



Thinking Teacher

## REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS

Last assignments of summer batch of 2020

## DAWA DINGTSA, TAKTSE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL, SIKKIM

### **This is how I feel about Reflective Writing, after taking this course....**

1. Reflective writing is more personal than other types of academic writing. You can use the first person (*I...*, *My...*, etc.) and explain how you felt.
2. Reflective writing is not just conveying information, instruction or argument.
3. It's a form of personal response to experiences, situations, events or new information. It's a processing phase where THINKING and learning takes place.
4. It helps you to become an active, aware and critical learner.
5. Critical reflection requires thoughtful and persistent inquiry.
6. To be able to pen down one's response, a lot of reading is essential in order to understand how authors have described their feelings. Not just feelings but adding thinking to make the story more vivid and interesting.
7. Reflective Writing helps to develop your ideas as follows:
  - What do I know about this topic?
  - Where does my existing knowledge come from?
  - What are the observations or experiences that shape my understanding?
  - Do I agree or disagree with this argument? Why?
8. Reflective Writing helps us to make connections such as :
  - How does this text help me to better understand this topic?
  - What does this text remind me of?

9. Reflective Writing is a purposeful activity in which you analyze experiences of your own teaching practice in order to learn and improve upon it.
10. I also learned that we reflect quite naturally in our day-to-day lives, thinking about things that have happened, why they happened, whether we handled them well or not.
11. Reflective Writing is reflecting on things that you have read and then linking them with your opinions.
12. Reflective Writing is not limited to pouring out your thoughts but it requires a clear line of thought, use of evidence or examples to illustrate your reflections and an analytical approach. This I noticed mostly in my colleague's pieces!

#### Conclusion:

I was nervous at first and did not feel confident about speaking in front of other participants. However, with Neeraja's friendly approach and very safe environment, I was able to share some of my thoughts with the group. Overall, it was a nice experience and I now feel that there is a lot more to learn from this Reflective Writing Course. I wonder whether I will be able to remember all that I have mentioned above, while writing the next reflective piece.

And lastly, but not the least, I need to work on the usage of correct grammatical sentences in my writing, to strengthen my piece and learn to be a critical learner with enhanced analytical skills.

RESMI DEEPAK, POORNAPRAJNA EDUCATION CENTRE, BANGALORE

### **A BEGINNING TO RE-LEARN**

It was in the month of April that I received a message from my Principal, regarding a course on *Reflective Writing For Teachers*. At first, I was confused whether it would really benefit me or not, as I had never before heard about reflective writing. But due to her motivating review, I finally enrolled for it.

On 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020, I received my first message from Dr. Neeraja regarding the commencement of the first session of Reflective writing, on the following day. I was very excited about this course, as this would be my first online course.

Due to the Covid lockdown, my work schedule at home was hectic, which resulted in some health issues. But somehow, I managed to attend the first session. It was an introductory session at the end of which an assignment with a deadline was given.

I can honestly say that I don't remember when I had written last. I am basically a science graduate with an honours in Chemistry. My transformation from a Science teacher to an English teacher was gradual. In this journey of teaching-learning, I couldn't find time to write anything.

Now the time had come for me to invest effort in expressing my thoughts. I sat for almost 2 days to analyse the assignment and slowly jotted down my thoughts. After reading my own writing, it was impossible for me to believe that those thoughts and expressions were truly mine. At one point, I felt nervous as to what my instructor would think about me, upon reading my reflections. Then, after a lot of editing, checking and rewriting, I finally sent in my first assignment and waited curiously for the feedback.

I was glad to receive the feedback from Dr. Neeraja with some encouragement and some corrections. As I had requested, I also got detailed feedback about grammatical errors and for correcting my

sentences. I was extremely happy. I repeatedly read the comments given in the comment box. I now felt confident that I, too, could express my thoughts.

Every subsequent session of reflective writing was intense and challenging. After each session, I could feel a difference in my writing. The most challenging and interesting part was peer evaluation, where we exchanged our assignments with one of our peers, and evaluated their assignment, as we had ours evaluated, too. We sincerely pointed out the errors and later shared our experience of doing so, in the next session.

Each class was a refreshing experience with a variety of assignments. Many articles were read in class and analysed in detail. I learned to analyse an article using rubrics and also to identify the takeaway from it, as a reader.

