

# Robust Thinking

## A Must for All Students

*If you could teach people to be better readers or listeners they would be better thinkers. But to become better readers or listeners, people have to become better thinkers ... Beyond the most elementary level, teaching reading is teaching thinking.*

~ Carl Bereiter, *Education and Mind in the Knowledge Age*

All educators should be encouraged to use robust thinking tasks throughout the day to encourage the kind of deep and reflective thinking that can create new knowledge, solve problems and empower today's students to make a difference in the world.

### The way to deeper understanding

Robust thinking tasks engage students in the literacy program by helping them to focus on the important issues, understandings and concepts in text. Such tasks require students to use their background knowledge in order to analyze text, to compare and to contrast it, to make inferences and to evaluate and synthesize information. Robust thinking tasks give students practice in mastering these cognitively demanding processes.

In designing robust thinking tasks for the elementary classroom, it may be helpful to consider the following set of

questions for each of the four roles of the literacy learner. Also referred to as the “four resources model,” these roles capture the requirements not only for being able to read text but also for being able to understand underlying meanings and to use text for other purposes. The four resources model, developed by Freebody and Luke and adapted by the Ministry's *Expert Panel Report* (2004), informs the expectations of the *Ontario Language Curriculum*.

Robust thinking tasks invite the student to engage in all four roles of the literate learner simultaneously.

### Questions for Consideration

#### Meaning Maker

- » What would engage this particular group of learners?
- » What are the significant details from the text?
- » What are the important issues, understandings and concepts at work in the text?
- » How do these link to curriculum content across subject areas?
- » What is the key vocabulary that helps one grasp the important issues, understandings and concepts in the text?

#### Code User

- » What conventions (i.e. punctuation, phrases or other grammatical structures) and text features are significant and lead to the important ideas in the text?

#### Text User

- » Why is this text format effective for this particular purpose and audience?
- » What features of the text format help the learner to understand the important issues, understandings and concepts?
- » What thinking processes will help the learner understand the fundamental ideas?

#### Text Analyzer

- » Who might have a different opinion within the text?
- » Who might have a different opinion outside the text?
- » Is this a fair and accurate representation?

Adapted from *A Guide To Effective Literacy Instruction: Vol. 1*, p. 29

## Criteria for a Robust Thinking Task

### ••• A robust thinking task should ...

- engage students with an important issue, understanding or concept either stated explicitly or left implicit.

According to Wiggins and McTighe, “big ideas go beyond discrete facts or skills to focus on larger concepts, principles or processes” (1998, p. 10). Underlying each of the questions listed above is an important idea that actively engages students in thinking about globally-relevant issues from a variety of perspectives. By presenting students with notions of personal responsibility, balance, honesty, tradition, environmental stewardship and respect, we engage them in thinking about fundamental concepts that impact their lives. Some tasks state the important ideas, issues and understandings explicitly to help guide student thinking, while others leave them implicit in order to encourage students to draw their own conclusions from the text.

- identify a thinking process.

Careful wording of a robust thinking task to include a reference to a particular thinking process helps students to organize their thinking, to extract critical information from the text and to structure their responses in a clear and coherent manner. Students need to be explicitly taught to attend to the words that signal different organizational structures in text (i.e. cause and effect, compare and contrast) and signal different ways to organize a particular response (i.e. draw a conclusion, make a judgement).

- encourage multiple perspectives.

High-quality text that encourages students to consider fundamental issues or events from a variety of perspectives is an essential component of any robust thinking task. Students need to be exposed to a range of forms (i.e. poetry, historical fiction, reports, procedures and persuasive expositions), formats (i.e. persuasive expositions as editorials, blogs or letters to the editor) and text structures (i.e. cause and effect, compare and contrast, timeline) as part of this work.

In order to help students read with an eye to multiple perspectives, it is important that the text also provides multiple supports for meaning. Text features or “the physical or design characteristics of a text” help to clarify meaning and aid students’ understanding. Some important text features include fonts and special effects, graphics and text organizers.

- include some details from the text but avoid being too complicated or detailed.

When details from the text are included in a request such as “Explain how Scaredy Squirrel’s life would be different if he got more sleep?” students are reminded to return to the text for supporting evidence. However, it is equally important to keep questions succinct so that students are not distracted from the question’s intent.

## Great Teaching and Learning in Two Small School Boards

Ontario educators have begun to build capacity around developing robust thinking tasks in rich and engaging literacy programs. Marion Massaloup, principal of Sacred Heart Elementary School in the Bruce-Grey Catholic District School Board, has been working with staff to support students in thinking more critically and then sharing their thoughts in a more profound written response. Christine Pfeffer, a Grade 3 teacher at the school, integrates robust thinking tasks in her literacy program. She employs a gradual release of responsibility model, providing students with anchor charts, strategy posters, clear assessment criteria and student self-assessment tools in order to help them become more critical and reflective thinkers.

A team championed by Superintendent Greg Reeves in the Peterborough Victoria Northumberland Clarington Catholic District School Board has begun to develop learning hubs in various geographical locations of the board, each with a focus on critical literacy and content-specific teaching-learning critical pathways centred on the Catholic virtues. Presently several school improvement teams are creating rich tasks that support the virtue of empathy, while at the same time incorporating anti-bullying resources such as *Second Step* and *Steps to Respect* that move students to action. Rich mentor texts support the teaching and learning cycle. Culminating tasks move away from pencil/paper activities to multimedia productions such as webcasts, podcasts, commercials, drama, posters, etc. to demonstrate robust student thinking.

We end this article where we began: teaching reading cannot be literally about teaching reading, but rather about teaching thinking, as Carl Bereiter so aptly suggests.

- We invite you to view examples of the integration of robust thinking tasks with the Catholic Graduate Expectations at [www.learningconnections.on.ca](http://www.learningconnections.on.ca) based on Peterborough Victoria Northumberland Clarington Catholic District School Board’s presentation at *When Faith Meets Pedagogy*.
- In late fall/early winter, The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat will be inviting instructional leaders across the province to participate in literacy and numeracy web conferences and face-to-face sessions. If you have any questions about the sessions, email [lns@ontario.ca](mailto:lns@ontario.ca).

### References

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