

REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS

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Letter to a friend describing her journey through this course – Smitha Nair, Marigold Creative, Cochin

Dear Vidhya,

I am sure you would be surprised to receive this letter from me, even though we speak to each other quite often, sharing what we've been up to in our personal space as well as at work.

I am writing to you to let you know what an eye-opener of a journey you suggested. Had it not been for the pandemic, I would have never thought to explore a course called 'Reflective Writing for Teachers'. Thank you for recommending it, and insisting that I take up this journey, even though I had my apprehensions. Cut to now after my ninth session, I feel it has got me thinking at various levels - and thinking through various perspectives.

To me, Reflective Writing has been that silent space between the words.

A space of deep listening and being open to other voices - the process of thinking and owning it has been transformational.

Jayshree Murali

Each week's assignment got me reflecting on my own journey as an educator – where I have faltered, stumbled and got back up – as a student or as an educator. Whether it was a helping hand lent by a teacher/colleague/ friend, or doing the course corrections myself, I pondered over them all through these assignments.

Like they say, words and images matter - the topics chosen for assignments by Neeraja *Didi*, or the additional reading resources to broaden one's perspectives, the peer group sharing of assignments and interaction every week – *all* these helped me discover ways in which one can make a difference.

The course is helping me interpret the more perplexing aspects of education and how, as educators, we are key factors in them. I must admit that the assignments did get a little tough, as I constantly looked for valid points to make, and engaged in a deeper understanding of the intricacies of the topics discussed.

We live in a partisan time and, many a time, we find ourselves squaring off others' thoughts and beliefs. This course is making me look at the same issue through varied lenses and, what is interesting is, a whole lot of perspectives are emerging from the sharing of assignments and discussions that come onto the platter, from educators of diverse backgrounds.

I particularly liked working on a few assignments that were more like holding a mirror to my past teaching experience in school. The first assignment on interpreting a student's report took me back to my very first experience of writing naïve student reports, using standard phrases, without even knowing the child. It was a reflection of myself as a clueless teacher, trying to fit into the roles of a teacher and then, years later, reflecting on the report as a parent. I would've never reflected on this as a teacher, parent or as a child.

Another one that got me thinking was to step into the shoes of a leader - 'Count your blessings' by Dr. John F Demartini, took me back into looking at my own strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats as a coordinator of my department. As I relived the situations, I looked at things that could have been undone or worked through differently.

A prompt to 'write a letter to my teacher' was an emotional one: it relaxed my mind and the opportunity to write a positive piece about my teacher was wonderful.

Reflective writing helps me to look at myself as if I am looking in the mirror. It not only nurtures me with self-love but also helps me watch my dark spots which have been left untouched and unfazed. As I put my thoughts on paper, I am able to let the little dark birds fly out of the cage, making me feel lighter and happier!!

Kalpana Sharma

I loved the idea of reminiscing the past. The course and the follow-up assignments, I thought, helped to delve deeper into issues on education and find meaning in the work that I continue to do, in the field of education.

It has been an un-layering and demystifying journey, to be able to pen-down my fears, apprehensions, triumphs and achievements as an educator – a step towards realisation of what an educator is capable of doing, through reflective practice.

I wish the journey of reflective writing that I have just begun continues to bring in continued learning; a constant

reminder of stepping back and looking at my work, to create and experiment with new ideas and approaches.

It has been a deeply enriching journey.

Take care,

Warmly Smitha

Letter to one's most impactful teacher – **Bula Felix, Suchitra Academy, Hyderabad**

Dear Teacher,

I am writing this letter to tell you how much I owe you for the good impact that you have had on my life. When people ask me who my favourite mentor was, you always come to mind. Your thoughtfulness and warm comments have stayed with me throughout the years. You believed that I could perform at my highest level in any endeavour. This was possible because of the most significant lesson that you taught me: you instilled in me the confidence to put forth my whole effort at all times.

I hope that one day I'll be able to emulate you and have an impact on every single student of mine. I always looked up to you as a child because of your wonderful comments.

When I look back, you are one of the people who I want to thank for making a huge difference in my life.

Thank you!

Yours Sincerely, Bula

Reflective writing is the process by which you examine your own thoughts, emotions and motivations for your behaviour. And when you put down those insights in writing, you take the reader on a similar reflective journey.

Rachita Shah

Anatomy of Fear

Geetha Nadarajan, former teacher at
Prakriya Green Wisdom School, Bangalore

I remember moving to a new school when I was in the fifth grade. The board, the manner in which they taught, the idea of discipline – everything was different in the new school. In the earlier school (where I had studied till fourth grade), my interests in expressing myself through music, dance and painting had been nurtured, and I still remember the feeling of pride and support provided by the teachers. I think the best thing that happened to me at that time was going to school. Because of family circumstances, we had to move to a town from a village setting. The ‘best school’ that my parents could find for me here was a conventional ICSE school in the town.

