

REFLECTIVE WRITING BY TEACHERS

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2020 BATCH



Photograph: Courtesy Rati Basu, Santiniketan



Thinking Teacher

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Reflective writing is like listening to the chant "OM" in a soulful deep voice that travels from the core of the heart, on a misty wintery morning, when the welcoming rising sun steadily spreads its streaks of orange hue, through the darkness of the night gone by.

DISHA JAIN

Participants read an extract from John Holt's HOW SCHOOLS FAIL and reflected on it. Here are some reflections ...

WHITHER GOEST I?

Disha Jain

In this extract from John Holt's book, I relate most with the question that Hull asks, "Where are you trying to get, and are you getting there?"

I have asked myself that question many times.

Thankfully, my teachers and mentors made me conscious of the same thought from an early phase in my career.

I think this question acts as a guiding light for every person, not just a teacher. It compels us to introspect. Since the exercise of turning the gaze within is a deliberate act of introspection, it could, at times, be mentally exhausting and frustrating, if one is conscious of it but does not act on it. That state, by all means, is a restless position to be in, and one that I have experienced often.

From the time that I was pursuing my Masters, my parents (especially my father) did not leave any stone unturned to persuade me to sit for the UPSC exam, because they thought that I was cut out for the profile of a diplomat. As for me, I had no dreams of taking the exam, because every time I explored the strategies to prepare for the drill, I felt overwhelmed with the deluge of information that was out there in the form of tutorials, coaching centres and things that wouldn't normally exist for a profession like teaching. For school teaching, such preparatory efforts were far less. For a considerable period of time, therefore, I stuck to my guns and pursued teaching instead, much to the disappointment of my parents.

After marriage, however, I gave in and decided to quit teaching and sit for the revered UPSC (Civil Services) Exam.

This was the time when my brother-in-law had scored an enviable position in the same exam, because of which the expectations were revived, and the spotlight was shifted back to me. With the kind of celebration that was held for my brother-in-law, my family (now an extended one) became greedier. They realized that it would now be easier for me to sit for the exam, as I would have a family member as my mentor.

Before taking this decision, I was teaching in a very elite school. Even though this school had reinforced my understanding of progressive, student-centric teaching, I was not able to win the respect and

admiration that I thought I deserved, for all my hard work and commitment. This was one of the top schools of the country that, I soon realized, thrived on putting its teachers down. Despite doing so much, I never felt at place in this environment, where one would feel a



Reflective Writing, to me, is a way to express my thoughts through words in the silence of the night with a light breeze blowing around me.

MANONITA BHATTACHARYA

strange mix of insecurity and subterfuge in the air. I would always wonder why the higher ups didn't focus on building a strong, connected teaching community.

With this feeling of embitterment on having failed to create a name for myself, I decided to give the UPSC exam a try.

'Maybe there, with administrative power in my hand, I might get a chance to bring about a change in the way that education is looked at,' I reasoned with myself.

Then came the two most troubling years of my life, intellectually and existentially.

When I look back on that time, I realize that my preparation phase for the UPSC was one exercise in the 'rigidity' of the means that John Holt talks about. There was **the method**, and you were expected to follow it, without question. I would often hear my brother-in-law say:

Complete the prescribed textbook for Economics in a week's time. Just go on reading it, even if you don't understand a word of it, don't worry. You will get a hang of the concepts as you read the same book through, the second and the third time.

Even though he meant well, I just couldn't bring myself to read that extremely boring textbook, without falling asleep or feeling frustrated at myself for reading without comprehension.

Is this how children feel, I wondered, when as teachers, we ask them to go repeatedly through the prescribed content that they find completely out of touch with their reality, and hence, irrelevant?

For me, reading prescribed content three times to grasp a concept had now become a ritual. Not just that, the whole preparation process had become a schedule cast in stone:

Get up early in the morning. Read the newspaper and make notes. Read a specific subject. Take a break. Read current affairs, get up, have dinner, and sleep early. Repeat and rewind the process the following day, and the days after, and for the rest of your preparation cycle. Don't watch or read anything that pushes you to spend too much time questioning or developing curiosity about a particular concept that you had read but didn't pursue.



