found that children whose families were on welfare were more likely to become involved in crime than they were to graduate (Making Connections Conference, Richmond, BC, November 2008). This research and the research of Doug Willms suggest that this trend can be broken if students form attachments with adults at school, if they learn meaningful pro-social behaviour, and if they have access to equality in their school curriculum, that is, if they are exposed to and can access the same high-quality content and courses as their peers (Willms 2002).

As a consequence of policies of inclusion and of recognition that all students have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment and to be with their peers, all these students are now found in regular classrooms. We believe that all students belong in regular classrooms, engaged in high-quality, thoughtful learning experiences with their peers while pursuing a complex, meaningful curriculum. We begin our planning with all students in mind and with the conviction that our planning for a full range of learner strengths and styles means that more students will have opportunities to be successful more of the time, and that fewer adaptations and modifications will be required for students with special needs. This is the essence of Universal Design for Learning (which is discussed in more detail in chapter 4).

Today's classrooms present a challenge: How do we best address the wide range of learners' needs — academic, social, and emotional? How do we build a community of learners who, as a result of working together, are more individually able than they would have been working alone? How do we prepare our students to be the best they can be in a complex, ever-changing world? What can we do in the classroom to make a difference for *all* learners? To answer some of the questions, we turn to the research.

What Makes a Difference for Adolescent Learners?

What helps adolescents learn more effectively? What can we do to better meet their needs? The Carnegie Corporation Report of 2004, *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa and Snow), outlines a collection of needs and promising practices that teachers can focus on and that, when common in classrooms, will heighten the learning of all students. This report delineates 15 attributes, nine of which are "instructional improvements" and six of which are "infrastructural improvements." Threaded through these areas are two common themes:

1. All learners can benefit from purposeful, engaging instruction.
2. More learning takes place in classrooms that focus on and nurture students as readers, writers, and thinkers.

Using the promising practices in *Reading Next* as a jumping-off point, we interpret the instructional needs of adolescents as in the following nine ways:

1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction

Frank Smith (2006) described learning to read as an apprenticeship. Young readers are welcomed into the club by working side by side with a mentor and learning the skills of the trade. We must continue this apprenticeship beyond the primary and intermediate grades. In order to learn how to read (that is, to comprehend, respond, and analyze) complex texts of different genres in different subject areas, students in the middle and senior years should continue the apprenticeship. Teachers, as mentors, show what goes

on in their minds as they read for meaning and understanding. How does a scientist, a statistician, a critic, a historian read? Students can learn this from teachers who work in those disciplines day after day. They must learn the skills of comprehension and analysis within the context of each discipline, what the skills are, what they look like, and how to do them.

Ellin Keene (2008) is a teacher-researcher who has described key comprehension strategies of effective readers and writers. Like others, she points out that good readers use these strategies to understand. Her list includes:

- monitoring meaning
- using relevant prior knowledge and schema
- asking questions
- inferring
- evoking images
- determining importance in text
- synthesizing

No list of comprehension strategies is a recipe for teaching. Keene's list of strategies can provide a helpful starting point as it sets us up to consider what we do when we are comprehending and how we will make this explicit to our students. As Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube (2001) remind us, the explicit teaching of these reading comprehension strategies is important only when the strategies help students construct personally meaningful understandings—they are not strategies for their own sake.

2. Effective instructional principles embedded in content

Students need to work with and learn effective reading, writing, and thinking strategies in all areas of the curriculum. Researchers such as Lenz and Deshler (2004) have found that students often do not generalize these thinking skills across units of study, let alone across subjects and contexts. Thus the explicit teaching of these strategies needs to happen in many settings and as part of the criteria for what successful thinkers and learners are expected to do and get better at. Students need to be taught how to make sense of all their different texts—poems in English classes, labs in science classes, recipes in home economics, primary sources in history, maps in geography, problems and applications in mathematics, images in art, and so on.

Effective instruction follows a pattern called the "gradual release of responsibility," which includes:

- model
- guided practice
- independent practice
- independent application (BCELA IRP 2006; Pearson and Gallagher 1983)

This gradual release of responsibility supports all learners:

- First the teacher models the thinking of how to make meaning from the text. This includes setting a purpose for students' reading, often in relation to a learning task. To introduce helpful ways to work with text they usually "think aloud," verbalizing for students how to determine, sort, and compare relevant information and ideas.
- Then opportunities are provided for students to think aloud with partners or in small groups, giving one another feedback on how they are working through their thinking. The teacher supports and coaches this phase.
- Then the students begin to work with the strategy or approach independently, still within the established framework for teaching and learning.
- Ultimately, the teacher looks for independent application of what has been taught. For this to happen, opportunities need to exist beyond the day's assignment, for the students to demonstrate—without teacher guidance—their independent use of the strategy.

