

Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer: Innovative Pedagogies for Cultivating Every Student's Potential

This book is brilliant. It is astonishingly practical and insightful. We create the conditions for each child's brilliance to manifest by a strengths-based approach in a culture of true caring. We may know these truths but have been too casual in practicing them. Today's world demands unfamiliar levels of courage and commitment to implement these practices wherever we can. It's now or never. A truly remarkable work!

Margaret J. Wheatley, Ed.D.

author of 10 books, from *Leadership and the New Science* to *Who Do We Choose to Be?*

Gamwell and Daly have done it again. With *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer*, they provide parents, children, teachers, administrators, and anyone else interested in schooling with an antidote to narrow-minded thinking and stifling technocracy. Key takeaways and practical ideas you can run with end each chapter. If you're tired of testing mandates and one-size-fits-all curricula, start earmarking your favorite pages of this book now. Mine already looks like an accordion.

Joel Westheimer,

University Research Chair in Democracy and Education at the University of Ottawa, Education columnist for CBC Radio

Peter Gamwell and Jane Daly challenge our understanding of what resiliency can mean. They introduce us to educators and other leaders who are succeeding (or creatively failing) as they seek to allow resiliency to flourish. Read this book: you will gain valuable tools to bolster your own skills and growth. You will be given insight in educating and engaging others towards their better lives.

Kate White,

Executive Emeritus,
United Nations Association in Canada

This is an indispensable work for anyone deeply committed to an education system that will inform not only students' minds but also their hearts. Education innovation really flourishes at the magical fusion of top-down strategies and bottom-up initiatives. Educators will find a practical framework to implement and create a support base for their innovation strategy or practice.

Piet Grymonprez,

Cofounder and Managing Director of MyMachine Global Foundation,
Brussels, Belgium

This book is both compelling and informative, filled with invaluable nuggets that resonate. The links to the videos punctuate the text with a creative and personal dimension that offers a kinaesthetic engagement for the reader. At a time when education is faced with an undeniable need for change, this book is a must-read for everyone—teacher, parent, and student!

Derek Brown,
CEO, Actorshop Ltd
London, UK

Peter Gamwell and Jane Daly use powerful and moving stories to lay out what schools can do to help students fully develop their potential and become the dreamers, doers, learners, and thinkers we need. This book provides specific actions educators can take to create a better educational environment where students can grow their potential and follow their passion. It is a book education needs in the effort to rethink and reimagine a better future for all children.

Yong Zhao,
Foundation Distinguished Professor,
University of Kansas

This is a new kind of book—one that invites us to perceive the innovation capacities within us all. Its bold goal is to inspire environments that enable our inherent brilliance. Read it—as it will help you emerge spaces that enable leadership, engagement, and thriving futures in the Age of Complexity.

Goran Matic, MDes
UN's World Creativity and Innovation Week (WCIW) Advisory Board
Member and Ambassador for Canada

This book is outstanding. Its unique perspectives are stimulating, thought-provoking, inspiring, challenging, and enlightening. I recommend this book to fellow scholars who are interested in innovation education, as well as teachers, trainers, and anyone curious about innovative pedagogies for cultivating every student's potential.

Prof. Dr. Taisir Subhi Yamin
General Director,
ICIE-Germany

Peter is a creative leader and educator who speaks and leads from the heart. He is a proven nurturer of the seeds of brilliance in others. He is a curator and a cheerleader of the innovative practices of educators. All of this comes alive in the book *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer*. As leaders and educators, we want to ensure the active engagement and development of each student and each adult with whom we work. Peter and Jane inspire and offer insight on to how we can do this better.

Kandace Jordan
Deputy Superintendent of Schools Golden Hills School Division
Strathmore, Alberta, Canada

Through charming recounts of authentic experiences inside and outside of the classroom, *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer* weaves together lessons to be learned in the dynamic intersection of leadership, learning, and living . . . and it does so brilliantly! The book's voice is its greatest strength! The stories, shared with grace and humour, description and detail, and tact and tension (at times!), make it an intriguing read from start to end. The book's relevancy is as clear as can be: the creation of conditions for stakeholders to flourish in the systems they inhabit!

Pino Buffone

Director of Education Renfrew County District School Board
Pembroke, Ontario, Canada

Gamwell and Daly's approach gets back to the types of learning at the hopeful center of all our work. Each vignette is wonderful and attainable in some way as a model. The authors' strength-based approach to innovation is informed by research, grounded practice, conversations, and common sense. It rings refreshingly clear in these uncertain times. The work should inform and support teams across the world.