REFLECTION is the evening breeze with its tender fragrance of spring. Sitting in front of the roaring ocean, with the gentle droplets flashing onto me, looking far into the horizon where the purple sky is spreading the mild orange and blue colours of the dawning sun, showcasing the splendour of the divine.

RATNAKUMARI SINGAMSETTY

This, I soon realized, reflected the general trend that had become the key to cracking the UPSC

exam on a fast track. This was the process that compelled you to read from worn-out, unstimulating photocopied textbooks, crammed with information that you had to retain and memorize. I was appalled to see how the top examination system of the country required candidates to consume knowledge

so as to regurgitate. Was that what the institution expected from the aspiring diplomats? I

don't know, for thankfully, I couldn't survive the rut. This was, however, certainly what was being sold to many young ambitious minds.

Sadly, it still is.

Even though I came to fall in love with many disciplines during my UPSC experience, I felt sad seeing how this 'one size fits all' mentality was being blatantly pursued. The whole exercise had me caught up in the middle. My conscience kept asking me the same question, "Where are you trying to get, and are you getting there?" My regimented schedule, on the other hand, coerced me to turn my eyes on the time, the syllabus, and the exam, instead. I couldn't put out that 'burning' question, nor could I heed it honestly.

As I see it now, this experience was one of the classic cases of "controlling the contents" of young impressionistic minds.

TRYING TO CONTROL THEIR MINDS

Manonita Bhattacharya

After an initial struggle to recall incidents related to this chapter from my own experience, I could clearly see a few, out of which I will share one incident, specially aligned with the last line which says 'trying to control the materials of their minds'.

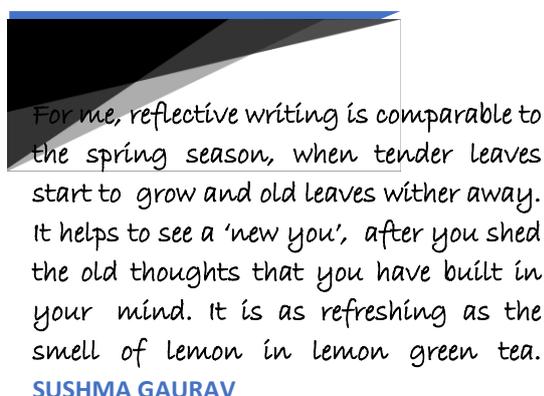
This incident occurred between my daughter and me. From an early age, I inculcated a habit from my father of eating in a clean manner, without spilling any food on the table. So when my daughter was growing up and started to eat on her own, I was absolutely clear that she had to follow the very same rules.

When she was two and a half years old, we went on a short trip to Darang in Himachal. Our host, an elderly person who owned a tea estate there, had an ancestral home which had been converted into a homestay. They had a beautiful dining hall, and everything was properly arranged with antique furniture and ceramic crockery.

At the lunch table, my daughter insisted that she was going to eat on her own and we agreed. Now in our Bengali tradition, we eat food with bare hands, and she noticed us doing this. So she, too, tried to eat with her hands, spilling everything on the table and continuing to eat in a manner that embarrassed me greatly. With mounting anxiety, I kept telling her to sit straight, hold the spoon correctly and eat properly. I was so overpowered with my own tension and rivetted on the process of clean eating that I completely forgot her age.

Our host interrupted and said "Arre don't push her, let her eat the way she wants, she will learn gradually."

But I was so immersed in the rule that one should eat properly, that I simply could not hear his wise words. I kept on repeating this for almost every meal that we started having



thereafter. I continuously poked her to eat properly and she, in turn, kept repeating the same. She simply would not learn!

Eventually due to demands at my workplace, I had to travel quite a bit and so I put her in a day-care. After a few days of her joining there, I checked with her day-care teacher if she was eating properly. The teacher informed me that yes, she was quite neat compared to the other children. I was surprised. She also informed me that they served them in bowls with spoons.

I came back home and tried this and found that she was actually eating neatly! And all this while, I had continuously been repeating the same mistake of correcting her! As I recall this incident, I feel terrible.

After reading this chapter I think I have gained a lot of insight and awareness. Not only as teachers or working professionals, but as individuals, there is a lot to learn from this chapter.

Participants watched [Eli Finkel's THE MARRIAGE HACK](#) and tried describing a conflict from the viewpoint of a benevolent third party.

