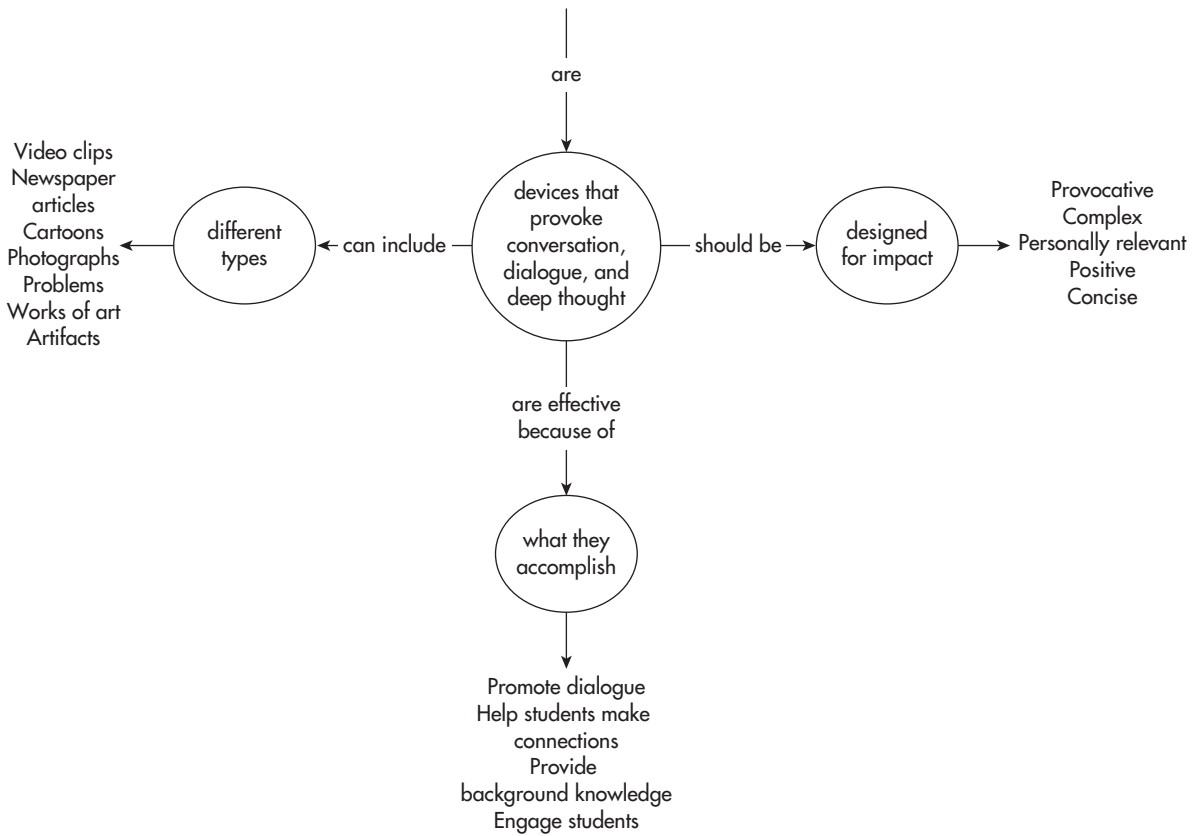


## Chapter 5: Thinking Prompts



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# 5

## THINKING PROMPTS

*How can one learn the truth by thinking? As one learns to see a face better if one draws it.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

*Thinking is where intelligent actions begin. We pause long enough to look more carefully at a situation, to see more of its character, to think about why it's happening, to notice how it's affecting us and others.*

—Margaret Wheatley

Instructional coach Shelly McBeth and language arts teacher Juli Watson worked together at Highland Park Secondary School in Topeka, Kansas. Shelly lit up when she talked about her experiences coaching Juli. “She is fabulous. Very creative . . . very constructivist. She is hyperkinetic almost. She is always doing something, always on the move, always wanting to go further. Teachers, students, everyone, she wants everyone to go deeper.”

Juli and Shelly shared a deep commitment to the students at Highland Park. Many of the students faced significant challenges, with more than 88% receiving free or reduced-price lunch. “They are the students who need the most,” Shelly said, “because they have the least.”