A ten-year-old felt uprooted, transplanted and alienated. Thick books – and many of them – ties, new uniforms, new teachers, huge cemented buildings – all seemed new. More than that, speaking in English was very scary, as English was not a norm at home or among friends and relatives until then. I remember the school charged a fine for speaking in the mother tongue. What I could do, therefore, was to keep quiet for the whole day, as I could neither understand nor talk in English. Every time I anticipated a question, I dreaded answering it in English.

As the years went by, I scored good marks in all the subjects except English grammar and History. I remember that the teachers who handled English (other than in 10th) and History were very harsh and I felt their success in teaching was directly linked to my getting good marks. Making me kneel down, demanding impositions, asking me to stand outside the classroom, whacking, making fun of me – all were implemented with the intent of making me talk better in English. In spite of all these efforts, I couldn't even say a word. There were speech competitions and writing competitions. I participated in all these but only for the category that was in my mother tongue. Students who couldn't talk well in English were considered inferior in that school. They would not be allowed to hold the assembly, or to give speeches on Independence Day. They were also not considered as students who made the school proud. I think the culture at that time was also that parents regarded teachers' words as golden. All that I went through was not brought to my parents' notice as I had picked up the message that complaining against the teachers would be construed as disrespectful. It ended with my crying in one corner of the house without anyone coming to know about it.

For a long time after my school days, this fear continued to haunt me. There have been instances like my inability to talk about pollution in one of the group discussions, only because I was afraid of making mistakes in the language – even though this topic was totally aligned with my interest. It took years for me to shatter that fear. I was blessed with people investing in me, inner strength and a positive attitude, so I made use of the opportunity to come out of the fear. I think I no longer have the ‘English fear’ in me, at this age. I have a long way to go, though, in including refined words in my expression.

In my early days of school teaching, I was asked to talk about context-building for some cultural events, and I remember saying, ‘I can talk about Science and Maths in English while teaching, but not about anything else.’ Later, I did conduct workshops as part of culture-building in the school where I worked. The teaching of first words to my children, reading a lot of books to them and talking to them as we came to Bangalore, and some writing – all of these have helped me to release this fear.

Letter to an aspiring Teacher.... Heena Bhamani Kachchi, Suchitra Academy, Hyderabad

Dear Aspiring Teacher: I understand that you have decided to make teaching your career. You have taken all the required courses and are now ready to mould young minds. I hope you will allow me to share with you what teaching is really like. I would like to do this – not to dissuade you from teaching or convince you that it is right for you. I would just like to share with you some of the everyday facts that come with a teaching life.

I hope you have learned all the modifications possible for students with special needs because every class that you have will be filled with a variety of students. You will need strategies for students with attention deficit, handwriting issues, behavioural problems, and from dysfunctional homes. Of course, the students who are not struggling will be too distracted by the students who are struggling, to perform up to their potential.

When you enter the class, ready to impart your pearls of wisdom, you have to understand that there are a million things that are more important to your students than what you have to tell them. Just when you think you have a lesson plan that will capture their attention, you realize that their attention is yours only for two minutes. [And that is on a good day.]

You will try your best to give clear instructions, but the interactions will unfold something like this:

Teacher: Put the paper in your folder.

Student 1: *Where do we put the paper?*

Teacher: Put the paper in your folder.

Student 2: *Do we give you the paper?*

Teacher: Put the paper in your folder.

Student 3: *Do we throw away the paper?*

Teacher: Put the paper in your folder.

You get the idea?! Teaching something on a deeper level suddenly seems like an insurmountable task. You will try to give each student as much attention as possible, but while you are helping one child, the other eighteen children will start calling your name. Yes, *even* when they see you actively trying to help someone else! By the end of the day, you won't want to hear your name for a very long time.

You will have students give you more information about their personal lives than you are prepared for. Be ready for parents who e-mail you full-page e-mails daily, about their children – and expect instant replies, even though you have not stopped to breathe since 8 o'clock that morning. You will write the assignment on the board, hand out an assignment sheet, post it on the class website – and students will enter your class saying, "But I didn't know we had homework!"

On the other hand, you can be the single stabilizing force in the life of a child with a chaotic home. You can be the one to make a child feel special. You can convince a child that she can do (or be) anything. You can watch countless students' faces light up when they realize that

they really do understand. You can connect with a child and make a difference. All of this outweighs the stress and strain of teaching. On a good day, teaching is stressful, tiring, demanding – and *amazingly rewarding*. Although there are days when you feel like tearing out your hair, there is one major reason to teach: *the children need you*. It makes a huge difference if you can see humour when you are struggling. Laughter is a strong medicine for just about anything. Keep alive your sense of humour, and realize that *you can make a difference*.

