

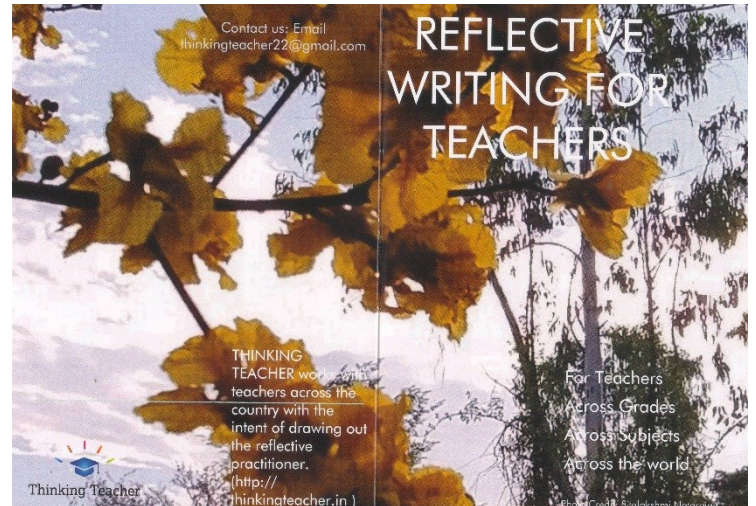


Thinking Teacher

FINAL COMPILATION

Winter Batch 2020

Reflective Writing For Teachers



Our Publications

Books: THE REFLECTIVE LEARNER (Notion Press, 2019)
TEACHING TALES, LEARNING TRAILS (Notion Press, 2018)
THE REFLECTIVE TEACHER (Orient Blackswan, 2015)
Visit <https://thinkingteacher.in/research-publications/> for more.

Research Papers
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TESTIMONIALS

I thoroughly enjoyed attending your classes. - Smita Makar, Bangalore

I am really inspired by this Reflective Writing course. The experiences that you share and the articles that you provide, opens up a completely different outlook on education. I always felt very averse to the typical teaching methods and may be that's why I could not connect to most of my teachers in school. Now that I learn all these readings and experiences I can relate to them so well. - Manonita Bhattacharya, Kolkata

Thank you so much for making me discover the joy of reflecting, writing and helping me become a better teacher. - Vidhya Nagaraj, Tumkuru, Karnataka

Thank you for bringing this learning opportunity during this pandemic. Let me know if you are conducting another online workshop or course. Count me in! - Swati Goutam, Varanasi

I look forward to these classes! Ratnakumar, Singamsetty, Andhra Pradesh

I really love your sessions! They seem to provide much needed time and space to discuss teaching experiences with ease and reflection, which usually never feels so comforting within an institutional space. I wonder why! Thank you so much for giving us a chance to dip within. - Disha Jain, Noida

Course Fee: Rs 3,500/- per person, maximum ten participants in each batch.

Online Course requires an investment of roughly one-and-a-half hours everyday (less or more, depending upon your speed of reading/writing) for five weeks. This includes the time spent in two one-hour online classes weekly.

Photo Credit: Rati Basu

Letter to a friend describing my journey through this course and how it has impacted me.

Dear Komal,

I told you about this course that I am doing on reflective writing. If I say that it has made me stop and ask myself - 'What am I doing?' - you will laugh at me and say that is exactly what you have been asking me for the last so many years.

While I still do not agree with you on your perceptions (which I will not elaborate on here), I feel that many times, I have gone through life without thinking and just existing or accepting. When our mentor gave me assignments, I cannot tell you how difficult it was. The evening that I would get the assignment, I would just read it and leave it. Then, in the little pockets of time that I would find the next day, my mind would dwell on the question. Thoughts would come flitting into my mind and go by during the day. By evening, I would sit down to write, seemingly having figured out the skeleton of my writing piece in my mind. But thoughts are ephemeral and fleeting, so I would never be happy with my first draft. The next day, the same pattern would follow. My thoughts would run amuck in my mind chasing each other and finally, when I would actually sit down to write my final piece, it would not have any resemblance to the first draft that I had prepared, but would be a completely new reflection.

I can actually hear you saying - 'Is she mad?' Well, Komal, I must say I am not mad and what's more, I enjoyed this course. It has been an unexpected experience that I will never forget.

It was interesting to go back to specific periods in time and wonder if life would have taken a different turn, had my reactions been different. The lines from Rainer Maria Rilke's, *Letters to a Young Poet* have left a mark- "If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no

poverty and no poor indifferent place." Though so stark, the lines seem so appropriate.

