Cognitive Composition: Thinking-Based Writing

Rebecca Reagan

Who can say what ignites a certain combination words, causing them to explode in the mind?...These are high mysteries...there is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which the young writer may shape his course. He will often find himself steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion........E.B. White

The most formidable opponent to the writing process is the blank page. The expectation that it will be filled with intelligent prose or poetry weighs heavily on the writer no matter what the age. The result is often a disorganized and superficial product. How can we as educators unlock the door to good writing? Where are the keys?

I seem to have spent most of my life looking for keys to one thing or another. Keys to skillful teaching, to appropriate student behavior, to classroom organization,... to the car. As a teacher of reading and writing, most often I have searched for the keys to teaching students how to read insightfully and write carefully and intelligently. There are three basic ideas/concepts, that when forged together, mold the keys to such writing. One is that deep and careful thinking prior to, as well as in conjunction with, writing, is necessary for deep and careful writing. The second idea is that such deep and careful thinking – what my colleagues and I call “skillful thinking” (Swartz, Costa, Beyer, Reagan, and Kallick, 2007)– needs to include both the exercise of thinking skills and the use of relevant habits of mind. And the third concept is that the most effective way that skillful thinking can result in such deep and careful writing is through the use of “writing maps” as part of thoughtful engagement by the students in the “standard” stages of the writing process: Pre-writing, drafting, editing and revising, re-writing, and the creation of a final product. The yield of all this – what I call Cognitive Composition is an example of the implementation of
Thinking Based Learning (see Swartz, Costa, Beyer, Reagan, and Kallick 2007). These elements together form the magical key that opens the door to one of the most powerful approaches to teaching writing.

Cognition, according to the American Heritage Science Dictionary, means “the mental faculty of knowing, which includes perceiving, recognizing, conceiving, judging, reasoning, and imagining”. Random House defines composition as “the art of putting words and sentences together in accordance with rules of grammar and rhetoric.” Cognitive Composition, therefore, would be using our full mental faculties to put words and sentences together for effective communication. In other words, cognitive composition involves the engagement of skillful thinking to guide the composition of a piece of writing. It is in this context that appropriate and productive habits of mind dramatically facilitate the writing process by enriching our awareness of and engagement with audience, purpose, content, process, and product as we think and write. The best way to demonstrate how this works is to provide a window into a classroom where instruction in skillful thinking, including habits of mind, and its extension into the writing process, share equally. Then we shall see if the keys open the door to good writing.

There are many kinds of writing. Each has its own character and requirements. Each has a variety of purposes and targets different audiences. Lessons in which instruction in skillful thinking is infused into content instruction will often lend themselves to a particular writing extension that can challenge students to transform the thinking that they do into effective writing. The lessons that are subsequently described in this paper bring out this connection and are referenced by the type of skillful thinking that is taught. Emphasized in each lesson are specific appropriate habits of mind that enhance the use of the skillful thinking strategy being taught and its extension into actual writing.
Comparing and Contrasting

My students have had difficulty producing quality compare/contrast essays. The most glaring problems not only involved organization of the writing itself but the use of inaccurate data and unimportant details. We were studying the English settlement of the New World in American History. When students compared and contrasted different settlements using just the basic questions of “How are they alike?” and “How are they different?” the results were less than stellar. As we read about Pocahontas and John Smith, for example, the students had problems separating fact from fiction, citing characters and events from the Disney version and they tended to include only immediately apparent and hence often superficial similarities and differences.

I decided that this was opportune time to take a look at actual history and Disney’s Pocahontas, comparing and contrasting fact and fiction. It would also be a good occasion to introduce students to procedures for more skillful comparing and contrasting, while at the same time emphasizing key habits of mind that would enhance this process. One of the most readable non-fiction accounts about this historical period that has been published is The Double Life of Pocahontas by Jean Fritz (1987). I had obtained multiple copies of Fritz’s book and asked students to read the first 25 pages that led us to the famous event where Pocahontas saved the life of John Smith. (Interestingly, many students continued to read the book in its entirety.) Students then watched the Disney movie version of Pocahontas again. They were asked to take notes about the characters, setting, plot, and events that were depicted in the movie. As we had previously worked on how to extract precise details from a text with accuracy, the students were asked to employ those skills in their note taking.