Peter Dillon

Superintendent of Schools
Berkshire Hill Regional School District Stockbridge, Massachusetts

This book focuses on the elements necessary to create a culture in which every child's particular brilliance is enabled and enhanced. The video clips are extremely compelling and illustrate the points perfectly. Peter Gamwell and Jane Daly, consummate storytellers, have written another gem of a book that shows us the conditions necessary to grow creativity that is present in each child. In so doing, their brilliance shines.

Dr. Betty J. Sternberg

CT Commissioner, Director, Teacher Leader Fellowship Program
Central Connecticut State University

This book is a WINNER!!! An important read for those who truly believe that every person has unique brilliance. I LOVE the student video interviews! The TRY THIS sections and the authentic stories of schools are powerful and effective and will help committed educators begin the conversations necessary for change and transformation. The opportunity is NOW as we leverage complexity and chaos to envision things differently . . . because we can and because we must.

Lynn Macan, Retired Superintendent

Cobleskill-Richmondville CSD
Bluffton, South Carolina

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Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer

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*For my granddaughters, Leah, Dylan, and Grace
Love, Grandpa*

*For my Mom, Who taught me a love of books,
and for whom nature-based learning and camping
always came naturally.
Jane*

Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer

Innovative Pedagogies for Cultivating
Every Student's Potential

Peter Gamwell

Jane Daly

Foreword by Yong Zhao

CORWIN

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Videos may also be accessed at
www.corwin.com/ThinkerListofVideos

List of Videos

Note From the Publisher: The authors have provided video and web content throughout the book that is available to you through QR (quick response) codes. To read a QR code, you must have a smartphone or tablet with a camera. We recommend that you download a QR code reader app that is made specifically for your phone or tablet brand.

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Acknowledgments

The early stages of writing this book coincided with the passing of someone who had a profound influence on my life, both personally and professionally. I was fortunate to have known Sir Ken Robinson for some thirty years. He was a mentor to me and a dear friend, as he was to so many. I first met him in the early 1990s at a Toronto conference regarding the arts in education. It was at that conference that I first felt compelled by his unique vision, which resonated with so many people around the globe.

It wasn't just his vision. He also provided a structure to help us make that vision a reality; he shared a lexicon to express this vision in our own way. And he created an urgency in his call to action—action that would transform the lives of students, families, communities, and educators.

For twelve years, I led a creativity movement with a school district in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. We wanted to foster learning cultures founded on the belief that in every person, adults and children alike, there lies a seed of brilliance—and that our primary focus should be to create the environmental, leadership, and cultural conditions that allow those seeds to flourish. Sir Ken was incredibly helpful in guiding and advising me on that journey, and on several occasions he gave keynote speeches and workshops at events we called Lead the Way. He was generous with his time and in the way he personalized the experience for everyone with whom he interacted. He immersed himself in the process and often put in twelve-hour days. His humanity always stood out—and his humor. He was never more than a semitone away from a one-liner.

So I felt it important to express my acknowledgment and to express my gratitude for his vision, his courage, and his mentorship and friendship. I really am not sure that without his influence and encouragement, I would be writing this book. Thank you, Sir Ken.

Another person who was very generous with her time, who helped guide us during the initial planning of this book, including how to present our stories coherently in print, was Margaret J. Wheatley. Meg, thank you for sharing your rich insights on organizational behavior and living systems, and for your warmth, wit, and encouragement.

The publication of our first book, *The Wonder Wall: Leading Creative Schools and Organizations in an Age of Complexity*, also coincided with the birth of our first two granddaughters, Leah and Dylan. They were just in time for the book launch, though they tell me they don't remember it.



Leah and Dylan

They were joined a year later by their cousin, Grace. I was delighted to watch their seeds of brilliance come to life, following the path of the three foundational imperatives of healthy and innovative learning environments that we explored in *The Wonder Wall*. And thanks to their amazing parents, family, and their grandma, Lele, the girls have bridged their inspiring environments to shine light on the characteristics of leadership we've explored here in *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer*: curiosity, the challenging of assumptions (and the assumptions on which they are based), and yes, their vibrant collision of ideas, alive in such young minds. All has brought a joyful lens and invigoration to the writing of this book.