So, why am I saying all this? The course has made me think of why I do what I do. I realize that when we go about the actions of everyday life, we do so with the spontaneous intuitive responses that show ourselves to be knowledgeable in some special way. When we try to describe our actions or even the intent behind our actions, we are at a loss or we have to struggle.

One of our assignments had a passage which had a very pertinent question- 'What are we doing and is what we are doing helping us reach there?' It got me thinking and I think I am going to be making a life changing decision soon. I also think it is very important for educators to be trained in reflective practices because reflection, both as a process and a product is necessary to become better educators.

With love and a lot of insight born from hindsight,

Anne

Letter to a teacher who influenced me

Dear Fr. Van,

As a part of my assignment, for the Reflective Teachers course, I am required to write a letter to a teacher who had the greatest impact on me. Even though I never got an opportunity to attend your classes, you had a great impact on me as my principal. So, this letter is to express my gratitude to you for being the inspiration and guiding force in my life.

Fr. Abraham SJ, our previous principal, was a terror to all of us. He was a great teacher, but he followed the traditional method of disciplining us. We used to run away from him whenever we used to meet him.

So, in 1983, when you became our principal, I was amazed to see some boys loitering outside your office during lunch recess. One day, when I, too, peeped inside your office, I noticed some senior boys talking and laughing freely with you. It was a totally unimaginable sight. Students interacting so freely with the principal was something that was never done earlier in our school. When you noticed me outside your office, you called me in and asked if I was interested in reading books. I noticed piles of new books on your table. I nodded my head and picked up a book from your table.

My interaction with you started from that afternoon and lasted till 2001.

There are many lessons that I have learned by observing your life. You were prompt to reply my letters. You made the other person feel special. You listened to your students and did not impose your ideas on them. You always said that nobody could make you angry. And surely you were never seen angry. It really amazed me. But later on, I learned that you had full control over your emotions and you never gave permission to others to make you happy or sad.

I was so taken up by your courage and bravery during the political upheaval in Darjeeling hills. In 1986, when the CRPF would come for raids and arrest the young boys from their homes, you would give the boys shelter at your residence. One day, when the CRPF came to your residence, you locked the door of the parlour from outside, where the boys were hiding and stood outside the door like a wall. After searching all the rooms when the CRPF could not find the boys, the officer threatened you that he would arrest you if you gave shelter to the boys. But you were never bothered by such threats and continued helping your boys whenever it was needed.

I would like to thank you for all these helpful acts and for being my inspiration.

Yours sincerely, Seraphin **Lepcha**

P.S. On All Souls Day on 2nd Nov, while remembering all departed souls, you were in my thoughts and prayers.

A SINGLE STORY

This is a story about a scientist, Dr. JS. He and my mentor, Dr. RT were rivals / partners, heading the laboratory, at the research institute where I worked as a project fellow. While my mentor, Dr. RT was nice, friendly and encouraging, Dr. JS had a forbidding demeanor. He always tried to dominate everyone, especially us project fellows. He liked to dictate what people should do, including the how, when and where of it. Dr. JS was short tempered. He often showed his anger, shouting at the top of his voice, openly scolding the fellows working in the laboratory. Consequently, all fellows, more so those who worked with him, were always stressed and tense when they were in the lab. All of us, have one or more horrifying memories of having suffered as the victims of Dr. JS's temper. One particular incident had affected me so much that I felt it would haunt me all my life.

I needed to ask Dr JS a big favour. This was at the time when I was at the tail end of my PhD work. I still needed two months' time to complete a final set of experiments. But Dr RT was leaving on a sudden transfer to another town. Would Dr JS allow me, a fellow with Dr RT, to work in what would be his lab after Dr RT had left? My work was not his responsibility after all.

Over the years, Dr JS had become more approachable than he was when I had newly joined the lab. I had felt that he was taking care to be kind and respectful to people, even project fellows. It was a pleasant surprise to see that he was such a courteous and attentive host when he had invited us project fellows, for a family ceremony. But I knew he and Dr RT were still rivals. Hoping for the best, I went to Dr. JS and explained my situation. He listened to me patiently. Without making a big deal of it, he simply asked me to share a list of experiments that I had wished to do and the timeline for the same. I did as I was asked. He gave me the permission. It was that simple.

