Mosaic of Thought

The Power of Comprehension Strategy Instruction

SECOND EDITION

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HEINEMANN
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(continues on p. xvi)
Contents

Foreword ix
Acknowledgments xiii

Chapter 1 Creating a New Mosaic 2
Chapter 2 Changing Times 24
Chapter 3 Mindful Reading: Monitoring and Revising Comprehension 44
Chapter 4 The Presence of the Past: Using Schema to Understand and Remember 66
Chapter 5 The Art of Discovery: Questioning 102
Chapter 6 Creating Meaning: Inference 138
Chapter 7 Bringing Text to Life: Using Sensory and Emotional Images to Enhance Comprehension 170
Chapter 8 The Heart of the Matter: Determining Importance 198
Chapter 9 The Evolution of Meaning: Synthesis 224
Epilogue Mosaic of Meaning 246

Appendix A: Thinking Strategies Used by Proficient Learners 255
Appendix B: Thinking Rubric 267
Appendix C: Epigraphs from the First Edition 273
References 281
Index 287
In Nick Hornsby’s bestselling novel *High Fidelity*, the main character, Rob, reflects on his surprising success with women, particularly given the fact that he is not particularly good-looking and that he is definitely downwardly mobile financially. He concludes that women like him because he “asks questions”—a tactic, by the way, that a lot of men have not managed to figure out.

My involvement with this amazing book came from a question (though perhaps not the kind Rob is referring to). I had just finished a workshop in Denver for the Public Education & Business Coalition (PEBC), and Ellin Keene was about to drive me to the airport. At that time, about 1995, the PEBC was a dynamic and innovative staff development organization in the Denver area—but not well known outside that area. As we began to head north to the airport, I asked Ellin whether she was working on any project.

As a matter of fact she was—and it had to do with comprehension. She explained to me that there was a body of research on comprehension that pointed to the extraordinary power of a small number of strategies. Ellin and a group of staff developers had been explicitly teaching these strategies to children, and had results to show their effectiveness. I was familiar with some of this research; in fact, my colleague Jane Hansen had worked with David Pearson on schema theory and comprehension. I had read some of the reports from federally funded national centers for reading, but this research hadn’t made its way into the classroom, so far as I could tell. Except for tacking “comprehension questions” onto reading passages, no one seemed much interested in the topic.

Since the Denver airport is about halfway to Canada, we had time to talk, and by the time its unmistakable teepee-like silhouette came on
the horizon, I had invited her to propose the book to Heinemann. Ellin teamed up with the incomparably gifted Susan Zimmermann (cofounder of the PEBC), and soon a proposal and chapters started coming my way. The book was accepted, published, and not only became one of the all-time best sellers for Heinemann, but also helped open the door for Cris Tovani, Debbie Miller, Stephanie Harvey, and other Denver-based teacher educators who became national figures in their own right.

It would be nice to claim Heinemann somehow saw all this coming. But I don’t think anyone did. The cover design was garish (mercifully replaced in this new edition); there was no big send-off, no publicity push. If ever a book sold itself, this one did. Yet in retrospect, the topic and timing—and of course the writing itself—couldn’t have been better.

At that time, the whole language and reading/writing process approaches to literacy instruction were under attack for their lack of direct explicit instruction. Sometimes this attack came from the educational right wing that wanted extensive phonics instruction, but it also came from thoughtful educators like George Hillocks and Lisa Delpit, who argued for more deliberate teaching of reading and writing processes, particularly for students who had not “naturally” internalized them in home-based literacy experiences. Clearly many children flourish in literature-rich environments, where they can, in Frank Smith’s words, learn to read “through the act of reading itself” (1983, 23). They can experience a positive cycle of reinforcement: Success in reading leads to more reading and more success in reading, with minimal instruction from the teacher.

But for some students this cycle was a negative one. Difficulty with reading led to avoidance, unproductive strategies, and negative self-attitudes, all of which made reading even more difficult—and more likely to be avoided. For these students, the incidental, “intuitive” approach to instruction that Smith and others promoted was simply not adequate.
Even successful readers need metacognitive strategies that can help them deal with difficulty, when normal habitual reading processes are not fully adequate to the task. Marvin Minsky, a leading cognitive scientist, makes clear the importance of these monitoring strategies:

Thinking is a process, and if your thinking does something you don’t want it to, you should be able to say something microscopic and analytic about it, and not something enveloping and evaluating about yourself as a learner . . . it may be all right to deal with other people in a vague global way—by having “attitudes” toward them, but it is devastating if this is the way you deal with yourself. (quoted in Bernstein 1981, 122)

Humans, after all, have a capacity no other animals have—we can think about our thinking. We can stand back and reflect upon our own thought processes, and if necessary alter them. We are not prisoners of reflex and habit. Mosaic of Thought provides a language and set of strategies to do this thinking.