Juli chose to work with Shelly because she wanted her students to have a deeper understanding of the novel they were reading, and through that novel, she wanted them to have a deeper appreciation of

and love for reading in general. “Juli,” Shelly told me, “wanted her students to know that there are elements woven throughout a story that make it richer and that if you understand what those elements are, you learn how to read a book and see the deeper meanings in the symbolism, themes, and relationships.” In short, Juli wanted her students to love reading.

Juli chose *November’s Blues* for her students to read. The novel’s author, Sharon M. Draper, explains on her website that she wrote the book because she believes young adults need to read material that “recognizes that teenagers live in a stressful and confusing world and face difficult decisions every day. Instead of avoiding issues they must deal with,” the author said, “I choose to address the problems they might encounter through fictional characters and situations” (Sharon Draper’s comments were taken from the website [sharondraper.com](http://sharondraper.com)).

Juli believed her students would better understand how to read if they personally connected with the story. She bought extra copies of the novel so that all students could read their own book instead of having to share copies, and she even persuaded the author to fly from Ohio and spend a day at Highland Park to meet the students and discuss her work.

After talking about the novel with her instructional coach, Juli wanted Shelly to help her use thinking prompts as a way to provide important background knowledge—an understanding of the blues—and to help students connect with the novel. Juli was afraid that her students would not understand the many references to the blues throughout the novel, so she used some blues songs as thinking prompts, playing the songs and asking students to describe how the music made them feel and how the music related to what the main character in the book, November, experienced. Shelly explained:

Music was an important factor, and Juli wanted her students to really understand the duality of the blues throughout the book. But it wasn’t just about the music. It wasn’t just music for the sake of being music. It was . . . there is that kind of weighty, mourning, kind of bluesy emotion that was very indicative of what the main character was feeling at the time. You know, the blues is usually about somebody who has been done wrong and whose life sucks, and Juli wanted her students to understand what the music was saying about what November was feeling. That is, there was a dual purpose to the music.

Blues music was one form of thinking prompt, but Juli also wanted to help students connect with November and her decisions. To do that, she and Shelly decided to use clips from the movie *Juno* as thinking prompts for classroom discussion about critical points in the novel. For example, Juli showed a scene where Juno, the movie's main character, told her parents she was pregnant, and the students discussed how difficult that experience might be.

Thanks to the thinking prompts, Shelly said, "there were wonderful classroom discussions around the clips about such things as social stigma and how it would feel if you were in November's position." By the end of the unit, informal assessments showed that the students had made significant gains in their learning. While the pretest results demonstrated that students didn't understand the blues or realize how understanding literary features could enhance reading, students' posttest scores were dramatically better. In fact, perhaps because they connected with the book, Shelly said, "many of the kids went on to read Sharon Draper's entire series of books."

Another teacher who uses thinking prompts masterfully is Mark Bulgutch, a professor at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. Mark was the chief editor for *The National*, Canada's top nighttime news program on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and he occasionally taught courses within the journalism program at Ryerson. Since *The National* was the most-watched news show in Canada, and since Mark's job was to decide what would and would not be shown on the program, he played an important role in shaping what was news in Canada.

I watched Mark teach at Ryerson University, where I was also teaching at the time. His classes ignited fiery discussion and dialogue among future journalists, media liaisons, or public relations experts as they considered what news should (and should not) be shown on television. His classes led students to significant breakthroughs in their understandings, and yet he provided no direct instruction or lecturing.

What he did, instead, in his courses was simple in conception but sophisticated in reality. Mark showed provocative film clips of newsworthy items and then asked the students to talk about whether or not each clip should be shown on the news. I watched these lessons on numerous occasions, and each time, the conversation was so animated that it almost took my breath away. The discussions were so intense and powerful that course leaders sometimes scheduled two-hour breaks after Mark's class so students could cool down.

Mark was careful to pick video clips that were powerful, provocative, emotional—and sometimes profound, sometimes trivial. One clip

that I will never forget showed a mother in JFK airport at the very instant she found out that her daughter had died in a plane crash. The mother's reaction was, as you can imagine, agonizing, intimate, and incredibly personal, the camera capturing every one of her movements at one of the most vulnerable points in her life. The talk in the classroom following the clip was dizzying. Some students were adamant that such a personal moment should never be shown on TV because showing the clip would be a violation of the grieving mother's right to some semblance of privacy. Others were just as convinced that the clip should be shown since it showed the intense personal consequences of real news, the weight of grief felt by those who have lost a loved one. "If you don't show the clip," they would say, "you are editing and sanitizing the news before anyone sees it."