One thing that reflective writing taught me is to see things from the other's perspective. Now, as the session is going to end, I will definitely miss this course and the instructor who kept me busy for 5 weeks indulging in good writing, chiselling out the best writer in me...My heartfelt thanks to Dr. Neeraja!

NIVEDITA BEDADUR, Former Faculty Azim Premji University

## Reflective Writing Course

2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020

The course introduced me to several beautiful pieces of reflective writing. The different genres that we looked at: a diary, a letter, a presentation, a piece of research, a literary piece, a film and a classroom observation helped us to think in different ways and experience different people's ways of approaching reflection. Reflection, we realised is deeply personal, deeply moving and transformative. Ultimately, reflection leads to action which changes us and others.

The curriculum of the course gave me the opportunity of going through beautiful works of literature, and to analyse them. The sheer variety of genres helped me examine reflective *thought* as well as reflective *language*. These experiences also helped me to experience the structure of reflective thought, the way we use words, in reflective literature. We examined Rilke's letters, *Educated – A Memoir*, a scene from the film *The Post*, a TED talk on perspective in relationships, a treatise on Fear, three middles and a teacher's diary. The variety gave us a rich experience, it helped us understand the features of reflective writing: the ideas, the flow, the way it touches our emotions and helps us look at a completely different perspective.

One particular piece of literature – a memoir, "Educated" - helped me understand reflection as a catharsis, an act of analysis, that took apart each thread of 'an experience'. It examined experience objectively, devoid of prejudice, and this, I saw, could help change things. It taught me how reflection can never be bitter, blaming another or damaging one's psyche. It allows us to reconcile experience to the paradigm that it belongs to, and to understand that there are different worlds and different paradigms.

In conclusion I would like to reiterate that I loved the course. You are one of the best teachers I have met, although you seem intimidating sometimes. Your understanding of the subject transcends the boundaries of conscious knowledge and pushes one to think deeper, to delve into the unconscious and intuitive, pushing oneself to break the boundaries and search for the non-tangible and abstract.

## SUNITHA B V, ILM Montessori house of Children, BANGALORE

Dear Neeraja,

I would like to start by thanking you for this wonderful program.

I enrolled into this program to learn a few tools about writing, as writing has been a big challenge for me. It's been years since I have penned down my thoughts, as I always thought that writing is not my forte. So when I realised that this course involved writing assignments, I was sceptical about my doing this.

And here I am, writing the final assignment!

I have enjoyed every single assignment that you have given us. Yes, it did require a lot of thinking, writing, rewriting, reading, re-reading and finally sending in the assignment. I appreciate all the time and patience with which my assignments were evaluated, commented upon and corrected. This is the first time that I have ever expressed my thoughts without any apprehensions and got an unbiased feedback. I am speechless about how valuable your feedback has been, and I am thankful to you! During the program, I revisited many old memories and got to think over them again! Some memories brought tears, others brought cheer, and some have set me thinking. The letter to my teacher made me realise my role as a teacher. I love teaching more now!

My 'aha' moment was when you shared one of your experiences and stepping aside from "I am right" to seeing from the other person's perspective. It was wonderful! It has changed me as to how I view an argument. I am now more open to the other person's views and it makes me feel nice. I have no inhibitions to say: "Yes, I am wrong, you were right."

The articles you shared and the books you spoke of have kindled a long-lost interest I had in reading. I have started to read again.

I appreciate the diligence with which you went about the program. I see that there is so much to learn from you. Thank you for all the support and encouragement.

Warm Regards

Sunitha

SUJATHA RAMANUJAM, ILM Montessori house of Children,  
BANGALORE

Dear Neeraja,

I don't know where to start so I'll start off by saying thank you for this 5-week journey. It's been nothing but wonderful.

Another person I have to thank for this experience is Sunitha who recommended the workshop to me. My first thought when she said: "It's an online workshop", was not to trouble myself with it. But before the thought sank in, I said "yes". So, I thought I would push myself to do something out of my comfort zone.

To tell you the truth, I loved every session.

Reading is not a habit that I cultivated, though it's something I cultivated in my children, at home and at school. And I know for a fact that that stemmed from my embarrassment at being dyslexic. But here, I *had to do it* to answer the questions. So, in the process, I learnt how to read the passage, understand it, interpret it and then analyse it from different angles. I think, somewhere, I've learnt to accept myself and not be hard on myself and my limitations, when it comes to words.

