

# REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS



MONSOON BATCH  
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**Vicki Hale** teaches English Language at St Joseph's College, Vishakhapatnam.

Dear Ones:

To three of my favourite aspiring teachers ~ Aneissha, Mahati and Revathi ~ your faces are before me as I write this, and I dream with you as you follow your dreams to be teachers...

Call it advice or words of wisdom, these are thoughts I've had as I have reflected recently on such things as education, teaching, fears, discrimination, rules and students. I won't tell you what to think as I hope you will never do with your own students! I will, instead, frame my thoughts as questions, that I hope you ponder in the weeks ahead, as your career begins.

What are you passionate about? Think deeply about your passion: where did it come from (the roots)? How did it develop and change? How has it been nourished? Then think about the things that have tried to steal this from you – the storms, the obstacles, the discouragements, the failures – can you see how it has not diminished? Perhaps it has even been fanned into flame because no one can stop you from pursuing this – it's your passion, your calling, your dream and without its fulfillment, you would not have lived.

To be or not to be – yourself? I hope the confidence you feel about yourself remains even while you listen to differences, face assumptions, and speak truth to yourself to abolish the lies that you might have heard or even contemplated. You are not defined by your mistakes. Humbly knowing yourself will enable you to stand in awe of others – not compare yourself to others. You are unique, forgiving and accepting – I have seen this in you – and you have it in you to appreciate differences, not be fearful of them. I hope fear will not impede or stagnate you, but rather enlighten you and bring forth empathy.

What have you noticed (you remember my favorite question!) and become aware of? Reflection is such a positive tool for teaching. Ask yourselves questions all the time, then take time to notice, to reflect with an open mind. Awareness is the key to unlocking understanding and engagement – teachers have so much to take in. They have to look beneath the surface of what students are saying and then reach down (take a risk), find the positive and spur that one on to a life of dreams and contribution – remembering always that not everyone is "a pencil man"! You will slowly find various ways and you WILL see your students become involved and productive.

And finally, what is the end goal (of a class, or a school year, or your life)? What defines the specific finish lines? I know you'll get frustrated with different aspects of teaching, but have a good cry and then remember you're on the journey – not of getting minds to conform to your way of thinking or the world's thinking, but to enable and empower them to think for themselves. Autonomous learners are worth "making" for they are real and full of dreams. You are that kind of learner, flexible and willing to think carefully (about the means that you want to use to bring about the chosen end). Look that "difficult or different" student in the eyes, see his or her heart, and you'll be back on track.

Will it be easy? Is it supposed to be easy? Who are you doing this for? Is it your little story of fulfillment or is it the greater picture of others – life and love, harmony and growth? Yes, "aspire" can mean merely accomplishing a goal, but it can also mean "ascend" – soar – and so I leave you with this short story, this picture or metaphor (remember when we thought of a place and connected an emotion?) What does it mean to teach and learn? I love to swing!

Picture with me a young, joyous girl with long flowing hair as she swings. The swing is fastened securely and hanging from a full-grown tree, its branch not yielding to the weight or the pressure. The young girl swings freely, the wind blowing through her hair, eyes wide and squeals of delight escaping her pursed lips. Her eyes wandering, then shutting to take it all in, her head held high. Her hands holding tight and then letting go, daring to feel even more free, as if she were a bird in flight. All this enabling her mind to wander through adventures and wonder in delight and curiosity – no boundaries, free to think, plan, create, dream and imagine – beyond the mundane, the oppression, the obstacles and the dark clouds.

She kicks her legs to reach even higher, to not slow down and to feel the independence – to soar – But if she does slow down, there's a hand, that gently pushes or nudges her a bit, a wind that moves her forward and a still small voice that says, "This is life – as a teacher and as a learner." Her smile appears as the agreement – as the knowing... that there ought to be excitement, adventure and wonder, always – NOT a fear of the unknown but a gentle push to go higher, face uncertainties, explore freedom, and dream of new horizons. This is education, this is literacy (personified), this is how it is meant to be – for everyone.

So, Ladies, look back and then move forward, swing and enjoy the ride!

Your loving co-learner, Vicki Ma'am



**Bvek Chettri** teaches Computers at Taktse International School, Gangtok, Sikkim

Dear Neeraja Akka,

"Coronavirus" and the "Lockdown" have destroyed many lives. The fear and the anxiety that these bring can immobilize you from the core. Kudos to all those teachers who did not let learning stop, despite such barriers. Though the Distance Learning Mode, came as a boon for so many hungry minds, it definitely demanded that teachers come out of their comfort zones and dive into perfecting their roles without adequate time for such preparation.

Although intimidated in the beginning, I now feel proud to say that I have successfully been a part of Taktse's Distance Learning Mode, running it for the past four months. Of course, the journey required me to think of things that I had not thought of before and be ready for situations that I had not encountered until now.