CHANGING PLACES

Sushma Gaurav

(VIEWING A DOMESTIC CONFLICT FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF MY FATHER-IN-LAW)

We were going on a long drive to beat the stress due to the pandemic. By “we”, I mean I, my granddaughter, son and daughter-in-law.

As we were about to leave, my granddaughter was super excited because it was a very long time since we had taken her out. Well, so were we! Equally excited!

The child asked her mother what the fun part in this ride would be, and my daughter-in-law replied somewhat wryly that the ride itself was the fun part except, that my son shouldn't pick any brawl with other commuters, on the way.

This sentence alone spoiled the mood of my son (here I am not being judgmental, just mentioning what happened). I could feel the tension which had instantly set in, as soon as we started the ride. We rode for a long time and parked the car under a tree. It was quite a hot day and we let our granddaughter cycle around for some time in the open space.

Since it was hot, all of us started sweating profusely. Now my son is allergic to AC. As soon as we sat in the car to return home, my daughter-in-law asked him to turn on the AC. He reverted in an angry tone that we would always ask him to take us out and no sooner would we go out, than we would immediately want to return home soon.

‘We simply won't adjust!’ was his last statement.

And after that, the only sound we heard until we reached back home was that of the FM radio playing in the car.

SUSHMA'S REFLECTION

As I wrote this piece, my biggest challenge was not to take sides or judge anyone - instead, to write without saying who was right and who was wrong at that time. It really took a long time for me to put myself in my father-in-law's shoes and write.

As I went on writing, the exercise made me realize that the mistake was truly mine. This incident happened very recently and until I wrote this, I was convinced that it was everyone else's mistake, certainly not mine. But now I realized that the whole thing started from me and it would have been a really refreshing ride had I not taunted my husband, because that, in turn, triggered a lot of unwanted events.

This exercise has really given an insight into the importance of NOT blurting out unnecessary remarks when we are excited. It also made me realize that there was an elderly person there with us and this surely would have affected his feelings. It also brought home the gaffe that I had committed by putting down a father's riding skill in front of his ten-year-old daughter.

Now I understand the saying 'BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR WORDS. ONCE THEY ARE SAID THEY CAN ONLY BE FORGIVEN, NOT FORGOTTEN.' As Eli Finkel says, it's absolutely worthwhile to invest some time in this exercise and improve ourselves to be better human beings. I can assertively declare that I learnt a very important lesson today.

My conflict: Vegetarianism vs Non-Vegetarianism

Anita Butani

I grew up in a family where non vegetarianism was a taboo. Therefore, neither meat, nor fish or eggs entered our home, forget learning how to cook them! However, I got



Reflective Writing is the smell of coffee that wafts from my yellow mug and envelops the entire room. It is the resounding silence that is occasionally broken by the patter of rain that I hear outside my room. It is the smoothness of my blank notebook awaiting the crisp pen to run on its surface.

DAWA YOLMO

married into a family that loved their meat, fish and eggs. Needless to say, my husband, Mahesh, relished them. Seeing this, I was in a fix, and it took all my courage to overcome my phobia of cooking non-vegetarian food.

Throughout our time together, the arguments between Mahesh and me would

primarily revolve around food. Frankly, I was unable to fathom how a person could relish meat while he couldn't understand my disgust and lack of motivation to cook it.

The following instance sums up how things have changed ever since. It is about a time when Mahesh and I (Anita) went grocery shopping. I have written it from the perspective of a benevolent third party.

Anita and Mahesh had gone to the local grocery store for their weekly shopping of essentials. Anita was focussed on her list of necessities including fruits and vegetables, with the thought that an item missed meant yet another visit, something to be avoided during COVID times.

Mahesh knew that, so he patiently looked around at things that caught his interest.

Anita kept a watch on the time, aware that she needed to hasten, when she remembered that the meat section was next. Quickly, she called him up and asked him to select what he preferred to buy.

Not very pleased, but knowing how Anita disliked having to select meats, he proceeded to take a look. Having bought all that she needed, Anita headed (sighing) to the meat section and found him looking closely at a pack of chunks. Mahesh beamed when he saw her come over.

"So what should we buy?" Both of them asked each other at the same time.

