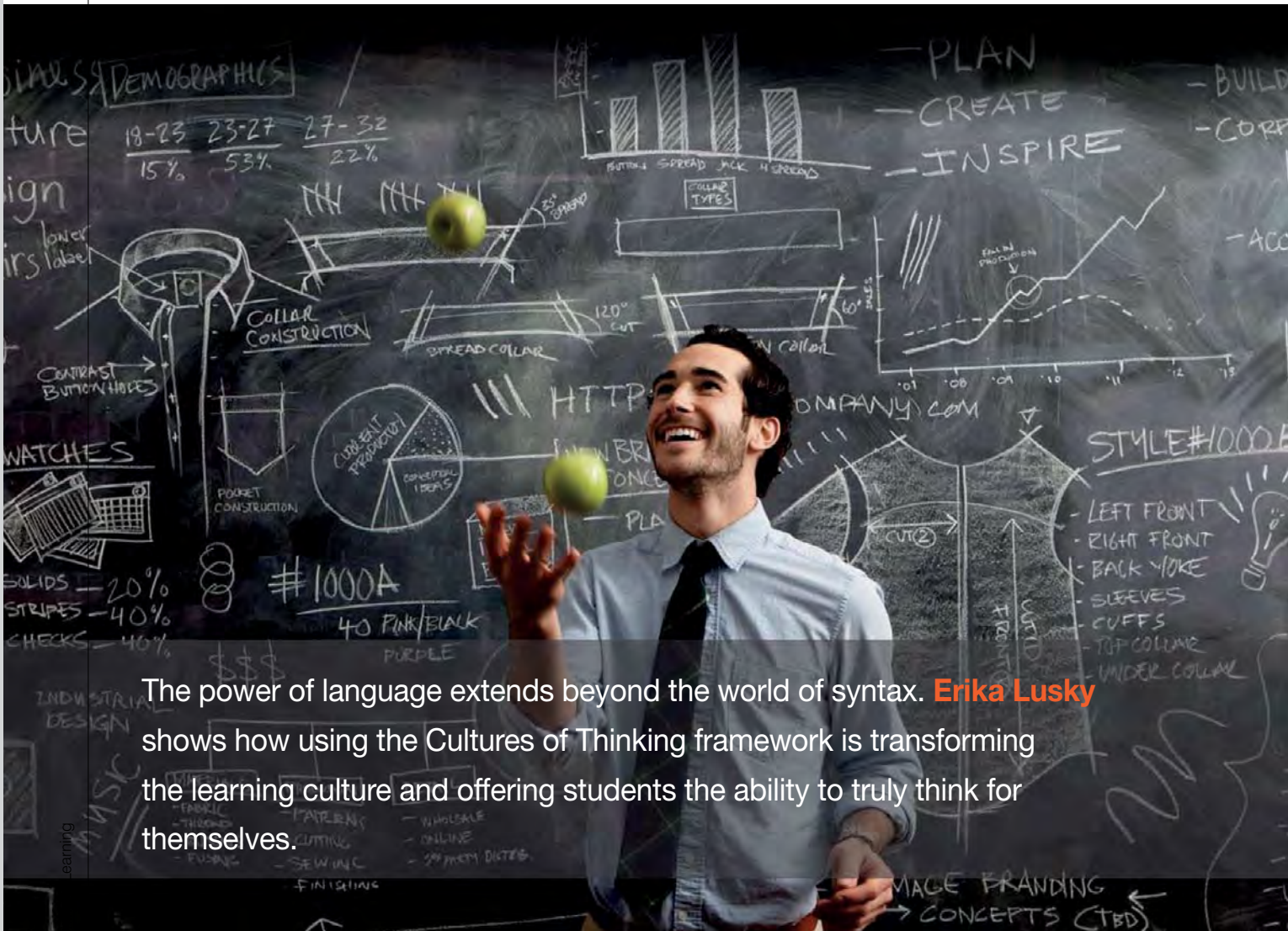# Shaping Reality
with the Language
of Thinking

The power of language extends beyond the world of syntax. **Erika Lusky** shows how using the Cultures of Thinking framework is transforming the learning culture and offering students the ability to truly think for themselves.

