



Thinking Teacher

FINAL COMPILATION

APRIL-MAY 2021 BATCH

REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS

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How do children learn?

Radhika Gupta

As a reflective student, passionate educator and an observant mother, this question has always been at the top of my mind. I strongly feel that our education system is a glorified assembly-line technique which churns out robots year after year; robots who are disciplined-to-follow and trained to work in factories and offices as tamed labour, whether intellectual or physical. We don't leave any room for the natural growth of the child. We kill their curiosity by forcing on to them what *we want* them to learn.

Ideally, it should be the other way round.

I vividly recall so many interviews where I spoke about the myriad learning styles of children, the urgency to allow students to satisfy their 'need for autonomy', and the spotlight to always be on child-centred, enquiry-based learning. Most school managements applauded these fancy thoughts and, needless to say, I cracked all those interviews. By the end of it, I knew exactly what school managements wanted to hear! I was honourably offered employment wherever I applied because they claimed to be in need of people with this kind of a 'modern' outlook. (I am yet to understand what is so 'modern' about this. To me, this is the core of education. People should have given it a long and hard thought aeons before I was born!) Here lies the irony: once I accepted these job offers and joined these schools, I metamorphosed from a free-thinking, empowered teacher to a horse with blinkers on, expected to follow the set rules and protocols laid down by the school. All those bombastic thoughts and ideals talked about at the interview table became bygones overnight. I worked in four different schools across different cities, but the essence was the same. The list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' was as lengthy for the teachers as it was for students.

A rebel at heart, I don't give up on what I believe in. Despite being forewarned not to pull a rabbit out of my hat in school, I kept trying my seemingly harmless little knick-knacks.

One fine morning in a school in Delhi, I made the students sit on the floor for 'circle time'. It was a first for these children who came from elite homes. They gave each other awkward looks. I sensed an unspoken dialogue - 'Sit on the floor? What about my pristine white uniform? And the germs on the floor? The dust?' I quickly interrupted them before that moment of hesitation could sink in. I plonked myself on the floor and asked them to form a circle. There were 2-3 eager ones who wanted to sit next to me. These led the way. Once the places next to me were occupied, the others followed suit. I began the circle time with a moment of thoughtful silence when we held hands and passed on positive energy to each other. Then began our discussion. We were all so engrossed that we didn't hear the bell ring, nor did we realize that the next teacher had walked in. Apparently, this 'next teacher' was from the old guard, so she saw what was happening and disapprovingly stormed out the very next moment. I knew I had stirred a hornet's nest. I quickly rose, asked my students to straighten themselves out, put their desks and chairs back in place and

get ready for the next class. As we hurried to set everything in place, that teacher walked in with the Principal in tow. I froze. The poker-faced Principal looked around at the happy faces. She threw a stern glance my way and said, 'This is not allowed. We cannot make children sit on the floor. Their parents will object to it.' I stood there, gobsmacked.

Another day, before beginning a chapter on 'Climate and Vegetation', I took my students out on a nature walk around the school to collect samples of soil, plants, stones, etc. My boisterous students, filled with excitement about finally being able to do something on their own without having to sit indoors, couldn't contain themselves in silence. The class cascaded down the stairs with a loud gurgle. And before we knew, the wrath of the Principal hit us like a bolt of lightning. I was questioned as to why I had left the classroom and with whose 'permission'. As per the School, a social sciences lesson should be conducted in the classroom and *only* in the classroom. I stood there, gobsmacked, yet again.

In one of my places of employment, I locked horns with the co-ordinator on a daily basis on matters as trivial as writing answers on the blackboard for students to 'copy' (which I never would), making children 'learn' answers (another no-no for me), what to look for while assessing students' work (I refused to mark them on neatness and presentation, which was mostly a job done by parents), doing too many hands-on activities (which would sometimes mess up the class but my repeated promises to clean up later would fall on deaf ears) and what have you...

Today, as a team leader, I see the same pattern in teachers too. As John Holt rightly highlights in the extract- 'We so easily fall into the same trap: the means to an end becomes an end in itself.' With the popularization of 'activities' to go with every lesson, teachers blindly dish out some off-beat, pseudo creative, cutting-pasting-drawing activities, without thinking whether or not it is linked to the topic being taught & is serving any fruitful purpose in the lesson. They simply throw it in because the checkbox has to be ticked. No learning outcomes are linked to them; no purpose has been identified.