Amidst such an already strenuous routine, along came this **Reflective Writing Course**: a course that would change my perspective about myself.

I have to confess that until now, my knowledge about Reflective Writing was that of a kindergarten student and I was never really keen to write. During my schooldays I was among those students who were more into physical and outdoor activities that we found to be so full of life, rather than hiding behind those lifeless books.. Somehow, I nurtured this practice so well that it got deeply rooted into my brain as one of my 'bad practices'.

Subconsciously, I tend to carry forward that childish pattern till now.

So given this background, I think you can guess how I must have felt when this course was offered to me.

In my first class, as I was expecting more people from the hills (this part of our world) with features that I could relate to, my stress spiked to the next level on seeing and hearing such diverse and well-versed people in my group. People who had that perfect look of a 'teacher', with the right 'accents' and a great sense of 'active participation' were the triggers for excessive secretion of adrenaline in my blood. Not to forget eloquent Ms. Vicki, an American, who served as the catalyst for these emotions. My calm and smiling face must have successfully hidden the turbulent emotions that I was going through. Honestly, I was more like a duck 'calmly and effortlessly' swimming in a pool, without letting anyone see the struggle that actually goes on, underneath the water.

During the course of our classes, I would wonder what I was gaining and how this course could be fruitful for me. But mostly, I would finish each class without much of an answer. To my surprise, as I am writing this letter, I am actually getting the answers that I had been looking for. You believed in my writing: maybe **this** was something that was missing in my life. An esteemed and prominent writer labelling me as 'someone who could write' was more than I had ever expected. For the past couple of weeks, you have been the driving force who has literally pushed me out of my self-webbed cocoon and made me believe that I could write. I must confess how inspired I was to hear you read aloud during classes: you truly give life to the words when you read them! Ms. Prabha has been another source of inspiration: not only for me, but I am sure, for all of us! Ms. Vicki's willingness and thirst to keep learning is the quality that I used to envy, but now I shall try to imbibe the same.

This course has not just made me write a lot but has also made me believe that I could write. I don't know the meaning of 'Akka' but thank you Akka for making me believe that I can write.

Sincerely, Bvek

**Prathima Dayanidhi** teaches History & Geography at The Valley School, Bangalore

Dear Sumita,

Congratulations on choosing one of the noblest professions in the world! I think the profession of teachers comes after that of doctors and farmers. If doctors and farmers give life to people, teachers have the opportunity to shape young minds and help them develop perspectives to look at the world.

Welcome to this wonderful journey of learning! Yes you read right, *the journey* of never-ending learning. Step into this world if you are willing to go back to your childhood and experience that adventure all over again.

As a teacher, one needs to wear different hats. You need to be a friend, a mentor, a companion, a student and a parent. This profession teaches so many life skills. First and foremost, it teaches patience, responsibility and accountability.

Speaking of responsibility, this job puts an immense load on your shoulders. Imagine you're standing in front of those young minds for 45 to 60 minutes several times a week. They are looking at you and listening to everything you say (or do not say). They can see through you and sense your care and affection. This is perhaps one profession where you cannot fake your concern. Your students absorb everything you are trying to convey through your words and body language. Do not get overwhelmed, just be yourself without trying to stand on a pedestal.

On the brighter side, if you get an opportunity to work with the younger kids, it is a blessing. Every day is a fun adventure. They will love you unconditionally. You would be their role model, their parents will envy you ☺ If you move on to higher classes, try to be their friend.

Accept them completely, nudge them whenever necessary. Have patience and try to be a good listener without judging them. Try to get to know them completely, spend as much time as possible with them outside the classroom. When you really care for them, they will open up to you.

In all this, let us not forget the subject that you are going to "teach". You might be very good at your subject but the challenge here is bringing the complexity of your subject to the level of your students, while retaining your passion for the subject. For that, you need to assess where they are and pitch at that level. The first step is to make the subject interesting for them. Try various approaches, connect topics to their lives wherever possible. Let your approach be a well-balanced attempt to include activities, exercises, brain teasers, and also rote learning - a combination of the experiential and skill-based approach. Most of all, it is your passion for the subject that will get communicated.

Being a teacher is so much like the journey of a new parent. You can never be a perfect teacher from day one. You will, however, surely learn to become one if you are interested in your students' learning. Observe them, listen to them, pay attention to the subtle signs that they constantly give you. Once you start doing this, you will instinctively know the right approach to draw in their attention.

All students in your class will not be alike, each will have his/her own learning style. Give some time to understand each student

and then you will know various approaches that you could use.

You need not patronise the students but do show them that you care. At times, you might have to be firm and demand certain work but as long as your demands are not emanating out of your ego, it is okay.