Anita asked: "Chicken is what you enjoy most, don't you? So, would you prefer this pack, with the bones, or just the soft bit?"

Exasperated, Mahesh said "Please, can you use the correct terms?" Anita apologised for never being able to recall the right terms, because as they both knew, she did not care to.

Anita added: "At least I can cook well enough now. And not just chicken, but even lamb, and fish too."

Instantly, Mahesh said "Actually, its 5 star, and I have told you, that it never ceases to amaze me that for someone who has never eaten it, you can cook it so perfectly."

Feeling pleased, Anita said: "I think you exaggerate, but of course, you would know better. My sense of smell helps me. Ok, so since the smell of fish is intolerable for me, I will pick these, while you can select your preference of fish, maybe?"

"Don't worry, I will not put you through that torture. I will buy the cans of processed fish and have a readymade preparation for today," said Mahesh.

Guiltily, Anita asked "Are you sure? I can cook whatever you pick up."

Anita's reflections: As I saw it from a third person's perspective, there was a sort of truce between us, having found a middle ground, with compromise and acceptance of each other's distaste and likings.

Even now, I cannot completely understand how a person can like meat so much that it seems like an addiction. When Mahesh tries his best to coax our daughter to eat, and she refuses, saying she will eat only if Mom eats and she has the right to choose if she wants to eat or not, I feel nonplussed. I do feel a bit of revulsion when using the same

vessels and have tried to segregate which ones get used for what purpose. It is challenging to see things from Mahesh's perspective, primarily because of not having tasted non-veg ever.

But I had a revelation of sorts when I fasted for Navratri and did not consume onions or garlic for nine days. By the end of that period, I was craving to cook my vegetables laced with onion and garlic, so as to feel like having eaten a fulfilling meal. It is at times like these that I can fathom, to a great extent, the need and the craving for meats that Mahesh has. I also realise that it is unfair to expect him to give up what he has always been used to.

During our discussions, Mahesh, too, has grown to realise my disgust and revulsion, and he respects that. This was clearly evident in his reaction in a restaurant when I almost ate some shreds of chicken. Thankfully it was spotted before I put the morsel in my mouth. Mahesh ensured that the cook stepped out to apologise. Since then, when we dine at a restaurant serving both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, and we order something exotic, he doesn't let me eat till he has checked it out first and pronounces it 'safe' for me to eat.

I have felt the whole array of emotions from disgust, awkwardness and numbness to a sense of achievement at finally being able to not just satisfy his palate, but even making it a finger-licking relish-worthy meal.

While doing this exercise of describing the entire episode from the vantage point of a benevolent third party, the entire film of the years with our arguments, reproach, expectations, hurt following my failed attempts at cooking coursed through my mind, and I felt a touch of cold grip my heart. The next moment was a total contrast when I felt a huge sense of relief at my progress and adaptation.



अकेली-ढलती शर्मों में, मेह की बूंदों से उठती मिट्टी की खुशबू। स्पंदित अतःकरण और चिंतन का प्रथम स्वपान खोलती कोमल - मधुर स्मृतियां ।

On lonely evenings that slowly slip by, with the fragrance of the first rain rising from the earth,

Something stirs within, and buds of thought allow the tender petals of sweet reflection to unfurl.

SWATI GAUTAM

Thanks a lot for this exercise, Neeraja, because it has helped me appreciate the appreciation of my efforts and deepen my understanding of his requirement- which is practically a necessity for him.

LETTER FROM A TEACHER TO A PARENT

Dear Mrs. Austin,

The last time we communicated was during the parent-teacher meet at school, when you came up to my desk and asked, "How is my child faring?"

I could sense a lot of anxiety in you, but like the trained professional that I am, I quipped, "Paolo is doing fine, you needn't worry about him. He has the potential to do well."

I saw you walking up to other teachers and repeat the same question that you had asked me. I could see that somewhere, my assurance had not sounded confident enough, even though you smiled courteously and thanked me for my efforts.

Part of me wanted to call you and share that Paolo actually wasn't doing that great in class, his performance had dipped (though not significantly), his distractions were noticeable and there had even been a case of non-compliance. All this could, of course, have been brushed off as 'just a passing phase'! I have seen adolescents facing similar situations and didn't think much about it. But for a mother, I know it's a cause for concern! Surely, you had observed your son's restlessness and therefore wished to discuss with me your concerns. You had entrusted me with your child with a lot of expectations, hope and aspirations.