Most importantly, students need opportunities to monitor their use of thinking strategies in gradual release and to make links between how and why they are used in different tasks and settings. (This and other key instructional principles are explained further in the next sections.)

3. Motivation and self-directed learning

Motivation affects engagement, the key to all learning. Motivation is often directly related to the quality of the relationship that a student has with the teacher. It is also related to the student's sense of voice and choice in the classroom. When all control seems to exist other than within the student, students may have difficulty maintaining their motivation for learning. For example, some approaches that inherently have more choice built in include literature and information circles, inquiry learning, teaching with and to multiple intelligences, open-ended teaching, and readers' and writers' workshops.

Within any of these instructional approaches, opportunities to set personal goals and to be involved in self-assessment make a difference in student literacy learning. This does not mean just asking the questions What do you want to learn? or How do you want to learn this? For most students, these questions are too broad.

Building opportunities for students to assess their own thinking and learning against shared criteria is one of the most effective ways to help students develop skills in metacognition—that is, thinking about their own thinking and learning. As students learn to use metacognition, they begin to make and monitor personalized plans for their growth. As teachers provide support and feedback to students, the students become greater agents of their own learning. This leads them to self-direct and to self-regulate, or monitor, their own learning.

4. Text-based collaborative learning

To build their repertoire of thinking strategies and develop content knowledge, students need opportunities to work both alone and in collaboration with others. Strategies that enable students to read together and to construct understandings of the text help move students beyond the limits of their own experience. Effective paired and group structures help students link their learning with others, pose questions, and dig more deeply as they socially construct their knowledge and understandings of text.

5. Strategic tutoring

Some students require more time and more specific teaching in order to reach the curricular outcomes. Allow time for this specific teaching to happen. Some of the additional time and specific teaching may occur in the regular class or in after-hour tutorials, while more intensive needs will be met in additional programming. In many middle and secondary schools, students view the resource centre as a place to get help with their homework. This is often just "getting through stuff" rather than building and increasing relevant skills such as how to synthesize the key ideas from information text. To narrow the achievement gap for students, structures must be created to help students learn and develop critical skills that they can then apply independently. This may range from an additional course to a tutorial, but the focus is on increasing literacy skill, not just on completing an assignment. Too many students have been heard to say, "Just help me get this assignment done. Don't teach me!"

6. Diverse texts

Richard Allington posed the question "How can you learn from texts you can't read?" (2001). This is a common concern. Far too often, students sit in classes where everyone has the same textbook. They are expected to first be interested in it, then be able to read it. However, the readability of many of our texts is far beyond the reading level of our students. These students could learn the content *if* it were presented with a more accessible text. Learning the content with accessible text would build a student's background knowledge and then allow them to tackle more challenging text. But this is a Catch-22 situation. As long as we stay tied to one text for all students, we limit the literacy and content learning of a large group of students. This is also true in English Language Arts classes, but we are seeing a strong movement toward teachers working with literature circles for part of the time, greatly increasing the amount of reading being done by students (Brownlie 2005). Information circles and inquiry learning are two approaches that teachers are using with non-fiction texts to engage students by offering a range in text complexity *and* further engaging students by offering choice.

7. Intensive writing

Students need the opportunity to write intensively, to write *connected text*—that is, text that requires them to generate ideas and to link these ideas through writing. Writing helps them clarify their thinking and hold their thinking, on paper or on the computer, while they reflect on it and polish it, alone and with others. Students need to write to make sense of what they are reading, to respond to what they are reading, and to reflect on their reading. Writing, not rote copying or filling in quick answers to someone else's questions, is a constructive, meaning-making process. In *Writing Next* (2006), Graham and Perin reviewed the scientific research on what makes a difference in improving writing for students in grades 4 to 12. Their research highlights such factors as writing strategies, summarization, collaborative writing, establishing specific product goals, word processing, sentence combining, pre-writing, inquiry, process writing, studying models of writing, and writing across the content areas.