Many years ago, I started to document and videotape the stories I came across. Now, whenever I'm asked to work with a class, a group of educators, or a school or community group, I bring the role of the ethnographer. I'm as eager to learn from their stories as I am to share my ideas. I've collected hundreds of such interviews, and many of the stories are told here. I'm so grateful to those who opened up to me and allowed me to share their journeys through the videos on these pages—people from age six to ninety-six. It's one thing to read these stories in a book; it's quite another to experience the telling of the story in the moment. Through sharing their experiences, they help us to determine how to reimagine learning cultures and the conditions that will foster our seeds of brilliance.

Thanks also for those who contemplated and answered the question that Jane and I have been asking for many years: If you were given a

blank slate, a magic wand, and the opportunity to reimagine and redesign a culture of learning, what would be some of your unshakable, foundational characteristics? The answers to this question, and others, helped us to shape and hone our own ideas. And it enabled us to craft, in our last chapter, a somewhat different approach to the assessment of creativity, shifting the focus from assessing the learner to assessing the learning culture.

Every now and again the stars align, and we meet someone who has a deep impact on our lives. I am fortunate this has happened often in my life. In 2012, when I was looking for someone to tell the story that traced our school board journey and research findings on fostering cultures of creativity, the search led me to Jane Daly. Since that time, Jane and I have coauthored a book and several articles together. This current book is told through my voice. But I want to make it clear that the ideas in the book are a result of two minds exchanging ideas, playing with ideas, and continually seeking new and novel ways to think things through.

Curiously, it came to me that the underpinning characteristics that we reveal in this book, pertaining to the growing of cultures of brilliance, capture precisely the dynamic of our thinking and writing. We are both insatiably curious; we often challenge each other's assumptions and the assumptions on which they are based; and yes, we collide. And through that collision emerge new pathways and new possibilities. This is a genuinely collaborative effort, and the book simply would not work without it. Thank you, Jane, for your brilliance, insight, and beautiful writing.

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About the Authors

Peter Gamwell



Born in Liverpool, England, Peter is the co-author, with Jane Daly, of *The Wonder Wall: Leading Creative Schools and Organizations in an Age of Complexity*, 2017, Corwin, foreword by Sir Ken Robinson; and *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer: Innovative Pedagogies for Cultivating Every Student's Potential*, April, 2022, Corwin, foreword by Yong Zhao.

An insightful, entertaining, and knowledgeable speaker, presenter, and consultant, Peter brings decades of academic research, experience, and insightful knowledge, gleaned from his award-winning career as a teacher and administrator at all levels of the education system. Through his presentations, workshops, books, YouTube channel, and website, he explores learning, leadership, and innovation and their impact on individual and organizational health and culture. Peter has worked across Canada and throughout many parts of the world, showing students, educators, administrators, schools, districts, companies, and policy makers how to foster that vibrancy in their own organizations.

Through the course of his work and research, Peter has captured the voices of hundreds of students and adults alike, video clips that provide unique and insightful glimpses into the lived world of our classrooms, schools, and organizations. These clips also provide critical insight as to how we might imagine our learning cultures in a way that reawakens the brilliance that lies in all of us, with a central focus on individual, group, and organizational well-being.

An adjunct professor with the University of Ottawa, Peter has been the recipient of many awards throughout his forty-year career. In 2013, he was awarded the Distinguished Leadership Award by the Ontario Public Supervisory Officers' Association for the work he led in

Learning, Leadership and Creativity with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. In 2015, he was awarded the Global Distinguished Leadership Award by the Alberta Teachers' Association.

In 2020, he cofounded the Canadian Network for Imagination and Creativity, @CNIC, which holds monthly *IdeaJams* on a wide range of topics—and which evoke lots of lively interactive conversation.

Jane Daly



Although Jane's career took her into the marketing and communications world, she was always fascinated by the field of education and the seeds of potential in every individual—especially when one of her own sons had difficulty reading and thus became “a problem to be solved.” She has worked on numerous communications projects for educational institutions and has taught at the college level. She has often observed the challenges and opportunities

that both educational organizations and businesses share when it comes to organizational learning.

Jane was happy to join Peter Gamwell as coauthor for *The Wonder Wall: Leading Creative Schools and Organizations in an Age of Complexity* and again with *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer: Innovative Pedagogies for Cultivating Every Student's Potential*.

Jane freelances as a communications strategist and commercial writer by day and enjoys fiction writing by night, as well as spending time with her husband John, and their kids and grandkids, at the small MacLaren's Landing beach community outside of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Foreword

Yong Zhao

University of Kansas

University of Melbourne

This is a time when we need to dream. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in millions of loved ones gone, tremendous disruptions to our normal life, and an unpredictable future. To move forward we must look to and dream of a better world. Hope lies in what we can imagine and what we can create for tomorrow.