Few pointers to motivate you:

Do not let work consume every minute of your day. Make time to follow other passions and get enough rest.

Find time to brainstorm with colleagues or just to listen to what they are doing in their classes.

Make your classroom user-friendly. Decorate it with subject-related materials. Display student work.

Remember that you always have something to learn and improve.

Know your students and become good at reading emotions. Some of our students are coping with more than we can imagine.

I wish you all the best for passionate teaching. May you enjoy each day with children and make connections with each one of them.

Wish you luck. *Sayonarra.....*Take care. Heena

The Danger of a Single Story – Ambika Bamidi, Suchitra Academy, Hyderabad

Scene -1 (calm and composed girl)

From childhood, I have always been very polite and introverted. That's how I was brought up. My father was in the army and my mother was a housewife. Due to some reason, my mother's mental condition was disturbed, and all of a sudden there was a disturbance in the family. My father, being in the army, had very few conversations with us and my mother was not in a position to converse. My elder sister started cooking at the very young age of 10 and I began looking after my younger sibling, studying on my own. We prepared breakfast, lunch and dinner on our own. There were days when we stopped eating for that day. We would go to school without lunch boxes and pass our time playing during that break.

Time passed and we grew up, passing on responsibilities to each other all along. My elder sister got married at the very young age of 17. And then, the workload came onto my shoulders. I had to focus on my studies and work at home also. By then, it was like a cakewalk for me because I had now become accustomed to it.

There was not much opportunity to talk and share our feelings with each other. I wanted to share all my questions and feelings with my father but I was scared. I would mostly maintain a distance and we would talk to each other in a low voice, because my father was very strict.

Scene -2 (A tiger)

Soon after my graduation, I got placed in a school as a teacher. I started working with great passion and I was one of the people who would ask so many questions to the management that ultimately, it made me the highlight and people surrounding me started looking at me as if I were a tiger who could roar any moment. I would raise my voice for my friends, colleagues, and students. Although I would get good support from others, it was of no use.

When things go out of my control – simultaneously, my inner voice says – “I think I need to calm down! I am talking out loud here just because I was not talking much at home!”

Scene -3 (A kind and energetic person)

I was a person who gave more value to friends and did whatever possible to help them. I never said ‘no’ to anyone. Even in my workplace, I would work extra time just to make people happy and have a friendly environment.

My students loved me because I would talk to them when they needed me. I was always seen as an all-rounder teacher and an energetic person.

Scene -4 (A wicked person)

I got married to the love of my life despite having a strict father (biggest achievement). Somehow, I managed to convince him. My husband gave me full liberty to speak my heart. He was the one who always supported me in everything. He tried solving my problems.

But in some situations, I made his life somewhat terrible and gave him a tough time. It was a phase when I had my baby and my mother-in-law had to take care of the child, as I was working. I was insecure that I was not able to give more time to my child. I felt I was not a good mother or a good wife. I was just in my own world that hit hard on my relationships. I would speak whatever came to my mind without even thinking about who the listener was. (My inner voice then:) “Was I ever like this before marriage? What if my husband was also strict like my father? What if I didn’t get the liberty and opportunity to talk? Would I still be the same?”

So far these are just three phases of mine (“When I myself can’t tolerate so many phases, how are others tolerating me?”)

On the whole, I am not seen as the same person by anyone in my life, I kept changing as my situation changed.

My father thinks I am the calmest person in his life.

My husband thinks I am the talkative person in his life who eats up his brain.

My friends think I am the kind person from whom they can seek help.

None of them except my husband knows my other side. Because he saw me when I was calm, and he became my friend because I was kind. He married me and then got to know that I can be so weird too.

My father was very strict but the reason why I was always calm, scared and would listen to him was:

- 1) He would take great care of my mother.
- 2) They would talk to each other for hours and hours with sign language as my mother had stopped talking and had no power to understand anything. [She still doesn't talk to anyone.]
- 3) He would be in the border for months but would make sure that we got everything that we needed (food, books, bags, shoes, crackers, sweets). He would send people to reach out to us.
- 4) He has been both mother and father to us but in a very orthodox way.
- 5) He never spoke to us about our periods but made sure that we had feminine hygiene needs in our cupboards.
- 6) Without talking to us, he would take care of each and everything that we wanted.
- 7) Just that explicit love was a little less.

I have so many things to speak but I am falling short of words.

Letter to a friend describing the journey through this course: **Namrata Gunwant**, Bhavan's Leelavati Munshi College of Education, New Delhi

Dear Megha,

How are you? Hope my letter finds you in good health and spirit. I had told you that I joined a course in July on *Reflective Writing for Teachers*. But before telling you about my learning after this course, I want to tell you how I got to know about this forum, Thinking Teacher, the course and, of course, *Neeraja Akka*.