Unfortunately, my answer let you down!

I felt a pang of guilt that day, self-doubt fogged my brain as I thought that instead, *I should have asked you the question, "How did I fare as a teacher to your child?"*

It didn't even occur to me then to do so.

You see, I was bound by my own fear, the fear of being judged! A fear of showing my vulnerability of staying disconnected to my students, feigning that everything is fine and keeping up the façade when I could clearly sense that something was amiss.

Behind our (teachers') positive demeanor, we live under constant pressure to perform: to ensure that all our students learn and excel, enforce discipline to the most errant lot, stick to the deadline of assessments and evaluations, remain forever ready to resolve conflicts and grievances - and all of this (and more) with an ever-present charming smile and patient bearing!

Read Rainer Maria Rilke's LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET. Write a letter to the parent of one of your students, sharing with them your own vulnerabilities as a teacher.

So, when a class doesn't go as planned, there's a slack in the students' performance or I am greeted with a stony silence for my questions, I perceive their (students') silence or disinterest as *my own inability* to trigger their interest. I am then plagued with the thought, "Am I a good teacher? Will my students remember me as someone who was able to infuse their impressionable minds with thoughts of equality, justice and inquisitiveness, who constantly nudged them to question facts and challenge stereotypical notions? Or will I just be a face to tolerate for years and therefore, just a momentary association?"

Striving to reach the pedestal of "The Perfect Teacher", we often get disconnected from our primary and focal contact – our students. Somewhere in this dereliction, I failed to question myself, "Did I allow them (students) to express their judgements? Or did I take their silence to imply ignorance and therefore rebuke them? Or, did I at any time realize that learning must come from deep within and can by no means be forced or hastened?"

As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his "Letters to a young poet" writes, "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."

Perhaps it is only through the slaying of the inner dragons that I will truly be able to connect to my students and seek the pleasures of learning free from inhibitions, bias and self-doubts - and wait for the final moment of my accomplishment, when I see them apply the knowledge gained to make the world a better place. To quote Rainer Maria Rilke, "All is gestation and then birthing."

So, let's wait for our pupa (Paolo) to grow his wings and transform into a beautiful human being and in his journey of self-exploration, I assure you that I'll watch over him and stay connected like his guardian angel.

With good wishes and greetings,
Madhusree Dutta Majumdar.

After watching [Chimamanda's TED TALK THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY](#), participants had to choose any one story from their own lives and rewrite it as a different story.

MY STORY AND HIS

Dawa Yolmo



Reflective writing gives me the ability to peer into and explore the world within the deep echelons of my mind. **ANITA BUTANI**

Preface: One of my earliest childhood memories is of my mother stepping up to the dance floor with her friends to swing around to the tune of some old Nepali song, with me clinging onto her leg begging her not to dance. When I think of it now, the reason for my doing so comes across very clearly. Even as a child, I had a single story of my mother. Mothers, for that 'child me', did not dance or have fun. They were supposed to be cooking and looking after us and so,

coming together with her friends to dance in public broke that image and embarrassed me. Hence, I clung onto her legs and rebelled. I did not want that perception of mine to be shattered. I only wanted her to be the mother that featured in my story!

As far as my father is concerned, I always saw him as a stranger incapable of loving. As kids we used to see him twice a year (if we were lucky) and the more months he spent away from us, the more distant our relationship became. I wouldn't be wrong to say that he was more of a stranger than a family member, and so, every time he was home, I was uncomfortable. I just couldn't get close to him. Simply because he had a thick moustache and looked like someone who couldn't love or be loved. His stern knitted brows pushed me further away from him.