When the chapters for the first edition of Mosaic made their way from Denver to Durham, I was struck by the way they opened. Susan and Ellin picked evocative, rich pieces of literature and showed how they would use comprehension strategies in responding to them. I remember one reviewer of the manuscript suggested these all be cut because teachers would want to get immediately to the “practical” procedures for the classroom. To our credit, we immediately recognized that as a bad idea.

In reading this new edition, I see even more clearly how crucial these openings are. Not only do they model the strategies, but they universalize them; they show that comprehension is for grown-ups too, and that some of our deepest pleasure as readers comes from slowing our thought processes so that we can contemplate them. All of these openings have been rewritten in this new edition, with new excerpts, yet they retain the wonderful attractiveness that made the first edition so welcoming to readers.
There are other significant changes. The authors draw on a decade of teacher innovation in the use of comprehension strategies. Ellin spent a good part of that decade helping teachers in some of the poorest school districts in the country, and she reports on what she did and what she saw. There are examples of reading conferences that focus on comprehension strategies, and a new model for the reader’s workshop. And there are new illustrations of how “think-alouds” can push students to comprehend deeply—and how students rise to the challenge.

Susan and Ellin also respond to some unintended applications of their ideas. To my knowledge, neither author is heavily invested in companies that market sticky notes, and they never intended that fluent readers should have their pleasure drained by constantly stopping to affix them. Strategy instruction was never intended to be a complete reading program; it was part of a curriculum in which there should be extensive independent reading and regular opportunities to hear great literature read aloud—for the sheer pleasure of it. And they never—ever—saw using strategies as an end in itself. Strategies are a means to deepen the reading experience and to give students a language to talk about their processes. In this edition, the authors clarify some of these teaching issues by clearly describing the place of strategy instruction in the wider reading curriculum and by answering questions about the sequencing of instruction.

So it is with great pleasure that Heinemann offers to you this edition, what will surely become the definitive edition, of this classic text. I am honored to be associated with it, and count it a special privilege to have worked with these two extraordinary women.

I’m so glad I asked that question.

Thomas Newkirk
University of New Hampshire
Creating a New Mosaic

Books

From the heart of this dark, evacuated campus
I can hear the library humming in the night,
a choir of authors murmuring inside their books
along the unlit, alphabetical shelves,
Giovanni Pontano next to Pope, Dumas next to his son,
each one stitched into his own private coat,
together forming a low, gigantic chord of language.

I picture a figure in the act of reading,
shoes on a desk, head tilted into the wind of a book,
a man in two worlds, holding the rope of his tie
as the suicide of lovers saturates a page,
or lighting a cigarette in the middle of a theorem.
He moves from paragraph to paragraph
as if touring a house of endless, paneled rooms.

I hear the voice of my mother reading to me
from a chair facing the bed, books about horses and dogs,
and inside her voice lie other distant sounds,
the horrors of a stable ablaze in the night,
a bark that is moving toward the brink of speech.

I watch myself building bookshelves in college,
walls within walls, as rain soaks New England,
or standing in a bookstore in a trench coat.

I see all of us reading ourselves away from ourselves,
straining in circles of light to find more light
until the line of words becomes a trail of crumbs
that we follow across a page of fresh snow;
when evening is shadowing the forest
and small birds flutter down to consume the crumbs,
we have to listen hard to hear the voices
of the boy and his sister receding into the woods.

— Billy Collins, The Apple That Astonished Paris
First Reader

I can see them standing politely on the wide pages
that I was still learning to turn,
Jane in a blue jumper, Dick with his crayon-brown hair,
playing with a ball or exploring the cosmos
of the backyard, unaware they are the first characters,
the boy and girl who begin fiction.

Beyond the simple illustration of their neighborhood
the other protagonists were waiting in a huddle:
frightening Healthcliff, frightened Pip, Nick Adams
carrying a fishing rod. Emma Bovary riding into Rouen.

But I would read about the perfect boy and his sister
even before I would read about Adam and Eve, garden and gate,
and before I heard the name Gutenberg, the type
of their simple talk was moving into my focusing eyes.

It was always Saturday and he and she
were always pointing at something and shouting, “Look!”
pointing at the dog, the bicycle, or at their father
as he pushed a hand mower over the lawn,
waving at aproned mother framed in the kitchen doorway,
pointing toward the sky, pointing at each other.

They wanted us to look but we had looked already
and seen the shaded lawn, the wagon, the postman.
We had seen the dog, walked, watered and fed the animal,
and now it was time to discover the infinite, clicking
permutations of the alphabet’s small and capital letters.
Alphabetical ourselves in the rows of classroom desks,
we were forgetting how to look, learning how to read.

— Billy Collins, *Questions About Angels*
Ellin’s Reflections

I stumble across Billy Collins’ poem “Books” as I prepare for a workshop at the University of New Hampshire in July 2006. I will work there with dear friends and colleagues Tom Newkirk, Louise Wrobleski, and Tomasen Carey in Hamilton Smith Hall, where Donald Graves and Donald Murray launched the writing process movement in the early 1980s.