We then thought about the strategy that we would use to compare and contrast the real version and Disney’s. more skillfully than if we just made a quick pass at listing some similarities
and differences. We had previously found that it was not enough to simply ask: “How were they similar and how were they different?” when we compare and contrast. To attain greater insight through this kind of thinking, we needed to do more. In this case we similarly needed to think more deeply and carefully about how these two sources depicted one of the most famous events in American history. By using a thinking strategy map such as the one that follows to make their comparing and contrasting more skillful, students were able to not only focus their thinking but to probe the similarities and differences they identified with greater depth. You will notice that an additional three questions besides “How are they alike?” and “How are they different?” appear on this thinking map. These acted as a guide for the students to also think about which similarities and differences are important, what patterns can be found in the similarities and differences, and what significant conclusions can they draw from the important similarities and differences. It is the addition of these three questions that leads to more skillful comparing and contrasting than just asking the first two questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking Strategy Map for Skillful Comparing and Contrasting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How are they similar?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How are they different?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What similarities and differences seem significant?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are the categories or patterns do you see in the significant similarities and differences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What interpretation or conclusion is suggested by the significant similarities and differences?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the information from the book and the movie and questions prompted by the thinking strategy map, students then recorded their ideas by completing the following graphic organizer. (based on Swartz and Parks 1994) However, students also determined that it was equally important to fill in the data accurately by checking their notes from the movie and the text of the
book. They realized that a conclusion was only worthy if it was based on accurate information true to the source from which it was extracted.
As the students were guided by this strategy they also worked cooperatively in groups of 3 or 4 while striving to be as precise and accurate about both sources of information as possible. Indeed by practicing the kind of interdependent thinking fostered by working in effective cooperative groups, they were able to enhance their thinking and increase their insights.

This is an example of how the practice of two important habits of mind – striving for accuracy and precision and thinking interdependently – enhanced the skillfulness of these students’ thinking. The result was that using the thinking strategy map for skillful compare and contrast as a framework and operationalizing this through the use of a special graphic organizer allowed students to extend their thinking, while the practice of these two important habits of mind led them to refine and enhance this thinking. This is reflected in the completed graphic organizer. Now, as we move on to the next phase of the lesson, the graphic organizer also becomes a hard copy of thinking to be used as pre-writing.

Pre-writing is often the most neglected of the stages of the writing process – and yet it is arguably the most important. It is so much easier to write if one has something thought-full to say. It is also so much easier to be accurate if students have a hard copy of their thinking and learning that has itself stressed accuracy. A completed graphic organizer structured to guide a specific type of skillful thinking is not intended as a worksheet. Rather, it is a product of in-depth thinking in which students can change, delete, or add information based on what they think is relevant and important. It is this thinking that provides the substance of what will be communicated in writing when a graphic organizer is treated as a piece of pre-writing.

The structure of this particular graphic organizer lends itself to the structure of good compare and contrast writing: there is a conclusion that is explicit as are the similarities, differences that support it. However, students often still have difficulty transferring their thinking
to an essay. The following is what I call a writing map. It was developed to help students organize their writing based on the structure of the thinking in which they had been engaged – in this case skillful comparing and contrasting. In order to understand the function of the writing map, think about a road map which is intended to guide the driver over unfamiliar territory. When the route is learned or a new route is desired, the present map is no longer needed or can be adapted to the new route. The purpose of the writing map is much the same in that it serves as a guide to the students to help them to transfer their thinking into an organized composition. A writing map also provides answers to frequently asked questions about the structure of the particular kind of writing required when the teacher is not available. It is important to note that the essays that result are all different as to what the students write. The map merely helps them to determine the how (based on the writing templates found in Swartz, Kiser, Reagan 1999).

As students experience the writing process, striving for accuracy and precision in both their content and their product, they must consider their audience and the purpose for which they are composing. Providing a place on the map to record these two elements assists the students in focusing on why and to whom they are writing. Audience and purpose are reflected in the degree of formality used in the writing. For example, an expository composition written to an adult varies greatly in language and format from a friendly letter to a friend.
OPEN COMPARE AND CONTRAST WRITING MAP

Expository
(This writing map is to be used with the completed Open Compare and Contrast graphic organizer)

Audience: _________________________________________________________

Purpose: __________________________________________________________

Paragraph 1 – This paragraph is an introduction to your writing.
- Sentence 1: Write the conclusion or interpretation from the graphic organizer. It should include the names of the two things that you are comparing and contrasting.
- Sentence 2: Write a sentence to elaborate on the first one, giving more information about your topic.
- Sentence 3: The last sentence should relate to your reader that the two things you are comparing have similarities and differences.

Paragraph 2 – This paragraph will explain the similarities that the two things share.
Before you begin this paragraph, you need to choose the three best similarities from your graphic organizer. Number them in order of importance from best (1) to least (3).
- Sentence 1: This is a topic sentence to tell the reader that the paragraph will contain similarities.
- Sentences 2 & 3: State the second most important similarity that you chose. Follow sentence 2 with an example of how the two things you are comparing meet the similarity.
- Sentences 4 & 5: State the least important similarity you chose. Follow sentence four with an elaboration of how the two things you are comparing meet the similarity.
- Sentences 6 & 7: State the most important similarity. Follow sentence 6 with an elaboration of how the two things share this commonality.