This year, somewhere in the month of January or February, I was searching for literature on reflective writing and practices in teacher education, for my PhD work. I entered the key words, *reflective writing* in the search bar and applied advanced filters to access content only from websites without copyright. To my surprise, I happened to bump into a website named thinkingteacher.in. Initially, I wasn't sure if I should go for the course, as I had never heard of any platform or any such courses being run by anyone. I just happened to raise a query in the form on the website and to my surprise, again, I got a reply from Dr. Neeraja. I felt excited to learn something about reflective writing, which I felt was indeed a necessity for a Teacher Educator like me, as I should be able to guide teacher trainees about reflective writing and its importance. [It's always better to learn and practice first what we intend to inculcate in others.]

I kept on waiting anxiously for the course to start and finally, the schedule came. I took a little more time to decide whether to join the course or not, due to the college commitments. The July batch was full, so I was given the option of joining the October batch. But luck favoured me and finally I was a part of the July batch only and the course began with one class per week.

I heaved a sigh of relief, as college had also started functioning with full rigour and, by the time I would return home, it would be around 5.15 pm (the start time of the weekly session). So, a frequency of once a week was comfortable for all the members of the course.

We began with the ice-breaker session, the Zeroth Session, where all the participants spoke about themselves. The initial assignment required us to frame answers from the point of view of a teacher, a parent and a child. I did it and felt confident. With each assignment submission, slowly, I became more confident. Even though my answers weren't that perfect, I enjoyed writing the assignments.

I feel this course and the assignments given were so unique in nature that they made us think deeply and introspect on different situations in one's life or other's lives. This course made me think about being in someone else's shoes. Different stories were shared by our facilitator Neeraja Akka, (dealing with educational issues) that I probably had never thought about or imagined.

While being in the classes, I would listen to read-alouds of assignments done by other practicing teachers from various schools across India. I was superbly impressed with their vocabulary and style. I loved doing all the assignments: like describing the meaning of education, the fears of a teacher, writing a letter to an influential teacher, etc. I also loved watching the interview of Tara Westover. I felt that they were very interesting, thought-provoking and engaging. With each passing session, the assignments became more challenging and quite tricky. But it has been a learning experience for me. The assignments actually helped me introspect a lot.

I always felt that writing was only meant for people from literature and never believed that *even I could write*. I never felt that I could write much and was always at a loss for words. I thought I didn't know what to write further. I feel that this course has taught me that, given the right kind of guidance and direction, one can start *looking at every situation deeply* and draw meaning from it. I felt confident after each passing class and enjoyed the classes greatly. Whatever incidents our mentor shared from her own life were worth listening to, and introspecting.

But looking at my own self, I am able to observe some change, like I have now started reflecting at the end of each of my classes and I am more careful in class. I am hopeful that my classroom practices will also gradually improve. I feel that these classes have motivated me to think beyond what is visible and develop an insight on different aspects of education.

I will suggest that you, too, join this course, as it will help you in understanding the nuances of reflective writing for your school teaching. I will share the link of website where you can enquire about upcoming course, if you are interested.

Pay my regards to uncle and aunt. Love to Meetu.

Your Loving Friend, *Namrata.*

Letter to the teacher who influenced her the most Sunita Sharma,
Independent Educator, Vadodara

Dear Daddy:

In my memory, Maths and you present an integral whole. On the one hand, I'm proud of your superior mathematical skills but, on the other, a bit remorseful of my lack of it. I remember how proudly Mommy would tell us about your 100/100 score in Maths. I, too, take pride in telling your grandchildren how you could solve complex equations as if it was child's play! How you could tell a random multiplication table without batting an eyelid! I always wondered how you could do it!

I couldn't. I could never go beyond the table of two, whereas you expected me to ace your rapid fire rounds just like you. Dad, I admired your skill. I still do, but was terrified of anything remotely related with Maths. You wondered how I couldn't solve the very question that you'd 'TAUGHT' me a day before the test - yet I flunked! I'd also be amazed to see the same question in the exam paper and try hard to RECALL the functions, factors, and formulae that you had painstakingly tried to hammer into my brain but I couldn't. I would be embarrassed, miserable. You would be furious, exasperated.

I'm aware of how I disappointed you with my poor scores. I remember all the stories you told me about your own teachers and how they taught, punished, even beat up the students. Yet, you learnt. You applied all of these strategies on me, but I couldn't learn.

What was magical for you, became monstrous for me. What was child's play to you, was your own child's maze in which she was lost. But you didn't realise this. You were overwhelmed but couldn't accept. Dad, you were my Maths teacher. I failed. But, I didn't fail alone. *We* failed. It was a collective failure.

