

Kathryn H. Au

# Literacy for all students: Ten steps toward making a difference

*In a fictitious letter to a new teacher taking a graduate-level course, Au explores questions often raised by young teachers and provides a set of principles for becoming a holistic, constructivist teacher.*



Dear Maile,  
In class yesterday afternoon, you described the challenges you face as a new teacher trying to conduct daily writers' and readers' workshops. You teach in a school with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Most are of Native Hawaiian ancestry, and the others are of many different ethnicities. Most speak a nonmainstream variety of English, Hawaii Creole English, as their first language, although a few speak other languages at home, such as Samoan, Ilokano, and Cantonese. Almost all are from low-income families.

Although your students are fourth graders, they do not appear to have had any previous experience with the process approach to writing or literature-based instruction. You have discovered that none of the other fourth-grade teachers are using these approaches, but you have heard that there is a fifth-grade teacher whose philosophy is similar to yours.

You want to continue with the writers' and readers' workshops, but you feel a great deal of uncertainty. Among the questions you raised were the following:

- Will the process approach to writing and literature-based instruction really prove effective with my students?
- Will it be possible to continue with these approaches on my own, even if my whole school is not moving in this direction?

• There is so much to do that I feel overwhelmed. What do I do first?

Your questions don't have simple answers; it's fortunate that we have the entire semester to address them. To focus our discussion, let me suggest 10 steps you might consider as you work to improve literacy instruction in your classroom.

## 1. Reflect upon your own philosophy of literacy, instruction, and learning.

Many teachers say, "Just tell me what to do!" They say they have no interest in philosophy. Yet I think it is vitally important to understand why we teach in one way or another. You may find it helpful to begin by organizing your thoughts about philosophy in three areas: literacy, instruction, and learning. Here are key ideas that have influenced my thinking.

Hansen (1992) writes of having students and teachers create literacy portfolios. The purpose of these portfolios is to answer the question, "Who am I as a reader and writer?" The portfolios contain artifacts along with brief, written reflections about why that artifact has been included. For example, one of the items in my literacy portfolio is a letter that I received from my grandmother. My favorite lines read:

Have to get ready now to go to the hospital to see the sick patients, long-term and daycare patients. We do this every Tuesday.

In my reflection I described how my grandmother wrote me this letter when she was 90 years old. I loved the idea that she was visiting the hospital to spread good cheer to people 20 or 30 years younger. Until I put my literacy portfolio together, I had not thought about the role of literacy in strengthening family ties.

One effect of creating a literacy portfolio is that we become aware of the power of literacy. Once we gain this awareness, we understand that part of our responsibility as teachers is to show students how literacy can be powerful in their lives. When students sense the power of literacy in their lives, they have ownership of literacy (Au, Scheu, & Kawakami, 1990). They value literacy and make it part of their everyday routines, at home as well as at school. I believe that ownership of literacy should be the overarching goal of the language arts curriculum (Au, Scheu, Kawakami, &

Herman, 1990). We must teach students the skills and strategies they need to become proficient readers and writers. However, students who find literacy personally meaningful will have the motivation to learn and apply skills and strategies; other students may not.

My thinking about instruction has changed a great deal over the years. When I was a beginning teacher, I taught following a traditional basal reading program, which recommended teaching skills first. Students were supposed to develop an interest in reading and writing after they had learned the skills. We now know that interest does not develop automatically as a consequence of teaching students many skills (Shannon, 1989). When skills are overemphasized and meaningful activities neglected, students tend to find little value in reading and writing. They fail to develop ownership of literacy.

I now believe that instruction should begin with interest, with activities that students can find personally meaningful. Examples of such activities are reading and discussing a thought-provoking novel, such as *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (1993), or writing about events important in one's life. The samples you've brought to class show that your students are writing about a variety of topics: fishing at the boat harbor, visiting grandparents in Arizona, planting taro. Once students are engaged in meaningful literacy activities, they have reasons to learn the skills and strategies they need to complete the activities successfully.