Children are natural-born dreamers but beyond dreaming of passing exams and receiving college acceptance letters, we want our children to dream of a world that is more prosperous and peaceful for everyone. This requires an education that guides students in asking questions about how humans can live peacefully together, and how we can respect differences and share our prosperity rather than wasting resources on creating divisions and fighting with one another.

We need schools that can prepare our children to become pragmatic dreamers who strive for justice, equality, and peace for all. But dreams are not enough. We need doers. We need to nurture students who can dream *and* take action.

This requires preparing them with the abilities and knowledge they will need to accomplish their goals. Instead of relying on the skills and knowledge requirements of the past, educators need to make rich connections between students' strengths, passions, and the skills and knowledge they will need to apply their individual strengths to their particular passions. A homogenous curriculum will not work. Our increasingly diverse world needs new and emerging talents – often students are our best guides as to what those talents are.

As we design the curricula of tomorrow, we need to do so knowing that what students learn during their K-12 education will not serve them for their entire life. The world is constantly changing, and the changes can be fast and significant. We need to prepare students to become self-motivated learners who will continue to seek out additional skills and knowledge throughout their entire lives. When faced with novel possibilities and challenges, someone with a learner mindset can quickly respond with timely learned and invented approaches. We need to stop limiting teaching to a few domains of knowledge and skills, instead, schools must prepare students to become lifelong learners who can seek out the learning they need when they need it in an infinite range of domains.

A dreamer, a doer, and a learner has also to be a thinker: an independent and critical thinker. The world is filled with misinformation as well as

biased and manipulated messages. The world is also filled with mysteries, unknown places, and uncertainties. Beyond our planet is a vast space of unknown. We need our students to develop their capacity as thinkers so they can make sound judgments and reach for heretofore unimagined scientific discoveries.

To prepare dreamers, doers, learners, and thinkers requires innovations in education. In *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer: Innovative Pedagogies for Cultivating Every Student's Potential*, Dr. Peter Gamwell and Jane Daly use powerful and moving stories to lay out what schools can do to help each and every student fully develop their potential to become the dreamers, doers, learners, and thinkers we need in the Age of Complexity. This book does more than chart a frontier in education. It provides specific actions educators can take to create a better educational environment in which students can grow their potential and can follow their passion. It is a book education needs in the effort to rethink and reimagine a better future for all children.

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CHAPTER 1

THINKER, LEARNER, DREAMER, DOER

INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGIES
FOR CULTIVATING EVERY
STUDENT'S POTENTIAL

"We need to help students adapt to the strong winds of change more like a resilient palm tree, rather than a strong oak."

—Peter Gamwell

In our first book, *The Wonder Wall: Leading Creative Schools and Organizations in a World of Complexity* (Gamwell & Daly, 2017), Jane Daly and I proposed that our modern society has entered a new era, one which we called the *Age of Complexity*.

That was in 2017, and while we thought we were living in complex times then, little did we know that our world was about to get significantly more complicated.

In the fall of 2019, we received an invitation from our publisher, Corwin, to submit a proposal for our next book, *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer: Innovative Pedagogies for Cultivating Every Student's Potential*. We carefully did our research and conducted interviews and busily plotted chapter outlines—all based on what we perceived to be our world's reality in that moment. We submitted the proposal just before Christmas.

And then COVID-19 hit, and everything changed.

We weren't alone, of course. Those four words, *And then COVID hit*, became a defining phrase for us in the years 2020 and 2021, as we listened to so many of our friends, colleagues and family members describe how their best-laid plans had gone awry. Weddings, graduation ceremonies, and long-awaited family vacations and reunions were canceled. Those who had been setting off to college or university stayed home. Schools and day cares closed, and our neighborhood parks and playgrounds were silent.

All of us were thrust into learning new ways of doing things. The way we shop changed dramatically. Companies, especially small, local businesses, scrambled to find and set up new ways to serve their customers and keep the lights on. Businesses of all sizes saw their supply chains disrupted as they struggled to stay afloat and remain relevant in an increasingly turbulent global market. Too many sank beneath the surface, and job layoffs and losses followed.

Many of those who were able to keep their jobs began to work remotely, an especially challenging experience for those trying to juggle jobs and children. Once sedate and dignified business meetings became riddled with toddlers in full tantrum mode, barking dogs, bleary eyes, and yes, the odd participant caught in the buff.