We still have the cursive writing and dictation drills, the mindless copying from the board, the notebook-checking with red and the ensuing tirade, the derogatory report cards, the expectation of 'perfect work'... the list is endless. I wish I can make a difference sometime ... somewhere ... to help my fellow teachers unlearn the ways that hold them back so that they can learn to fly.

Letter to my grandniece

Ramya Chidambaram

20-May-41

Dear Nila,

My hearty congratulations and best wishes to you on the occasion of your high school graduation. I am very glad that you have been selected at the University of your choice.

I got to know that you are reading about the Covid pandemic which changed our lifestyle and the way that we perceived the world around us. I would like to share with you how this impacted me, as a person.

My nephew, your father, was married in 2019 and your parents were planning a long road trip for their first anniversary. Just a week before their planned trip, the country was struck with the first lockdown. It was something unheard of in my lifetime, especially in our part of the country. Your parents ended up celebrating their anniversary at home, inviting me and other relatives to a Zoom meeting. It was quite a novel idea. My parents (who were in their 70's) marvelled at how technology brought us all together during such challenging times. Yes, technology soon became a big part of our lives.

The concept of 'work from home' became quite common. However, we had to take care of household activities too and so, work-life balance took a backseat. Gradually, we learnt to manage our lives better. We also enjoyed doing household chores as a family and this brought us all together.

This is when online schooling became the new norm. Children were initially quite excited, but within a month, they turned restless. As teachers, we had to come up with innovative ways to engage the children. They had access to information, so the role of teachers as information-providers or interpreters of text books was no longer valid. This was already apparent a few years before the pandemic, but now, it just made everyone relook at education, within a short span of time. That is when teachers turned into mentors who guided and inspired their students. The current education system that is producing wonderful human beings such as you, is a result of our learnings from those times.

When the 2nd wave hit our country, I started volunteering with a medical team. While helping the families of patients stay connected with the doctors, I learnt to be patient and empathetic. That was also the period when everyone became an 'internet doctor'. We had access to all kinds of medical information and everyone started suggesting to doctors how to treat the infection and its symptoms. I saw how people relentlessly gave medical suggestions and hospitals who were already stretched to their limits were left to deal with patients' families too. That's when, I learnt to trust the doctors completely. There was just no other choice.

Being locked down for almost two years, I also used this opportunity to empower myself, by focussing more on my inner development through yoga and volunteering. It gave me so much mental and emotional balance and clarity to deal with any kind of situation. Friends and relatives who had long gone away from my life got reconnected and we understood how

important it is to maintain our social relationships. Suddenly, we were all thrown into a roller coaster ride, but we came out of it with a new vigour and the strength to live a better life.

There is a certain beauty in coming together and fighting against a pandemic and it left such a deep impact on all of us. The virus did not recognise country boundaries and it taught us to look at each other with more empathy and acceptance. I think that's the strength of human behaviour. We have our own ways, but when calamity strikes, we work as one organism. Though we lost many lives, looking back after 20 years, I see that, as human beings, we have come out of this pandemic as a stronger species. We have become more aware of our environment too and we care, not just about our wellbeing, but every other creature on our Mother Earth.

With love,

Ramya Paatti

Repetitive Correction

Priyanka Das Sarkar

While reading this extract from John Holt's "How Schools Fail", I was reminded of how I insist on leaving a line after every answer and then drawing a line to make it look neat. It is something I was told that I should insist on, in Middle School, where the focus is on habit formation. However, I feel I am not as punitive as the writer, hence, all my students are not following it diligently.

Another thing which struck a chord in me is the quote "Where are you trying to get, and are you getting there?" As a school, we believe in creating an environment for children to learn in a non-threatening way but are we able to do it? Last academic year, we re-looked at our practices and found some things to be redundant. It was like the Guru's cat, we were following certain processes simply because of doing it from earlier years.

I have always given importance to following rules - this could be because of my childhood, being brought up in an Army family and Christian school. As a student, I think doing the home work is a basic duty. Last academic year, we moved to online schooling and adapted ourselves to Google classroom. In Google classroom, there is an option called "To do list" where one can see the pending HW. Every evening, I would sit with my son and check all his pending HW, explain it to him (if required) and urge him to ensure that all the HW was submitted on time, by checking the To do list. The rule at home was: "once the HW is finished, then you can go to play downstairs." Of course, it was not always followed rigidly.