Reflective writing is like enjoying the laughter of a baby when she is tickled. **ANITA BUTANI**

In this story my father is warm and not at all intimidating, but he still wears his dark moustache. He is a father of three whom he loves equally but cannot make them understand this. He stays months away from them, sweating down his back in the scorching Purulia sun, in the suffocating engineering cell, thinking of the Durga puja holidays, when he can finally not only see them, but also get away from this fierce heat into the cloud cladded mountains. He starts to think of gifts that he must bring back to his daughters. He has to imagine how tall they should have grown, as he hunts for the pretty dresses in the crowded market. He picks up the prettiest looking doll for his youngest one and knows instantly that the other two will be upset if he doesn't bring them anything special. So he grabs a badminton set. They have been asking for it for months and with the school break approaching, they would definitely welcome it more than they would welcome him. He picks up a stiff cotton sari for his wife, already imagining her struggle with it, as she wraps it around herself for the puja at home. He packs all these with the hope that he will get to spend a nice family break for the next ten to fifteen days. Making an uncomfortable journey back in packed coaches, he finally reaches home, only to be greeted by his sullen and fearful daughters who hide away every time he tries to reach out to them.

Many years later the same man but now with his greying moustache sits on the parched terrace looking away into the horizon silently, swallowing the self-disappointment and shedding some quiet tears. He has spent the whole day in the heat once again, walking from one medical store to another, with a prescription that now hangs limp with his sweat. He has been unable to procure the medicine that his daughter is desperately in need of and the more he thinks about his failure, the more vivid the picture of his dying daughter flashes across his eyes. He weeps at his helplessness, his failure as a father and the abstruse love that he has never been able to exhibit.

THE MANY FACETS OF MY FRIEND VAASANTHI

Ratna Singamsetty

Vaasanthi is my good friend and neighbour. My single story of her is that she is very shabby in the kitchen, while cooking. It becomes next to impossible to stay with her when she cooks. All the ingredients spill over onto her sari and we can guess the menu of that day just by looking at her. She uses her hand to pick up the ingredients from the dabba and then wipes it on her sari. There is oil all over the kitchen counter and the sink is impossible to mention.

This was my single story of her. I rewrote her story differently as below:

Vaasanthi is an amazing cook. Relatives, neighbours and friends throng to her kitchen for food. Be it *laddu, sambar, biryani double ka meetha* or *vada*, they are so tasty that you will just keep eating. She enjoys feeding people.

She is a very fun-loving person. During get-togethers in the apartment complex, she is the star: for her jokes keep people in splits. She entertains everyone with a typical mix of Hyderabad Hindi and Urdu, in the right accent.

She is also a compassionate and loving person, full of humaneness. If anyone falls sick, she will be the first one to visit them with some food. She fed my husband and me for five months continuously when both of us were ill at the same time, lying on our respective beds.

She is ever ready to extend any kind of help to anyone. I have never seen her say 'no' to any request. I have never seen her feel jealous or express hatred towards anyone, which surprises me. She has an amazing quality of picking up the positive attributes in everyone and appreciating them with such fervour.

She is very punctual. At any function or meeting, she will surely be there on time.

With all these amazing traits in her lovely personality, she can be a little messy in her own kitchen and dirty her own kitchen counter.

I enjoy her association, as I find that there is plenty to learn from her.

MY DEFINITION OF EDUCATION

Swati Gautam

Education for me is awareness, being aware about myself, people, and the environment around me. I should be able to explore all possibilities to grow into an evolved human being.

Being able to see through myself, I think my education should give me the strength to forgive and accept myself and others, so as to move ahead in

Having listened to TARA WESTOVER (author of EDUCATED), participants were asked to write 500 words on what they thought education is, or who an educated person is.

life without getting stuck in my past experiences. I should also not allow my past to dictate what I am today.

Education should also help me to start from knowing my own identity and skills. It must enhance my capability to absorb goodness from the environment around me. Education should give us the perspective to see through our own biases and prejudices and also equip us to deal with them. Our education should enable us to see both the sides of a coin and develop a “zoom out” perspective. One should not get influenced easily, positively or negatively. It should enable us to question every thought before allowing it to turn into an opinion based on that. But at the same time, we shouldn’t judge another person’s faith or opinion.

We must create breathing space for every thought or opinion to grow respectfully. We shouldn’t grow into individuals who are ready to attack those who have different opinions. We shouldn’t lock our brains, instead, we should let people express freely whatever they want to. Our education should create an environment where we can grow and flourish with differences of opinion, without hurting each other.