I recommenced my work. Mentally, my fingers were always crossed during that two-month period. I was on my own. Dr RT had already left. So had the other fellows from his team. But everything went peacefully. I completed my experiments as planned. On the last day of the two-month period, I thanked Dr. JS with all my heart. He simply and graciously accepted my gratitude and wished me the best for my future. Later, when I sent him a thank you card, he again showed great magnanimity. He called me over the phone and spoke encouraging words to me. His actions meant so much to me then, when I was alone and had been left to sort things out on my own.

To this day, I feel indebted to him for his kindness. It would have been extremely difficult

for me to complete my PhD without his timely help. Most importantly, never once, during all that period, did he even in the slightest of way indicate that he had done me a favour. The memory of his generosity and selflessness warms my heart to this day.

Shubhangi Bhide

To the teacher who inspired me

As I go down the memory lane reminiscing about my school life and my teachers, I remember you very vividly, my dear Mrs. Singh, my high school teacher, as a warm, sweetly greying, fair lady, elegantly clad in your signature printed silk sarees. Your graceful appearance and conduct have influenced me to date, in the way I dress and carry myself. You left a strong impression in my mind because of your warmth and kindness.

As a class teacher, you treated me like one of your own children by standing up for me and comforting me in my times of distress - like when the Telugu teacher, Mrs. Kusuma always punished me. [I am still of the opinion that she carried a certain grudge against me, as a result of which, she would punish me for no reason.] When on one such occasion I was very hurt and was feeling low, you comforted me. When she complained about me to my parents, you defended me and supported me in front of them, which meant the world to me. Besides providing me with the moral support that I needed, you have also significantly influenced the trajectory of my career. You were so proficient in English and had an interesting way of teaching it, which is what got me interested in the subject. You would narrate many engrossing stories very expressively. The grammar part always caused me a lot of pain, but literature is something else. You taught us all the literature chapters, in the

form of stories. I remember the way you modulated your voice to suit different roles. It was utterly captivating. I am proud to say that I have learned this from you.

Our school was a traditional convent school and was very prejudiced. Colour, status, and language were key factors in being recognized in school. Being dark-skinned, I developed very low self-esteem in my schooldays due to my complexion. However, the classroom culture that you created focused on giving every student a voice, while keeping in mind their insecurities and at the same time, providing social and emotional support. This helped me get through my teenage years and high school.

I just want you to know that you have had a powerful impact on my life. Thank you for being an incredible teacher, and one of the most inspiring people in my life. I will always look up to you.

With warm regards,

Sunanda

Reflections:

At first, I was shocked to notice that I could not recollect any fond memories off the top of my head. Feelings of hurt and confusion, being unable to understand the prejudices against me (because of my colour and culture), are the first that came to my mind. How I would eagerly look forward to participating in school dramas but was always denied the chance!

I always thought I had a very disturbing and unhappy school-life. However, now that I think of it, it was not all that bad. I remember several good things, too, which I had forgotten. I remember all those school picnics and school fetes, quite a few of which I participated in. I thought I was inconsequential, but I have grown to realise that I am remembered by a lot of people. When I come to think of it, I wonder why

I held myself in such low regard. Thanks to social media, we have formed many reunion groups on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp where so many of my schoolmates remember and recollect memories with me, some of which even I had forgotten, so I guess I made my impact in the class.

The feelings that rushed through me were those of nostalgia, excitement, and disbelief – all together. There were tangled up emotions and connections in my head. As I began segregating, I kept recollecting more people. There was a Mrs. Rao, Mrs. Baria, Mrs. Gardner, Mrs. Phillips, who had this really big mole on her upper lip. Mrs. Rama, who was a tall and hefty lady with a big bindi. Not only do I remember the teachers and schoolmates, but also remembered some of the other incidents involving them, much to my utter disbelief. Mrs. Singh, however, has been the most influential during my high school days.

Every time I thought of my school life, I was frequently left with a bitter taste in my mouth. Thanks to this exercise, I got an opportunity to reminisce how I have grown and shattered my insecurities, I have acknowledged my role model, someone who I did not even think I admired but who, on a subconscious level, impacted me greatly. I now also have many positive anecdotes and feelings associated with school and am left nostalgic thinking of all those fond memories.

Sunanda

Letter to a teacher who influenced me the most

Dear Anne Singh ma'am,

How are you? Hope this letter finds you in good health and happiness. I feel so thankful to the supreme power, that is responsible for every action on earth, to have created this moment for me. A moment that has made me continuously think about you, and only you, and even set me off writing this letter to you. I left C.J.M after my 10th standard, and so did my physical connection with the school, as I still have not been able to

make it to Dehradun due to personal commitments. Though I came across so many teachers after that, some even inspired me in bits, you are the one that my heart belongs to!