Mark didn't tell the students what to think. He used video clips that prompted them to think and then created an opportunity for students to explore the boundaries of their own journalistic principles. Because of Mark's thinking prompts, and the dialogue they provoked, most students left the class with a much deeper understanding of their own beliefs about what constitutes news.

When I wrote Mark about his experiences teaching the class, he sent the following email: "There are usually a few students who come up to me when it's over to tell me it was the most meaningful day they've spent in college. THAT is rewarding."

## What Are Thinking Prompts?

Both Juli Watson and Mark Bulgutch used video clips as thinking prompts, and for reasons discussed below, video clips, used effectively, are very effective catalysts for thought and dialogue. However, a thinking prompt, as I define it, can be any device a teacher puts in front of students to prompt thinking, discussion, and dialogue. Thinking prompts can include video clips, newspaper articles or columns, cartoons, photographs, problems, works of art, and artifacts. Even individual words can be used as thinking prompts. What matters is that the prompt, whatever form it takes, provokes discussion, dialogue, and thought. Below, we will take a look at some of the most powerful thinking prompts, including film clips, cases, short stories, poems, works of art, newspaper articles and columns, and advertisements.

**Film Clips.** As Juli Watson and Mark Bulgutch's classes showed, film clips can be powerful thinking prompts because they tend to engage students fully. Teachers can use short films to augment student learning in every subject area. For example, video can be used to help elementary

students understand place value and to introduce high school students to statistics, to provide a context for a kindergarten story about sharing, or to prompt discussion among seniors about women's rights.

**Cases.** Cases, perhaps most famously developed by Harvard Business School, can also serve as effective thinking prompts. Business cases, often used in higher education, are short narratives that describe an individual or an organization at an important point in professional or personal life. As Golich, Boyer, Franko, and Lamy have written (2000), "cases recount, as objectively and meticulously as possible, real events or problems so that the reader relives the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties confronted by the original participants in the case" (p. 1). A case, Swanson, Elliott, and Harmon (2011) suggest,

represents a type of dilemma or problem that arises with some frequency. The dilemmas themselves and the factors that contribute to their complexity provide the grist for focusing discussions, debates, and collaborative learning. (pp. 8–9)

But students don't have to go to Harvard to learn from cases. Teachers can prompt thought by using cases that put students at the heart of important decisions in any subject area. Students could read and discuss cases that depict people confronting environmental or ethical issues or that present mathematical problems students need to resolve.

The case format can also be used to prompt discussion of historical events or literary works. Students reading about westward migration in the United States, for example, could discuss real-life decisions that pioneers would have had to make during their journey west, and students reading novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* could discuss the complicated decisions the characters face at critical points in the works.

**Short Stories.** Teachers have always used short stories as thinking prompts, though they probably didn't refer to them in that way. For example, many teachers have used Richard Connell's *The Most Dangerous Game* as a catalyst for discussion of ethical principles related to the sanctity of life. Others have used Raymond Carver's *A Small, Good Thing* (Rubenstein, 2005) to prompt discussion of issues related to compassion, forgiveness, or community. Like cases, stories take readers inside others' thinking, and as such, they can help students reconsider their own thinking about any issue described in a case.

**Poems.** Poems can also serve as thinking prompts for discussing whatever topic is addressed by a poem, which can be pretty much anything. Thus, the issues raised by poets can range from ethics, as prompted by

Earl Birney’s “David,” to love, as prompted by E. E. Cummings’ “Somewhere I Have Travelled, Gladly Beyond,” to the impact technology may have on our lives, as in Wendell Berry’s “How to Be a Poet,” or to eating someone else’s grapes in the refrigerator, as in William Carlos Williams’ “This Is Just to Say.” Indeed, Billy Collins’ poem “Introduction to Poetry” is a great thinking prompt for discussing what poetry is and how we should experience it.