It is somehow fitting that we return to Collins’ poetry here, having begun the first edition of Mosaic of Thought with his poem “First Reader.” Former poet laureate of the United States, Collins creates poems that appeal to a broad cross-section of readers, bringing poetry to thousands who previously thought it was too difficult for them to understand.

In both “First Reader” and “Books,” Billy Collins asks us to think differently about books and readers. That is what we tried to do in the original Mosaic of Thought. In this edition, we offer a deeper look at the ideas we presented ten years ago. These two poems speak of a deepening process as well. To me, “First Reader” makes a more direct statement than “Books,” which offers a more complex view of the world of the reader and the role of books.

In “First Reader,” Collins challenges the conventional wisdom that has long defined learning to read as the process of using texts with severely limited vocabulary to master a sequence of little skills that accumulate until one day, almost magically, kids figure out the mysterious code and “learn to read.” Collins exposes the flaw in that assumption: In learning to read through little books where perfectly dressed, well-behaved, white, middle-class characters say, “Look!” he warns, “we were forgetting how to look, learning how to read.”

“First Reader” prompts me to flash through a brisk chronology of my own learning-to-read days. Miss Gregg looks down fondly from her desk. My six-year-old fingers prop my book at an angle on the desk,
just like all the other children in the classroom who hold the same reader, in the same position. I see Dick and Jane standing politely on those wide pages. I must have liked Dick and Jane. They no doubt affirmed my small place in the world. My family looked a lot like theirs: mom, dad, one brother. Dick and Jane preserved the status quo. They didn’t encourage me to look beyond the pages into their lives. They didn’t stimulate me to think.

Who were the first characters for me after Dick and Jane? Why is it so difficult to remember them? Mrs. Schoonmaker was my fourth-grade teacher. She played bridge with my grandmother on Wednesday nights and was always a little grumpy on Thursday morning. She introduced me to *Black Beauty* and *National Velvet*, but she also put me in the middle math group with Miss Schakelford. I knew what that meant.

My next years as a reader were characterized by learning that words on the page constituted a literal, finite truth that wasn’t to be challenged by the reader. We learned to identify main ideas and write short book reports. We answered comprehension questions at the end of abridged stories in basal readers. Looking at layers of meaning in text was never even considered. Examining text was abandoned in favor of three reading groups a day and free reading on Friday afternoons. There were no questions about why Cathy wouldn’t marry Heathcliff, or what drove Emma Bovary to suicide. Rereading, understanding symbolic meanings, or talking with others about books—the activities that define my reading as an adult—were not part of my life as a reader back then.

It wasn’t until Honors English my senior year of high school that things changed. Jan Call was the teacher. She suggested, for the first time in my life, that I look beyond the text, consider multiple meanings, propose an interpretation different from that posed by the rest of the class, or ponder symbolism. Willy Loman, the protagonist in *Death of a Salesman*, became the subject of several weeks of discussion. It would never have occurred to me that his name could symbolize his plight. Jan Call suggested we embrace many ways of knowing a book
and that we—how radical!—reread it in its entirety or in small pieces. I felt utterly ill prepared for this type of discussion. And, given that school hadn’t included this kind of discussion before the twelfth grade, I was unprepared. Everyone joked that the notoriously talkative Ellin Oliver was mysteriously quiet in Honors English. I was one of those students who in “learning how to read” had forgotten “how to look.”

The poem “Books” provides a different perspective. Collins writes of a “man in two worlds” whose real-world presence ebbs as he pours his conscious energy into books in which the “suicide of lovers saturates a page.” I see a professorial-looking man in the 1960s. He is in black and white—like an old movie—though his surroundings, in my mind, are in muted colors. He wears a suit, attire more formal than his slouched posture in a forgotten corner of the library would lead one to expect. He has been in that spot—a hard wooden chair, worn but substantial—for hours. The New England winter light has drained from the hillside outside the library windows, but the color changes are minimal: from gray tinged with yellow, to gray tinged with pink, to the steel gray of the moment.

The man runs a hand through his thinning hair and, for those short hours, he escapes the anxiety of his tenure battle and the gnawing truth that he hasn’t heard from his son in months. For now, he inhabits a world of characters who mostly allow him to forget. He is “reading [himself] away from [himself], straining in circles of light to find more light,” to move beyond his own life, to discover in those pages something deeper, more universal.

I reread the poem but don’t hear the murmur and hum of authors Collins describes. To me it is a cacophony and it startles me as I read: all those characters straining to be heard from the pages of the books that surround this solitary man. Their voices and actions are unpredictable, savage, and loud. I wonder that he isn’t distracted by them. Strangely, through the din, I can hear his heart beat, slow, steady, loud in its own right.
As I listen, my professor (my professor!?) leans back in his chair, takes a long look at his watch, steals a resigned look outside, and gathers his coat to move back into the night of his world.