Paragraph 3 – This paragraph will discuss the differences between the two things.
Choose the three best categories (listed under the With Regard To box) and number them from best (1) to least (3).
- Sentence 1: This is a transition sentence between the two paragraphs. It should connect the last sentences of paragraph 2 to the topic of paragraph three. For example, “Although ___ and ___ have similarities, they also have differences.”
- Sentences 2 & 3: Write a sentence using the second most important category. Follow sentence two with an example of how each of the two is different in this regard. (You may also write additional sentences giving specific examples.)
- Sentences 4 & 5: Write a sentence using the third most important category. Follow sentence four with an example of how each of the two is different in this regard. (You may also write additional sentences giving specific examples.)
- Sentences 6 & 7: Write a sentence using the most important category. Then tell the reader how each is different in this regard. (You may also write additional sentences giving specific examples.)

Paragraph 4 – This is your concluding paragraph.
- Sentences 1, 2, and 3: This is your opportunity to impress the reader with your conclusion. However, it should be worded differently from the first paragraph. The last sentence, the clincher, is what the reader will remember the best.
  Hint: Reread your entire essay. Then answer the question, “So what?” in your mind. This will help to generate a closing statement.
After the first draft, students exchanged compositions and read them for content, using the graphic organizer and writing map as their guides. The reader then asked the writer questions of clarity and elaboration. Revisions were then made. Since we were striving for not only accuracy in our content but also accuracy in form, students then exchanged papers and looked for grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors as well as incomplete or confusing sentences. The following is an example of a checklist that was developed to aid students in checking for accuracy in compositions:

**Striving for Accuracy in Compositions**

- Be specific about the subject about which you are writing
- Use precise language and sentence structure appropriate to the audience and purpose
- Use content vocabulary for specificity
- Go back to the text or source material and verify that what you are writing is accurate
- Use what is written on the graphic organizer as a reference

Another opportunity was given to revise – after all, we are modeling the importance of taking pride in the finished product. As my school had a computer lab that was made available to all, students typed their composition and made corrections on the computer. Below you will find the product of cognitive composition as it relates to the lesson on Pocahontas extended to include a piece of compare/contrast writing. It was done by a fifth grade student. The audience was a teacher or parent. The purpose was not only to inform said audience about the similarities and differences of the two versions, but also to reveal the writer’s deeper and more careful thinking.
Pocahontas: Fact vs Fiction

The story of Pocahontas has been told in various ways for hundreds of years. In 1607 the English came to the New World to find gold, but instead they discovered “savages”. While both Pocahontas, the Disney movie and the factual account researched and written by Jean Fritz in The Real Pocahontas, show an actual historical event that was a result of the conflict between the cultures, they also show the differences between history and Hollywood.

There are some similarities between the movie and actual historical fact. One very important commonality is that both versions have the same main characters: Pocahontas, John Smith, and Powhatten. All three of these people play an important role in both fact and fiction. Powhatten was the chief of the Indian tribe and was Pocahontas’s father. This means that he was in control of his people. Pocahontas was a princess who was a free-spirited girl that roamed through the woods. She also lived in both worlds – that of the white and Indian. John Smith, an English captain, was an outsider from England, who was very pleased with the New World in both reality and fiction. He was a bold adventurer who viewed the Indians as savages because they did not dress or act like Englishmen. Another thing they have in common is that both versions had conflict between the cultures of the English and Indians. The Indians dressed, acted, thought, and played differently from the white men. They had different values and a way of living that the English did not understand. A third similarity is probably the one that is best remembered by everyone. Pocahontas saved John Smith from being killed by Powhatten, her father. This event changed the course of history because of the relationship between the Indian Princess and the English captain.

Even though there are some similarities in both versions of Pocahontas, there are also quite a few important differences. One difference was the actual relationship between John Smith and Pocahontas. In the movie they met almost as soon as the English landed and they became romantically involved since Pocahontas was shown as a beautiful young woman and John Smith was a handsome Englishman. In reality, the evidence shows that they did not meet until Pocahontas “saved” his life and he became her “adopted” brother. She was really an 11 year old girl and he was a short, bearded man in his late 20’s. Another way the movie was different from the actual history was the addition of stereotypes. In the Disney production the Indians were all tall, fierce, and serious. The English were greedy and not very intelligent – except, of course, for John Smith. They were either short and fat or tall and skinny – except again for John Smith, who was tall, blond and handsome. In real life, there were good guys and bad guys on both sides. Not all of the English were greedy and not all of the Indians were noble. A third way in which they were different was the reason that Pocahontas saved John Smith from being clubbed to death by her father. The actual facts are more interesting than the Hollywood version. Pocahontas actually did throw herself over him and begged for his life. However, in the movie she did it because she loved him. In real life, she had not met him until she asked that he be saved. More precisely, anytime a girl or woman in that particular tribe saved the life of a male captive, he became the adopted son of her father and had to present him with gifts. Since Powhatten wanted guns, it seems likely that her father planned the whole thing!