As with any aspect of learning, engagement is the key. These factors to improve writing work in concert to increase student engagement and understanding of how to develop their own thinking and how to connect, synthesize, and apply the concepts they are learning about.

8. A technology component

Computers, web pages, and online journals are all examples of the information and communications technology that can open the world to learners. Literacy development is enhanced by the use of technology as a means of accessing, demonstrating, and expanding thinking. Technology is not simply a fancy pencil for recording or a sophisticated tool that provides drill and practice. Nor is it solely a means to fast-track a conversation, for example by twittering or blogging or instant messaging. Nor is it just for entertainment. The use of technology must be based on the same sound educational principles as in any other learning situation. And as with any other new learning situation, learning has a social aspect, so interaction, partners, and conversation should be included with technology. A group of teachers in West Vancouver were involved in a laptop research project with their grade 7 students. One teacher stated, "One of the surprises of this project has been how much more interaction time I have had with my students. They are so engaged with their work that I can move from student to student, coaching and providing specific feedback. I hadn't expected this. There are simply no management issues, and I have so much more time to teach."

9. Ongoing formative assessment of students

Black and Wiliam's (1998) study of formative assessment practices for the Assessment Research Group (ARG) clarifies how teachers are changing their assessment practices to emphasize formative assessment. With formative

assessment, teachers use the information gained from classroom work, daily assignments, interviews, conferences, and snapshots of student performance to guide their teaching and their students' learning. This assessment is called assessment *for* learning. Its main purpose is to guide instruction. With formative assessment, students become more aware of the required expectations and more involved in giving feedback to themselves and others on their progress toward these expectations. Involving students in formative assessment has been shown to increase student learning and raise achievement.

We consider the following questions when we look at how assessment informs instruction from a teaching perspective:

- What can my students do?
- What is missing? *or* What do they still need to learn?
- What do I need to teach?
- Is my teaching making a difference?
- If not, what do I need to teach now? Do I teach in a different way, or move on?

As mentioned earlier, we know that student learning is greatly enhanced when teachers focus on student metacognition and goal-setting. We consider the following questions when we look at how assessment informs learning from a student's perspective:

- What am I able to do, considering the criteria for success?
- What is missing? *or* What do I need to learn?
- What is my plan for learning?
- Who can help me?

Meeting the Needs

So what do effective teachers do? What works in classrooms? These are our four key beliefs:

1. Teachers need a mental model of effective learning

The mental model of effective learning works as a lens. Through this lens, information is viewed—new strategies, new programs, new curriculum, new assessment tools, and new mandates. Teachers use their mental model to describe to others—and to themselves when planning and reflecting—what they value in learning and what works in their classrooms. They use their model to examine information to see how it fits with their beliefs. If it doesn't, they either discard the new information or rework it in order to make it fit. Consider, for example, a teacher working with literature circles in her classroom. A colleague volunteers to share a shiny, updated, levelled reading kit with her. The colleague presents the kit because she knows that the teacher is trying to work with multiple levels of texts in her room. The kit even has an assessment tool that tells her "exactly where the kids are at and monitors their

progress!" The classroom teacher appreciates the multiple texts presented in the kit but does not want her students reading short passages and answering someone else's questions, especially in a multiple choice format. She does not see these as authentic or engaging reading tasks and does not see the assessment as based on her view of reading. If she uses the kit at all, it will be with a strategy focus, such as finding the key idea of a passage and having the students choose which passage they want to read in order to practise the strategy of finding the key idea.

2. Open-ended strategies support all learners

Purposeful, constructive activities that teachers engage in to link their students and their experiences with the content of the curriculum, prepare students to construct understanding. When planning instruction, the teacher takes into consideration the learners in her class and the curriculum expectations to design strategic learning sequences that will assist the learners in moving from their current learning place to another learning place as described in the curriculum. This requires knowing the learner, knowing the curriculum, and knowing how best to facilitate the learning.