Schools in low-income communities, like the one in which you teach, are the most susceptible to curricula that overemphasize skills (Allington, 1991). When scores on standardized tests are low, an increased emphasis on skills is often regarded as the logical solution. I fear this solution can be damaging to students' overall development as literacy learners. Even more than other students, struggling readers and writers need to be involved in meaningful literacy activities. These are the students who most need to experience ownership of literacy. Skill instruction can and should take place within the context of their engagement in meaningful activities.

The saying that children learn to read by reading and to write by writing applies as much to the struggling reader and writer as it does to other students. Skills and strategies are

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only as good as students' ability to apply them at the right time. Students have the best opportunity to gain experience with the application and orchestration of skills and strategies when they engage in the full processes of reading and writing. That is why authentic literacy activities—reading and writing that is real and meaningful—are central to a successful classroom literacy program, especially for students of diverse backgrounds.

## **2. Choose a focus for change.**

You mentioned feeling overwhelmed because there are so many things you want to try. Sometimes, in our enthusiasm for new ideas, we run the risk of taking on too much at once. I've learned that it is best to focus on just one area at a time; for example, either the process approach to writing (Calkins, 1994; Graves 1994) or literature-based instruction (Roser & Martinez, 1995). Suppose you decide to focus on the process approach to writing. This means that you will concentrate your energies and attention on making changes to the writers' workshop. You will continue to conduct a readers' workshop and to teach reading as you are now doing, with only minor adjustments.

Teaching within the framework of a whole literacy curriculum—including the writers' workshop, the readers' workshop, and portfolio assessment—is extremely demanding for teachers (Au & Carroll, 1997). Teachers must relate to students in new ways, such as sharing their own literacy with students. It requires a great deal of thought, as well as trial and error in the classroom, to make the transformation. Teachers who try to do everything at once find that they are unable to gain a clear understanding of any particular aspect: writers' workshop, readers' workshop, or portfolio assessment (Au & Scheu, 1996).

You're wondering what to do first. Most of the teachers I know, who share a holistic, constructivist philosophy (Applebee, 1991; Raphael & Hiebert, 1996), judge the starting point to be the process approach to writing. In my experience, writing on self-selected topics—planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—does more than anything else to build ownership of literacy for students of diverse backgrounds. I am a great believer in the power of literature to inspire and motivate students to become avid readers and lovers of lit-

eracy. But I have seen time and again, for students like those in your class, that ownership of literacy begins when they write and publish books about their own lives.

## **3. Make a commitment to full implementation of your chosen focus.**

You asked whether using a holistic, constructivist approach to literacy instruction would prove effective with your students. I'm convinced that this kind of approach can be highly effective in improving the literacy achievement and attitudes of students of diverse backgrounds. However, it will only be effective under conditions of full implementation (Au & Carroll, 1997). Full implementation means that all the key features of the innovation, such as the writers' workshop or portfolio assessment, are in place in your classroom. It is important to take change one step at a time and to move steadily toward full implementation.

One way of moving toward full implementation of your chosen focus is to work with a checklist. The checklist would contain all the features of classroom organization, teacher-led instruction, opportunities for student learning, and portfolio assessment that you believe to be important (Au & Carroll, 1997). The checklist can help you set goals for your own professional development. You begin by identifying the items you already have in place in your classroom. Then, perhaps once a month, you select the item or items that you would like to implement next.

You may want to look over several different checklists, such as those developed by Johnson and Wilder (1992) and Vogt (1991). If you are like most teachers, you will find yourself revising one of the checklists, drawing upon your own thinking and the ideas in other checklists. After all, unlike the authors of the original checklist, you know your own students and have a good sense of what will work effectively with them. In developing a checklist, you will also have started to plan your professional development as a teacher of literacy.

My colleagues and I (Au & Scheu, 1996) learned of the importance of full implementation while working with a checklist for the writer's workshop. We discovered that an implementation level of about 90% of checklist

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items is the point at which dramatic improvements in students' learning are seen. Below this level, although an increasing number of checklist items may be implemented, literacy achievement does not seem to improve. An implementation level of 90% proved to be what social scientists call a tipping point, the point when the situation has finally changed enough so that positive results occur. To reach the tipping point, teachers had to have faith that they were on the right track and be patient and thorough in their work.