The lives of Pocahontas and John Smith were truly exciting ones. If she had not “saved” him, the English would have had a more difficult time in the New World. However, the movie makers did not trust history to be as interesting as their own imagination. They changed fact to fiction to include romance and stereotypical characters and left accuracy for historians. However, no matter the version, the Indian Princess Pocahontas and Captain John Smith will live forever in our history.
Note that the composition not only reflects skillful thinking related to the content, but also awareness of the writing process. Yes, this took several class periods and also time at home as homework. However, the first time a type of writing is introduced; it should be given time, effort and attention. These three factors show the value a teacher assigns to learning a task or concept.

There is one more step in the Cognitive Composition process that is often overlooked in our rush to get on to another curriculum requirement. Let’s review what has taken place so far. Students have learned the historical content of the lesson, differentiated fact from fiction, learned how to extend comparing and contrasting beyond merely listing similarities and differences so that it can be done with skill, thought in-depth about what they were going to write before they wrote it, utilized a writing map to help them organize their compositions, created a checklist for striving for accuracy when writing, and produced a quality product of which they can be proud. There was one more thing to do – discuss as a class the elements of cognitive composition that they had just experienced. The following questions are examples of the types of questions that can help to guide this discussion:

- Was the strategy for skillful comparing and contrasting useful in composing your writing? If so, how? If not, what would you add or remove that will make it more useful?
- How did the use of the graphic organizer affect your ability to know what you wanted to write? Did it affect your writing in any other way? If so, how?
- Did the Writing Map help you to organize your writing? If so, how? If not, why?
- Would you change the writing map? If so, how?
- What impact, if any, did keeping in mind striving for accuracy have on your writing? What specific things did you do to strive for accuracy?
- Do we need to make any changes to our checklist for Striving for Accuracy in Compositions? If so, what?
- Was working together with other students helpful? How? Would you do it again? When? Why?
- In what ways did the thinking that we did beforehand and the thinking you did as you wrote help you develop your final product?
- How will you compose a piece of compare/contrast writing the next time you are asked to write such an essay?
Students may want to start a notebook where they keep copies of thinking maps, graphic organizers, writing maps, final copies, and notes on their responses to the preceding questions for future reference.

I share with my colleagues the idea that teaching students to become skillful thinkers not only involves teaching them important thinking procedures like the one for skillful compare and contrast, and habits of mind that enhance such thinking like thinking interdependently, but also teaching them how they can take charge of their own thinking so that when they face thinking challenges, they can size them up and respond to them with the appropriate type of skillful thinking. This concluding metacognitive activity paves the way for this third important component in thinking-based learning.

**Parts / Whole Relationships**

Everything has parts. Even parts have parts. Keeping that in mind, one of the elements of the curriculum that is very difficult for students is reading and interpreting historical documents. It is even harder for them to write about the function of the components of these documents. The following lesson, like the previous one, may be taught in either a Social Studies or Language Arts class. It focuses on the Constitution of the United States as content, teaching students how to skillfully determine parts to whole relationships as the thinking objective. Emphasizing the use of clear and precise language as a habit of mind, in this case, enhances achieving this objective.

Like many other teachers, I found the traditional way of teaching students about the Constitution was extremely boring, especially to my students who usually came away from such instruction with little real understanding of this document. Reading, discussing, and answering written questions was a chore with little carryover after the usual test. Students still didn’t
understand how this document affected their daily lives. The resulting essays were shallow and lackluster. The challenge was to create a lesson on the Constitution that used the elements of Cognitive Composition.

In order to skillfully think about the Constitution, we had to become familiar with it first—a daunting task. The Preamble of the Constitution was the key. Since a preamble’s purpose is to signal the reader as to the content of what is to come, we asked the question: “Does the Constitution itself fulfill the promises made in the Preamble?” Just to refresh your memory, the Preamble reads as follows:

We the people of the United States in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

In order to clarify our understanding of the language contained in the Preamble and in order to better answer the question, we utilized dictionaries to determine the nuances of meaning of those words involved in the promises. The students even decided that they needed to memorize it so that they could think about it more readily. Now how to make the entire Constitution digestible?