To help students construct their personal understandings, we divide our strategies into three categories, based on their purpose:

1. connecting
2. processing
3. transforming and personalizing

Figure 1.1 Planning open-ended strategies

Strategy Category	Strategy Purpose
Connecting	• Connect to others and to curriculum content • Access and activate background knowledge • Acquire and build background knowledge
Processing	• Interact with new ideas, build understanding by adding on new information and revising former information
Transforming/Personalizing	• Showing acquired information in personalized, thoughtful ways

Figure 1.1 captures our view of planning. We try to work with collaborative strategies as much as possible, to capitalize on the social aspect of learning. We want all students to connect what they and others already know to the ideas and concepts they will be studying. We often start a learning sequence by asking students to predict, link, and/or compare key words, ideas, or relationships before engaging with new content. These are connecting strategies, helping students build from what they know. Next we use processing strategies to help students build the comprehension and analysis skills that they need to successfully use, link, and compare key information from the new

texts with what they knew previously. Students might be asked to record or highlight a key word for the paragraph and find three other words that provide details related to this key word. Processing strategies can be used with all kinds of texts — print, media, visual, and oral. Finally, we use transforming strategies. We want our students to take information and be able to synthesize and represent it in a way that shows that they have taken important, relevant ideas and understood them enough to transform them, and, when possible, interpret the information in their own way.

We develop and choose open-ended and collaborative strategies with all the learners in mind. These strategies are open-ended in that they do not ask students to find the "right" answer but rather require students to make connections, process information, and transform the information in a variety of ways. Working with open-ended strategies leaves room for us to scaffold learning based on the strengths and needs of the individual students within the class. The strategies are collaborative in that they require students to share their thinking at several points along the way — both teaching and learning from one another — as all ideas are welcome, and understandings are refined over time. In designing instruction this way, we find that we need to make fewer adaptations and modifications for the diverse learners in our class. This allows us more time for both whole-class teaching, small-group coaching, and individual conferencing. More students are included as members of the learning community and are exposed to quality teaching rather than working on separate packages of material designed for them as individuals and/or removed from the classroom learning context. For us, a supportive classroom is one that welcomes and celebrates learners and is designed to encourage all of its community members as strategic thinkers.

3. Collaboration counts

All teachers, no matter what their role in a school is, work in exceedingly complex jobs. We believe that such complexity is decreased when we work together. Michael Fullan (2004) says that the ability to collaborate is one of the core requirements of postmodern society. He believes that, without collaborative skills and relationships, it is not possible for students to learn and to continue to learn as much as they need in life beyond the classroom. This is as true for adults as it is for students! Collaboration can come in the form of co-planning, co-assessing, or co-teaching. In all forms, teachers work together as equals, bringing their unique and complementary skills together to create a stronger whole. Hourcade and Bauwens (2002) see the model of one educator teaching alone in one classroom for the entire day, trying to meet the needs of all students, as no longer appropriate. Professional collaboration is the way of the future, and cooperative teaching is at the forefront of professional collaboration. Collaboration opportunities include resource teacher and classroom teachers working together, or two or more classroom teachers working together. The teaching scenarios in this book have all been developed collaboratively.

4. All students belong in the regular classroom

We begin planning with all students in mind, then build in further adaptations and modifications as necessary. As much as possible, resource teachers focus on supporting the work of the regular classroom. We consider resource teachers to include all non-enrolling teachers whose job it is to support atypical learners. These may include learning assistance teachers, special education teachers, English as an Additional Language teachers, English as Second Dialect teachers, librarians. This does not preclude strategic tutoring outside the classroom but does change the focus of the program design. The initial question in planning for students with special needs is *not* Whom should I see? What should I do? It *is* Let's build a class profile, set class goals, examine our lesson design, and then see who will need additional support and how this can best be given. Whenever possible, the focus of the intervention should be in the classroom, scaffolding student learning to the curriculum content and the classroom context. Most important is that teams set shared goals for all students and work to address how teaching and learning sequences can be designed for maximum impact. Then the classroom and resource teachers think about the time they have at their disposal and their own strengths and skills, and work to build support for students accordingly. A resource teacher's role might include:

- **team teaching lessons in the class**, where both teachers have interchangeable roles leading lesson sequences, checking in with small groups, creating adaptations and modifications within the sequences to scaffold specific students' learning
- **complementary instruction**, where each teacher takes on specific aspects of the lesson, for example, one teacher prepares the strategy sequence and a graphic organizer, while the other finds a range of texts and adapts the sequence and organizer for various students
- **supplementary instruction,** where one teacher takes the lead in large-group instruction and the second teacher works with small groups to pre-teach, re-teach, or deepen understanding

These and many other configurations involve planning together with the diverse needs of all learners in mind, and they involve a commitment to giving students engaging, coherent learning opportunities. Thus, working together in the regular class ensures that all students receive foundational content, modelled strategy instruction, and collaborative learning opportunities. In instances where support occurs outside the classroom, it is still with the same goals in mind.