Maths still puzzles me, although I understand it better and don't dread it anymore. I don't know if it's possible to make *all subjects* interesting for *all the students*, but it's certainly desirable to acknowledge the limits of individual learning.

I'm thankful to a wonderful teacher who introduces Maths as 'the language of the universe...' I must tell you, Dad, that it is a much better introduction to Maths than the forced learning of tables and formulae. It has helped me see the immense reach of Maths in our world. From wondering about how it matters to me if someone makes a profit or a loss, I've begun appreciating gains that Maths may add to our lives. If only those who teach maths could use the universal language of love as its most effective tool!

I'm sure you'd be delighted to know that I know the tables now.

Love in multiples.

Sunita

Reflective writing is analysing an experience, recording its impact on oneself and then thinking of the steps planned with this new knowledge.

Heena Bhamani Kachchi

What is Education? Mousumi Pradeep, Suchitra Academy, Hyderabad

"Education is not the learning of the facts; it's rather training the mind to think."

Albert Einstein

Education is basically a training to develop skills. It is a lifelong activity which makes us capable of contributing to society. It's a reconstruction of our experiences through the body, mind & soul. Personality development through education is closely related to the socio-economic growth of society. Peace of mind can be attained only through morality & ethics. During the initial stages of education, inculcating a value system in children gives a strong foundation & develops better human beings. Preparing the mind to handle freedom and move in the right direction is an important facet of modern education.

Education empowers us to communicate our thoughts, feelings and emotions. Strengthening of the mind so as to enable the emergence of good decision makers and right thinkers should play a key role in every education system. Learning and imparting knowledge, progressing from the unknown to the known, from darkness to the visible, inculcating the patience to listen/observe and analyse will contribute to the real growth of a person.

An educated person will know how to react to different situations, and to distinguish between relevant & irrelevant information. True education removes naivety and ignorance from people, leaving them aware, informed and enlightened. The knowledge thus gained is used in a productive way to improve cooperation and collaboration in forging better relationships. Creative design, cultural promotion and technological skills culminate in developing a holistic mind. At times, the rigorous process of education encourages us to question our own assumptions and think deeply. Behavioural modifications take place throughout the process of education. Be it formal or informal, the approach should remain the same – developing cultural awareness, knowledge and skills.

A letter to my future grandchild – Shireen Ignatius, Suchitra Academy, Hyderabad

India
2050

My darling grandchild:

Hope you're happy and aren't troubling your parents. You come from a technologically advanced generation and may not be the kind who'd read letters but I will still push my luck hoping you'd read this letter of mine with patience.

I grew up in a generation where we'd email more than write letters, Facetime rather than go and meet people personally. It would not be wrong to say that I thought my generation was selfish and materialistic. Everyone was ambitious, and everyone was constantly on the move, trying to achieve their goals.

Reflective writing is an opportunity to step back, delve deeper (think, explore and respond) and make connections with real-life situations, opinions, thoughts, feelings and perspectives shared during the course.

Smitha Nair

As you know, September 2019 was the happiest time for me - when your father was born, I felt like life couldn't get better than this. I had planned a lot of things for him and at the same time, wanted to protect him. I would get him new clothes, take pictures and cut a cake for him every time he completed a month (I did this until Zayden turned one year). Now moving to Jan 2020, Zayden and I moved to Oman to join Grandpa. Life was quiet there with no friends and family and I had to do everything by myself. But I was fine because Grandpa was very supportive and caring. January was done and we entered into February when we heard about a dangerous virus that had entered the country and was life-threatening. Not just Oman, this virus terrorised the entire world. It had started in Wuhan (China) but within no time, we entered the pandemic. It seemed like life came to a standstill. The world had entered a lockdown phase. Every day we read about the number of lives that this virus had claimed and we were scared. Your dad was just a five-month-old baby and we were too scared for him especially. Life had become so unpredictable for everyone. Who could be next? We had started wearing masks and gloves, in case we had to go anywhere. My parents missed their grandchild Zayden and wanted us to come to Hyderabad and spend time with them during the holidays but we were just confined to video calls. All public places were shut down except for hospitals and pharmacy stores.

Needless to say, with everything shut down, the job market was affected severely, with millions worldwide losing their jobs. Your Grandpa (working for sales back then) was no exception, his company shut down. It was on April 15th, just three days after Easter that we received the news. We were devastated. Had it been just Grandpa and I, we would've managed something - but with a baby, our options were limited. Grandpa was very heartbroken because he had given that job his *everything* and, in the end, he lost it. He was more desperate than I was to go back to Hyderabad. We were without a job, with an infant and in a country that no longer felt like our own. The owners of his company had assured him that till he left Oman, they would give him half-pay and they did that for a month. We immediately started packing with the hope that we'd be able to leave on one of the rescue flights. We finally left Oman on 18th May 2020 with an eight-month-old Zayden when the pandemic was at its peak. We did take precautions, however, we were very worried for him because that was when he had gotten very inquisitive and wouldn't leave a chance to meddle with objects around him. By God's grace, that boy slept till we entered the hotel room, where we had to temporarily isolate ourselves before we went home.