One day, I received an email from the school mentioning that my son was not submitting HW in Science and Math and there were many pending HW items. It was a bolt from the blue. When I checked his classroom assignment minutely, I observed that he had not uploaded the attachment of the assignment, but just turned them in.

This was a trick that some of my students would do, to make the assignment disappear from the To-do list and also to make the parent feel that the HW was done.

He wanted to play online games on the iPad, which I had not been allowing if he had not done his HW. This was his way of fooling me.

I was taken aback because for me, it was dishonest and tantamount to cheating but to him - a 12 year old - it was a way to get out of doing something monotonous. I was just not able to understand him. We spoke: initially, he refused but later he agreed to do it.

For the next three days, we sat together and I saw to it that he completed his work. He could not spend as much time as he would have liked to with his friends. I allowed him to go cycling in the evenings, though. I felt that he needed that break, but there had to be a price to pay for what he had done.

The lesson I learnt was to look at his submissions and not just the 'To do list'.

Children will come up with ways to defy the norms if there are punishments, and I should be able to appreciate that.

Just because I have been a rule-following girl does not mean that my son will be the same. Both my husband and I are having conversations with him on the importance of working hard, but to a 12-year-old it falls on deaf ears, at times.

There is this quote that we often repeat: "*The more you sweat in training the less you bleed in battle.*"

Letter to a friend about the RW Course

Deepthi Jampani

Hi Deepa KG:

Peace of mind results from self-realization, not location.

– James Blanchard Cisneros

Only one class left! After that, I will not meet Akka again. I am feeling very sad. It's like God has given me an opportunity and taken it back. You might be wondering why I am talking like this and whom I am referring to. Let me keep it a surprise for some time - about Akka.

I joined a course that helped me travel to my past and present. I always wondered how a person who remembers the whole school timetable or to whom the task of allotting substitutions is given, is not able to remember and use those words while talking. To my surprise, I understood that the 'single stories' which I had developed about myself had themselves stopped me from doing many things!

Last month, with lots of excitement I joined a course titled *Reflective Writing*. After two weeks, I felt that this was for teachers who have good writing skills. A few assignments lowered my confidence. I imagined myself as a dropout student. The habit of not quitting made me think positively and continue the course.

The concept of a mind map assisted me in understanding the articles very easily. This gives a clear perception of the topic, just like how an algorithm in programming languages is used to derive a solution.

Projecting that I am very strong requires a lot of energy. I realized that it's not required to show myself like that. Fear is placing a mask on my face. Now I am trying to convert my fear into excitement. You may wonder if there is any use of that conversion. Excitement always gives me energy. So, when I do a task with excitement, I overcome my fear.

After reading one teacher's words "I teach, but they won't learn", I saw myself in that teacher. Instead of helping the children, if I judge them through the year, I come to this conclusion. If I continue judging I will never be satisfied, and it's a waste of teaching efforts. So, I decided to only observe and help the children, without jumping to conclusions.

There is no beginning and end for the happiness and conflicts in life. It's a continuous process. To resolve conflicts, I need to think as a third person or switch roles. I am now sure that if I do this, I can have some control over my life. One more concept that helped me to reflect is freeing myself from conditioning. By getting in touch with my thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations I can come out of the conditioning which I may have imbibed from parents, neighbours, or even my own self.

Fear and single stories are blocking my mind. Through this *Reflective Writing* course, I think I will come out of this and lead a healthy and satisfying life.

My facilitator for the *Reflective Writing* session is Neeraja Akka. Why am I calling her "Akka"? I was even surprised when we were asked to call her Akka. But you won't believe I felt like I am with a family, I knew them for a long time. She always smiles and I wonder how it is possible. She corrected all my mistakes very patiently and she never judged me. This helped me to continue with the session and to discover myself.

Yours Deepthi J

A SINGLE STORY OF A STUDENT

Roshni Sancheti

In my previous batch, I had a shy student, Samanvi. She wouldn't open up, and sometimes, she would cry when persuaded to speak. She was from Siddipet and her previous school did not emphasise phonics and reading much. She also had trouble initially understanding my instructions and interacting with me.

The single story which I had about Samanvi, was that she faces difficulty in reading, understanding and interacting with others. Also, she would take time to be a confident reader and to communicate with others.

Last year, due to the pandemic, we had a virtual Teacher's day celebration. All the children had planned various plays and songs to conduct the celebration. With the help of their parents, they had also composed a dance video, and Samanvi was one of the dancers!