Such liberties I have taken with “First Reader” and “Books.” I do so without apology. I am the reader. It is my will I impose on Collins’ poetry. I cherish my right and ability to do so. I know also that if I read these poems again next week or next year or ten years from now, they will speak to me differently. I know that if I have a conversation with my husband David or daughter Elizabeth about them, more tiles will be added to the mosaic of my understanding. How can I help but long for children to have the same rights? How can we rest until all our children have immersed themselves in a literary world that encourages and teaches them to read, reread, invent, explore, question, and imagine?

Into the Classroom

It was 1989. The fifth graders stared at me like I was crazy when I got them to sit on the floor in Claudia Keeley’s classroom at South Street Elementary. “C’mon, why do we have to be on the floor like first graders?” one boy groaned. When I pulled out Roberto Innocenti’s Rose Blanche, a story about a young girl during World War II, another asked, “Mrs. Keene, why are you going to use a book for little kids with us?”

“It’s okay,” I replied. “You’re going to find this book startling. There are ideas in it that are really more appropriate for older kids.”

Still they squirmed; complained they were uncomfortable; whined they were missing snack time. Claudia looked embarrassed. I shot her a don’t-worry-let’s-stick-to-the-plan look.

“I’m not going to read this book from beginning to end the way you’re used to hearing stories read aloud,” I told them. “I’m going to share my thinking with you as I read. I want you to hear the questions that form in my mind when I read Rose Blanche. Usually you don’t know what questions people ask as they read. Today I’m going to share
mine, and I want you to think about your questions as well. Great readers ask questions as they read.”

The kids exchanged uncomfortable glances. I overheard a girl whisper, “What’s the point of that?” I was beginning to wonder myself.

“When I read certain kinds of books, my mind is filled with questions. I can answer some of them, but some are more interesting to leave unanswered. I’m going to stop reading when one of those questions pops into my mind, and I’m going to share it with you.”

I paused—too early, I now realize—at the end of the second page and wondered aloud why the soldiers would wink at the children. Twenty hands shot up, each kid eager to answer.

“Wait, I’m not sure I want to answer that right now.” At least I had the sense to ask them to wait and let me think about my own question; I realized quickly that it wasn’t a very searching question.

I paused again several pages later and wondered aloud why a little boy would jump out of a truck and try to run away. And I wondered why the mayor grabbed the child and gave him back to the soldiers. This time, as I looked at the kids’ faces, I could see they were thinking about the answer. All except a couple hand-raisers had already learned to let me linger with the question, rather than try to answer it for me.

After a few pages, something had changed in that classroom. As I kept reading, the students started asking their own questions. “Why are the kids in prison?” “What could they have done wrong?” “Why did they wear yellow stars on their clothes?” “Why don’t they give them food?” No more grumbling about being treated like little kids or missing snacks. They were listening.

This think-aloud in Claudia’s classroom was a maiden voyage for me. It was practice, pure and simple. I wasn’t totally sure what I was doing. I had read some research, had conversations with graduate school professors, and, honestly, it just made sense to share my thinking out loud about the comprehension strategies—in this case questioning—with those fifth graders. How else could I show them
what could be going on in their minds when they read? They needed to know that reading is an action sport, and that the action takes place in their minds. They also needed to know that their questions would be—and should be—different from my questions.

After Claudia’s kids headed off to lunch, we sat in her quiet classroom and debriefed the lesson. After a shaky start, the kids had definitely become engaged—they wanted to answer the questions I posed; they were eager to find out what happened in the text; they started asking their own questions. We talked about their questions. They were primarily clarifying questions—answerable questions that readers use to ensure they understand before they read on—but at least they had taken the baton when I handed it off. They weren’t only going for the answers to my questions. They saw a role for themselves in generating the questions.

“Okay, what’s next?” Claudia asked. “What should I do with them tomorrow?”

“I have no idea,” I told her. We laughed, but I didn’t.

What We’ve Learned

I’ve learned a lot since that late-1980s foray. I know when reading picture books, it’s often more effective to wait several pages before thinking aloud. I know that to think aloud about an easily answered question is less effective than tackling tougher, more provocative questions. With *Rose Blanche*, a book conducive to reflection, I should have discouraged the students’ early answers in favor of speculating about the more complex issues the questions brought to mind. I should have previewed *Rose Blanche* more carefully so that when questions arose, I would have known which focused on the most important aspects of the book.

I know better now. But what I remember eighteen years later is how intoxicating that session in Claudia’s classroom was. I remember the
change that came over the students as they lost themselves in thought about *Rose Blanche* and began to share their questions and search for answers, even though my teaching and their responses weren’t very refined. I remember how challenging it was to try to read aloud in an engaging way, simultaneously considering questions and deciding when to think aloud about them. I remember the energy and the engagement I saw in the kids’ faces. In Claudia’s and other classrooms where we were testing our ideas about explicitly teaching comprehension, a new world of teaching opened to me, far more engaging, stimulating, and *fun* than following any teacher’s manual.