Anne ma'am, after moving to middle school, I waited for 3 years to have you as my teacher. My wish was granted in 9th standard when you finally became my English teacher. Those were the best days of school life. I used to wait for your period. You walked into class every day, looking so beautiful with your warm smile and style! As I close my eyes, right now, I can feel myself drift 13 years back. You instilled in me a love for the English language. I found myself completely immersed and happily lost on the journeys that you took me with you, as we traversed together the myriad alleyways that this language had to offer! It was magical to hear you dive into the layers beneath texts and mystically touch that softest spot in my heart, time and again, with your explanations of the poetry. You introduced me to so many genres of books and ensured that I had a library book at all times. Ma'am, I have such fond memories of debates, elocutions and dramas that we did together. I will be forever grateful to you for being such a positive influence during the most sensitive and important developmental phase of my life.

Writing this letter makes me feel like I just opened my eyes after a deep meditation. Thinking about you fills me with positivity, ma'am and I feel more responsible towards the young minds that I now work with at school. I want to leave a beautiful imprint on the hearts of my children, just like you left yours on mine forever. Hope to see you soon, ma'am.

P.S.- Ma'am, do you still have your gorgeous maroon watch with the black dial? Because my trip to a watch store, in all these years, has been incomplete without looking for a similar one. My search continues!

Warm hugs and loads of gratitude,

Krithika.

Dear Aspiring Teacher,

I am so glad that you aspire to enter into a profession that many don't. Teachers often just come into teaching, whether or not it is their calling. Now that you have this ambition, how about reflecting on its genesis, along with those very reasons that bring you into teaching.

While you search for all the 'whys', try to go back to your childhood memories, your initial journey into your formal and informal education. Do those memories bring you happiness, or do they make you restless? Put down your answers because these will help you decide what kind of teacher you want to be. Were you nurtured with love and care, were you stopped from exploring the world around you, were you shown disgust for messing your clothes when you played your heart out? How many instances do you recollect of adults telling you 'NO' for something or the other? Did you have the freedom to let your emotions out, or were you always expected to have a happy face? How many times did your parents want you to recite a poem in front of strangers? What were your feelings then? Were you just a face in your teacher's classroom, or were you hand-held to blossom? What were your feelings like in the mornings: were you excited to go to school, or did it look like just another day in the year? Were you allowed to fill your choice of colours when you had just started to draw or were you forced to draw an apple - always red? Did anybody spend time to chat with you, to read out stories to you? Were people around you bothered about what you felt, what you liked, your fears, what made you angry, what made you sad?

As you start reflecting, shift your focus now to your teen years. How often were you trusted for your decisions, or even allowed to make decisions? Were you spending valuable time with your parents, were you sounding rebellious, or were you enjoying every moment of your schooling? When you made any mistake, how

were you treated? Were you under any pressure of performing, be it from family or peers, in academics or something else? Did you have people around you who took you seriously? Did the idea of schooling instill hope in you, or was it of no consequence at all?

When you stepped into adulthood, were you able to make some sense of who you are and your purpose in life? At this point, what are your assumptions about children and education at large? Do you think children under your care will feel safe, challenged, and capable and will they be able to believe in themselves?

What is your preparation, as you plan to plunge into the daunting task of nurturing children? Twenty years from now, when these children will look back, what is the picture that you think they will have of you?

Remember to just sit and observe children, as you move on to teach them. What they do will tell you what you should do with them - or actually, what you *shouldn't*. They have an immense power to transform you and make you a person worthy of being called a "teacher".
Regards and Best Wishes,

Trisha

TIDBITS

This course has been the highlight of 2020 for me. It has, in fact, been a spiritual experience for me.

While doing assignments, I got the opportunity to go back to many of my past experiences and relive those moments. Some of them were pleasant while others were unpleasant. But those reflections have helped me to get in touch with my inner being and have made me understand myself better. This course has also taught me to live in the present moment. Reflecting on my past experiences and reliving those moments have helped me to be aware and alert of the present moment. The effect of this course on me has been such that in the midst of daily activities, I find myself pausing for a while and distancing myself from 'me', so as to be aware of my feelings and present experience. I feel that that this course has awakened all my senses. I feel fully alive now. I am no more floating on the surface.