Last week, I got a mail from one of my ex-students, saying how his interest in History changed after attending my classes and how it motivated him to choose this subject for his higher studies. Of course, I was on cloud nine when I read it. But my inner voice uttered that we need to take everything with a pinch of salt. Both criticism and praise have a place in the growth of a person. Do not get bogged down by criticism either, be it from a student, a parent or a fellow teacher. Do give a thought to what they are saying and ask yourself if there could be any truth in it. If so, see how you can rectify it and change your approach. If not, then simply continue to do your best. Because their criticism may not be about you, it could just reflect their state of mind at that time.

I know all this is easier said than done. Self-love and being kind to yourself will help you become a better person under such circumstances. Do find a fellow teacher to share your thoughts and apprehensions. Collective wisdom is always better to handle situations - especially in a school.

Finally, be a friend to the parents. Try to understand where the child is coming from. Parents are your partners in this journey of learning. Give them the confidence that just like them, you, too, want the best for their child. If you can understand parents, it is a lot easier to connect with the student. Not all parents will be willing to be your friends, some of them are going to test you. You do not have to please them, stand your ground and do what is right for the child. Eventually they may well come around.

This is a wonderful profession; your social circle will increase tenfold. After some years, you will be proud to see your students going places and achieving greater heights in their chosen fields. Some of them will keep in touch: cherish that connect. But be willing to let go, do not get attached to any student. Affection without attachment or possessiveness is the 'mantra' to maintain your inner balance. Isn't this true for all relationships?

Enjoy every day and cherish every moment with your students. Focus on building strong relationships and learning will happen effortlessly. I am sorry if I have given too much advice! I am so happy that I got one more fellow teacher to walk with me and so I am sharing my learnings with you. Please take all this with a pinch of salt 😊

Affectionately, Prathima

**Prabha Sudarshan** mentors Biology and Chemistry teachers at Prakriya Green Wisdom School, Bangalore.

Dear Neeraja,

I would like to start the letter with a big hug and heartfelt thanks to you for this wonderful course. When you first sent me the information about it, I didn't reflect too much but I was game for anything that would bring in a rigour of writing in me. Having attended some of your workshops and heard from others whose action research you had facilitated, I felt that a writing course offered by you would be just the thing.

There was one other objective that I had in mind (albeit subconsciously) to join this workshop. While I do a good amount of reflection and reflective writing, I also have a lot of inhibitions while putting things down in black and white. I have a mental block! I was hoping this workshop would help me get over it.

The past five weeks were an exhilarating roller coaster ride! My feelings and emotions went up and down from the exciting online sessions

to thought-provoking reflection periods, to nerve-racking writing times and of course the nail-biting waiting sessions for your response!! I thoroughly enjoyed every one of those moments.

The value of any course depends on the genuineness of the person conducting it. When you brought in examples from your own life experiences, your message became very authentic and we could all connect with you so well.

The best part of the course were the triggers. The excerpts that you had picked from various sources (including books and articles) were perfect to provoke thinking at multiple levels. What was more important, apart from the trigger itself, is the sequence in which it was given. We started with the masks that we are wearing and the impact of it while dealing with every teacher's nightmare – tough child and tougher parents. As we moved on to the need for adding perspectives and ended with the need to have more than one story for ourselves and the others, we had peeled several layers of masks that we had covered ourselves with.

I loved the reading materials and it had influenced me to want to read the entire book or watch the entire video and not just stop with what you shared. It also helped in expanding my world view. This entire process made me rethink about the linearity in our thinking processes, the impact of it in our lives and the way we are imparting education. Maybe I am making a harsh cause-and-effect statement here, but I feel that our education system has become very robotic because of the lack of reflective practice which might bring in a certain cyclicity to it. I feel this must be a regular practice for teachers so that it can infuse newer energy into them, and this would eventually trickle down to the students.

While I knew that writing must come more from the gut and heart than from the brain, this session helped me put this belief into practice. It also brought in the rigour that I was

hoping for. I wish to continue this practice. I would also like to propose to the group that we can form a group by ourselves and share our reflective writing with each other. Let me see if there are any takers for this proposal.

As much as I enjoyed the course, I also have some things that I was not so happy with. The 11 of us had spent about 5 weeks doing a course. I wish I got to know my course mates better during that time. While I do understand that some of us need some time before opening up in a group, I am left with a question: would we have gotten to know each other if the course was slightly longer?

I also have a similar feeling with respect to the one-hour online session. The session is divided very nicely into (a) discussion of previous class reflection, (b) trigger for the current class and (c) a short discussion on the trigger. Maybe, if we had more time for discussions, we could have added more perspectives to our thoughts. The question that is at the top of my mind is, "Have we just skimmed the surface? Given time would we/could we have delved deeper?"

Maybe I need to reflect on those thoughts more.

All good things must come to an end. But as Richard Bach says, "One school has finished, and the time has come for another to begin."

So I bid adieu to you Neeraja with a promise to explore and express more.