Now I know that to help kids peer into the mind of a proficient reader—and thereby develop an understanding of what they must do as they read—many think-alouds over a long period of time are necessary. Since those early trial-and-error days, my thinking about comprehension strategy instruction has evolved in myriad ways—but its essence is unchanged. If I were to work with Claudia’s students today, I would still teach questioning as an essential comprehension strategy that proficient readers use to deepen understanding. I would still use thinking aloud as the instructional bread and butter of reader’s workshop; still ask kids to generate questions as they read independently; still choose the best in children’s literature for my lesson, using fiction or nonfiction that I personally found provocative and multifaceted; still gather the kids, no matter what their ages, around me on the floor so I had eye contact and a sense of intimacy in the classroom.

But there are differences—some I’ve taught myself, some I’ve gleaned from reading the research, some I’ve learned from watching hundreds of extraordinary teachers around the country as they teach comprehension strategies. I remember frustration when, early in a strategy study, children didn’t do much more than imitate my responses. As, over time, they built confidence in their own thinking, their responses
became progressively stronger, deeper, and more articulate. Working with colleagues, we found that comprehension strategy study needs to be built on a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student. The teacher first demonstrates the use of the strategy in numerous types of books and then creates a safe and stimulating environment for students to practice the strategies in their own reading. Most effective is fluid instruction that encourages the sharing of responses in heterogeneous large groups and then reinforces that thinking in small groups and through individual conferences.

Most important, I realized that I could raise my expectations far higher than I had imagined. When immersed in compelling text and equipped with comprehension strategies, children will reach further, probe deeper, and understand complex material from the earliest ages.

Humble Beginnings

Nine of us sat around a table in a 1920s-era office building—converted apartments—located across the street from the Colorado State Capitol. The room had fallen from its glory days, but crown molding, wainscoting, and a handsome tile fireplace remained. The windows opened to a courtyard with summer flower beds. The sound of cars passing on the busy one-way street mixed with the splashing of the fountain. Elizabeth Keene, two months old at the time, slept in her car seat after having been passed around for all to admire.

We came together monthly—staff developers and Public Education & Business Coalition (PEBC) staff—to share what we’d experienced in the schools and classrooms where we were working. From the small kitchen across the hall, we helped ourselves to tea. There was always the unmistakable smell of popcorn “fresh” from the microwave. A bell rang whenever the front door opened, announcing a new arrival.
The chairs were wobbly and squeaked as we shifted positions. Talk began in earnest well before those meetings officially began.

Several years before, the PEBC had launched its Literacy League pilot school project in five schools—two in inner-city Denver, three in outlying suburban districts—initially with a focus on improving students’ writing skills. Ellin and Liz Stedem, an elementary teacher with broad experience in reading and writing, began by cautiously stepping into a few classrooms. They wanted to serve as coaches, not experts, to learn alongside teachers. They were eager to help analyze the teachers’ strengths and weaknesses, but also to examine their classrooms in light of the groundbreaking writing process work of teachers and researchers in New Hampshire, New York, and around the country. Language Arts classes were being converted into writing workshops in which children wrote every day from their own experiences, learned to revise their own work, and shared their writing with classmates. Children were being taught to replicate the process used by real writers, and the result was more compelling, detailed writing and greater student engagement.

We sat around that table in 1989 with Laura Benson, Anne Goudvis, Steph Harvey, Chryse Hutchins, Debbie Miller, Marjory Ulm, Liz Stedem, and Cris Tovani. The energy was palpable. By then more schools and more staff developers were involved in the Literacy League. The work was going well. Kids were writing more. Teachers were writing with their students. Students were overcoming their discomfort with writing and even looked forward to writing time. Much of their writing was infused with their unique voices. They were writing (as writers do) about topics of their choice to explain ideas that mattered to them. But there were rumblings.

“Kids aren’t reading enough,” Steph Harvey blurted. “They’re writing stories about their dogs, their grandparents, their passions. They’re having fun, but they’re just not reading enough. Even worse, I’m seeing kids who seem to read fluently, but when I try to have a conversation
with them about what they read, they don’t have a clue. Their decoding is excellent, but they aren’t getting it.”

We had noticed a dichotomy: The tone and feeling of engagement the students had during writing disappeared when they shifted to reading, took out their basals, and, too often, checked out intellectually. We knew there was a problem. Their teachers knew there was a problem. Teachers were working to build their classroom libraries so kids had more choice in the books they read. They were creating writing/reading blocks where students could shift from writing to reading, all in a workshop setting. Nonetheless, something was lacking.

Steph told of a conversation she had with Leslie Blauman, an upper-grade teacher at Meadow Point Elementary School. “Even Leslie, who is a gifted teacher, just doesn’t feel like she’s teaching reading. She says things like, ‘My kids are fluent readers, but it’s not enough just to put more books in their hands and check in once in a while.’ Leslie wants her instruction to be more focused, but she doesn’t know what to teach. She wants the kids to have the same engaged experience with reading as they’re having with writing. She just doesn’t know how to make that happen.”