During this time, Grandpa was desperately hunting for jobs, contacting his sources. He would give interviews but recruiters were not okay with taking a person who had been away from the country for nearly 8 years. We got impatient with each passing day, our savings were exhausted too with the travel, medicines, your dad's formula feed, diapers, etc. There was once such bad a time that your dad was growing out of his clothes but we didn't have the money to even buy him new clothes! We felt like helpless failures, and somewhere my Zayden could sense all this. My sister, however, bought him some new clothes. This bad phase taught us who our true friends were and who pretended to be friends. Our circle got very small, as Grandpa had people who stopped responding to his calls or messages. We then vowed to ourselves that God forbid, if anyone goes through a situation like this, we will do everything we can to help them out.

Coming to September, Zayden turned 1 and we were still jobless. We had planned a big birthday party for him but things don't always go as planned. We somehow had some money in our Oman account which we used to buy a cake and clothes for him and celebrated with just the immediate family. We felt really bad that my little Zayden had to go through all this: it was our battle not his, then why did *he* have to pay the price? Why did he have to sense his parents being unhappy? Why did he have to see his helpless father break down and why did he have to see his mother go through anxiety? But I guess, this was his journey and ours too and this just brought us much closer and strengthened our faith in God. Coming to November, I got a job and in December just a day before Christmas, Grandpa got a job and life was better after that. We learnt our lessons and moved ahead.

It was very painful back then but we are very thankful for this journey. This bad phase made us more humble, resilient and, if I can say, wise. Remember my child, when things go wrong, God is trying to teach you something. Fight your way out of it and learn your lesson. Hope to see you soon.

Reflections are the pointers which help me to evolve and move out of ignorance.

Geetha Nadarajan

Lots and lots of love, Grandma

Letter to her most impactful teacher

Rachita Shah,

Poorna Learning Centre, Bangalore

Dearest Sonia Teacher,

You probably – no... most definitely – will have no recollection of me. I was not even your student! And yet, you have had a lasting impression on me. It is ironic that it is not the teachers who taught me, but the one *that I missed being taught by*, that remains embedded in my memories of school.

My first memory of you is of you standing in the corridor talking to Surlekar Sir with another teacher by your side. Probably you were being introduced to him or by him...I don't know. It was recess time; I was walking down the corridor, dodging crowds of students running, laughing, shouting, jostling... 'New teacher', my friend had whispered as I had turned in the direction of her finger, to catch a glimpse - long skirt, t-shirt, dangling earrings, curly hair tied

back in a ponytail, you were smiling your dimpled smile...not grumpy but SMILING! You radiated life.

I had hoped that you'd teach me some day. Alas, I was in the top 10 scoring students and therefore destined to be in section A at every grade level. And you, you genuinely loved to teach, you understood the value of a good teacher and the difference that such a teacher can make. Hence, you chose to teach every other section *except A*.

But you did teach us for a few days when our pregnant English teacher took leave for her delivery. God bless the baby for his/her timing. I must have been in Grade 7 at that time. Imagine my joy when you walked in to substitute for her.

I do not recollect the lesson you taught us, but at the end of it you asked us to write a poem ruing the destruction of Goa. I wrote a poem entitled, "Oh Goa! I cry for you". I even earned a 'good' from you for that piece. I have kept it safely. Funny thing, I was clairvoyant. I recently reread the poem and everything that I had bemoaned, has come true. Today, as an adult, I truly cry for what has become of MY Goa.

That aside, I also wrote another poem about how I loved Goa. For that I earned no more than a cursory tick from you. Well, rereading it I understand your judgment. But at that time, I was disappointed that my poetic genius was not consistent enough to keep you

Reflective writing is a kind of meditation that can be done at the end of every day. It could become a holy book as it gives a chance to reflect upon our action just by writing things down on paper.

Ambika Bamidi

impressed. Anyway, you probably were not able to cope with the added workload and within a few days, the teachers were reshuffled and I lost you again to sections B, C and D. (Sigh!)

The next time that I had an opportunity to be taught by you was in grade 8, when we could choose our activity. I opted for theatre arts because you were leading it. The only catch was that we had to audition for it. I did not make the cut. I may be considered a drama queen and maybe even a good story teller by my loved ones, but I was not uninhibited enough to act my heart out to impress you that day. The next year, theatre arts was opened up again – this time to all students without any audition. But I did not enrol for it. Because you had already judged that I had no talent and also, another teacher was teaching it – not you. I think you had left school by then.