Despite dreading the assignments that would follow every session, I would eagerly wait for them. The topics chosen was one reason for my eagerness - every piece was thought-provoking. The beginning of every assignment felt like I was setting off on a journey to an undisclosed location - which was exciting. (A huge shift from how I felt about assignments at the beginning!) The discussion with other participants that followed every assignment was eye-opening. There are so many perspectives to the world and with every perspective, another layer is added to the piece. Viewing one world through many different perspectives was like seeing it through a kaleidoscope - so many patterns and colours emerge from it.

I don't know if my writing will improve after this course, but it was definitely an eye opener for me. It got me to reflect on various aspects of my life. For example, we have preconceived notions about the way the world works/should work. Most often, we tend to view it only with that lens - our lens. That's something I've realised about myself. I'm uncertain if this learning will reflect in my thought process and actions, but I suppose this very realization is a start.

And something I must mention is that your feedback was so genuine and supportive that it made me want to better myself. Despite being in pain (with a backache), your encouragement and support was what pushed me to continue to participate and remain involved, despite my fears of using technology and having to write.

Thank you once again for all the support, encouragement and the many learnings.

Thanks,

Sujatha

DEEPTHA GOPALAN, HEADSTART SCHOOL, CHENNAI

Dear Neeraja Akka,

Before coming across this course, I have always felt that I need to effectively converge my thoughts and express them in a well-articulated, written form.

By 'thoughts', I mean my observations of someone, or some event which involved me, or which happened in front of me for another person/group. For example, it could be a conflict between me and another person, or it could be some incident in classroom between groups of children or it could be my reflection on my own actions.

I have always been a person who prefers taking mental notes as I would rather not invest the effort of transcribing them into writing. Perhaps I have never felt the need for that process. This has resulted in my living with those thoughts vividly in mind, but not moving forward productively.

From this course, I have realized that penning down my experiences and reflecting on my responses to those experiences opens up several fresh perspectives, something which would have never happened by merely accumulating thoughts forever in my mind.

I must say that I am not a voracious reader, but this course has made me experience the important role of reading in reflective thinking. As a reader, when I travelled the journey along with each writer, it helped me understand the thought process of that writer, their background story, the circumstances under which they would have written and, most importantly, to connect with their emotions. This has helped me to break down the process of reflective thinking into being observant about the surroundings being in the writer's or other person's shoes to understand their perspective reflecting on my responses to the situation, or how I would respond to that situation if I were there in their position.

Not being judgmental about the writer or the person for their actions or words. Being compassionate towards them

The reading exercises have greatly helped me with this. As I am a slow reader, it would normally take me a day or two to read five pages of an article, because I tend to re-read lines to understand the entire content, for more clarity. This slow process of reading helped me connect deeply to different layers of the content.

I would like to thank you for empowering me and transforming me into a person who does not think twice now, to read long writeups. Also, for building the confidence in me to write about the thoughts running inside my head. The cathartic experience that I have felt as a result of writing down my thoughts is everlasting and it pushes me to write more.

I am still refining my abilities to articulate my thoughts in a comprehensive and structured manner. This is thanks to your very detailed feedback, which has helped me step back from my own writing artefact (which is dear to me) and view the critique constructively. You have been very kind enough to clarify the doubts, that I sometimes had, to understand your feedback in such a way that it motivates me to write much better.

The interactive online sessions have been very interesting and thought provoking. Listening to some profound thoughts by friends in the team have left me in awe.

Warm Regards,

Deeptha

Chennai 30<sup>th</sup> May 2020

## NANDASHREE, KUMARANS SCHOOL, BANGALORE

31<sup>st</sup> May 2020

Dear Neeraja,

As a first-time writer, I had a feeling that my writings were ordinary, without depth. I always felt hesitant to write, as there was no free flow of thoughts. I feared that my writing would seem very simple and naïve to the reader. This restricted me from practicing reflective writing, as I felt intimidated by possible comments and what others would think about me.

You had once told us, in your first session, that you have played the role of a sculptor who has chiseled away the non-image, so as to allow the real image to emerge. There has been a transformation in my thoughts, which is reflected in my writing now.

This course has not only been restricted to academics but has transformed the way that I think and also write. When I was doing my assignments and getting them edited by you, waiting for your comments on the reflective part of my writing, I must honestly confess that I felt vulnerable, as I had a pre-conditioned idea that since I lead a team of teachers, I need to be perfect in everything. If I show my flaws through my writing, what would be your view of me? Though I agreed for peer evaluation, I was, at the same time, hesitant to share my writing. There was some kind of fear and an element of self-doubt whether my peers would accept my writing.