Warm Regards, Prabha

**Sharmila Basheer** teaches all Lower Elementary Subjects at Al Qamar Academy, Chennai

Hello Akhila,

I have received your letter and hope you are keeping safe and good.

I am thrilled to know that you chose teaching as your career. I hope you let me share my experience as a teacher, but I am not trying to encourage or discourage you through this.

I feel that teaching is not a job but a service, and we must never treat children as our possessions but as individuals in their own right. We are not there to guide them but to facilitate their learning. We cannot be molding them into anything: we can only help them.

We must believe that each child is unique and treat each child so. No one is more than another. Every child has a natural need to learn: as soon as a child is born, (s)he learns how to communicate, though (s)he cannot speak, (s)he cries in different ways for different needs. No one needs to teach her/him how to do that.

Every class will have a variety of children, I hope you have got training on how to deal with children with special needs like attention deficiency, hyper activeness, children from dysfunctional families, etc.... of course we need different strategies to deal with each. These children will be an obvious distraction for others who don't struggle as much to learn.

The child's real learning begins only after (s)he starts trusting you and there is a bonding between you and the child. Teaching is not confined to the four walls of the classroom, and you are a role model for the children even when you are outside the classroom. The way you speak to an adult who is not related to the school is also very important when you are in their field of vision.

When we enter the classroom, we can never expect the children to be just ready and automatically switched into learning mode. There will be a hundred different things going on in their minds, which are far more important for them than to listen to you. You will realize that giving simple instructions can be an impossible task, for example:

You: Record the lesson in your classwork

Child 1: Can I use my pen instead of my pencil?

You: Record the lesson in your classwork

Child 2: Should I submit the book to you?

You: Record the lesson in your classwork

Child 3: Aunty, he took my pencil!

You: Record the lesson in your classwork

You may start thinking, will I ever be able to make them understand my instructions and begin to teach? As soon as you try giving individual attention to one child, fifteen others will start calling out your name. If you have one-on-one interactions with the children often, that will help improve the bond between you and each child. Some children will start sharing their personal life also.

There will be parents sending messages at any time of day and expecting instant replies from you. You would have announced about the assignment more than ten times in the classroom, but there will be children coming on the next day saying, "I didn't know that we had homework."

Be prepared to have battles with the parents on the PTM days, you must learn the art of 'confronting *without* confronting'.

On the other hand, once a child begins to trust you, you will be a constant presence in that child's life. (S)he will listen to your words more than her/his parents' words. Your words will be taken as a Universal Truth.

Keep the humor live in the class, enjoy their seemingly meaningless jokes. Though you will end up on most days feeling tired and even stressed, in the end, children need you. That is the force that pushes you to keep going. Now, during these COVID days, being unable to meet my children personally as I stay home, it has made me realize how much I miss their innocent faces, laughter, and their touch.

Keep in touch with your senior teachers, some of who are children's favorites. At the start of the day, don't ever forget to smile wholeheartedly at the children. Decorate the classroom with children's work, give your full attention when you are speaking to them. Don't let lesson plans bind you, just go with the flow and always have a plan B. Children should have freedom in the classroom, even as they adhere to certain firm rules. Treat yourself as a part of that classroom community - as then, all the rules should apply to you as well. Treat the children with the same respect that you would expect from them. Admit your mistakes, apologize and move on. Make some time to follow your passion and get enough rest.

Wish you good luck, Sharmi.

**Rinchen Pakhrin** is the HR Head at Taktse International School, Gangtok, Sikkim

Dear Akka,

Let me be honest, the first session left me clueless. Although I could somehow imagine myself as Harish's parent, I struggled to see how I would feel as his teacher writing that report. At that point, I was unsure if this course was for me, because I had started feeling like a round peg in a square hole.

Every time you asked a question and I would find myself thinking "okay, that's a tough one!" However, Vicki's or Prabha's prompt responses would make me reconsider my opinion. Moreover, their answers sounded somewhat similar to those tiny phrases forming in my head. It was just that I didn't know how to connect them together fast enough - hence those awkward silences. Not that I have mastered this art now, but I know that I am getting there!

Thank you for introducing me to the mind map!

My immediate reactions were, "Looks like a maze, will it really work?" and "Oh well, my

thoughts are always fragmented too, so it wouldn't really hurt to try." Only when I started writing down those fragments did I realise that I could actually piece them together to construct logical sentences and paragraphs - it worked! And things started looking up!