My education should not make me so full of ego that I cannot see the need to learn or grow anymore. Education should be able to leave us as open-minded individuals, always wanting to learn and grow. Being compassionate and being able to empathize, being helpful and kind to other living beings – these should emerge from a good education. If I choose to ignore what is happening in the world around me and I am not sensitive to the suffering of mankind, I think I have simply wasted my entire life.

“पोथी पढ़ी –पढ़ी जग मुआ, पंडित भया न कोय
ढाई आखर प्रेम के पढ़े सो पंडित होय | ” -कबीर

MY REFLECTIONS AFTER THE FOURTH RUN OF THE ONLINE COURSE

Neeraja Raghavan

Despite having taught for decades, the uniqueness of every batch of learners never ceases to surprise me. Every teacher must surely be experiencing this: even when the textbook is yellow and frayed, the desks are worn out and the walls peeling off layers of paint – there is a definite freshness that each batch of students brings in, that turns the ‘same old’ content into something new and pulsating with life! I can only liken it to the fresh flowers that blossom on the same tree each season. Surely they are different, each time? They *must* be, in some subtle way ...

I must say that I thoroughly enjoy the fragrance of each season, each batch. I simply love



Reflection is a blissful, meditative exercise that makes me aware of the sweet tweeting of birds at dawn, the fragrance of jasmine tingling my senses as I surrender myself to the myriad shades of thoughts, dreams and aspirations. MADHUSREE DUTTA MAJUMDAR

meeting teachers online twice a week, from across the country (of course, I would much rather meet them face to face, but ...). Given the busy day of a teacher, I had initially designed the course with doubts – would anyone find it possible to take up a course, at

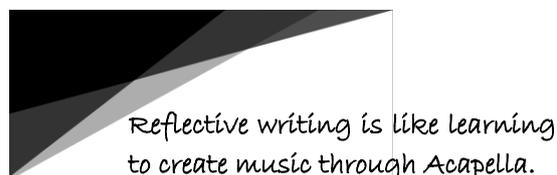
the end of a tiring day? And what's more, even submit assignments weekly twice?

Again and again, I have been reassured that many of them experience immense value in such a platform. Some have articulated this explicitly. Perhaps this is largely because no one is seen as coming from some history, or ascribed ulterior motives; instead, everyone is heard and respected for just *being who they are* – a concerned teacher, parent or citizen, basking in a friendly atmosphere where we exchange thoughts about what we read, write and what matters to us. One participant summed it up beautifully when she wrote, after the ninth class: “It was such a healing experience for our troubled souls in this difficult time.” If I may say so, we teachers need healing *at all times* – sometimes more than at others!

So I hope you will receive what I have to say now as my *subjective* reflections – simply perceiving the contrast, with no intention to make any judgments.

This bunch of reflective writers was different from the previous groups in several ways. For one, they all gelled with each other from the word ‘go’. Was it some special chemistry that they shared? I really don't know, seeing as none of them (except Ratna and Swati) knew each other before the start of the course. The usual initial shyness, short periods of silence and resistance to speak up were almost completely missing. Everyone participated volubly, right from the first or second class. And to add to this, their eagerness to read aloud their pieces in each session served to quickly bring them closer to each other. While reading aloud one's assignment is a regular practice in this course, here was a bunch that articulated their appreciation of the other's writing – as was evident from the manner in which they ended the course suggesting to each other which piece to select for this compilation.

While one or two previous batches have expressed the wish to remain in touch after the course is over (and indeed, there are some who are still discussing issues online), this bunch seems determined to stay connected even after today. Time will tell if they sustain this intent!;-)



ANITA BUTANI

I can't help reflecting on the question: (why) is it so seldom that such easy and deep reflection happens inside a staff room? Within a school's teaching faculty? What prevents it? What can enable it? I would like to turn these questions over in my mind ... they are my takeaway from the course.

For now, I wish to submit that it is teachers like these four batches (who did the course) that we need: teachers who *want to connect* to others in their fraternity, so as to keep alive the discussion of important issues.

Teachers who look within, even as they can see that doing so takes them out of their comfort zones.

Teachers who savour the readings that are offered to them and ask for more.

Teachers who readily offer their writings to a peer for critiquing.

I look forward to doing all I can to building such a network and having it grow!

<http://thinkingteacher.in>



Photograph: Courtesy Rati Basu, Santiniketan