**Photographs.** Simple photographs can prompt spirited and meaningful discussion and dialogue. Photographs of environmental disasters or the impact of climate change shown in science or social studies classrooms, for example, can lead to lively discussion about ethical actions of businesses or policy decisions of governments. Historical photographs, such as those from the civil rights marches, can be used to provoke students to think more deeply about the significance of events or to provide a context for deeper student understanding. When used effectively as a thinking prompt, a photograph can be worth much more than a thousand words.

**Words and Metaphors.** Even single words can function as thinking prompts. If a teacher writes the word “respect” on the white board, for example, and asks students for their opinion on what the word means, she is using the word as a thinking prompt.

Metaphors, too, can be powerful thinking prompts. In his book *Imaginization* (1993), organizational theorist Gareth Morgan suggests that we use metaphors to broaden our thinking about topics or think more creatively by

pursuing the implications of a resonant image or metaphor to develop new insights that can help us organize in new ways. . . . [Using metaphors as thinking prompts] . . . allows us to break free of the constraints of traditional thinking and to create the opportunity for new behaviors rooted in a new image of what one is doing. (p. 87)

As should be clear, there are many different kinds of thinking prompts, and there are also many reasons why teachers should consider using them.

## Why Use Thinking Prompts?

**They Promote Dialogue.** Dialogue occurs when people use conversation to dig deeply into a topic and explore ideas with others. As David

Bohm (1996) has written, dialogue is “thinking together.” Since dialogue is a way of communicating, where there is equality between speakers, where ideas are shared, and where every person’s ideas are respected, dialogue changes the way teachers approach facilitating learning in the classroom.

Bohm’s short book *On Dialogue* (1996) is a concise introduction to this way of interacting. Bohm uncovers the etymology of the word “dialogue,” explaining that the original Greek meaning of “logos” is “meaning” and that the original Greek meaning of “dia” is “through.” Thus, dialogue is a form of communication in which meaning moves back and forth between and through people. Bohm explains:

The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a *stream of meaning* flowing among and through us and between us . . . out of which will emerge some new understanding. It’s something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It’s something creative. And this *shared meaning* is the “glue” or “cement” that holds people and societies together. (p. 1)

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) describes the dialogical approach to learning that he developed while working mostly with illiterate and impoverished workers in Brazil. Freire rejects traditional forms of teaching where the teacher tells the students what to do and learn, what he calls “banking education,” and instead proposes problem-posing learning, where teacher and learner work together as partners. Problem-posing learning is dialogical, designed to free students through reflection, not fill them with facts.

Freire sees thinking prompts, which he refers to as “cognizable objects,” as powerful tools for creating a setting where dialogue is possible. Freire writes:

The cognizable object . . . intermediates the cognitive actors—teacher on the one hand and students on the other. . . . Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. (p. 67)

Thinking prompts decentralize the classroom; that is, they turn students’ attention away from the teacher to something else, such as a film clip, a poem, or a newspaper column, that everyone can comment on equally, whether teacher or student. While the teacher mediates discussion, maintains some focus, mediates conflict, and calls



attention to connections, in a real sense, the teacher is a learner, a participant in the dialogue just like the students. When true dialogue occurs, teachers can be as swept up in the conversation as the students are.

Parker Palmer (2009) writes about the power of thinking prompts, which he refers to as “third things,” to promote dialogue and meaningful conversation. According to Palmer, teachers can use thinking prompts to explore topics metaphorically

via a poem, a story, a piece of music, or a work of art that embodies it [the topic for discussion]. I call these embodiments “third things” because they represent neither the voice of the facilitator nor the voice of the participant. . . . Mediated by a third thing, truth can emerge from, and return to, our awareness at whatever pace and depth we are able to handle—sometimes inwardly in silence, sometimes aloud in community—giving the shy soul the protective cover it needs.

Rightly used, a third thing functions a bit like the old Rorschach inkblot test, evoking from us whatever the soul wants us to attend to. (pp. 92–93)

**They Help Students Make Connections.** Teachers today recognize that they can increase student learning by increasing students’ ability to see connections with and between the various knowledge, skills, and big ideas they are learning. Juli Watson, mentioned earlier in the chapter, for example, used thinking prompts in her class to make it easier for students to connect with the experiences of November, the central character in the novel they were reading.