Others, from first responders and health care workers to truck drivers and retail clerks, risked their own health and lives to keep the world going. Among those heroes were teachers and educators who, even if they were not physically in a classroom, pulled out all the stops to try to keep some semblance of normalcy and stability for their students, in a rapidly changing world no one had ever experienced before.

Many people, especially those who lived alone, became socially isolated, cut off physically from their friends, co-workers and loved ones. With hospitals closed to visitors, too many lost loved ones to the disease without even having the chance to say goodbye.

Our once busy roads trickled to a few cars and empty city buses rumbling by. As workplaces, restaurants, movie theatres and other social

gathering spots were shuttered, friendly chats over the back fence disappeared. Without planes overhead, even the skies were quieted, save for the rather incongruously cheerful chirping of birds.

Welcome to the Age of Complexity

Strangely enough, Jane and I had actually predicted a global pandemic in *The Wonder Wall* as one example of how, when living in an Age of Complexity, even the best-laid plans can change forever in an instant. The COVID-19 pandemic was having an impact on nearly every conceivable aspect of our lives, and we were filled with the uncertainty of not knowing how long the situation would last and how bad (or not so bad) things were going to get.

We learned our book proposal had been accepted in early June of 2020, with a publishing date set for the spring of 2022. As we began writing out *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer* in earnest, in the midst of the pandemic and the ongoing unrest for George Floyd's senseless death, we had no idea what was going to happen next, how the world was about to change, or whether the content of our book would even be relevant in nearly two years' time.

As we now draw closer to finishing our first draft of *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer*, here in April of 2021, the changes in our lives continue to astound us. While Jane and I met at least weekly in person while working on *The Wonder Wall*, we've not seen each other face-to-face in well over a year. This has made co-authoring a book together a much different kind of exercise. We've faced a lot more challenges and have sometimes felt like we were flying blind.

But through the process, one thing became crystal clear to both of us. Despite the ongoing uncertainty in the world, *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer: Innovative Pedagogies for Cultivating Every Student's Potential*, has never been more relevant. The more things change, the more chaotic and unpredictable things become, the more we need to bring out the seeds of brilliance that are lying dormant in our students—the thinkers, learners, dreamers, and doers of today and tomorrow. We need to arm our people with the innovative skills, resilience, and compassion it will take to not only bring us through these challenging times but also enable us to find, embrace, and build new opportunities for healthy learning and working environments and true cultures of belonging for students, teachers, parents, and communities.

Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer builds on some ideas introduced in *The Wonder Wall*, but don't worry if you haven't read it or if you need a refresher. There are only two things you need to know about, which we've briefly summarized here: the impacts of living in an Age of Complexity, and the three imperatives

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and four supporting conditions for building healthy, innovative learning environments.

Adapting to an increasingly complex world

In times past, eras typically began or ended in a very linear fashion, due to some significant social upheaval such as war, political changes, cultural revolutions, or innovation or when the “Next Big Thing” came along. And yes, when a pandemic occurred.

But with today’s much faster rate of change and scope of complexity, eras are no longer politely waiting for a former era to leave the stage before emerging from the wings. Instead, we’re seeing hundreds of eras take the stage simultaneously across all spheres of society: educational, political, spiritual, economic, social, technological, medical, scientific, environmental, and more. There are no longer beginnings or endings but rather a blurred, continuous confluence of changes, upheavals, down-heavals, round-and-round heavals, and influences.

Our current Age of Complexity is a time in which we’re pulled in dozens of different directions and influenced by multiple competing factors at once, to the extent that it’s no longer clear or sometimes even possible to determine the right courses of action to take. You could see this phenomenon during COVID-19, in which measures taken to protect the public’s health could plunge people into poverty, while measures to protect the economy could risk people’s lives. Issues can no longer be viewed in strictly good or bad, right or wrong, terms.

Thinking about a jigsaw puzzle can help you envision what living in an Age of Complexity is like. A jigsaw puzzle can be both messy and neat—its pieces scattered randomly across a table, or arranged into one coherent piece, matching what we expect it to look like from the picture on the box. But imagine if that picture on the box was different from the finished puzzle; or if there were not only some puzzle pieces missing but pieces from other puzzles added in. And what if some puzzle pieces changed their images, colors, or dimensions? Or after you’d correctly put some pieces together, they later changed shape and no longer fit?

Such is life in the Age of Complexity.