"The limits of my language are the limits of my world," said the great 20th century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. He adds, "Language is much more than a communication medium, it is a shaper of reality. Teachers, who are figures of authority and tone-setters, name situations and through the choice of their diction and syntax will create limitations and affordances. Keeping language mindful, open to possibilities, inclusive and positive is vital. The challenge is to remain

metacognitively conscious of the power of language at all times so that the reality we shape is what we want it to be. When we stop thinking, the language we produce can be sloppy, deterministic and prejudiced." Wittgenstein's thought-provoking words made me begin to think about my own use of language.

Just a few years ago, I was co-teaching in a middle school language arts classroom. The students in our classroom were all certified in special education with a variety of disabilities and therefore receiving direct instruction to remediate their deficits. The pre-prescribed literacy program that we were to teach from was entirely scripted. The program told students when to 'listen', 'look', and even 'think'. Students would sit in class, day after day, knowing exactly what was coming next by simply looking at the next page in their workbook, which repeated the same sequence of instructional steps over and over with different content. Students would follow along (not all of them) and respond like robots. Something didn't feel right. I wondered if I could change the way vocabulary words were traditionally introduced and practiced? I wondered if I could change rote responses by asking open-ended questions and creating an opportunity for students to form new ideas to enhance their learning according to their own abilities? I quickly realised that it wasn't a matter of swapping one word or prompt for another rather one approach for another. The changes needed to be made were really a shift in thinking.

Fortunately for my students, something better came our way – a book called *Creating a Culture of Thinking*. A Culture of Thinking, defined by Harvard University researcher Dr. Ron Ritchhart, is "a place where a group's collective thinking as well as each individual's thinking is valued, visible, and actively promoted as part of the regular day-to-day experience." Dr. Ritchhart believes that building a 'thinking culture' within our schools is the key to better learning. He discovered eight cultural forces that can shape a culture of thinking and contribute to powerful learning and deeper understanding. While all eight cultural forces are always present and working in tandem, the cultural force of Language stood out for me as a place to zoom in on initially, not only to create a culture of thinking but to support and improve the language skills of students.
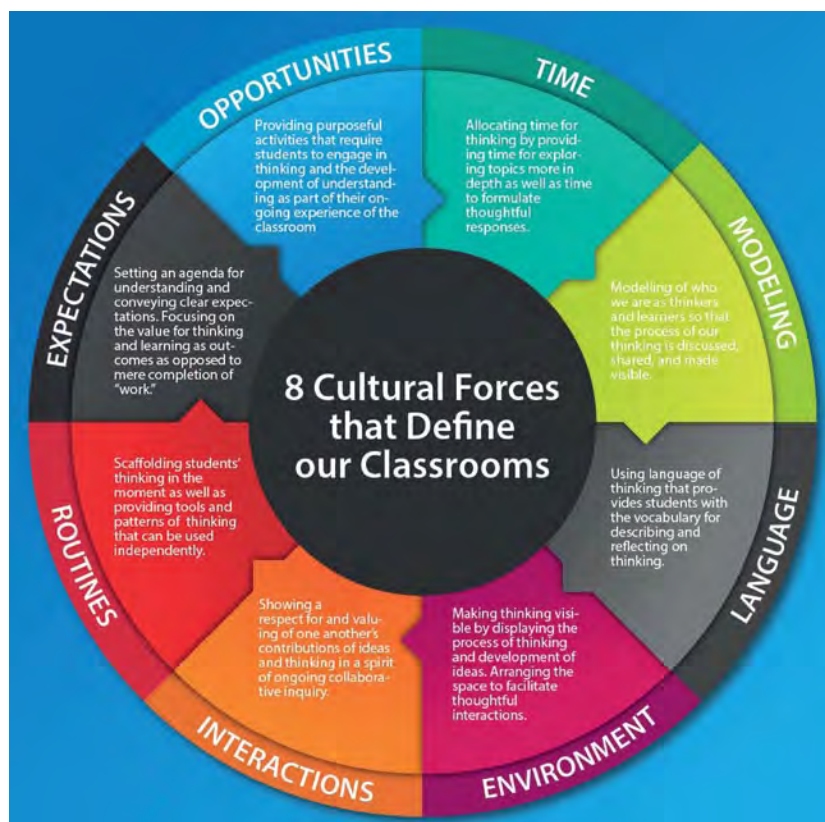
I got my hands on a resource related to the Cultures of Thinking project titled, *7 Types of Language to Incorporate in Your Classroom*. I became excited about the many possibilities to harness language. Just as we prepare for the content and learning opportunities we offer, we can also plan for the specific language moves, questions and phrases that will best promote thinking and understanding. I began to focus on the things I said. I would plan and record questions to press for thinking until they became a habit and felt natural to ask. I would display specific language stems and use the *7 Types of Language to Incorporate in Your Classroom* document to prime my language for each class. I learned that our words can shift students' perceptions of themselves and of their learning, and alter an entire classroom culture. Further, words and phrases hold considerable power over classroom conversations, thus over students' literate and intellectual development. I quickly began to notice the subtle yet powerful effects of my language. Here's what happened as I directed myself to the 7 types of language.