While the course progressed, I could feel the metamorphosis within me. I had begun to embrace my own vulnerability, which gave birth to creativity in my writing, ultimately leading to happiness and gratitude.

I also realized that though we were in a virtual classroom, there was some kind of connection between each one of us. This may have happened as we were discussing deeper stuff and reflecting on it. By knowing varied points of view for the same narratives and acknowledging other's perspectives, I became gentler and kinder to others.

I would like to share this poem (or whatever you may prefer to call it!) written by me, just to convey how I felt about the course.

## **The Unseen Path**

*A path in everybody's mind  
beckons to destinations beyond.  
Call it a dream, ultimate desire or 'nirvana'!*

*A path spurs us on to goals  
Leads us progressively  
From one peak to another*

*In this unseen path, we feel lost  
But here emerges our true spirit  
A way is found or built*

*Reflective thinking, ultimate realization  
The impossible was made possible!*

I whole-heartedly thank you for making me feel that it is possible to reflect and write and helping me find my path to self-discovery.

Warm regards,

Nanda

**DEEPTHA VIVEKANAND, ST KABIR'S SCHOOL, CHANDIGARH**

31st May, 2020

Chandigarh

Dear Neeraja:

The thesaurus says that reflection and absorption are opposites. I find that oddly interesting. I ask myself, "How can I reflect on something if I don't absorb it enough?" "How can I truly express my thoughts about something if I have not soaked it all up?"

A part of me says it's both flippant and audacious of me to write about reflection and absorption in this way to a Chemistry teacher, but please allow me.

These two words are dancing the tango in front of me right now. Between my eyes and the computer screen, I can see these two people, let's call them A & R, cavorting to the music while locked in an intimate embrace. 'A' listens deeply to the partner while 'R' expresses thoughtful movements. Then, 'A' accepts 'R's lead and reciprocates with harmony, and the dance continues to flow like water. There is constant motion. Each one takes turns to listen and respond. They both have a little of each other in them. How can they be opposites, therefore? 'Friends' would be too simple. 'Companions' sounds about right. 'Soulmates' would be perfect.

Have I flouted too many rules in the Science textbook with this analogy? Well, this is what the course has made me do! The readings have made me see the value of observing deeply, listening with all my senses, watching out for every small detail in my interactions with my students, my colleagues, my family, and my friends. My thoughts have more clarity, my writing has become more deliberate and uninhibited, and my inner critic is not so severe. I may never have drawn such unlikely parallels had I not read Rilke's letters. Parker Palmer's piece on fear has given me the strength to be creative, while Tara Westover's story reinforced my thoughts on coming to my authenticity. John Holt's question, "Where are we trying to get, and is this thing that we are doing helping us to get there?" will be my guiding motto from here on. Many ideas I had have been challenged and some have been validated by these readings. Some were so prophetic that they told me exactly what I needed to hear. I don't

feel alone in my head anymore. The voices that once used to scream all at once have found a release. They are calmer now.

The timing of this course couldn't have been better for me. It came at a time when I was struggling to make sense of where schools are heading and what the true purpose of education is. It has given me a much needed pause so that I may reorient my compass. Through the readings and the assignments, I now have a deeper understanding of the playing field and my role in it. I cannot say I have all the answers - I never may - but the one thing I am taking away from this course is to consciously eliminate fear to the extent possible. In my interactions with people, in my classes, and in my decision-making.

There is a new world waiting for all of us. It's calling out to us to rediscover it and start living. It's telling us to absorb and reflect, with passion and purpose. It's asking us to do the tango. And, I think I'm ready.

Thank you for creating this course, Neeraja.

Best wishes,

Deeptha

TARANNUM KHAN, POORNA LEARNING CENTRE, BANGALORE

Dear Afroz,

I hope you are doing fine. It's been nearly a month since we connected, as there was a lot happening at my end. You know how mundane my life had become: going through the daily routine, I had built a shell around myself, where I had just lost touch with my inner core. There was a deep sense of disconnect that I had been going through all these years. It seems that I had worn a mask to hide all my pain, loneliness and helplessness. For the outer world I was the one who was very confident, in control of everything. But in reality, I was broken and shattered inside. All these years, I was trying to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but darkness always prevailed.

I was waiting for a small window to bring some sunshine into my life.