In order to fully understand a whole it is important to understand the function of its parts. Traditionally when identifying the parts of an object or process, students would simply assign a label. This would result in a list that looks something like this when applied to the U.S. Constitution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Constitution and Its Parts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preamble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article I:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article II:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article III:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article IV:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Merely labeling the parts of the Constitution would not result in a deep understanding of the basic law of our country. To accomplish this a thinking strategy map is needed to guide our thinking about parts whole relationships beyond merely asking and answering the traditional question – “What are the parts of this object?” Asking only this first question “What smaller parts make up the whole?” would result in a list like the one above. By adding questions that require careful thinking about what would happen to the whole object if a part were missing, what the function of the part is, and how the parts all work together to make the whole operate, a much deeper understanding is attained. The result is a thinking strategy map much like the one below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking Strategy Map for Parts Whole Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What smaller things make up the whole?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. For each part, what would happen if it was missing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What is the function of each part?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How do the parts work together to make the whole what it is or operate as it does?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using this thinking strategy map, which represents a basic procedure for skillful parts-whole thinking, as our guide, our first task was to identify the parts of the Constitution that followed the Preamble. As listed in the prior example, there are seven main parts, or Articles, that designate the responsibilities of the federal government, its branches, and those of the states. In order to answer questions number 2 and 3 on the map, however, more than just remembering the names of these articles is called for. To accomplish this the class divided into 7 teams of 3 or 4 members. This was done at random by simply having the students stand in line and numbering them from 1-7. The one’s took Article 1, the two’s Article 2 and so on. Their task was to read the Article, determine what would happen to our country and/or their daily lives if it were missing, and conversely state in positive terms what the function was - which they then presented to the class –
using clear and precise language (in other words, language specifically related to the content).

Each group recorded their findings on a graphic organizer designed for these purposes (based on Swartz and Parks 1994). The example below is the graphic organizer for Article V which deals with amending or changing the Constitution.

When the results of using the thinking strategy map for skillful parts/whole thinking to determine the function of each of the Articles had been presented to the whole class, we then
completed the top part of the following class graphic organizer as our preparation for each student writing a short essay to answer the last question on the thinking strategy map (based on Swartz and Parks 1994). Just as in the previous example of comparing and contrasting, this graphic organizer became our pre-writing. Notice how the considerable thought that had so far gone into what the students wrote on the previous graphic organizer is now included in this summary of the class’s work.
Much like what we did in the compare/contrast example, the following writing map was used as a guide in composing a one paragraph essay utilizing the class graphic organizer as pre-writing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Map for Short Parts Whole Essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To be used after completion of the graphic organizers for Parts Whole Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience: ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose: ______________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence 1: Should name the whole object and tell something about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence 2: Extend or elaborate the ideas in sentence 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence 3 to Conclusion: Discuss each of the parts and tell how its function contributes to the overall operation of the whole or the way it serves its purpose. This will take several sentences. Make sure you use the graphic organizer to check off each part as you write about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: This sentence is most powerful part of your essay. It should not only include the name of the whole, but should also be a memorable statement that will leave your reader impressed by your skillful thinking!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since this was the first time we had done this kind of thinking and writing, we again followed the writing process as described in the preceding lesson. The purpose was to write an explanation of how the parts of the U.S. Constitution work together for a history textbook. Therefore, it would follow that the intended audience was students who would be reading the textbook. The students exchanged papers for revising and editing. Only this time the students used the class graphic organizer as a guide to make sure that the paper they were reading had all the parts. Keep in mind that we practiced Cognitive Composition which involves explicit use of skillful thinking – an element of which is the habit of mind we were practicing. The result is a checklist that is something like this:

**Using Clear and Precise Language in Composition**
- Use what is written on the graphic organizer as a reference
- Use language should be appropriate for the audience and purpose
- Explanations should be concise
- Use clarifying sentences to explain what your audience may not understand or know
Since students had just completed a series of lessons on similes and metaphors, many wished to incorporate that learning into their writing. Below is a final product written by one fifth grader:

**The Constitution**

The Articles all work together to form the basic law of our country – the Constitution. It integrates us together as a whole, as one people. These articles function much like the parts of a bicycle. The handlebars provide the balance a rider needs to move forward much like the branches of government established by Articles I, II, and III balance power between the President, Congress, and Courts. This allows us to move forward as a country since it establishes justice, provides for the common defense, promotes the general welfare, and secures the blessings of liberty for all of the people who live here. The states are the spokes that are held together by the hub of the constitution in Articles IV and VI in order to secure domestic tranquility. Sometimes a bicycle doesn’t have all it needs to work as well as it could. Just like the government sometimes needs new laws to make it function better. New accessories can be added or changes made because of Article V which allows for amending the Constitution. In order for a bicycle to function, it must have a rider. Article VII provided for this when it required the states to join in order for the nation to be formed. All the parts of the Constitution were put in motion by the people - striving to be a more perfect union.