#### **4. Establish clear goals for students' learning.**

Goals for student learning can help you know how to direct your teaching. Of course, you have already gained much of the information you need through observations of your students. You have a sense of their strengths as literacy learners and the areas in which they can benefit from instruction. Other information comes from outside the classroom, as you learn what other educators think about the goals for student learning at your grade level. In class we reviewed our state's language arts standards (Hawaii State Commission on Performance Standards, 1994), as well as the national standards for the English language arts proposed by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996). These documents are valuable resources, but they provide broad frameworks rather than ready-made solutions. Our state standards document describes goals across several grade levels (for example, kindergarten through Grade 3), while the national standards document lists goals appropriate from kindergarten through high school. Neither provides grade-level benchmarks—goals for student learning for each grade level—the form of standards most useful to the classroom teacher. For example, suppose that a broad goal at the state level is for students to understand and appreciate literature. A corresponding benchmark at the fourth-grade level would be that students write a response to literature, including story elements, the author's message, and connections to their own lives.

I've worked on the process of developing benchmarks at several schools, and in most cases it has not been difficult for teachers to reach consensus about the benchmarks appro-

priate for each grade. The difficulty lies in moving from benchmarks as theoretical statements to benchmarks as actual goals that students will achieve. Schools like yours, in low-income communities, generally have a history of low student achievement. Given past experience, teachers may be skeptical about whether their students can actually reach the benchmarks (Au & Scheu, 1996). Teachers have told me, "I feel that these are the right benchmarks for my grade level, but I don't see how my students can achieve them."

Students of diverse backgrounds, like your students, can reach levels of performance consistent with state and national standards for achievement in the language arts (Au & Carroll, 1997; Au & Scheu, 1996). The teachers whose students achieved these results used practices that you may find helpful. They made benchmarks public and visible to students. They rewrote the benchmarks in language students could understand, and they posted charts with the benchmarks. They discussed the benchmarks so students knew what each one meant. They showed students examples, such as research reports completed by students the year before, of the kind of work that would be expected of them. They kept the benchmarks posted and frequently referred to them. Students knew the goals for literacy learning at their grade level; expectations were clear. With the cards on the table, so to speak, teachers and students can work collaboratively toward achievement of the benchmarks.

#### **5. Share your own literacy with students.**

I mentioned earlier that the teacher's role is transformed in whole literacy classrooms. One of the characteristics of constructivist, holistic forms of teaching is that the teacher demonstrates to students that s/he engages in the same processes of literacy as they do. For example, if students are supposed to write in notebooks, the teacher shows how s/he writes entries in her/his notebook (Calkins, 1994). Teachers strive to be the kind of readers and writers they wish their students to be. As Graves (1990) suggests, teachers' discovery of their own literacy is the starting point for a successful writers' workshop.

It takes courage for teachers to share their own literacy with students. When we share our

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literacy with students we reveal ourselves as human beings with interests and feelings. Perhaps for this reason, teachers' sharing of their literacy makes a profound impression on students. Chris Tanioka, a fourth-grade teacher, wanted her students to understand how much she loved books.

One day she brought in a large bag of books and told the class she wanted to share some books she had on her nightstand and was currently reading. One by one she pulled out her books and told the class what they were about and why they were important to her. Some were "how to" books on flower arranging and swimming, one was a popular novel recommended to her by a colleague, and several were children's books. These she said she loved most of all. "I used to hide my books so no one would know I read children's books. But not anymore!" (Carroll, Wilson, & Au, 1996)

Nora Okamoto, a fifth-grade teacher, used her own writing as the basis for minilessons during the writers' workshop. In one minilesson, she focused on the benchmark *reconsiders and reorganizes writing*, showing students how she had changed a piece of writing from one genre to another.

Nora began by telling the students about a journal entry she had written about her father. She spoke about how hard it was to share her writing because the subject was a personal and emotional one. She talked about the feelings she had when her father experienced difficulties following the death of her mother. Nora explained how helpless she felt, not knowing what to do or say. She decided to write a piece about her father to express how much he meant to her. Then, reconsidering her writing, she saw how she could turn it into a poem, a less personal way to express her strong feelings. She showed the students how she circled thoughts and words from her journal entry and then began drafting. When Nora read the poem, the class was mesmerized. (Carroll et al., 1996)

Students in these classrooms did not have to be lectured about the power of literacy. Through their teachers' demonstrations, they saw it with their own eyes.