“I have an idea,” Ellin said.

Ellin was in Jan Dole’s graduate reading methods class at the University of Denver in the early 1980s and had kept in close contact with her. Important research was under way about reading comprehension. Ellin, always the research junkie, was intrigued about a body of research Jan had shared with her called the proficient-reader research. It identified seven principal comprehension strategies that good readers use when they read (see Figure 1.1).

“I think Jan and her colleagues are tossing around the notion that these strategies could form the core of a very effective comprehension curriculum. If we give explicit, long-term instruction using the strategies, they think we can actually improve comprehension. We’ve always thought of comprehension as something ‘caught not taught,’ but this is fascinating stuff and it makes sense.”
“That’s really interesting, Ellin,” Susan said, “Can we pursue it? We’ve grappled with what to teach for a long time. It’s logical that good readers use certain thought processes. If we know what great readers do when they read, that’s what we should teach, right?”

A sense of urgency arose. We began an exploration that led to some important early answers. The teachers and PEBC staff developers started with conversations about their own reading. When Liz Stedem read Wallace Stegner’s Crossing to Safety, she told us to put down anything else we might be reading and read it immediately. We read Nadine Gordimer’s My Son’s Story and Lawrence Thornton’s Imagining Argentina and talked about parts we loved, sections that

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**Figure 1.1**

**Metacognitive Strategies**

(listening to the voice in your mind that speaks while you read)

- **Monitoring for meaning**—knowing when you know, knowing when you don’t know
- **Using and creating schema**—making connections between the new and the known, building and activating background knowledge
- **Asking questions**—generating questions before, during, and after reading that lead you deeper into the text
- **Determining importance**—deciding what matters most, what is worth remembering
- **Inferring**—combining background knowledge with information from the text to predict, conclude, make judgments, interpret
- **Using sensory and emotional images**—creating mental images to deepen and stretch meaning
- **Synthesizing**—creating an evolution of meaning by combining understanding with knowledge from other texts/sources
surprised us, events we didn’t fully understand, and mutual friends who might enjoy them. We started a PEBC book club. By the time we talked about Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Beloved by Toni Morrison, a year later, our lives as readers had changed permanently.

“The only time I recall anyone teaching me directly how to improve my reading was a speed reading course my mother forced me to take the summer before I went to college,” said Chryse Hutchins, one of the PEBC staff developers. “This new way of looking at reading is incredible. I mean, I read and I’m thinking at two different levels now. I’m taking in the content, the events in the story, the editorial, the gardening hints, whatever, but I’m also posing and answering questions, pondering, really living in my visual images as I read. I’m thinking about experiences I’ve had and books I’ve read that relate to this text and I’m making decisions about what I think is most important. I’m driving myself a little crazy. I’m talking about metacognition at cocktail parties,” she moaned. After telling her to “get a life,” the others had to admit they did the same.

Ellin said, “We need to think about what this means for kids and for our work with teachers. If proficient readers use these strategies to make meaning when they read, could it be possible to help kids become more aware of their own reading processes and then teach them to improve their comprehension? Could we help kids learn to comprehend in the first place, and deepen their comprehension once they’re reading fairly independently? Is that too simplistic?” Ellin paused. “My mother always told me that elegance and strength are found in simplicity.” Smiles spread around the table.

We focused more on the proficient-reader research that Ellin had introduced. This body of work examined the cognitive processes (strategies) used most commonly by proficient readers, whether adults glued to a gripping novel or advanced placement seniors making their way through a physics text.
In our adult reading groups and at the PEBC staff developers’ meetings, we tested the strategies on our own reading. We became more conscious of our own thinking processes as readers. We realized we could concentrate simultaneously on the text and our ways of thinking about it. What seemed most extraordinary, however, was that by thinking about our own thinking—that is, by being metacognitive—we could actually deepen and enhance our comprehension of the text.

The Problem: How to Teach Comprehension

In the 1980s teachers around the country began to abandon basal-driven reading instruction for several reasons. Primarily, like the students we observed, their students were disengaged. As teachers, they were uncomfortable with the instructional model based on rote learning, which left little room for serious analysis and exploration. But, most alarming, they were moving away from this type of instruction because too many of their students were not learning how to comprehend what they read.

For six years Ellin directed the Chapter One (now Title I) program in the Douglas County, Colorado, School District. She and the Chapter One teachers spent many hours observing and scrutinizing the work of elementary students identified for these services. The profiles of many of the children troubled them. These were children who successfully read words from word lists on comprehension inventories. They were able to decode words accurately with acceptable pronunciation. Some even read passages fluently. Yet after they read, many were unable to tell what the passages meant. These children didn’t know when they were comprehending and when they weren’t. Many didn’t know what they were supposed to comprehend when they read. Others didn’t seem to know that text is supposed to mean something.