Gradually, when I was able to have more conversations with them, apart from the classes, I understood more about this child. Samanvi loved to create her own stories. She created a flip book of one of them, with stick figures drawn. She was also good at crafting things out of waste materials.

With the help of her parents, she was able to make a pinwheel, a weighing balance and most incredibly, a Piggy bank cum ATM machine from a tetra pack carton. The working of this ATM machine was simple, yet mind-blowing. There was a slight opening on the top where the coins could be dropped and a slit on the side where a card was to be inserted. One could not withdraw the coins from it, but once the card was inserted, the coins would fall down.

Samanvi is a bundle of talents. Her wings have shades of beautiful colours, some colours are solid and fast and some are still being painted. She is en route to becoming confident at interacting with others in different ways.

ANOTHER SINGLE STORY

Suchitra Raghunathan

My single story is about my mother-in-law.

She is someone I detested (very stereotypically) from the very beginning of my marriage. Our families are distantly related, and I had heard of her from my mother from the time that I was very young. That picture was tainted as my mother also never liked her. She was portrayed as a conniving woman for whom the ends justified the means! In our family, we put freedom of speech on a pedestal and somehow, anyone who seemed not to confront things head-on meant that they were shady people and didn't have too much integrity. My MIL is a person who avoids confrontation and somehow, that was never a quality to be respected in my eyes (thanks to my upbringing). In fact, it was seen as a sign of weakness and not rated very high in my family's moral compass.

So, I would see her adjusting yesterday's *rasam* and telling her (obnoxiously patriarchal) husband that the *rasam* was made just today! "Freshly!" She would announce 😊 and I would be aghast at the open lie and slowly but surely, I started to detest her. The list would be endless about how she would bend over backwards to keep peace and in my mind all I could see was how meek she was. I would be on a moral high ground thinking: "My values are so much better". *I would never lie to please someone*, etc. Her lies truly bothered me and I would constantly comment to my friends that I was amazed at how she could pass from the truth to the lie so easily, as though there were no boundaries!

I remember an anecdote when I was newly married, and she took me to a temple where some event was going on, and we had to light 108 lamps. An older person approached my MIL and asked if we could help. She accepted it so graciously and said that is why we were here to offer our services, etc. I started on the 'job' right away pouring oil in each lamp and began lighting it. It was slightly strenuous and within 10 minutes, my MIL came to me and told me in Bengali (a common language, that we both know) that "one should always appear busy and not break our backs like this". I distinctly remember being shocked at how one could pretend even in the house of God!!! This incident cemented my single story about her even further.

Now, we both live in the same house for the past five years and I have managed to see many more stories about her. I now see her as someone who has so much positivity and patience. I am amazed at how she has managed to brave a marital life of 50-plus years with a husband for whom patriarchy leads the way. Despite that, she has managed to keep her smile alive and continues to spread cheer and happiness to all around her. I see her as someone who cares enough for me to remind me like a human clock to take my medicines on time. She is someone who ensures that I quickly return any *dabba* that a neighbor gives me, with enough goodies so that we are not 'seen' in bad light! She is constantly after my son and ensures that he has had enough nutrition for the day. She supervises the house-help and is constantly on the lookout for loopholes so that we do not incur 'wasteful expenditure'. She enquires about my well-being and urges me to take rest every once in a while. Yes, she lies quite a bit and yes, it still irks me, but I am now able to take off that veil of judgment that I had about her and can see why this was her coping strategy. She probably needed to use lying as a strategy to get her over-bearing husband off her back! She was not empowered enough to be able to take the challenge head-on and so relied on this as a strategy to escape the grief.

Letter to an Aspiring Teacher

Deepa Kapoor

Dear Neha,

How are you doing? I'm sure you are keeping yourself busy, you are such a hardworking, diligent soul, and you know I have always admired you for that. After our last conversation, I have been thinking about what you told me about your future plans, you said you want to be

a teacher and I can't tell you how it excited me! I was so thrilled to hear your decision and to top it, you said, I was your role model; haah! That was the icing on the cake for me! I hardly hear of young adults ever dreaming of becoming an educator, may your tribe increase!

You remember when you were a little girl, you made *Dadi* and me play 'teacher- teacher' with you... you were a perfect teacher even then, when I asked you a question, I remember you rolling your eyes and asking me if I didn't know such a simple thing!!