Although COVID-19 was certainly far-reaching in its complexity, complexities are increasingly ubiquitous, ranging from the environment to the economy to social media to family structure to science. This Age of Complexity will likely be with us for generations to come.

Unprecedented impacts on our world

This state of complexity impacts our world in three unprecedented ways.

- 1. Changes push and pull us in all directions at once.** Ages were once perceived as evolutionary stages of progress, each building on the lessons and developments of the previous in a

linear fashion. In states of complexity, however, we are evolving, devolving, and revolving, and advances that push one sphere of society forward such as resource extraction may have a direct and negative impact on another, such as the environment. For example, electric vehicles, which reduce emissions, also cause significant pollution from lithium mining to manufacture car batteries.

2. **There is less consensus on what “progress” looks like.** The internet and social media have given us the ability to instantly communicate and refute opinions, facing off multiple stakeholder groups with opposing viewpoints. This can make it harder to find solutions a majority can agree on, or even figure out which direction we should be pulling together.
3. **This complexity makes future trends more difficult to predict.** Within the mathematical concept of chaos theory, complex systems are highly sensitive to changes in conditions, so even small alterations can result in disproportionate consequences. It’s important to bear in mind that these results aren’t always negative, however. Even a single teacher making a single positive change can have a domino effect more quickly than ever before.

The impacts this complexity is having on our traditional methods of teaching and leading employees are profound and introduce a messiness and uncertainty that we must embrace if we are to reimagine the future. It’s human nature to strive for equilibrium and balance; today’s Age of Complexity means we must instead adapt to the idea that balance may no longer be attainable and re-engineer our education systems to build a better, more innovative future for all, regardless. We need to help students adapt to the strong winds of change more like a resilient palm tree, rather than a strong oak. We need to help them not only survive in the Age of Complexity but to *thrive* through innovative thinking.

How we react to times of inbetweenity

In times of complexity, people are often forced to get creative and come up with new ways of doing things if they’re going to survive. The late Dr. Bobby Moore introduced us to the concept of inbetweenity—times in between times when one era is on its way out and another has yet to emerge (Gamwell & Daly, 2017). He believed there are three main ways people typically handle this state of flux.

1. Some attempt to stay rooted in the past, holding on to the status quo for dear life. For this group, change is a source of great anxiety, and they try to cling to the old ways of doing things.

2. Others take a more hybrid approach, trying to deal with the uncertainty by projecting past or current trends in the future. They say they're okay with change, as long as it's predictable and stays obediently within known parameters.
3. A third group, by contrast, embraces the developing uncertainties, employing a faculty of vision. Less threatened by change, they believe any negative impacts can be overcome through innovation and that there are always opportunities to be grasped. They lead others by fostering environments that harness imagination in pursuit of solutions; they don't try to control or to predict the future but to *invent* it. These practical visionaries have the ability to construct worlds that are not yet but can be.

The confluence of so many changes and variables makes it hard for people to even know where to begin sorting it all out, so many of them get the urge to try to *control* the complexity, nail it down, put it into a plan and contrive ways to monitor it, manage it, measure it, and mitigate it. We tend to become more rigid and inflexible as we try to control the complexity, attempting to micromanage things within our spheres of influence.

However, when things are changing so quickly and in so many different directions, attempting to find the *one right answer*, or even determine the *one wrong thing*, may be futile; it may be more advantageous to research a variety of flexible and nimble solutions, back up resources, and make contingency plans.

We need to move beyond teaching students to answer the questions and teach them to question the answers.

That means that in our classrooms, we need to move beyond teaching students to answer the questions and teach them to question the answers, as well as to question assumptions and the assumptions on which the assumptions are based.

The Three Imperatives and Four Conditions

So how do we get students and others to become more innovative? Exploring these ideas led Jane and me to a confounding conundrum. If innovative thinking is a skill that only a lucky few possess, how do we explain those situations in which students, individuals, and entire teams suddenly and inexplicably become brilliant, displaying innovation, insight, and leadership capabilities significantly beyond what they have ever demonstrated before?

And more importantly, what is the elusive formula that can allow teachers and other leaders to consistently replicate this “blossoming brilliance” in classrooms, boardrooms, and living rooms alike?

Building on our own experiences in education and business, as well as a decade of research and input from more than a thousand leaders

across education and a range of other industry sectors, we uncovered some surprising truths about innovation and leadership. Our most crucial lesson learned is that innovation and leadership are not things we can effectively teach to individuals or teams. What we really need to do is change our learning and working environments in such a way that it allows the natural brilliance—brilliance that lies untapped in each and every one of us—to shine through.