Guess what? The moment happened! It's been almost a month that I have been on this journey: can you guess what it could be? The journey that I am referring to is a reflective writing course which I enrolled into.

The course brings out the best in you and also makes you reflect on things, which are unsettling for you, at times. It's an experience where you would be deconditioning yourself, but through the instructor's persistence and patience, she takes you into an inquiry where many ideas, beliefs and notions are challenged. All this is done in a manner where you

would get immense freedom to express yourself, without being judged.

How did all this happen? Well, we, as a class, had to go through readings, followed by discussions around them. Later on, we were asked to reflect through focused questions, which were our assignments. All these were designed in such a manner that we learnt the art of reflecting, where we could see things from the author's perspective and also relate it to our life.

It was an experience where I could literally be the third party and broaden my perspective. Somehow, I felt that all the puzzles of my life, which were like a Rubik's cube, were solved! It was very unsettling at first, because as we progressed, all those assignments were really shaking me hard. But that was good: as you know, before clarity, there needs to be confusion! It was like a fog where I just could not search myself, but I held on, and kept moving, though my pace was slow. These assignments were really designed such that I have grown through leaps and bounds, in my personal and professional life.

This had never happened all these years. Another amazing feature of this course is learning through peers. It's a very good process where you get insight about your work, but it opens up a window of opportunity to understand the other as well.

This course has transformed me. I am now more empathetic, forgiving, calmer and critical as well.

I highly recommend this course, as it would unleash the best in you, on all fronts. It's a like a mirror, giving you the experience of finding your true self.

After going through my letter do revert and let me know what you have decided. I am sure it's going to be a yes.

Till then, bye. Lots of love and hugs coming your way.

Tarannum Khan

NEERAJA RAGHAVAN, THINKING TEACHER, BANGALORE

Dear Teachers of the Summer 2020 Batch of *Reflective Writing For Teachers*:

As our five-week course draws to a close, I am stepping back to collate the learnings that it - and you - gave me.

Each one of you taught me something.

And all of you together gave me something ...

**Dawa Dingtsa** showed me how a not-so-talkative participant in class can actually emerge with a very robust understanding of what reflection and reflective writing is. [The mountains of Sikkim must have made her quietly imbibe the essence of a lesson!] **Sunita** showed me how the simple act of reflection can bring about an understanding of the other's helplessness: the very thing that confounded one at first! The lesson that she drew from her reflection on a hankering desire - to live life fully, in the present - reminded me to do the same! **Nandashree** touched my heart with her admission that just by doing an assignment (that followed the YouTube clip by Elli Finkel), she was able to forgive the other party in a ten-year-old conflict! **Deeptha Gopalan** moved me with her instant attempt to reach out to me over the telephone, when she felt she had not done her assignment justice! (When in fact, she had!) **Nivedita's** presence was a constant reassurance: both as an old friend and as a very active participant in the course. Her zeal to procure a book that was mentioned in class, read it entirely in one sitting and then write about her takeaway so eloquently touched us all deeply. **Sujatha** never failed to inspire awe: her determination to overcome every obstacle - be it a severe backache or difficulty in handling technology - was largely responsible for her reaping rich fruits in the course. **Tarannum** took my breath away: as she honestly confessed to being brought well out of her comfort zones through the assignments, couldn't bring herself to do a couple of them at first, felt like quitting the course but hung on -

and eventually wrote me the most beautiful email expressing gratitude for a course that helped her confront many old ghosts! **Resmi** was no less a surprise: her calm and quiet exterior belied the immense pain that she was in, right in the first class, and her sincere writings showed the intense engagement that her (mostly unheard) voice did not! **Deeptha Vivekanand** blew our minds away with the power of her pen: words flowed from it like pearls off a necklace, symmetric yet unique, sequential yet like a collage! The alacrity with which she offered her Zoom connection for today's session has indebted all of us to her!

Every one of you reaffirmed my immense faith in the teachers of our land. How much each of you had to deal with during these difficult times, and yet, not one of you used that as an excuse to miss a class or an assignment! I wish to shout out to all those who criticize our teachers for the way they are handling/not handling online classes: "Here is a set of teachers who are proof of the sincerity, dedication and continuous openness to learn that is the hallmark of any good teacher!"

March on, my friends! As long as there are teachers like you in our country, there is hope for education!

THANK YOU!

Warmly, Neeraja

Bangalore, June 2020