## **6. Make school literacy learning a meaningful, rewarding experience for students.**

You described how some students in your classroom have a negative attitude toward school and try to disrupt the class. They seem to be testing you to see how you will respond. You are working at winning them over, but you wonder if you will be successful. You worry that the time you are spending with this handful of students is taking time away from

others, and you are concerned about negative effects on the whole class.

D'Amato (1988) points out that students of diverse backgrounds may not see the point of going to school. They may not have the understanding that doing well in school can improve their life opportunities, leading to college and a good job, because these connections have not been illustrated in their own families. D'Amato suggests that teachers must make school an interesting and rewarding daily experience, so that students will have a reason for coming to school and doing their best to learn.

In this view, literacy learning activities that students find meaningful are not a luxury but a necessity. Here are some ideas for making literacy meaningful for students.

- Before discussing a book, have students discuss their experiences related to the topic or theme of the book (Au, 1979). For example, before reading *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), students might be asked what they would like to do when they grow up. Then they could be asked how they would feel if someone else were to make that decision for them.

- Teach students to write in notebooks about experiences important in their lives (Calkins, 1991). Demonstrate the process by reading entries from your own notebook.

- Interview students to learn about their tastes as readers. If students are indifferent to reading or do not yet have preferences, help them identify materials related to their interests. These materials may be surfing magazines or comic books, but that is a start. Make sure these materials are available to students during sustained silent reading.

- Invite older students, parents, and community members into the classroom to serve as literate role models. Have these individuals discuss the importance of literacy in their lives. For example, musicians who compose songs or raps can discuss the importance of writing. Students can gain the understanding that people in every occupation—*kumu hula*, lifeguards, farmers—use reading and writing to do their jobs well.

## **7. Involve students in portfolio assessment.**

You are thinking of trying portfolio assessment. However, you have heard that it is a lot of work and wonder if it will be worth the

trouble. Portfolio assessment is indeed worthwhile, because of what it can do to promote students' ownership of literacy. When portfolio assessment is successful, students take responsibility for their own literacy learning.

Once teachers have familiarized students with the grade-level benchmarks, they are ready to help students start portfolios. A list of benchmarks is attached to each student's portfolio. The teacher explains to students that they will be gathering evidence in their portfolios to show their progress in meeting the grade-level benchmarks. As each benchmark is reviewed, the teacher asks students if they can think of anything that might serve as evidence. For example, I observed a group of fifth graders who were asked to find evidence for the benchmark *plans writing*. Several students said they would use the topic lists and webs from their writing folders as evidence. One student asked if she could use as evidence a notebook entry that had been the basis for a published piece.

Teachers can help students understand portfolio assessment as a process that takes place across the year. When the portfolios are introduced, perhaps at the end of the first quarter, students may notice that they do not have evidence for all the benchmarks. For example, they may not have evidence for the benchmark *reads different genres of fiction and shows understanding of genre characteristics*, because they have only read realistic fiction. Students become aware of the need to work on this benchmark in the future. Teachers may ask students to write down the goals they will pursue during the next quarter. Students identify the benchmarks they will work on. They also identify personal goals that may not be represented by any benchmarks.

Valencia (1990) envisions the portfolio process as one in which students have the opportunity to reflect upon and evaluate their own learning. With portfolios, students take control of their own literacy learning, an important aspect of ownership. Through the use of benchmarks, students understand what others expect of them. By reflecting on their own progress as literacy learners, they understand what they should expect of themselves.

## **8. Keep parents involved in students' literacy learning.**

You mentioned that you have already had some contact with parents. The mother of one

of your students stopped by to talk with you. She had noticed her son's new enthusiasm for writing and was wondering if there was anything she could do to sustain this interest. A father wanted you to know that he was concerned about his daughter's spelling. He asked when his daughter would start having weekly spelling tests, and he was surprised when you explained that she would be learning correct spelling by editing her own writing.