7 TYPES OF LANGUAGE to incorporate in YOUR CLASSROOM

THE LANGUAGE OF COMMUNITY

Pronoun choice can communicate a sense of inclusiveness, collaboration, and community (we, us, our); or it can deliver a message of division, separateness, and control (I and you)

THE LANGUAGE OF INITIATIVE

Teachers can convey to students that they are active, decision-making agents in the learning process: "Tell me what you just did," "What's your plan for talking this?" and "Where will you go next?" asks learners to identify strategies and be explicit about them.

THE LANGUAGE OF PRAISE & FEEDBACK

Teachers use language to direct praise and feedback either on behavior or on learning. Effective learning feedback aims to guide future learning and is specific, descriptive, informative, sincere, and action-oriented as opposed to global, judgmental, reflexive, and purely evaluative.

Source: Ritchhart, Ron. "Chapter Three: Language." *Creating Cultures of Thinking: The 8 Forces We Must Master to Truly Transform Our Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2105. 61-86.

THE LANGUAGE OF THINKING

Teachers have the power to name and notice the thinking that students are doing, providing them with more sophisticated language for their thinking: "That's an interesting *connection*." "You've really *generated* some new ideas." "That's a new *theory*."

THE LANGUAGE OF IDENTITY

Language can invite students to step into new identities as scientists, writers, authors, mathematicians, thinkers and so on. These words communicate that it is learning to do and act authentically that matters, not just learning about the subject.

THE LANGUAGE OF MINDFULNESS

Language that allows for the possibility of interpretation and that opens the door to even a small bit of ambiguity has the power to keep the mind in an open state, avoiding early closure, pursuing possibilities, and listening to the information provided by others. "What might be an answer?" or "What might be going on here?" The use of the word "might," what is called conditional language, sends the mind a subtle clue that definitive answers aren't warranted, but speculation is.

THE LANGUAGE OF LISTENING

Good listeners ask authentic questions to clarify points, unearth any assumptions they may be bringing to the situation, and be sure of the speaker's intent. To verify their understanding, good listeners may paraphrase what speakers have said and ask speakers to verify they have correctly represented their ideas.

The Language of Community

We began using the pronouns 'we', 'our', and 'us'. When we use those pronouns, we align with our belief that learning is a social endeavor and that we are in the learning experience together. A key language move on my part was swapping, "I would like you to…" with, "We might consider..." I began to notice students moving from passive recipient learners to active participatory learners who were in control of their own learning. I would often ask, "Where do we go from here?" hoping students would see themselves as part of a community of learners, rather than being dissociated. "Language works to position people in relation to one another." (Davies and Harre 1999; Langenhove and Harre 1999).

Language of Initiative

Teachers love strategies. We live and breathe strategies, everything from brushing our teeth to writing an essay. We often teach our students strategies often, and that's not necessarily a bad idea. I always wondered if students were using the taught strategies once they left my presence. I always dreamed of following my students to another class and observing them putting a taught strategy into play in another context, placing them in the driver's seat. It still felt like I was directing though. I still caught myself offering, "Next you need to..." or "Remember we learned…". I later learned that knowing and implementing a taught strategy is still different than acting strategically. Learning to act strategically invites and shapes behaviour and enhances agency. I began to elicit questions rather than statements to foster this type of language. I would ask:

"How are you planning on…?"

"What are you wondering about…?"

"What other information do you think you need?"

"Where do you think you can find that?"

"What might be a good way to show this?"

"What might you do differently next time?"

Students became more independent by making choices rather than being told what to do. I heard their imagination shine through in their responses. I believe the language of initiative is a helpful step in promoting choice and developing character.