Often when the Chapter One children listened to stories read aloud, it was clear they weren’t aware that they should be thinking about the
story or that they should be prepared to talk about it afterward. They paid little attention to the illustrations and showed only slight interest as their classes undertook activities related to the content of the books. Increasingly, Ellin became aware of a growing group of students who could decode words, but couldn’t really understand what they read.

The problem wasn’t limited to upper-grade students like those Steph Harvey talked about in Leslie Blauman’s fifth-grade class. Debbie Miller, a superb first-grade teacher then at Denver’s Knapp Elementary (and later author of *Reading with Meaning*), bemoaned the fact that she spent so much instruction time focused on word learning. She didn’t feel she was teaching comprehension either. She wondered if it was possible to teach young children to use the comprehension strategies.

Ellin’s teaching colleagues in the Douglas County Chapter One program as well as thousands of teachers around the country lost confidence in traditional reading instruction because their students weren’t engaged and too many of them didn’t comprehend what they read. They knew there had to be a better way. They knew that teaching reading implies more than hoping that all the worksheets and comprehension questions somehow add up to the real thing.

Nonetheless, when teachers made significant changes in their reading classrooms, they continued to raise a collective voice: “We have moved on. We have left controlled, teacher-proof reading programs that instruct ‘Say this’ in bold print. We have created reader’s workshops instead of reading classes, and they are inviting places where children can learn to love to read. We have filled our shelves with wonderful children’s literature. We read to our students for hours every week. Children in our classrooms love books and spend time with them every day. As teachers we are happier and more creative than before, but if we don’t want to return to programmed reading instruction, we’re going to have to know what to teach instead.”
It became clear that many of these important questions focused on the content to be taught for comprehension. Teachers felt increasingly confident about how the classroom environment and management should be handled. They were absorbed and enthused about the process of transforming their classrooms into reader’s and writer’s workshops, and they felt an enhanced sense of engagement from their students, as well as for themselves. Teachers were beginning to understand the need to articulate and focus instruction on the mental processes that underlie reading.

The teachers at the cutting edge in literacy instruction who asked tough questions and discussed important issues with us believed the set of skills lifted from the basal scope and sequence was irrelevant and uninteresting in terms of teaching children how to comprehend. But they didn’t yet know what to replace the scope and sequence with.

**Experimenting with Comprehension Strategies**

The brilliance of the proficient-reader research is that it gave us new insight into what to teach: the comprehension strategies. We tested them in our own reading and in classrooms like Claudia Keeley’s and Leslie Blauman’s. We read differently having used them ourselves. When confronted with a challenging article in the Economist or the New Yorker, we found that we used the strategies consciously and successfully. In general, as we read, we were simply more aware of our thinking. We paid more attention to the thought processes that we used as we read, and as a result became more aware readers. If we could do that as adults, we reasoned, think what it might mean for children.

A search began. Through journals and visits to reading projects in school districts around the country, we looked for settings in which children studied in workshop environments surrounded by high-quality fic-
tion and nonfiction; and where they were given ample opportunity to read every day as well as to talk and write about their interpretations of books; and where the teacher explicitly taught the comprehension strategies identified in the proficient-reader research. We wanted to see if teachers anywhere in the country were implementing the proficient-reader research by using the strategies and helping children practice them in a workshop setting.

We found classrooms where teachers had created reader’s workshops that focused primarily on selecting books and on sharing in book clubs. Minilessons centered on ways children, working alone or in groups, could create vivid written and artistic responses to what they read. We found classrooms where children developed elaborate projects around concepts from books they read. In many classrooms, teachers taught children to use graphic organizers such as webbing and mapping processes to help them remember details about characters, setting, and plot. The tools were primarily enrichment activities. Teachers used them to assess what children remembered from their reading, but the activities did little to actually improve children’s comprehension while they were reading. We also found many classrooms where a great deal of direct instruction focused on a string of isolated and unrelated skills.

Something was missing. It was, we came to believe, the study of literature in a workshop setting combined with deep, focused comprehension instruction—instruction that targeted the thinking that occurs during reading, thinking that determines how deeply the text is understood.

As we designed the Reading Project, we turned to teachers like Leslie Blauman, Debbie Miller, Anne Henderson, Patrick Allen, Mimi DeRose, Colleen Buddy, and Mary Urtz. We observed early demonstrations like the one Ellin conducted in Claudia Keeley’s fifth-grade classroom and watched the children closely to take our direction from them. When Claudia asked Ellin, “What’s next?” we knew we were
forging new territory. We saw that thinking aloud was a potent instructional tactic. It permitted us to let children in on one of the best-kept secrets of human cognition—what we think about as we read. We noticed that when we modeled and thought aloud about a strategy, children could begin to apply that strategy on their own, first in pairs and trios, later in their independent reading.