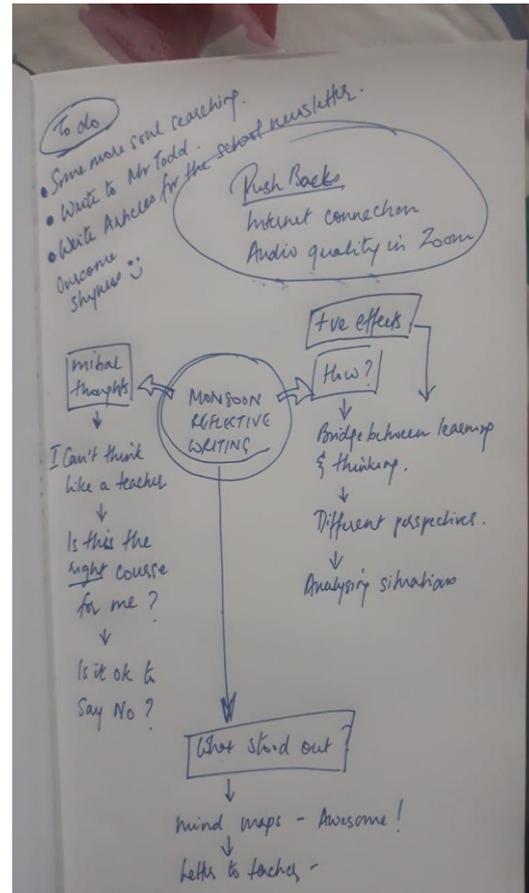
The assignment that I enjoyed the most was the "letter to a teacher who has influenced you". Not only did it not give me an opportunity to look back at my school years, but it also enabled me to honour the teacher who had had such a positive impact on my life. Following this, I did some research and found out from a friend that Mr. Todd is alive and well, currently living with his family in Chennai. I take it upon myself to find him and actually write to him.

For me "Reflection" now means to dig deep into my thoughts to find that which is meaningful and significant. Just like the "Demartini" assignment, it also means analysing events or situations from different perspectives (which could be very helpful in my line of work, especially interview reports). The rubric (to self-assess one's reflective writing) has also inadvertently become an integral part of my writing.

In closing, I would like to say that I thoroughly enjoyed this course. I know I have said this before, but I want you to know that I mean it. This course, the wonderful group and the thought-provoking assignments have left a lasting impression on me. It has been an amazing experience and I sincerely hope more people like me benefit from them.

Sincerely, Rinchen

P.S. The mind map is below.



**Smita Makar** teaches English at Greenwood High School, Bangalore.

Dear Mayuri,

I've been wanting to write to you since a long time. Must say it is hard to find time. The ongoing pandemic has thrown us off gear. We are flailing our arms to catch our breath and prevent ourselves from drowning. The world has come to a standstill and we teachers have been thrown into a foreign land. Here, we need to learn a new set of skills, unlearn the previous ones and relearn the practices of antiquity (like seeing that learning can happen outside the confines of a classroom) to survive. Or else, we run the risk of being eliminated.

Now, don't be disheartened. My point in writing all this is not to demotivate you from choosing this profession, but to shed light on its challenges. You must have

heard it said that teaching is a noble profession. It is indeed, but if you must take this profession up, do so only if it is your passion, not for any other reason.

The urge to serve society, in whatever small way you can, should be your driving force. On this note, let me give you a clear picture of what to expect and what not to expect from this profession.

Hard work, patience, keeping yourself updated with the latest practices and putting in that extra effort – all these will be expected from you. In return, you will gain satisfaction (and believe me that will be immense!) by molding your students in the best possible way, giving shape to their dreams, turning them into thinking individuals, and watching them blossom. In a few cases, you will witness one amongst them grooming himself, with your help, to be a future leader. You will witness many wonders and will be able to relive your childhood, albeit partially.

Partially, I say - and emphasize - because the effort required to conduct one class is huge. If you want to make your classes interesting, you will have to devise multiple ways to hold the attention of your pupils. And here, unlike adults, you will find no diplomacy. They will not fake their interest. So, their feedback is constant and genuine. If you do not go that extra mile, you can slip into mediocrity anytime.

Sometimes, the process can get monotonous if you end up teaching the same grades for many years in a row. You may feel saturated in your job. That is the time to reinvent yourself. Enroll yourself into a new course to upgrade your skills and climb the ladder high.

Here, I may digress a little bit and point out one thing. If you are looking for financial benefits from this profession, then you are at the wrong place. You have to slog for years before you earn a decent salary. This

profession gives you benefit more in kind than in cash.

Having said that, let me add that there are schools which pay well. To reach those schools, you should first acquire the requisite experience and expertise in your field.

Unlike other professions, you cannot cut yourself off completely from your work – more importantly, from your students - once you are off campus. Technology makes sure that you are always connected to your students. Like a guardian angel, you should be there to guide them.

Last, but not the least; you need to demonstrate good interpersonal skills to deal with the demanding parents of today's generation. Tact, empathy and patience are a few qualities that will give you an edge over others.

If by reading this, you feel, you still want to be a teacher; then for sure I feel you have the makings of one. Go ahead and give your best. I'm sure that in a few years, this will no longer be your profession, but will turn into your vocation.