I have no doubts you will do complete justice to your job. You know this is one profession where each single day is with fresh challenges and excitements. When I was young, I used to wonder, how people stayed on in this same career for years and years, it's only when I got into the field I realized it's because of this, it's a delight each and every day and there is nothing to make you feel bored.

You know Neha, the classroom is the best learning environment, and I am not saying that for the kids, I am speaking for us- adults- the teachers. Each child will teach you something new every day, they will have their stories, their happy moments, some disappointing ones, and some sad ones, have the patience to see and hear that. Don't rush with kids, look into their eyes when you speak to them, there will be one waiting to tell you a secret that she wants to share only with you.... You will have piles of corrections, you will be just wanting to walk off from the class to the next, you will have the next deadline on your mind, the next meeting schedule up your sleeve... but don't forget that one little child in the din... she is there at the door, waiting for you to speak her heart out, it may be a long drawn sentence that she's trying to make to explain her story to you, in your heart of hearts you would just want to disappear from there..... But please hang on, she needs you...

You will have many sleepless nights too, you will sit up late preparing for your next class, chalking out ways to keep the mystery alive in the interaction, you will want your children to participate, imagine, elucidate.... Be up on their toes with wonder and excitement. It would be all worth it, you will never regret.

In the piles and piles of corrections that you would do, don't forget to leave those special notes for children, they love it when teachers leave a good comment for them, use those post its, the colourful ones, or the smilies you get, the minute you give out the books you will see them opening up to see what's in store for them and they will show it off to the others.... Never a dull moment, did I not say that?

Remember to touch upon the ones who never speak up, the shabby one, the one who forgets her stationery, the one who always has his hair ruffled- they have a story to tell you, you never know what is going on in their little heads, be there for them, they need you the most.

You will also have to be very strong and upfront when dealing with parents, be there to show them the true picture, they may be the reason for their child's contempt. You know their child more than they can imagine, you know the deep secrets their child has shared with you, be careful not to let the secrets out, but be there to show them the mirror, be there to lend an ear to their woes.

So you see, you are stepping into a profession where you will be mothering hundreds of kids and they will never forget their teacher who never forgot to walk the extra mile for them.

So dear, as you can see, it's a work of the heart. It will be transformational for yourself and for those whom you touch upon! Good luck to you.

Love

Deepa

My Reflections

Neeraja Raghavan

The sun has set on another run of the course, and another group that bonded over five weeks is bidding farewell. It is such a privilege to forge fresh bonds with committed teachers across the country, in the twilight of my life! I feel so blessed to be doing this work.

This was a smaller group than my usual batches: since nine teachers enrolled initially and then, two dropped out for logistic reasons.

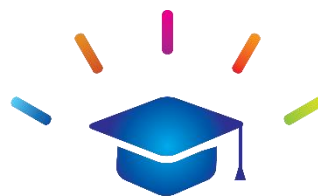
So we were left with seven participants — which should have enabled us to mull over our discussions longer. It speaks of the articulateness of this bunch that more than one member expressed the need to have slightly longer sessions! "An hour and a quarter would have helped," said more than one teacher at the end of the course! Another said the course should have been longer: five weeks was way too short!

I liked the way your end-of-course feedback gave me food for thought. In one instance, the desire to keep a buffer fifteen minutes for sharing each one's profound learning experience was expressed. It made me happy that this forum kindled such a desire, and I will consider the possibility of extending the scope of the sessions to more than reflecting and writing. In another instance, a candid outpouring of discontent over not being heard enough was articulated: while at the same time, acknowledging the constraint of time and the space that was given to another to express herself. It brought home to me the need to emphasise my availability even after class for such residues to be expressed:

over a telephone call, if not an email. One participant spoke gratefully of the door that this course opened for her to begin writing, while another asked how she can continue to build on this practice so as to hone her writing skills. While I have answered the latter personally, I can't tell you how happy it makes me to see more and more teachers taking the time to write their thoughts, describe their experiences and share these with other teachers. This is what the teaching community in India sorely lacks; and badly needs! I wish more and more teachers are heard; and their voices resound across the country and outside of it, so that there is far less of 'telling teachers how to teach' (by even those who have never faced a bunch of students) and more of 'understanding all that teaching entails'. Oh, how this will alter the face of education in India!

I wish for this group more such 'pause buttons' in each day, more reflection – and if this results in some writing too, I cannot ask for more!

Thank you for being with me these five weeks! All the very best to you all!



Thinking Teacher