Language of Praise and Feedback

"The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism." – Norman Vincent Peale.

I believe people like to hear praise every now and then and I don't think we're going to stop using it all together. But, what if we promised to follow praise with specific, detailed feedback to move learning forward? What if we noticed students' willingness to explore or reflect? I decided to try replacing praise with causal statements, you did ABC with a consequence XYZ. For example, "When you added dialogue to your piece, I really understood how the character Marcy felt". This statement shows the consequence of a process of learning rather than a global statement of praise such as "good job". We can also turn students' attention to the process by saying things like, "It sounds like you used what you already know by identifying important aspects including XYZ. How can we build from this knowledge to further build explanations?" Sometimes, I just say, "Thank You!"

Language of Thinking

Remember the pre-prescribed literacy program? Here's what thinking would sound like:

Student 1: "Blah, Blah, Blah…"
Teacher: "That's not a myth"
Student 2: "Yadda Yadda Yadda…"
Teacher: "That's a myth, anyone else?"
Student 3: Another suggestion of a myth...
Teacher: "That's a myth...anyone else?"

So, where is the discussion? Where are the languages of learning? Another resource that found its way to our classroom was, "The Understanding Map" consisting of key thinking moves that lead to understanding created by Dr. Ron Ritchhart. We attached sentence stems to the map to use and model the language of thinking for ourselves and our students. Through noticing and naming, we began to communicate and demonstrate the value of thinking.
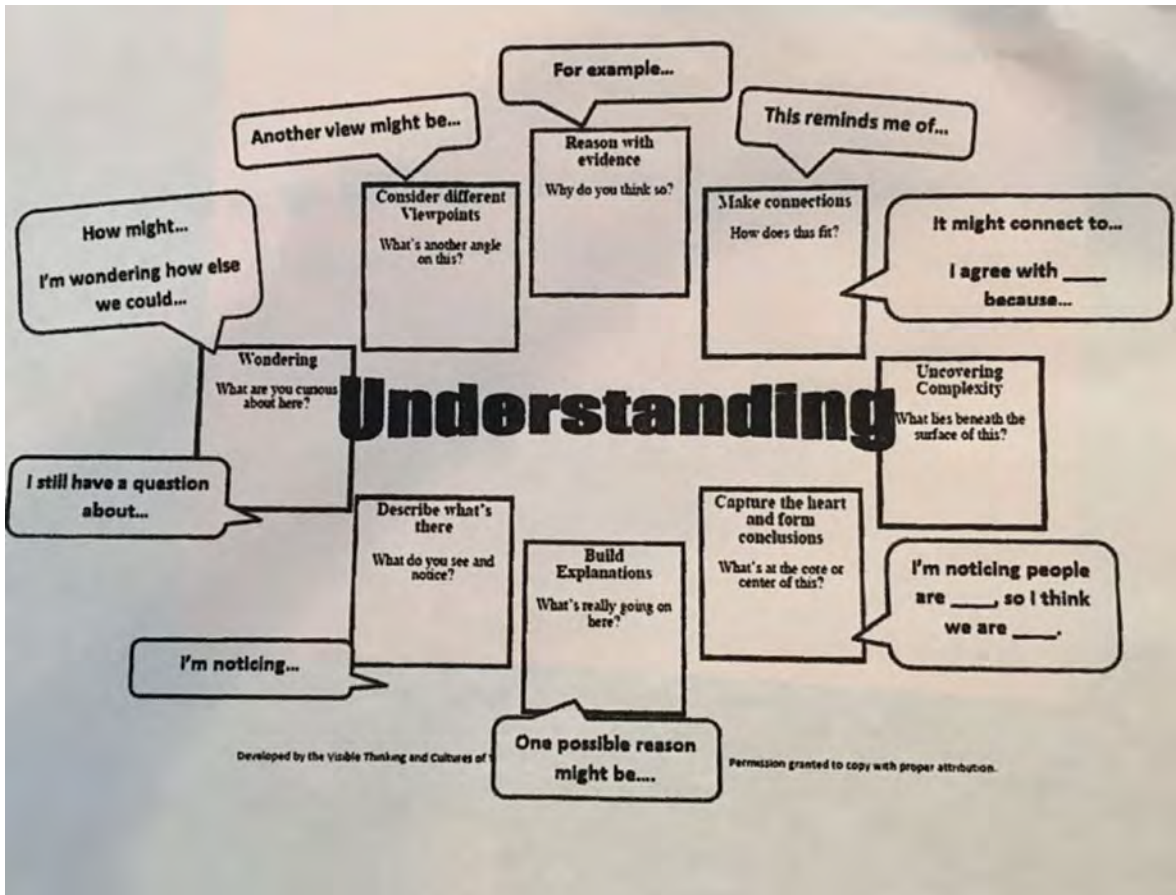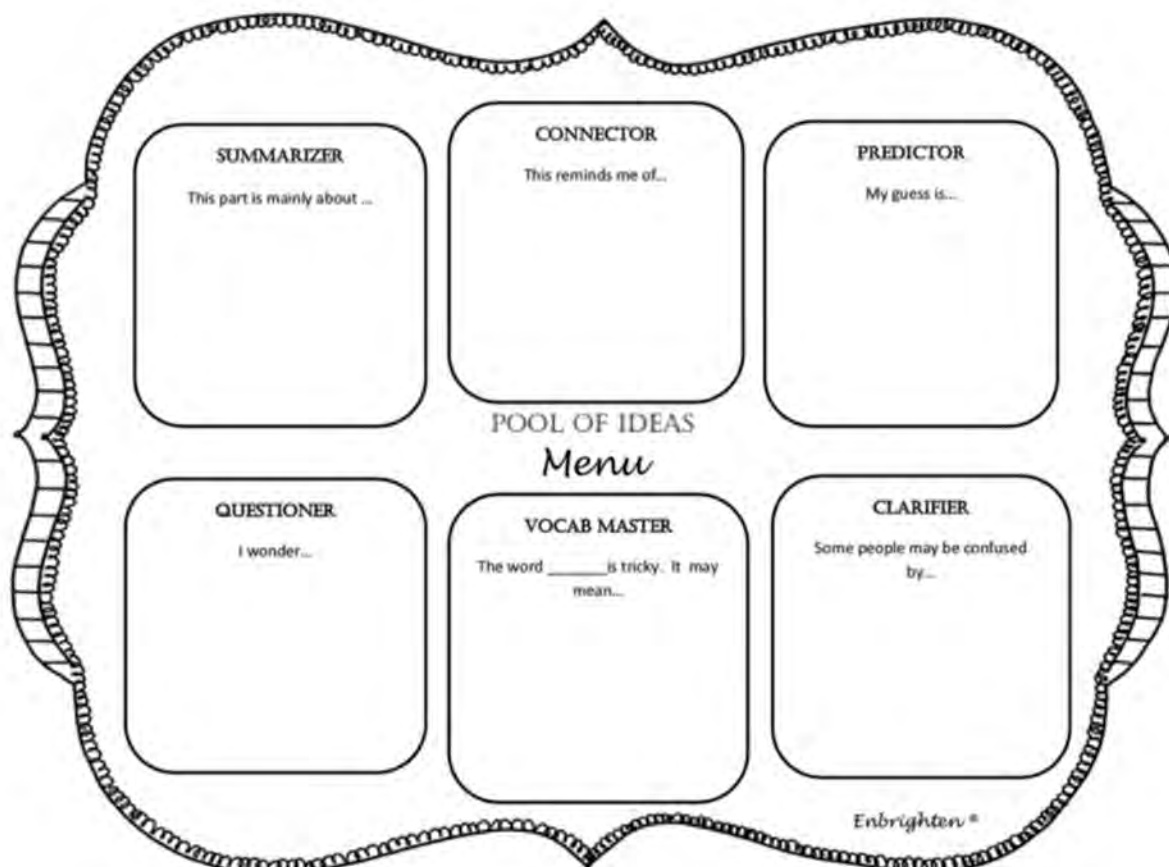

I question students, "What are you noticing?" or "Are there any patterns emerging?" bringing their attention to the featured artefact and modelling the language of thinking, opening up possibilities and building mental flexibility. On the flip side, I comment on students' responses. I might say something like, "That's an interesting connection" or "That's one possible explanation, any others?" Over time, students began to use the language of thinking themselves, becoming analysers of their own thinking and the thinking of others, fostering metacognition. Noticing and naming thinking takes a hidden mental skill into the public realm for the benefit of classroom community, as well as for the individual student. Once you begin to notice something, it's hard not to notice

it again. This language move sends the message that we are more interested in a student's behaviour of making meaning than them giving the right answers.