I am not sure whether this letter is making any sense to you. I find it difficult to describe my experiences in words. But my learning from this course is that reflecting on our daily experiences gives us the joy of living. Without reflection, we are only living on the surface an artificial life. And mind mapping is a powerful tool for reflection.

Writer 1 Lepcha

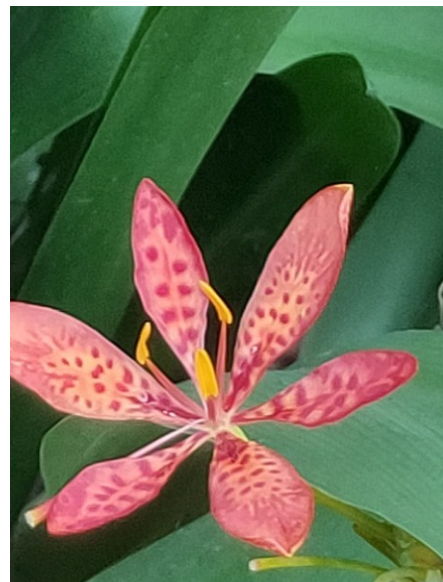


Photo Credit Rati Basu

I started working about fifteen years ago. I came across this one man whose personality seemed very repulsive to me. He was an active advocate for the LGBTQ community. I thought of him as belonging to a set of activists and, as a result, regarded him as one of those irresponsible, rebellious troublemakers fighting for cultures and ideas foreign to us.

It was an extremely daunting task for me to travel with him on work. Nothing that he said or did seemed to go well with me. However, during a later part of these programs, I got to know of certain personal experiences that he had witnessed, which had shaped these beliefs.

A few years ago, his father had met with an accident, on his way to work. While all the bystanders were standing there watching the scene, a group of eunuchs rushed him to the hospital and saved his life. Ever since, he has been an active advocate of the LGTBQ community.

I realized that he was a very genuine and warm person, his experiences notwithstanding. He helped me get over many of my inhibitions, and had I not gotten an opportunity to interact with him, I would have missed out on acquiring a good friend and great experiences.

I was so persistent in believing the single-story of him as an arrogant activist that I could not look beyond that and recognize his whole persona.

Writer 2 Sunanda



Photo Credit Sapna Sajan

If our minds are already in a reproachful space, it is likely that we will continue to perceive every exchange as a rebuke. It is better that any thought of having been treated unfairly by others be diverted to a process of self-assessment. This may involve giving honest answers to the questions; could I have behaved wrongly, first? Could my attitude be at fault? Am I jumping to unpleasant conclusions because of some prior bias? It may also help to examine the situation concerned. Sometimes, unpleasantness is the consequence of a circumstance and not anyone's fault. Acknowledging the truth of one's own shortfall is important, even if immediately hurtful. The process of being open to finding the underlying cause of unpleasantness (instead of directly blaming someone) may help lessen the possibility of harbouring any resentment or grudge, even if then one finds that the fault lies elsewhere.

Writer 3 Shubhangi

This course cannot be taken easily and would require your complete surrender to experience its magic. I was a little apprehensive about how I would find time to pause and reflect, I just couldn't let this opportunity slip away. But surprisingly, I realized - and here I may sound a little crazy - something made it happen magically. There have been reflections that happened sub-consciously while sleeping, some which did not let me sleep, some where the heart just could not wait to make its imprint on paper. This course has transformed me in many ways. The biggest discovery for me was the power of writing. I could see my thoughts gaining clarity and the cloud lifting off my mind, as I wrote my reflections. At the end of each assignment, I gained something precious, something that I believe will help me at every stage of life, something that has the power to make my life less complex and more joyous.

We don't need to be expert writers to do this course, as the reflections in themselves have the potential to get the words straight out of our hearts. Nothing can be more beautiful and more impactful than a piece of writing which evolves from the depths of our heart, right?

Writer 4 Krithika

Education, to me, is very similar to poetry. It evokes creativity in me and so, the beauty of life brings in a certain rhythm that balances my soul, body, and mind, precisely in the same order, taking me into a world full of questions. Some of these I seek answers to, some make me restless and as for the rest, I just let them be.

I am scared to define education because that mere definition will limit it. Then how do I express it? Maybe it is hidden in the questions that I keep asking myself. Often, I wonder, what is there in this cycle of birth and death? Doesn't each one go through it and meet the same end? Isn't this difference a result of education or the lack of it? Does this mean a good education reflects how well I travel this path, through life to death?