One of our tasks in moving toward a holistic, constructivist approach to literacy instruction is to familiarize parents with the benefits of this approach. Most parents have not experienced readers' and writers' workshops and portfolio assessment in their own education. They may find it puzzling when they see drafts of students' writing with invented spelling, or they may wonder why teachers are not assigning phonics worksheets as homework.

Teachers can do much to address parents' questions and concerns. At evening meetings, some teachers have parents participate in a writers' or readers' workshop, to give them a sense of the learning experiences available to their children. Other teachers may explain these approaches to parents using slides of the classroom to illustrate different types of activities, such as peer conferences or literature circles. Some teachers communicate with parents through a monthly newsletter. Students participate in planning the newsletter and write most of the articles. Teachers may help parents learn new ways of helping their children with homework. For example, parents may feel uncomfortable eliciting children's ideas about a book. Through a monthly newsletter, teachers might share ideas for discussing books, such as suggestions for open-ended questions.

Some parents have schedules that allow them to work as volunteers in the classroom. During the readers' workshop, parents may bring a favorite book to read aloud to students, or they may listen to students read. Parents literate in a language other than English may be invited to the classroom to demonstrate that writing system, for example, Chinese calligraphy. Parents can confer with students about their writing and help students publish books by entering and printing texts on the computer.

Eleanor Baker, a university business writing instructor, spent a year as a volunteer in her son's first-grade class, assisting during the

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writers' workshop. On her first day, Baker (1994) found it difficult to work with young children in such a busy environment:

I felt overwhelmed because the children were so small with such tiny voices that could run a mile a minute. I felt that I couldn't focus on one child and make any sense of what he or she was saying because there was so much activity going on—children writing, children conferring with classmates or teacher, children brainstorming, and children drawing pictures. (Remember, I grew up at a time when neat rows of quiet students were the norm!) (p. 374)

Baker's words remind us of just how different classrooms today are from those parents usually recall. Gradually, as Baker interacted with the children and observed Martha Willenbrock, her son's teacher, she came to understand the benefits of the process approach to writing. Baker concludes:

The approach to writing that was used in this classroom does not turn all children into prolific writers; some children write much more than others. The approach does allow each child to write successfully, however, no matter what difficulties he or she encounters. (p. 377)

When teachers welcome parents as volunteers, parents have the chance to see the benefits of readers' and writers' workshops for themselves.

## 9. Network with other teachers.

You have found the teachers at your grade level to be cordial and welcoming, but they do not appear interested in discussing instructional issues with you. You wonder if you should approach the fifth-grade teacher who seems to share your philosophy. That could be the first step toward forming your own teacher network. It would certainly be convenient to share ideas with the teachers at your grade level, but often teachers do not find themselves with such ready-made networks. Instead, they must create their own networks by doing just what you plan to do, actively seeking out others who share their philosophy. Being part of a teacher network is one of the best things you can do to further your own professional development.

I have heard many teachers use words like these to describe their experiences before joining a network:

I would go to a workshop and get all excited about this new approach. For the next few days, I would try it in my classroom. It wouldn't work. And I would think to myself, what am I doing wrong? I had so many questions, but there was no one to ask. So after a while, I would give up and go back to what I was doing before.

Most teachers have an interest in improving their teaching, but their past efforts have often been disappointing and frustrating. The typical one-day workshop provides inspiration and just enough knowledge to get started—but not enough to deal with the difficulties that arise in a particular classroom. Most teachers who hold a holistic, constructivist philosophy know that they must direct their own professional development. They have their own questions about literacy instruction, and they seek answers to these questions. They select carefully from the workshops offered by their school, their districts, and publishers. Most important, they belong to teacher networks so they can discuss and reflect upon the changes they are making in their classrooms.

Once you have identified colleagues interested in joining a network, you will face other challenges. It takes time to learn to describe one's classroom practices to other teachers and to articulate one's concerns about instruction. It takes practice to consult with other teachers: to listen, restate another's concerns, ask questions, offer suggestions. It takes practice to facilitate a discussion, make sure that everyone is heard, and keep the conversation focused on the key issues. Yet the rewards far outweigh the difficulties. Sometimes you will pose a question that spurs suggestions from the group. However, even when your colleagues cannot offer specific ideas, they will provide you with the encouragement to continue wrestling with the issues.