But these were not the only opportunities I had to observe you. We both belonged to the Blue House. So, for every single intra-school competition - elocution, debate, recitation, and spelling bee – I'd be there, auditioning with a handful of other students.

Also, I loved watching the rehearsals where you trained Tabassum, Prashant and Pavan for the recitation of 'The Frog and The Nightingale' by Vikram Seth. It was one of the rare times when the Blue House won any competition. And how could we not...it was presented innovatively! Three grades presenting one poem – Tabassum, the delicate nightingale standing on a chair; Prashant with his baritone bringing the arrogant frog to life and Pavan, the deadpan narrator. We HAD to win that year. And then, you left the school! Blue House went back to being just that...blue...never in the running to win any competition; always at the bottom of the stack.

I still have the photocopy of the poem stashed away. I still dream of someday replicating the presentation with my students.

I learnt very little academically from you, like the pronunciation of some commonly mispronounced words. But it was your personality that held sway over me. When I was appointed a drama teacher, I was asked to deck up like a Christmas tree for every class. With a muted sense of dressing, I needed a point of reference. That is when I dug into my memories of you - the dangling earrings, eye liner, trendy clothes and a smile.

Nowadays, kids love their teachers. We smile, we are friendly with them and we teach lovingly. But in those days, you were an exception. Probably *the only one who taught because she loved it* and not because it was an easy career option. We loved you because you always smiled and did not humiliate those who made a mistake. You knew how to hold our attention, rarely did any student disrupt the class. Given a chance, I would like to read your lesson plans. I would like to pick your brain on how you kept all of us engaged. How did you teach the challenging ones?

Every time my classmates and I meet, we wonder about your whereabouts. You just disappeared after leaving school. You have no online presence either. I wish there was a way for me to let you know the impact that you had on a shy, tentative, pre-teen girl - whom you never taught! I hope to run into you someday and convey my feelings to you in person.

Thank you for being you,

Rachita Shah

(Ex- student of People's High School)

Reflections after reading John Holt – Jayshree Murali, Independent Educator, Mumbai

I was what one would call an accidental teacher who fell in love with children. Their questions and opinions would leave me with wonder and fill my heart with hope and affection.

My background has been in Statistics, but Literature appealed to me and the school felt I would do well as an English and Social Sciences teacher with the Primary Years. Then came in Prof T K Mohammad, (if I recall rightly, he was part of the National Education Policy 1986) and all hell broke loose.

He restructured teacher duties aligning it with their backgrounds. So, I was mercilessly pulled out of English and given Math for Grades 5, 6 and 7. But he did make one concession for me: he said he would give me one English Class knowing how passionate I was. I said to myself: how hard could it be to do elementary Math - I wasn't exactly scared of it.

How little did I know of the hurdles that awaited me!

I was a popular English teacher and the children just could not fathom how I could even teach them Math. Their eyes went up in disbelief as they asked me "You know Math, teacher?"

That said, we went about the syllabus. I had chosen the topic "Graphs". I gathered they had done a little bit in the earlier grade, and so building on that was not going to be difficult.

And so, I began "plotting", the X and Y axes carelessly drawn up on the whiteboard with a cursory brushing up of the scales. The text we used was a Scottish book with lots of sums to do. I would do a couple of them in class and give some as homework. I knew the bunch of kids as an English teacher and they were bright and chirpy and so, I expected the same kind of participation in Math too.

Days passed, and I slowly realized that the children's participation was rather muted. Their responses were sluggish but I plodded on, solving the problems and explaining to those who nodded in agreement with me.

But when the homework was not done repeatedly, it set me thinking. *Why was this happening?*

And I decided I must have it out with them, what is it that I was not able to crack? Why could I not motivate the children? After all, they were the same kids who made me feel special as their English teacher.

I told them what I had observed and how sad it made me feel. I asked them where they were stuck and that they could freely tell me, and I would repeat everything for them.

And one boy, Jerome, said they did not know how to do the scales. And that I was going fast. My so-called superior communication skills were the cause. And my assumption that they had done it in the earlier class and this was something basic got overturned.

Reflective writing is exploring the unexplored. It is a journey of thinking, introspecting and looking beyond what is visible and deriving meaning from it. It is something which gives direction to our thoughts and helps us sail through.