To show how that could be done in *The Wonder Wall*, we identified three crucial imperatives and four supporting conditions for healthy and innovative learning environments. Once embedded, these imperatives and conditions enable teachers and leaders to reimagine and reshape individual and organizational learning environments to increase innovation, leadership, well-being, enhanced learning, and more.

These are the three imperatives:

1. **Recognize that there is a seed of brilliance in everyone.** Believe this, value it, and find ways to tap into this potential.
2. **Think and act from a strength-based perspective.** For example, instead of approaching budget meetings as figuring where we can cut programs, pose questions such as, “What are the amazing possibilities that we want to achieve? How will we make that happen? Who can we partner with?” Avoid deficit thinking that views everything, including struggling students, as “problems to be solved.”
3. **Foster a culture of belonging.** This isn’t just “nice to have.” Brain science is proving that emotions play a crucial role in our ability to think, learn, and retain information.

Four conditions support these imperatives:

1. **Storytelling and listening.** The brain is hardwired to learn through storytelling. Tell your stories. Encourage others to share theirs. Listen with intention. When we encourage people to tell their stories and practice active listening, we build stronger relationships.
2. **Moving beyond diversity to true inclusivity.** We must recognize that every person, of all levels and backgrounds, has important ideas, experiences, and talents to share. Encourage the kind of inclusivity that drives real innovative change.
3. **Making it personal.** We need to make learning deeply personal to allow learning to be embraced. Connect the subject being taught to something that is deeply personal for the learner.
4. **Recognizing that celebration is an attitude.** We need to understand that celebrating isn’t an event; it’s a way of life. We must foster a sense of joy and novelty with the sheer wonder of learning, knowing that stretching the imagination will lead to tangible results.

How to Get the Most Out of This Book

We don't have all the answers or a one-size-fits-all solution for transforming our learning systems. We're always looking for new ideas and insights. So we reached out to classrooms, schools, districts, and organizations in various parts of the world to find inspiring examples for building environments that spawn innovation, leadership, education, humanity, community, and the interconnectedness of it that binds us together.

We were overwhelmed by the positive response, and many schools and organizations invited me to come speak to, lead, or participate in their own quests for innovative environments. I traveled to several locations to work hand in hand on large projects with these partners, who are reimagining what learning environments can be. Eight detailed case studies from these experiences form the basis for this book, and you'll find key themes throughout:

Learn from powerful examples

As you read through *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer*, you'll find you can "learn by example," as you're invited to view the inner workings of classrooms, school boards, and districts that are using the three imperatives to enable engagement, innovation, and the unique brilliance of both students and teachers to shine through. You'll also see how this growing brilliance didn't remain in the classroom or confine itself to a few individuals—it sparked a resonance that took the brilliance beyond the classroom and indeed grew throughout the entire community and beyond.

Hear directly from students themselves

In this book, the students become the teachers. One voice that's rarely heard in discussions about educational transformation is the voice of the student. During my many visits to the schools I've been involved with, I've not only talked to the teachers, principals, and parents but also to the students. I've developed an extensive collection of face-to-face, videotaped interviews with them to gain a better appreciation of what's happening "on the ground" and to learn from their lived experiences. Many of the stories told here are accompanied by a quick response (QR) code that you can use to access full interviews with students and teachers, as well as other resources.

[*Note:* To read a QR code, you must have a smartphone or tablet with a camera. We recommend that you download a QR code reader app that is made specifically for your phone or tablet brand.]

Review main ideas with the Key Takeaways

The end of each chapter includes key takeaways, so you can quickly recap the main points. Think of this as your cheat sheet.

Gain insight for your next steps through Reflective Questions

You'll also find reflective questions you can ask yourself, your colleagues, and even your students to help inform and guide your thinking and next steps to create a truly healthy and innovative learning environment.

Get ideas for related lesson plans with TRY THIS!

Through our own spheres of influence, we can make an enormous difference for those around us by implementing conditions that foster creative learning environments, with practical, simple suggestions. You'll find the book is packed with actionable tips and ideas, and at the end of each chapter, there's a TRY THIS! mini-lesson plan you can try out in your own classroom, school, or community.