Anne Henderson’s kindergartners at Meadow Point and Summit Elementary schools taught us that the youngest children could become deeply engaged and excited about being metacognitive (able to think about their thinking). Mary Urtz’ fifth graders taught us that the comprehension strategies worked just as well in nonfiction as in fiction. Leslie Blauman’s third, fourth, and fifth graders taught us how far children can delve in their book club discussions. Colleen Buddy helped us develop a working language to define and describe each strategy. Debbie Miller taught us how to include comprehension strategy instruction in a reader’s/writer’s workshop that honored children’s choices and interests and cultivated thinking in an environment of respect and high expectations. Patrick Allen explored the outer limits of long-term strategy instruction, finding that the longer we focused on a strategy, the more students were able to use the strategy to plumb the depths of meaning. Mimi DeRose worked with us to understand how strategies can be applied across content areas.

Talking around that conference table, applying the comprehension strategies in our own reading, and learning from these teachers and their students enabled us to piece together the initial mosaic of thinking about comprehension instruction.

We were figuring things out as we went, discovering the power the comprehension strategies unleashed in classrooms. We were astonished at the quality of thinking kids shared when they took the strategies for a test drive themselves. Lessons like the one Ellin taught at South Street School were not driven by orthodoxy. The hope was that we were
aligned closely enough with the proficient-reader research to begin answering some questions that had been troubling us at the PEBC.

We never imagined that *Mosaic of Thought* and the other books written by PEBC colleagues on comprehension strategy instruction and professional learning\(^1\) would touch a chord in teachers around the country. We didn’t realize then that we were not alone. Teachers throughout America were struggling with the same issues we faced in classrooms in the Denver area. We wanted to challenge the conventional wisdom about the way teachers approached comprehension instruction and to invite young readers into a world where they could read as real readers do, with depth and insight. We wanted to make comprehension teaching and learning more accessible to teachers and, through them, to students who had never experienced a book so deeply that it could become an anchor for the development of their emotions, beliefs, and values. We were just beginning to hear from teachers about their frustration in working with children who were fluent readers but who struggled to understand. We knew we had to be as honest as possible about what worked and what didn’t, and that we had to keep going until we had answers.

This edition of *Mosaic of Thought* is about what remains true—and what is different—since those early days at the PEBC. It’s about the evolution of our thinking about comprehension strategy instruction as we’ve traversed the country working with extraordinary teachers in all fifty states and throughout Canada. It’s about listening and talking with others whose thinking we admire. People like Don Murray, Don Graves, Tom Newkirk, Lucy Calkins, Shelley Harwayne, Mary Ellen

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\(^1\) *Nonfiction Matters*, Stephanie Harvey; *Strategies That Work*, Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis; *Reading with Meaning*, Debbie Miller; *I Read It, But I Don’t Get It*, Cris Tovani; *Do I Really Have to Teach Reading?* Cris Tovani; *7 Keys to Comprehension*, Susan Zimmermann and Chryse Hutchins; *Learning Along the Way*, Diane Sweeney; *Pathways*, Marjorie Larner; *Writing Through the Tween Years*, Bruce Morgan; *To Understand*, Ellin Oliver Keene.
Giacobbe, Joanne Hindley Salch, Ralph Fletcher, and Georgia Heard provided the foundation and inspiration for our early work and caused us not only to teach differently, but also to think differently about children’s capacity to think at high levels. This book is about listening to and watching great teachers at work.

In the prologue to the first edition of *Mosaic of Thought*, we wrote, “Children need to learn letters, sounds, words, sentences, books, and they need to learn to comprehend literally and inferentially.” We would now add the word simultaneously. Children need to learn letters, sounds, words, sentences, and how to comprehend what they read—*simultaneously*. Children do not learn to read in a lock-step, linear fashion. Small children are building the foundation for later reading when they listen to and respond to stories being read to them. When a child falls in love with a story, a huge step has been taken. That child knows the power of words and understands that words on a page contain important meaning. Of course, children need to learn letters, sounds, and words, but simultaneously they must be learning about the *meaning* held in those symbols on the page. They must be able to become as immersed and enchanted by the written word as the “professor” was in Billy Collins’ “Books.”

In that prologue we also said, “Our hope is that this book gives teachers new ways to think about their own reading, and effective ways to inspire children to read deeply and carefully. Ultimately, we will be most gratified if teachers move beyond this book—expanding and deepening the concepts, sharing their insights with other teachers and parents, working through obstacles together, creating new mosaics of thought.” This has happened beyond our wildest dreams. Everywhere we go, teachers regale us with stories from their classrooms, ways they have embraced and elaborated upon the concepts outlined in *Mosaic of Thought*. There is no doubt who the true experts are: those teachers who have a thorough understanding of the reading process and the
determination to understand and respond to each child’s needs as a reader. When they call upon the comprehension strategies to help their students gain understanding, magic happens. We applaud their work and thank them for having the courage, moxie, and good sense to create an even more beautiful and effective mosaic.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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