Namrata Gunwant

It then dawned on me, that all they needed was reinforcement of *cm* to *mm* conversion and division. I spent nearly two classes doing just this, slowly and step by step. Wonder of wonders, the homework came in time and the participation became active. And not only that, it was **my class** that had aced the Geography Exams which was totally graph-based. Poetic justice it was 😊

Letter to a friend describing the journey through this course: Kalpana Sharma, Rajghat Besant School (KFI), Varanasi

Dear Rosa,

I recently enrolled myself for an online course on *Reflective Writing*. Today I want to tell you how happy I am that I joined the course and the impact that it has had on me. The entire journey so far has been enriching. A lot of churning happened at every step. Each session was a great learning; I would eagerly wait for these sessions so I that could hear others' views. Most of the time I would be running between classes and meetings and log on to my course without any preparation. But the course content was so stimulating that it always refreshed me and there was food for thought as I logged out of my sessions. Doing assignments was a real task for me, since I would be wrapped up with a hundred and one things at my work place. I could never do justice to them. My write-ups were always hurried and half-baked but still, they helped me put my thoughts in writing - which was otherwise difficult for me. It encouraged me to write and I felt liberated a couple of times after doing my assignments. I would eagerly wait

for the feedback and it actually nurtured me in many ways. This straight away made me more aware of the feedback *which I was giving to my students*. I was not able to meet Neeraja di in person, yet this weekly feedback touched me in many ways. Deep introspection helped me to understand myself in a comprehensive way. I became more self-critical. I feel more settled, at peace and aware. Till I joined this course, it seemed as if I was partially aware of myself and what I bring to my class. I was actually pouring out of a cup which was empty. I was under the impression that MY CUP IS FULL. Rainer Maria Rilke's words fitted so aptly for me- "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."

The course helped me to demystify many notions which I was carrying about myself, my relationship with self and others' around. I was able to follow a process to understand myself in a phased out manner (recognize, investigate and nurture). I am now aware of the beliefs that I have been caught up with. This trap resulted in giving me a limited understanding of who I am. They were hurting me in many ways and have been responsible for my sporadic reactions. This recognition now helps me to understand myself and puts me at peace. I investigated them to understand the many stories which make me what I am today and now I look forward to nurturing myself by taking a pause, maintaining a work-life balance. There is a deep urge to break the shackles and follow my heart.

After these eight weeks, I feel more sorted out. There is a constant churning happening within, urging me to fill my cup.

"If our hearts are ready for anything, we are touched by the beauty and poetry and mystery that fill our world. We find our true refuge in every moment. We are happy. Our daily life is no poorer and our cup is always full." Tara Brach

Affectionately,

Kalpana



Photo Courtesy: Rati Basu, Santiniketan

My Reflections

Neeraja Raghavan, Thinking Teacher, Bangalore



Thinking Teacher

<http://thinkingteacher.in>

We have come to the end of the tenth run of the Course titled *Reflective Writing for Teachers*. With each batch having about ten participants, the total number of teachers who have taken this course is now around one hundred.

What was different for me, this time round? I paused to reflect on this.

For one, the last run of the course was almost a year ago. So that brought in a heightened level of freshness *within me*. When I ran four or five batches in a single year (as I did in 2020-2021), I soon found it hard to approach the same course content with freshness every time. In fact, when one participant in 2021 candidly wrote in her feedback form that she found the classes 'monotonous' on occasion, I sat up with a jolt and paused the course.

This tenth online batch was the largest (twelve participants) to date and the *only one* to run after a long gap. This time, I actually enjoyed Chimamanda's *The Danger of a Single Story*, and De Martini's turnaround in the cynical and resentful CEO almost as much as I had when I first encountered these characters! An old lesson relearned: if the teacher begins to get bored with course content, *it is time for the teacher to stop teaching it!* Or at least, to switch to another course for some time before returning to the old one with a fresh eye.

And the parallel lesson was: the same content comes alive even for a seasoned teacher, if it is experienced like a favourite story that is retold. The latter is possible after a long hiatus.

Another lesson I learned was that (usually busy) teachers are *even more harried* post-pandemic (if indeed we are post-pandemic). There is now far more that has been heaped onto their plates than before – what with coping with learning losses that happened during the pandemic, and switching to offline teaching after two years of online classes. In such a time, the very fact that there are still some teachers who are willing to invest time and effort in building their own capacities is remarkable enough. Expecting them to strictly adhere to course timelines during such a pressing time is somewhat unreasonable. I struggled to shed the Convent-school-trained disciplinarian inside me and present a more flexible face to this batch of teachers. *I seriously doubt that I succeeded, though!* Old habits die hard.

That said, I loved every session with this batch. Their energy at the end of a working day, their willingness to engage with each assignment and hear each other out – all of these renewed my faith in our country's school teachers, something that has been my guaranteed gift at the end of *every single run of this course!*

And now, with a hundred teachers who were exposed to the joys of reflective writing, I am toying with ways and means of sustaining this fire at least in those within who it continues to burn. My dream of seeing teachers across the country dip into each other's expertise and knowledge is a fire that continues to rage in me – may the Powers that Be help me light this fire at least in some pockets of the country!