Researchers on reading have long emphasized the importance of students making connections. Keene and Zimmeran (1997), for example, discussed the importance of text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. As Cris Tovani has written (2000), readers get a lot more out of reading when they make connections because connections, which are often increased by thinking prompts, help students empathize with characters and understand their motivation, visualize what they are reading, stay focused, set a purpose, be actively involved in reading, and remember what they have read.

**They Provide Background Knowledge.** Sandi Silbernagel—a teacher I met and interviewed for my program Talking About Teaching on the Teaching Channel, and whom I write about in more detail in other parts of this book—guided her second-grade students to use

text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections while they read the short story “Feliciana Feydra LeRoux: A Cajun Tale.” Specifically, she used video clips and photographs to help her students better understand what it would be like for Feliciana, the central character, to venture into a swamp filled with slimy reptiles. The video she used, displayed on her Smart Board, showing alligators, snakes, and spiders, elicited gasps from the students and helped them better understand the story.

As Robert Marzano has written in *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement* (2004), ensuring that students have appropriate background knowledge is one of the most important variables contributing to student learning. Marzano writes:

What students *already know* about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to the content. Commonly, researchers and theorists refer to what a person already knows about a topic as “background knowledge.” (p. 1)

Numerous studies have confirmed the relationship between background knowledge and achievement (Dochy, Segers, & Buehl, 1999). Thus, students who have a great deal of background knowledge in a given subject area are likely to learn new information readily and quite well.

Thinking prompts are frequently used successfully to increase student background knowledge. For example, students who see pictures of the dustbowl and discuss what life would have been like during that time will better understand John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Because thinking prompts are often visual or auditory, and because they prompt students to discuss whatever they depict, they can be a window into content in any subject area, helping students see experience through others’ eyes instead of their own.

**They Engage Students.** I have shown hundreds of thinking prompts to thousands of people, children and adults, and have seen one thing firsthand: They capture people’s attention. Thinking prompts that are visual—video clips, photographs, even words or short cases visually displayed—engage learners because increasingly people are drawn to visual stimuli.

Ian Jukes, Ted McCain, and Lee Crockett, in their book *Understanding the Digital Generation* (2010), make a strong case that today’s

students are very visual. Citing the research of Eric Jensen and others, the authors conclude that

at least 60 percent of students in any given classroom are not auditory or text-based learners. Increasingly, because of digital bombardment, because they think graphically, and because they've grown up in the new digital landscape, they're either visual or visual kinesthetic learners, or a combination of the two. (p. 29)

Thinking prompts also engage students in other ways. As Robert Marzano explained in *The Art and Science of Teaching* (2007), a number of studies have shown that students are engaged when they take part in a dialogue that involves mild controversy or when they have opportunities to talk about themselves. Both of these situations are frequently the outcome of the use of thinking prompts.

Finally, research on the brain suggests, what educators have always known, that variety increases engagement. Thinking prompts, like other teaching practices discussed in this section of the book, shift what occurs in the class, and consequently increase engagement. In my observations of teachers, I frequently see that every student appears to be authentically engaged when teachers use thinking prompts effectively.



Download a checklist for the attributes of effective thinking prompts at [www.corwin.com/highimpactinstruction](http://www.corwin.com/highimpactinstruction)

## What Are the Attributes of Effective Thinking Prompts?

One of my favorite thinking prompts is a video clip of NBA basketball coach Maurice Cheeks interacting with a 13-year-old eighth-grade student, Natalie Gilbert. In the clip, Natalie, who won a Portland Trailblazer "Get the Feeling of a Star" promotion, stands before basketball fans at the Portland Trailblazers' first home game of the NBA playoffs, ready to sing the national anthem. After singing a few words, Natalie stumbles, and in front of 17,000 fans and millions of television viewers loses all composure, forgets the words, and desperately looks around for anyone who can help her. She looks absolutely terrified, and a day or two after the event, when interviewed on *The Today Show*, Natalie admitted, "I thought it was going to be the worst day of my life."

However, the day did not turn out to be the worst experience of her life. A few seconds after she stumbles, Coach Cheeks ran to her side, sang the words with her, gestured to the crowd to sing along,