Leverage insights about learning in an Age of Complexity

To succeed in an Age of Complexity, Jane and I have learned that students, and everyone else, must be allowed to question assumptions and the assumptions on which the assumptions are based. Deep change is never easy, and there is always pushback. In *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer*, you can explore deeply ingrained assumptions that our society, and thus our schools and organizations, must challenge if we are to strive for a more optimistic and harmonious world in our new Age of Complexity. Teaching students (and adults) how to untangle and challenge these assumptions and engage in productive discussion provides the tools they need to be more resilient and compassionate, and to think critically and innovatively. Although focused on schools, the insight, ideas, and methods included in *Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer* can be applied in virtually any environment, whether it's a classroom, business, family, organization, or community.

You may want to read this book twice

Thinker, Learner, Dreamer, Doer is for people who want to create environments that foster and support innovation, leadership, and engagement. It's for people who believe that everybody has unique creative capacities, and in this age of incredible complexity, they want to find ways of fostering cultures that tap into that brilliance and uniqueness

that lie within everyone. It's an intricate and interconnected process, with no easy answers and some overlap. We hope you find great joy and inspiration in this book, and to understand the full nuance, we encourage you to read it twice.

CHAPTER 1

Key Takeaways

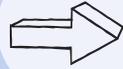
- ▶ We're living in an Age of Complexity: The speed of changes taking place across all spheres of life and the increasing number of competing agendas means it's no longer possible to determine the "one right answer" or the "one wrong problem," and we must find new ways to communicate and innovate.
- ▶ Times of Inbetweenity: People tend to react in one of three ways when facing times of uncertainty—strive to hold onto the status quo; attempt to move forward by using tools and knowledge from the past; or embrace the uncertainty and invent the future through a faculty of vision.
- ▶ Every person has seeds of brilliance, which flourish through healthy learning environments: The three imperatives and four conditions that create those environments and drive innovation will help you in creating your own healthy environments.

Reflective Questions



1. How can we, as teachers and leaders, model and shape the learning culture to be sensitive to students' stages of inbetweenity and transitions? What would happen if we talked to our students about our own times of inbetweenity and what we did to cope?
2. Even day-to-day transitions throughout the school day can become times of inbetweenity. Some students might experience anxiety moving from class to class, and we probably all remember the dread of wondering if we'd find anyone to sit with at lunch. How can we create a caring culture of support for everyone to ease these daily transitions at school?

3. How do we consider the broader community each child comes from and the times of inbetweenity they're experiencing outside school? What can we do on a day-to-day basis to help students articulate their experiences and approaches to coping with inbetweenity?
4. How do we create this supportive environment for our teachers? How do we help new teachers or teachers who are new to the school or a specific grade?



Try This!

Make a Plan for Your School's Times of Inbetweenity

This chapter discussed the three main ways people react to times of inbetweenity. We experience the anxiety—or hope and excitement—at times of inbetweenity that take place throughout our lives: graduations, marriage (or divorce), starting a new job (or losing one), switching careers, moving to a new city, becoming a parent, retirement, and many other of life's milestones.

Children are impacted by the inbetweenities of the adults in their lives, but they grapple with their own as well, from welcoming a new sibling and the first day of school to the death of a grandparent and applying for colleges or first jobs.

Host an Inbetweenity Workshop

Hold a workshop to introduce the concept of inbetweenity to your colleagues and teachers.

- For a true diversity of ideas, invite some students to join the workshop as well. Invited students should not be only the high achievers but students from all levels, including those who struggle.
- Build a list of the daily, weekly, or seasonal times of inbetweenity staff and students may experience. Invite an open discussion on how these times make people feel, and how it impacts learning and well-being.

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(Continued)

- Choose three to five of the most disruptive or opportunistic times of inbetweenity to work on.
- Break into groups, ensuring that each group has a good mixture of administration, teachers, and students. Ask them to think deeply about how to be sensitive to staff and students' own times of inbetweenity, and how to help individuals and groups cope with and embrace these momentous milestones and changes.
- Each team can be assigned to tackle one of the chosen inbetweenities, or you may want to have the teams work around the room clockwise, so all have a crack at coming up with solutions for each inbetweenity.
- Share the results with the school community and invite more solutions from across the district.

Be sure to take a strength-based approach. Get creative! Rather than viewing these times as problems to be solved, explore how these events might bring about positive experiences and exciting opportunities. For example, if ninth-grade students experience the first day of high school as a nerve-racking time of inbetweenity, perhaps each could be assigned a senior student to greet them at the door, take them to their locker, tour them around the school, and get them to their first class—helping not only to ease the anxiety of the younger students but building a mentorship opportunity between different-aged peers as well.