Language of Identity

Roles can alter a student's participation in a classroom. It can shape the way they interact with their studies and one another. For example, telling students how they should write, a task seen as being done for the teacher, is quite different from asking the question, "What are you doing as a writer today?" In our classroom, we began to assign roles based on the context. In this example, we used roles closely associated with comprehension strategies. Before, during and after reading a text, students would jot down their thinking from the lens of their specific role. Over time, students were able to take on multiple roles. Following a reading, we would hold collaborative discussions surrounding the text or topic. Students would share out by using the provided sentences stems and continue with their own thinking. Inviting a conversation on these different conditions changes the identity and agency of the student. I noticed that when students identified themselves with a role, there was a larger sense of responsibility, students raised their own expectations of themselves, their length of utterances and vocabulary use increased and they were more readily able to connect to each other and the world.

SUMMARIZER
This part is mainly about ...

CONNECTOR
This reminds me of...

PREDICTOR
My guess is...

POOL OF IDEAS
Menu

QUESTIONER
i wonder...

VOCAB MASTER
The word _____ is tricky. It may mean...

CLARIFIER
Some people may be confused by...

Enbrighten ®

Language of Mindfulness

As teachers, we are typically highly structured, thinking individuals with well-planned lives. We are also creatures of habit and expectation. We have spent most of our careers teaching kids 'stuff', having them memorise 'stuff' and expecting them to verbally or in writing spit back the same 'stuff'. We were

conditioned to teach facts and accept only right answers. In that situation, teachers hold all the knowledge and stand with authority to transmit the knowledge that only they know. That might suggest that most of the knowledge children have of the world is that that has been given to them. A way to change the status quo is to open up conversations in the classroom through our choice of language. An alternative to absolute language, which points to closed answers, is conditional language. I began to use two key words: 'might' and 'could'. I would ask, "What do you think might be going on here?" or "What could have led to that conclusion?" Conditional language affords students the opportunity to build explanations, wonder, challenge assumptions and much more. Using conditional language can open up a journey that may have been closed by 'knowing'.

Language of Listening

I don't believe the adult is the only teacher in the room anymore. Our willingness to listen shows genuine respect for students. By adopting a listening disposition as a teacher in the classroom, I was able to give feedback that was authentic and which informed learning. I could also begin to look and listen for what wasn't being said. My colleague and I created a document to prime ourselves with specific language moves while facilitating collaborative discussions to demonstrate and model listening. We also created 'Discussion Starter Prompts' to prime students with the language needed to verify agreement, respectfully pose another view and clarify points. Over time, our students were able to use this language independently and realised the benefits of using one another as a resource. They began to realise that this skill was helpful in developing understanding of themselves and each other. They began to listen with curiosity rather than listening for their turn to speak. A community of listeners and learners was beginning to be built where all voices mattered.
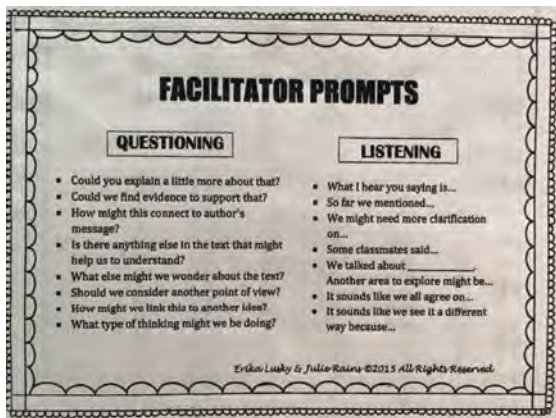
Dr. Ritchhart created a wonderful list of 10 Things to Say to your Students Everyday, which included a 'bonus suggestion' that might be the most important priming tool we can use as we create a more student centered learning experience in which the language is core. The bonus suggestion reads, "Say Nothing!" or "WAIT", which stands for "Why Am I Talking?"

As I reflect on each class, I often ask myself these three questions: What should I stop doing? What should I keep doing? What should I start doing? After learning about the power of language as a culture shaper, I've added a question, Why didn't I do this sooner?

Erika Lusky is a secondary level teacher in the area of special education and is also an instructional coach, helping schools and teachers implement Cultures of Thinking in their teaching.