Not only were the students surprised by how much they learned about the basic law of our nation and its effect on their lives, so were the parents! Again we completed our Cognitive Composition by discussing our engagement with the process and determining if there was anything we would change, delete, or add. Some prompting questions are:

- Was the strategy for skillful Parts Whole Relationships useful in your writing? If so, how? If not, what would you add or remove that will make it more useful?
- How did the use of the graphic organizer affect your ability to know what you wanted to write? Did it affect your writing in other ways?
- What role did the Writing Map play in the development of your writing?
- Would you change the Writing Map? If so, how?
- What impact, if any, did keeping in mind the need to use clear and precise language have on your writing? What specific things did you do and think about to make sure that your language was clear and precise?
- Was working together with other students helpful in your writing? How? Would you do this again? When? Why?
In what ways did the thinking you did beforehand and the thinking you did as you wrote help you to develop your final product?
How will you do this the next time you are asked to write about Parts Whole Relationships?

As an extension, the class decided to explore metaphors for the Constitution. After a detailed process of determining if a metaphor says what it needs to say about the person or object and if there are any differences that make a difference, the students wrote a modified diamante.

Clear and precise language is even more important in poetry – especially when using such a structured form. The limits that are placed on the number and function of words require that students thoroughly explore exactly what they want to say and how they are going to say it. A standard form for a diamante follows:

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Noun
Adjective, Adjective
Ing word, Ing word, Ing word
Noun, Noun, Noun, Noun
Ing word, Ing word, Ing word
Adjective, Adjective
Noun
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The first 4 ½ lines are about the top noun, the last 4 ½ lines concern the last noun.

The students modified the form by making the diamante a metaphor where all had to relate to both. Here is an example:

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Constitution
Provident, Strong
Supporting, Lasting, Changing
Freedom, Power, Structure, Form
Protecting, Surrounding, Uniting
Intricate, Flexible
Spider Web
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**Decision Making**

We have explored two kinds of expository writing with examples of cognitive composition about Pocahontas and the Constitution. Finally, let us take a look at the fine art of persuasion. In
this case a cognitive composition will flow from a skillful thinking lesson on the Newbery Award winning novel *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (1991) using skillful decision making as the thinking objective and a writing process that will result in a persuasive letter, all enhanced by an emphasis on the habit of mind of understanding and respecting, or empathizing with other points of view.

The students have read Shiloh to the point where a pivotal decision will chart the direction the characters will take for the rest of the book. Here is a brief synopsis of what has occurred so far: Marty Preston is a member of a poor family in Friendly, West Virginia. His father, a rural postman, has refused to let him have a dog since it would be one more mouth to feed. When a young beagle follows Marty home from Shiloh Bridge one day, his father insists he return the dog to its owner Judd Travers. Mr. Travers, however, is known to abuse animals and sure enough, when the dog is return to him, he threatens to break its legs if it runs away again. But the dog does run away again and returns to Marty. It is then that Marty names the beagle Shiloh. Knowing what will happen to Shiloh if he takes it back to Judd, Marty hides it in the woods. After a while Mrs. Preston becomes suspicious and follows Marty to Shiloh’s hiding place. This is the situation that makes a decision necessary for Mrs. Preston. What should she do?

The thinking strategy map for skillful decision map the helped to guide us through the lesson follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking Strategy Map for Skillful Decision Making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What makes a decision necessary?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are my options?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are the likely consequences of each option?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How important are the consequences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Which option is best in light of the consequences?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we worked our way through this thinking strategy map the students found many options for Mrs. Preston. It is so important in this skill that the second question does not limit choices. If
we had asked, “Should Mrs. Preston keep the secret or not?”, then the options would have been limited to two and the all important step of brainstorming various options to explore would have been lost. This is key to the subsequent writing and to the emphasis on empathy.

I would be remiss at this point if I did not go back to the beginning of the school year when this class spent a great deal of time laying the ground work for empathizing with and understanding of others motives and actions. We filled boards and charts with all the things we could think of that influenced ourselves and others. As we wrote them down, we discussed the how and why of the influence. We typed the result on the class computer, ran it off, and put it in our notebooks. As we thought of others throughout the year, we added them to our list, but only after we had discussed the item in class. Parents often offered suggestions at home or when they came to school. Many were usual: race, height, weight, religion, climate, economic background, handicapping conditions, etc. Some were not usual: traumatic events such as living through a tornado or hurricane, addictions, abuse, and classroom environment. They tried to think of everything. The list was used to choose a different point of view, to look at it in-depth, and write either poetry or prose “walking in that person’s moccasins”. The results were extraordinary. An example is below written by a fifth grader:

**Blindness**  
*By Lacy Burress*

*My appearance is fairly normal.*  
*On the outside I look the same.*  
*There’s something you may not notice,*  
*And it sometimes causes me sadness and pain.*  
*There are people who make fun of me.*  
*And there are some that understand*  
*That my life is kind of different*  
*Because I don’t see things like they can.*  
*The pictures in my mind are different*
They are like those in an antique book,
The shades I see are mainly black and white
Like the photos your great-grandparents took.
    I may not see the colors
    In a rainbow like you do.
    My senses help me see them
    In a way that’s unique from you.
    Red is not a color.
    To me it’s the feeling of love.
Yellow is the warmth of the sun on my face
    And blue is the air above.
Green is the smell of newly cut grass
    And white is the softness of snow.
I wish I could see colors like you do,
    But that’s a world I will never know.

Empathy for, and understanding of, other peoples’ motives and actions is essential when reading novels and using the information that has been gathered to write either poetry or prose. One student said that “you have to listen with your mind as you read so that when you write you can reach your audience’s thoughts with your words”. Profound thinking for a 10 year old.

As we approached the best way to tackle the many options that the students brainstormed for Mrs. Preston, the class decided to work in groups of 3 or 4 - each choosing an option that they thought in light of the situation was worth considering (though they were prepared to reject it if, based on the results of question 4, it turned out not to be viable). Some groups worked on the same one, but went about exploring it differently. Using what they had previously learned about understanding and empathizing with others, they became Mrs. Preston. They considered the consequences of the option they chose, both positive and negative, and for each any evidence from the text that would prove that the consequence was or was not likely to occur (assuming that we needed to weigh more heavily those consequences that were likely). Then they assigned a value to
the consequence based on how important it was from Mrs. Preston’s point of view. Taking all the data into consideration, they decided if the option was a good one for Mrs. Preston.

Note how through this entire process, these 10 and 11 year olds had to think about the situation from Mrs. Preston’s point of view – that of an adult and a mother. They had to “listen with their minds and watch her actions” starting from the events leading up to this one to help them determine the influences in her life. They had to think about the dailiness of her life and how this decision would affect it. The ability to “become” an adult had been honed by the lessons we had engaged in at the beginning of the year. Here is an example of one of the multitude of graphic organizers, each a little different from the others, that resulted: (Swartz, Kiser, Reagan 1999)
The notations on the graphic organizer which include plus and minus signs, circles and checks are more easily understood when referring back to the thinking strategy map for skillful decision making. Question # 3 asks “What are the likely consequences of each option. Students first determine if it is a positive (+) or negative (-) consequence. Then they find and record evidence from the text that shows that the consequence will or will not occur, which it turn results in a check for those that are likely and a line across those that are not. The third column contains the answer for each likely consequence to question # 4 which deals with its value or importance. The rating scale was a simple one: Very Important, Important, and Not Very Important. Based on all of this they then determined if the option was a good option. The groups then presented their findings to the whole class – which inspired a lively discussion about each option’s merits, sometimes based on serious disagreements between students.

This decision making activity concluded with each student comparing the different results and then answering the last question on the thinking strategy map: “Which option is best?” Each group was given copies of the other groups’ completed graphic organizers so they would be able to compare all the options considered.

When they engaged in this process the students were told that they should be prepared to defend their choices. This, in turn, prepared them for the final phase of this lesson – writing a persuasive letter to Mrs. Preston recommending an option and explaining why it was the best one. The students were asked to write about what they considered the top three options and to use the following writing map (Swartz, Kiser, Reagan 1999).
DECISION MAKING WRITING MAP – RECOMMENDING THE BEST OPTION

Persuasive letter
(This writing map is to be used with at least 3 completed Skillful Decision Making graphic organizers)

This persuasive letter will be used to convince your reader to take an action that you recommend. You will use at least 3 completed Decision making graphic organizers that have each explored a different option. Before you begin writing, rank the options from strongest (1) to weakest (3).