Best of luck for your journey ahead!

Yours truly, Smita

**Shubhangi Rajput** teaches Science and Chemistry at Adani Vidya Mandir, Ahmedabad.

Dear Vidushi,

At the outset, I must appreciate your courage to narrow down your choices and choose the profession which has been termed as the 'mother of all professions'.

I can see your hidden talent and enthusiasm in the way that you carry out your tasks. Keep it up! I think these are most vital ingredients in any teacher's life. If you are enthusiastic, your learners around you will resonate with it, too. Anything under the sky can be achieved if your learners successfully imbibe the seeds of the enthusiasm. This may

sound strange, but the prescribed curriculum and the content is now very easily accessible on e-platforms. One click and you get all things, but the joy of learning can be achieved only through the close monitoring of an enthusiastic teacher.

The teaching-learning process is like an "onion": the more you peel, the more you evolve. If you won't cry, but if you fail to do so you may fall in trouble. By this, what I am trying to highlight is handling the learners is a very delicate task. Our vocabulary should be such that it is effective but not offensive. You need to be gentle yet assertive. If you tend to incline towards a particular child, it can prove to be dangerous. Today's students are mostly coming from nuclear families. It is our primary responsibility to try and understand the child as well as the family background of each child.

The other role of a teacher is that of an employee in an organization. You must first really read, re-read and understand the vision, mission and philosophy of the school where you are going to work. Getting into an established school may be considered "cool" but understanding the work culture, rules and regulations and sustaining the same needs a lot of courage, patience and resilience. You are working *for* some, and under someone. You are only one soul, playing very delicately interwoven roles. When one element tries to dominate the other, the entire persona changes and brings in bitterness or passiveness.

Remember, when you stand in front of the class of 40, actually another 200 eyes are also watching you. So, your dress, hair style and all mannerisms should be very appropriate. Gone are the days when 'teacher' means saree, spectacles and hair coiled into a bun of. Today's "modern" schools advocate stylish attire. However, I regret that I belong to the old school who still believe that the thinking should be progressive, but attire should be modest.

The role of a teacher is most challenging and ever evolving. Change is the only thing that is permanent. One of the most vital requirements for a teacher is to find an emotional connect with whatever age group she is dealing with. Yes, emotional connect does not mean being friends on "Face book, Instagram and blah...blah". It has a very deep meaning. You need to read the eyes and faces of the learners. Their body language and mannerisms explain far more than their words or actions do. No one will teach you this, nor can any capacity building be done in this domain. This can be learnt only through experience, compassion and a kind heart.

Now, something which may sound harsh but is sadly true: your efforts should be focused but remember that the results aren't always tangible. Here, we must take a resort of "Geeta" shloka, which says: "Keep yourself balanced in happiness and sorrow, victory or defeat in equal. Remember, if you have touched a life and succeeded in bringing the slightest change, then you have done a great job!! The most crucial difference between other professions and teaching is that it is concentrated around "human lives" so it is very multi-layered and diverse.

So, my humble request that you ponder on these points. If your gut feeling still pushes you to take up this profession, then I wish you the best of luck! God bless you, dear.

Loads of Love, Shubhangi

**Kulbir Kaur** teaches English and Social Sciences at LakshmiPat Singhania Academy, Kolkata

Dear Reet:

Hey! It was lovely to hear from you last week. I have been thinking about you but was really caught up with work so could not take time out to write .

When we last met, you had shared with me that you aspire to be a teacher. Well, teachers are arguably the most important members of our society.

They give children purpose, set them up to become successful citizens of our world, and inspire in them a drive to do well and succeed in life. In many professions, it is easy to overstate the importance of the job. But in the case of educators, it is more likely that people will underestimate the importance of teachers in our society. It is good to reflect on the vital importance of their dedicated efforts in shaping young minds, by instilling in them the values that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

One of my aunts always says, "You have done a great job by taking up teaching as a profession. You teachers get ample time for yourselves and your family. "

That is when I tell her that teaching is even more challenging today than it used to be decades ago. The education system has evolved to require the use of technology as well and so, teachers must ensure that they keep pace with the changing times. Taking on the task of shaping young minds is a tremendous responsibility. To say that teachers can change lives is not an exaggeration. Today, a teacher is not only teaching but she is also playing the role of a **facilitator, counsellor, guide and psychologist**.

Teachers are people whom we look up to and even emulate. Nearly everyone has a teacher whom they admired and who provided them with an example of how to conduct themselves.

Imparting students information in a way that they will remember and use it is one of the greatest gifts anyone can give to another person. While so much emphasis today is on acquiring the skills necessary to excel in a certain profession – particularly in the post-secondary environment – much of the "life-changing stuff" happens in the early years, as children are moulded at the hands of a good teacher.

Every teacher will find herself approached by students at some time or the other.