As I start reflecting on this journey of life, I see that life teaches us at every minute. One may not have a formal education, going from school to college, but don't we say that life and time are the crucial teachers, teaching us life's lessons? Doesn't a child who sells vegetables have a much better sense of estimation than one going through formal education, sitting in an air-conditioned classroom? Doesn't a rag picker understand the health hazards that he faces better than those who verbally propagate the banning of plastic? Are people from the mountains not better at survival tactics than those who are reading about it in the plains? I don't associate education with a formal set up. It starts from birth at home, shapes our lives and continues to bring in experiences that keep pushing us to realize our highest potential.

So, what is education? Maybe it is a tool that helps to make a smooth transition from life to death and we can beautifully use this tool for us to maintain harmony with others till we co-exist with them.

Writer 5 Trisha



Photo Credit: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

When I began teaching, I had several fears - fear of not being in control of a class, fear of being embarrassed in front of a class, fear of not being able to answer a question, fear of being observed, to name but a few. It was very subtle, but very real. It never went away during the school year. However, these fears drove me to prepare better as a teacher. I would look for interesting connections, design activities to make the topic I was teaching interesting, plan the period I had to the minute, look at a topic from all angles trying to anticipate the questions that I could be asked. It never worked of course, but in the process, I learnt something more. There were times when the lessons bombed. There were units that were slow and boring. Content that was not interesting. I would wrestle with ways that I could make it work. I connected with my co-teachers. I was not too proud to ask for help when I needed it. I kept my eyes and ears open - for new insights into the art of teaching and learning. Another thing that I did was to connect with my students. Each one was precious to me and they knew it. The FEAR made me a better teacher than I would have been otherwise.

Writer 6 Anne

My reflections

Every batch teaches me something new. With every run of this course, I emerge with a *different* question.

I find this to be the most fascinating thing about teaching and learning. The same content can be transacted year after year: yet *the learnings are unique*, each time.

In this run of the course, I experienced the need for me to take a serious look at *how my feedback is received*. In the words of one participant:

During online sessions, sometimes it feels like one is being attacked/ accused unfairly. And this being rather unexpected, the purpose/focus of discussion (seeing and considering different perspectives) is lost. It becomes one-sided (teacher-centered). However, to contradict myself, the forum environment is open, and the one-sidedness is mostly due to the way we are conditioned by our culture. But maybe the latter could be taken into consideration until the time when things are different?

I find the embedded reflection in the above extract to be quite remarkable, viz. “the one-sidedness is mostly due to the way we are conditioned by our culture.” It was in our penultimate session that I sensed this sort of judgment being experienced by a participant (even though I knew I was soliciting her views too) and therefore, invested quite a bit of effort in drawing her feelings out of her – first over text messages, and then, over a telephone conversation.

As I have openly articulated during our sessions, one of my continued areas of learning is in *giving respectful feedback*. While I am not sure that I give *disrespectful* feedback, I can certainly see a lot of room for making the process more two-way. How this can actually be achieved – given the structure and duration of this course – will need some careful thought.

That aside, I find that I experience afresh with each batch the magic in the whole process of reflection. As one participant said: “I think the online medium of instruction was getting to me slowly and I could see myself losing my fun-loving, lighthearted nature. This course helped me connect with my deeper self and I feel a lot calmer and more relaxed now. It has given me the valuable gift of reflection and has taught me the power of writing.”

Another said:

“I can feel in me the strengthening of a wish to be able to politely convey a difference in opinion.”

As I have written above, I couldn’t agree more! I am not only experiencing a strengthening of such a wish, I truly feel the need to take a course on *how to give effective feedback*!

But most importantly, my consistent takeaway from all these runs (five online, one face-to-face so far) of the course has been the heartwarming assurance that there are so many teachers in our country who value reflection, hunt for ways of building their own capacities and are willing to invest their already limited time and over-demanded energy into this!

I always end this course with fresh hope for the education of children in our country.

Thank you for keeping that hope alive in me!

Neeraja Raghavan

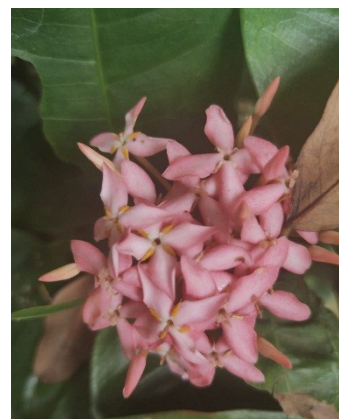


Photo Credit: Rati Basu