Finding the time to participate in a network may be the greatest challenge of all. Most teachers do not have time for network meetings during the school day. Sometimes they meet at lunch or after school. I belong to a teacher network that meets once a month over dinner. There are teachers who form carpools so they can network on the drive to and from school. Where there's a will, there's a way.

## 10. Allow time for change to take place.

You have just begun your second year of teaching, and you are concerned about improving your literacy program, not to mention your teaching of math and other subjects. You know that this year is going more smoothly than last year, but you wish your teaching would improve more quickly. You mentioned

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being surprised by how patient you could be with your students but noted that you had trouble being patient with yourself. You wonder how long it will take before you have the process approach to writing, literature-based instruction, and portfolio assessment all in place in your classroom.

I cannot say exactly, but it could well be several years before you feel comfortable with all these elements in your classroom language arts program. I see growth in your thinking since the beginning of our class, and I feel you are making more progress than you realize. If you have a holistic, constructivist philosophy, you will find that your vision of your classroom and your goals for professional development are constantly evolving. You have embarked on a journey that will continue for at least as long as you are a teacher.

I want to close by addressing a question that you have been too polite to raise in class. That is the question of what impact constructivist, holistic literacy instruction can really have on students' lives. Many of your students face difficult circumstances at home. Some are homeless. Some come to school hungry. Some have a parent in prison or addicted to drugs. Sometimes it seems as if there is little a teacher can do in the classroom that could possibly help students overcome these conditions. Yet literacy may help some students understand and come to terms with the challenges in their lives.

In one classroom, students engaged in dialogue journals with their teacher. A girl wrote about an incident that seemed to the teacher to involve sexual abuse. The teacher, the school counselor, and the student met to discuss the situation. Soon after, the student's parents took legal action to make sure the offender, a male relative, would not harm the girl again.

The student decided to write a book about these experiences, and she was determined to share the book with her classmates. When the teacher asked whether she really wanted to do this, the girl stood firm in her decision. She said that she hoped other students would learn from her experiences; if they were being abused, they could do something about it.

This is a particularly dramatic example, but I know of many other instances in which students used literacy to address difficulties in their lives: witnessing the arrest of an older brother, moving in with relatives when a father

lost his job, learning that a beloved grandmother had died. Accounts written by adolescents testify to the lasting impression of experiences in classrooms with holistic, constructivist teaching (e.g., Crockett & Weidhaas, 1992).

I can't say for a fact that your students will be convinced of the power of literacy, or that literacy will improve their lives. But it just might.

Sincerely yours,

Kathy Au

### Author notes

The questions and responses in this letter are based on discussions with a graduate class in which about half the students were beginning teachers in low-income schools. The concerns attributed to Maile, a fictitious character, were the ones expressed by these teachers.

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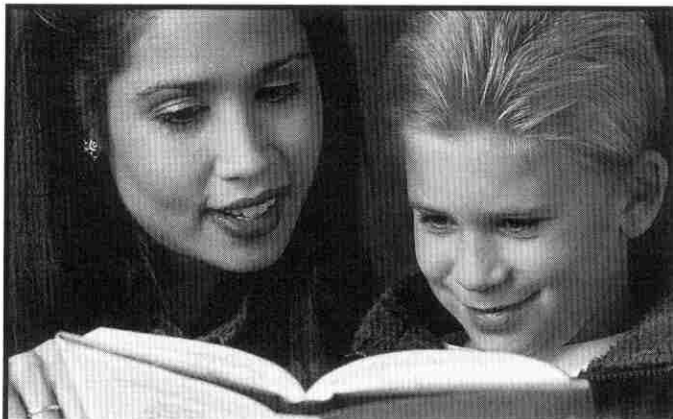
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A classroom achievement-based learning information system. The computer-adaptive reading test and database that delivers norm-referenced information on classroom reading growth. Score any student's reading level in 10 minutes or less!

#### READING RENAISSANCE® PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Reading Renaissance methods help teachers maximize these powerful learning information systems. Balance instruction with increased reading practice, and build critical thinking skills.

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**Accelerated  
Reader®**

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