They will seek advice on everything from academic interests to issues related to their personal lives. Within the classroom, teachers also serve as sounding boards for students on everything from historical events to the meaning of a literary piece. Teachers are also expected to provide guidance on pursuing higher education and participate in events that a young person to build new skills.

Imagine these days when the whole world is shut down, and most businesses have had a setback... we still see teachers working round the clock to give their best to children. There are teachers who have never used laptops/PC in their lives - or if at all, only used for a limited time. Today, in these trying times they have accepted the challenges of teaching online. Teaching can be a tough and challenging job but, when you see your students succeed in life it gives you utmost happiness. In fact, I am glad that I chose this profession. It is an ongoing process where you too keep learning and evolving .

So, sweetheart, are you ready to become a teacher and inspire your students to work harder and reach their goals? I am sure you will prove to be an inspirational teacher one day.

Good luck for your future endeavours. Looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours lovingly, Kulbir

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आदरणीय नीरजा मैम (अक्का)

नमस्कार ।

निशब्द हूँ, क्या लिखूँ ? यह सामान्य पत्र नहीं अपने गुरु के प्रति आभार पत्र है । लघु को विशिष्ट बनाने के लिए और मन में यह विश्वास जगाने के लिए कि, “मुश्किल नहीं है कुछ भी अगर ठान लीजिए ।” टीचर बनकर ऐसी बातें तो अपने विद्यार्थियों से हम करते आ रहे हैं किन्तु जब खुद विद्यार्थी बनें और इसे महसूस किया तब मैंने पाया कि सचमुच, बच्चों में यह भरोसा आपकी तरह मैं जगा सकूँ तभी जीवन सार्थक है ।

आपका व्यक्तित्व मुझे किसी चलते-फिरते ग्रंथ से कम नहीं लगा । कितनी सहजता से, तरह-तरह के अपने अनुभवों, अपने कृतियों का वर्णन करते हुए, गहराई से भरपूर बातों व घटनाक्रम का कितना सरल वर्णन ! दिल से दिलों तक पहुंचने का अद्भुत कौशल !

महज कुछ घंटों का आपका साथ ,जीवन के प्रति ना जाने कितने लोगों

Respected Neeraja Akka,

*Namaskaar!*

I am at a loss for words: what should I write? This is not an ordinary letter: it is a letter of gratitude to my teacher. For making the difficult easy, and awakening the faith in my mind that ‘nothing is difficult if one sets one’s mind to it.’ As teachers, we have long been sharing such truisms with our students, but when I became a student and experienced it for myself, I realised that my life would become more meaningful if I, too, could sow this faith in children.

You came through to me as nothing less than a walking-talking book. With such ease, you shared with us your diverse experiences and your work, and described so simply the most profound issues and events! Truly a unique skill to reach out from one heart to another!

A mere engagement of a few hours with you is capable of altering the perspective of Goodness knows how many people! At least, I have

का नज़रिया बदलने में सक्षम है। कम से कम मैंने तो यही महसूस किया। शानदार दूरदर्शिता, शिक्षक-वर्ग में सामान्य सोच, सामान्य घटनाक्रम से अलग सोच पैदा करने का आपका यह प्रयास ही वह चुंबकीय शक्ति है जिसकी वजह से पूरी दुनिया के लोग आपसे जुड़े हैं और मैं जानती हूँ कि आगे भी जुड़ेंगे। करिश्माई बुद्धिजीवी व्यक्तित्व की स्वामिनी नीरजा अक्का आप अपनी अनोखी सक्रियता से हम जैसों के जीवन में प्रकाश भरने की पुरज़ोर कोशिश में लीन हैं। आपका यह प्रयास जन कल्याण ही तो है। बस! अब हमारी क्लास पूरी होने ही वाली है और हम अनेक चीज़ें यहाँ से लेकर जाएंगे लेकिन-

कुछ विवशता हमारी थी,  
कुछ दुर्भाग्य हमारा था,  
कि दिल अभी भरा नहीं,  
अभी सबकुछ मिला नहीं।

अगली गर्मी की छुट्टियों में नीरजा अक्का, आपके सानिध्य की आकांक्षा में...

रीटा प्रसाद

experienced this for myself.

Your farsightedness, your practice of questioning commonly held beliefs in the world of teaching, and encouraging out-of-the-box thinking are some of the efforts that attract diverse people to you – and I know that you, too, engage with a variety of people. You have roped people like us into your untiring efforts which are all directed towards a better society.

Our course is now drawing to an end and we will take this forward, but –

*Some compulsions were ours,  
Some of it was our misfortune.  
But our hearts are not yet full  
We haven't received it all yet!*

Neeraja akka, in the next summer vacation, I hope to associate with you again!

Rita Prasad

**Neeraja Raghavan** is Founder Director at THINKING TEACHER, Bangalore

Dear Monsoon Batch:

I have received a lot of food for thought from you all. I hope to chew on it for a while now ...