Audience:

Purpose:

Paragraph 1 – This paragraph is your opportunity to gain the attention of the person to whom you are writing.
- Explain the situation that makes the decision necessary.
- State the purpose of the letter.
- List the options that you are going to discuss

Paragraph 2 – This paragraph is to inform your reader about the option you ranked second strongest (2).
- State the second strongest of the options. Discuss it with regard to its positive and negative consequences. Support each consequence with evidence and explain its importance. (8-10 sentences)

Paragraph 3 – This paragraph is to inform your reader about the option you ranked the weakest (3).
- State the weakest of the options and discuss it with regard to its positive and negative consequences. Support each consequence with evidence and explain its importance. (8-10 sentences)

Paragraph 4 – This paragraph is to inform your reader about the option you ranked as the strongest (1).
- State the strongest of the options (this is the one you think is best) and discuss it with regard to its positive and negative consequences. Support each consequence with evidence and explain its importance. (8-10 sentences)

Paragraph 5 – This paragraph is your recommendation.
- Review the options you have discussed and recommend the one that you think is best in light of the consequences. Explain why the option you are recommending is better than the others. (6-8 sentences)

Paragraph 6 – This paragraph is your last chance to convince the person to whom you are writing that the option you are recommending is the best one.
- Make your recommendation again. Give the strongest reasons why it is the best one. Close your letter with something like this: Thank you for your consideration or Please consider my recommendation. (4-5 sentences)

As with the previous lessons the students assisted each other in revising and editing their compositions. One of the rules in the class was, as the year progressed, students did not work in the same editing teams. This created diversity and encouraged students to work outside their immediate group of friends. Again they could only ask questions of clarity and elaboration, keeping hurt feelings to a minimum. A final copy follows: (Swartz, Kiser, Reagan 1999)
Dear Mrs. Preston,

You have discovered Marty’s secret. He is keeping the dog Shiloh from Judd because he fears that Judd will kill it. You are faced with a tough choice. The purpose of this letter is to recommend what I think you should do. It may seem to you that you have to decide whether to tell Marty’s father or not. However, there are many options other than just those two. You could keep Marty’s secret and tell no one, make Marty take Shiloh back to Judd and not tell your husband, or take Shiloh back to the house and show him to Marty’s father.

If you Marty take Shiloh back to Judd and not tell pa that you found him, there are several negative consequences and not too many positive ones. Most likely your husband would find out. After all he is a postman and they visit with everyone. He feels very strongly about the fact that Shiloh belongs to Judd and he would be embarrassed in front of Judd. Being so mean and cruel, Judd might have Marty arrested, although he often breaks the law by killing deer out of season. Judd might even kill Shiloh. He has a history of abusing his dogs and has threatened to break Shiloh’s legs if he found him.

Another option you might consider is to keep Marty’s secret and tell no one. It is obvious that you believe that telling the truth is extremely important. It is part of your deep faith in God. When you made Marty tell the truth about eating Dara Lynn’s treat, you showed how you felt about lying. Omission is another form of lying. You might even feel so guilty that it would change your relationship with your husband and family. Pa also might find out since he often goes hunting. He would probably be mad at you at first, but you seem to have a strong marriage so he most likely will forgive you. However, there would be some pretty miserable moments first. Guilt is hard to live with.

Probably the best option of the three is to take Shiloh back to the house, show it to Marty’s father and explain the situation to him as best your can. You have a very good relationship with your husband and he listens to you. Even though he feels strongly about property, he might help to think of another solution besides giving the dog back to Judd. Because you have told the truth, you would not feel guilty, Marty would see that the truth is very important because you were a good role model. Although Shiloh might have to go back to Judd, Marty’s father might be more understanding about the situation and he might tell Judd that he is going to be watching to see if he hurts Shiloh.

If you look at these three options, each has both positive and negative consequences. Because you value the truth so highly and more good things can come out of taking Shiloh back to the house and talking to Marty’s father, that is the option that I recommend to you. It will keep the trusting relationship that you have with your husband and show Marty that a truth is of great value. Thank you for your consideration and attention. Please think carefully before you make a decision. The future of your family could depend on it.

Sincerely,

We were, of course, not finished yet. We again discussed the elements of Cognitive Composition and how they worked separately and together to form the whole. How did the Habit of Mind of “listening” with empathy and understanding influence us as writers and as interdependent but independent thinkers? How would we change the writing map to make it more useful? What
else could we do to be more empathetic and understanding of others? This, of course, is an important question, not just for a fifth grade language arts class, but for life.

Skillful Thinking as defined in Thinking Based Learning (2007) is “a self-planned, proficient, and purposeful application of appropriate thinking skills without skipping any key operations, using relevant skill related knowledge and supported by appropriate important mental habits”. It is in instructional contexts like those previously described that emphasizing and helping students practice important habits of mind, such as those identified in the work of Art Costa and Bena Kallick, have their most instructional force, and contribute most to the development of our students as good thinkers, good readers, and good writers. The keys for effective writing are found in these elements of skillful thinking infused into instruction that emphasizes the writing process. The implementation of Cognitive Composition in the classroom creates an environment in which the blank page will no longer be frightening, but rather will be something to fill with exciting and intelligent ideas that are the product of skillful thinking and are expressed in informative, compelling, and powerful writing. The keys work, the door is open...may I invite you to walk through.

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REFERENCES