Firstly, I learnt that the very first assignment – where you had to review a

traditional report and a reflective one, about a boy Harish who was struggling in fourth grade – is *not as trivial as I had imagined it to be*. Certainly not when all the participants are *not* teachers, and one of them is an HR Head, like Rinchen. That was a pretty major omission on my part: to miss seeing that an HR professional could not be expected to easily put himself in the shoes of a teacher and reflect on it! Thank you, Rinchen, for giving me this important lesson.

Secondly, I like the suggestion from Vicki that the introductory session should not be counted as one of the ten classes. I see your point, Vicki! It was mostly just introducing ourselves and setting expectations. So, I agree that it should not be included as one of the ten sessions.

I do tend to be very conscious (a little too obsessed, maybe?!) of the time, and that makes me appear like I am in a hurry, sometimes. Thanks, Shubhangi for cautioning me in this regard.

That there could be a need for periodic ice breakers is something that Bvek brought to my attention: thank you for that!

Too short a course, Prabha? Thank you for saying that! In my view, that is far better feedback than hearing that the course was too long! Or that the sessions dragged. But I am so glad to hear that “constant practice of doing it again and again has helped (you) to write with a bit more ease.”

When Rita contacted me before the course started, telling me that she is a Hindi teacher and asking if she would be required to write only in English, I jumped at the opportunity of having a teacher reflect in a language that she was comfortable with. I loved the audio recordings that you would send on WhatsApp as part of your assignments, Rita!

The most remarkable take away for me – each time I offer this course – is the energy

that I go away with. This is no easy time for teachers! With online courses, plus all the usual domestic chores, and restricted movement outside even for grocery shopping etc., teachers are eager to enroll in a course out of their own volition! When people bemoan the state of education in our country, and some of them blame it all on the teachers, I feel like introducing to them to:

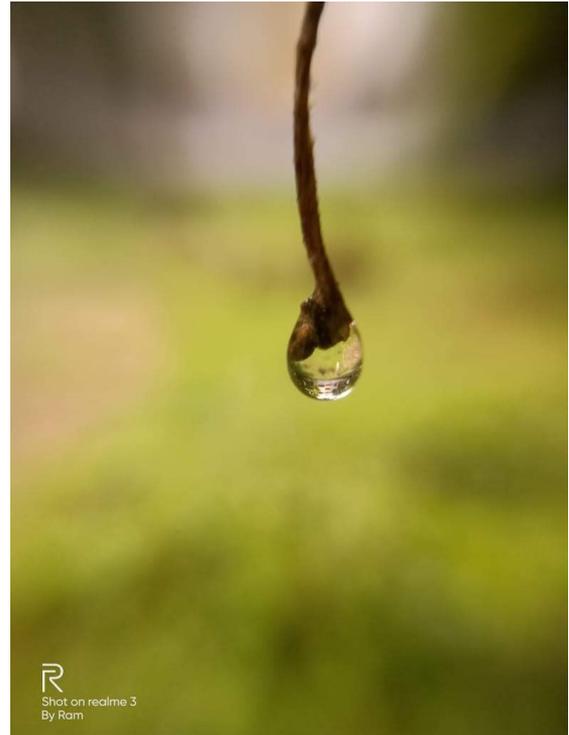
- the Bveks who believe that they can't write and yet, take up a course in Reflective Writing – and fail to convince anyone of their story “I just can't write!” – why, they write so well!
- The Rita's who repeatedly apologise because they miss turning in *just one assignment* and promise to take the course all over again to reap its full benefit!
- The Vicki's who with all their expertise and experience, enthusiastically register for a course on Reflective Writing and diligently turn in every assignment and more – well before time!
- The Prabha's who carry their rich experience and competence so lightly, as they explore afresh the territory of Reflective Writing as if they are stepping into a foreign land
- The Kulbir's who miss registering for the previous run of the course, and persistently keep in touch so as not to miss registering for the next run,
- The Prathima's who draw inspiration from a stray workshop conducted by a facilitator and grab the first chance to do a course offered by her,
- The Shubhangi's who wistfully declare at the end of the course: “It was too short.. We had just begun to understand one another, and it came to closure.”

- The Rinchen's who despite not being teachers, enroll for a course like this with some initial misgivings but stay on to eventually draw from it the utmost benefit. (You taught me that a silent participant should not be dismissed as a 'non-participant'!)
- The Smita's who are so eager to build their own capacity that they wish to take course after course, after this one ends!
- The Sharmila's who confront the numerous challenges that they face in cyberspace and never allow these to come in the way of their own learning!

A big THANK YOU to each and every one of you!

What will I do now, on Wednesday and Friday afternoon? I need to reflect ...!

Warmly, Neeraja



**Acknowledgments:**

Photographs: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama