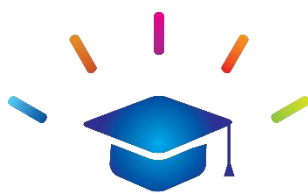


FINAL COMPILATION

SEP-OCT 2021 BATCH


REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS




Thinking Teacher

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Reflecting writing is opening the storehouse of memories to pick up the selected pearls of experiences and craft a piece so intricate that those who see, think and wonder! –
Mary Samuel



Reflective writing for me is the energy of the red rising sun and the calm of the blue sea, lulling you into a writing trance. - Priyanka

Letter to the teacher who impacted me the most

Sangeeta Roy

Dear Sister Noella,

I know that you must have taught many students and brought several differences in them, at their tender ages.

Well, I was almost 12 years of age and was going through some changes in my whole being (now I know very well what they were!).

Although I was a good student, my tomboyish personality was manifesting in a carefree attitude. I felt irritated very quickly and had strange kinds of emotions towards boys. As a result, I was dipping in my studies and, somehow, hiding that from my mother.

I noticed that you (our class Sister) were observing me while I was standing, during the morning assembly. I checked myself and stopped smiling and chattering with my friend. Again, the next morning, you were observing me with your greyish-green eyes. God, you had beautiful, big but piercing eyes! I asked myself, what might the matter be? Today I had done my homework, as I got that look yesterday, so I was feeling a little safer. Again, on the third day you looked at me during morning assembly and, asking me to come out of line, you took me to our classroom, which was just in front. I don't remember your exact words (as it was 40 years ago) but I remember very vividly what you meant: you said some very kind words but in an austere tone, that I was not using my full potential, and you were expecting a lot from me.

It happened only for few minutes, but it was a big bang for me.

My heart was pounding in my chest, and I could not sing the prayers that morning. Nobody had shown such concern towards me until then!

I thank you from the depths of my heart, Sister!

That was a big turning point for me, as I regained my lost confidence and strove to do my best. I now knew that someone was looking at me with concern, love and affection. You became my 'best Sister' and I admired you, as you took us to our school church and taught us to sit and experience the silence there. It was the seed sown which I still cherish and nourish in my spiritual journey.

Although you were a nun, you were not that strict and stern, which is probably why we (girls) were able to talk to you and, for me, your mystical and spiritual aura amplified my awe for you, manifold.

I felt privileged as I came to know later that you had started your teaching career with our class. You were so young and inspiring!

I changed my school after that class and came back almost 10 years later, to get some admission information for my aunt's child. You were sitting in the Principal's chair! Again, my heart skipped a beat as I was not expecting you there.

As you saw me, you came out of the room with the same agility, which was again more food for admiration.

I have mentioned this incident to my daughter and a few of my colleagues.

Later when I heard that you dropped your nun (ship), left the church and got married, I applauded you and felt so happy and elated.

May be because of you, I place teaching on a much higher pedestal than any other profession.

With loving memories,

Sangeeta

Repetitive correction

Syeda Ashraf Unnisa

Early on in my career, I taught Mathematics. When teaching students how to multiply, we used the age-old method of memorisation. I would enter the classroom and write out the tables on the blackboard. The children were then made to repeat the set of numbers over and over again.

In this modern era, it may sound absurd but this was a ritual that we (teachers) followed religiously. It was a 'must' to learn the tables - at least till 20. Our parent-teacher interactions would start by discussing how well multiplication tables had been memorised. When I was a child, I still remember my father trying to make me learn multiples of 35. I would try to memorize it, but to date, I have never been successful. I was therefore given the tag – 'she is not good at Mathematics'.

Ironically, I then became a Mathematics teacher! When I started teaching, the only method I knew was the way that I had been taught.

It was my first year as a Math teacher and in my class, I had this boy who found it very difficult to learn the tables. Even a simple table of 6/7 was a challenge for him to memorise. I was at my wits' end as I had spent a week trying to cajole, intimidate and encourage the boy to somehow memorize the sets of numbers.

Every period began with my asking him random answers for the tables. He would start off well but the moment he stumbled, the fall would continue. He would get nervous and start giving wrong answers even for the ones that he knew. I would then make him stand in a corner and repeat the tables.

After being at it for almost 10 days, one day, this child drew up enough courage to meet me after class and very pleadingly said: 'I want to learn what you are trying to teach me. I tried so much but I am not able to learn.'

I consoled him and told him that we would try again and he should not give up so easily. I remember advising him to wake up early in the morning, sit in the fresh air and then again try memorizing the tables. He promised to try and I left the class.

Somehow, the expression on his face did not allow me to rest. I started thinking – *why is this child not able to memorise something so simple? What could he be finding so difficult?* After much pondering, I could not get an answer.

A few days later, as the teachers chatted in the staff room, this boy's name came up. I shared how he was finding it difficult to learn a simple thing. Other teachers also joined in, as to how this was 'a difficult child' who does not do well in any subject other than Science. I decided to find out from the Science teacher how she gets the boy to

do well in Science. She told me that he is different from the others and is always asking questions - *how does this happen? Why does it happen?* And that he doesn't seem to stop till the teacher explains everything.

This conversation got me thinking – was there some other way that I could teach, so that I could help him learn? But this was the way that I had seen it being taught everywhere, right from my childhood, and all my counterparts, too, did the same! [It was not yet the Internet era for me to log on to Google and search for all the various methods to teach such a simple thing.] Faced with such a problem, I thought the best person who could help me was my own teacher. She was my professor during my B. Ed program. I approached her to discuss the problem.

She smiled at me and said – ‘We are all different, if each one of us is different from the other, why do you assume that this child will also learn like everybody else? Maybe he just doesn't understand what you want him to learn. Try to explain to him *what multiplication actually is.*’

I went back to class the next week – I had now thought of different ways that I could explain to my students what multiplication actually is. I designed simple activities and involved children in doing them. It was such a lively class that day! At the end of the class, I remember it was not only this boy, but the entire class who had a smile on their faces. They came up to me and said - ‘Ma’am, we finally understood what multiplication is.’

It was only then that I realised it was not that one boy alone who did not understand, but many more!

This one incident has definitely had a large impact on my teaching style.

Letter to grandchild of the future

Sonam Topden Bhutia

Hello there, this is your Grandfather Topden, today I am writing to tell you about my experiences (both horrendous and enthralling) of the times that we had in the year 2020. It might feel surreal reading this but that's okay.

The reason I am writing to you is that I have enrolled myself in the reflective writing course by Dr. Neeraja, whom we call “Akka” which means elder sister in many South Indian languages.

In one of my assignments, I got this opportunity to write a letter to my grandchildren about the Covid-19 pandemic situation that we went through. Covid-19 is a virus, which was discovered in a market located in the city of Wuhan, China in the year 2019. This virus is mostly found in animals and it can be transferred from one species to another and it becomes very dangerous when transmitted, and somehow, this virus found its way to humans. It mostly infects the respiratory system of humans.

I heard the news of this virus in the month of December 2019 – others might have heard of it before me. It grabbed my attention when the death rate of people in China increased. My friends and I were confident that it wouldn't reach Sikkim, because there had been other similar viruses in the past that did not reach Sikkim at all.

After a few days, we heard the news about the first Covid 19 case being reported in India in Kerala, followed by Gujarat, and then gradually, other states also started to report the infection. The entire world was suffering from this virus and death rates were increasing all over. There was no cure, no vaccine for this virus, most countries were following the guidelines from WHO and the only way to stop this infection from spreading was to halt movement of people, avoid large gatherings, wash hands after every hour, wear a mask and maintain social distance of two meters from people.

Our country being one of the most populated and developing countries, it was a big challenge for the government to control the pandemic and as the proverb goes "Prevention is better than cure". Our Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, declared this Pandemic to be a national threat and imposed a national emergency through a lock down in the whole country, which meant that there was a complete shutdown of everything like schools, shops, restaurant, shopping malls and all offices (private and Government). People were supposed to stay indoors and not only India, but almost all the countries imposed lockdowns to prevent the spread of this virus.

Thus, the year 2020 passed away in lockdown and it was very difficult. It affected the poor people very badly. They had no income and it was getting harder everyday to survive. The people who migrated to cities for work and education suffered greatly. Some people lost their family members, others lost jobs, some lost their business, etc. Though the year 2020 wasn't pleasant, there was hope that we could fight this pandemic when, finally, the vaccine was developed.

To support our fellow citizens, businessmen, celebrities, and common people also donated to the PM's fund, and with that money, the government distributed rations to needy people.

Slowly, the spread of virus was getting controlled, the lockdown was lifted and the year passed. Although mostly old people died, life was slowly getting back to normal and schools, offices, shops, restaurants were gradually reopened.

Then came the second wave in the year 2021, and this was far worse than the first one. The virus started to mutate into different forms, researchers said that it was adapting itself over the course of time and becoming deadlier and more rapidly transferable. The TV news started to show hospitals from almost all the cities, and it was tragic to see that there were no beds for patients, people were flooding out of hospitals, and there was shortage of oxygen - oh! It was chaos, worse than a war!

The government again imposed a lockdown as the virus was spreading too fast. But this time the government did not shut down the entire country, just the states and cities that were infected.

In the second wave, both young and old were dying and the dead bodies were piling up at cremation grounds. Almost all over the country, the cremation grounds were functioning 24/7. It was the most painful thing for us to encounter – as we were unable to say goodbye to our loved ones, and it seemed like there was no hope.

But this pandemic taught us many things and for me, it was a great learning experience as we were forced to take online classes – which I had never done. Technologically I

upgraded myself, and even Nature got a chance to breathe clean air, as during the lockdown when everything was paused, the pollution levels decreased tremendously.

Never forget to be grateful for things in life, to appreciate what we have and be prepared for the unprecedented events in the future.

Your Loving

Ajya (grandfather)

Single Story of a student

Maa Pratapi

Dear Satya,

It's been just shy of a month since school physically opened. It's only now that I've had the opportunity to actually meet you and interact with you in person, rather than in the virtual space. Though I have technically been your class teacher for the past four months, I hardly know you.

You barely attended any of the online classes – and if you did, your camera was off, and your audio never worked. You hardly submitted any of your assignments – even after repeated reminders and follow up – and when you did, which was always well past the deadline, most of what was submitted was a cut-copy-paste from the internet. You would disappear for weeks at a stretch, and then, we would exercise our only *brahmastra* and pull in your parents to step in and see what the matter was. Thereafter, you would suddenly make a namesake appearance, only to disappear again.

Your parents were equally perplexed upon hearing about your performance, because, as far as they knew, you were in front of the computer all day and you insisted that you were doing your school work. Neither of them wanted to be helicopter parents. They were clear that they wanted to respect your space, and maintain some semblance of a sane relationship with you, especially because, for the first time, you were all in an enclosed space 24 x 7, with no alternate option.

Having exhausted the few tools in my bag to be able to reach out to you or rectify the situation, there came a point in time where I also gave up. The meeting point of the boundaries of your world and mine seemed to be mutually inconvenient. By the second month of the term, a single story had emerged in my mind. I concluded that you had decided that your schooling was simply not a priority.

When your subject teachers would flag your non-participation in classes, I would tell them to send you a personal note – two, if need be. Still, thereafter, if you didn't respond, I asked them to just leave it be, and went as far as to say that if you do show up and submit something, it's a bonus. You were a new student, and all of us, your teachers, were digital strangers. The rapport was simply not there.

Then, school re-opened. A once-quiet campus became abuzz with the dynamic chaos that you, as students, bring with you. Call it naivety or wishful thinking, but I had

hoped that once you all returned, things would settle down and go back to “normal.” (I’m not sure what that even means anymore in this post-pandemic world.)

Within two weeks, a litany of complaints or concerns about you started pouring in. *You refuse to wake up. You’re late for everything. You don’t eat the food served in dining and compensate by junking. You don’t pay attention in your classes. You disappear from the house without informing anyone of your whereabouts. You are becoming a bit too exclusive with a particular classmate. You are liberal in your use of four-letter words. You spin stories, talk back in a disrespectful tone and pit one adult against the other without any remorse.*

The situation had escalated and being both your class teacher and the Senior School Coordinator, I had no choice but to have to speak to you. It was something that I was not looking forward to. Already there was no rapport, and you had exhibited a similar disregard in the online phase, and this seemed to be a logical extension.

But as fate would have it, before I called you for a meeting, a classmate of yours intervened. She waylaid me on the pathway, grabbed your hand so you couldn’t escape, and said that you had something that you wanted to express but didn’t have the guts to do so, and then left us to continue the conversation. You hesitated to speak at first, and then blurted out whatever was going on in your mind.

You shared that you have been having a hard time adjusting to the school, and that this was the first time you have been in a residential school. Falling into a routine in accordance with school guidelines – which you feel are a little old-fashioned – has been a challenge. You know that you are terrible when it comes to time management, and that you can be hot-tempered.

For the past one and a half years, owing to the pandemic and enforced online schooling, you have been used to following your own schedules according to your own terms. Online schooling was pure torture. How could anyone expect students to sit in front of a computer all day listening to teachers drone on and on? The assignments were pointless. Most of them you could just Google online. You want to learn, but this approach was just not working for you.

The best part of school is interacting with friends, and together enduring your teachers and playing mischief to keep things tolerable and interesting. You felt that the teachers and house parents were quick to judge, and had already written you off as being ‘difficult,’ and that this has been the story of your life. Your parents and teachers from your previous school had labelled you as a ‘problem child’ that needs fixing. It is they, not you, who were looking for a quick fix, and thought that by coming to a school where yoga is a central part, everything would fall into place. You’re figuring things out for yourself and have come to a place of fight or flight.

This short exchange demolished my one-dimensional narrative of who you are. Unknowingly, you called me out. I had inadvertently joined that group of adults who had concluded that you were difficult, and was going to help concretize the wall that you have already built around yourself. I had readied myself to give you the Sermon

on the Mount, not giving you enough credit to have the agency and capacity to introspect.

We're a month in to school. We're just beginning to get to know one another. While I cannot guarantee smooth sailing, just know that you haven't been written off. On the contrary, when it comes to my understanding of you, you've made me turn over a new leaf. Sometimes I forget what it is to be a student, and all the expectations that come with it, both self-imposed and external.

Incidentally, I have recently enrolled in an online course on reflective writing, and can empathize with you regarding the challenges of transacting in an online space, when day-to-day activities can pull you in so many different directions. Ironically, some of the same points of concern that I had noted for you during online learning, even I am guilty of. What's more, the course has also made me pause and look at the futility of my approach to education and instruction, so when you talk about having to 'endure' your classes, if truth be told, you might actually have a point there!

So, where do we go from here? There's no ready-made solution. Maybe just an occasional chat over a cup of herbal tea with a dollop of courage to be straight up with whatever comes up, and the perseverance to make things work the best way possible.

Pranam,

Maa Pratapi

A letter to my yet-to-be born grandchild

Blandina Priyanka

7th October 2041

Dear grandchild,

I would like to tell you the story of the little Corona King, the virus that shook the world. As I write this letter today, 7th October 2041, COVID 19 has become a tamer disease and COVID 19 pandemic has become a distant memory.

I grew up in a world of chaos. Our ancestors worshipped Mother Nature and asked us to respect it, but at some point, we forgot the wisdom imparted by them. People became self-centered and failed to think that future generations should love to live on Planet Earth. They went about destroying our planet – they polluted the quality of water, soil and air. Mother Nature was crying! Then Mother Nature thought, *enough is enough!* She unleashed her wrath in the form of a virus – the great coronavirus.

The disease started as an epidemic but within a matter of months, it became a global pandemic and wreaked havoc. It forced us to stay indoors due to the lockdown imposed by the government. Gradually, casualties surged and people started to fear for their lives, as well as those of their near and dear ones. I thought that the virus would be gone in a few months and everything would come back to normal. But gradually, months turned into years and there were no signs of the virus disappearing.

It looked like the virus was thoroughly enjoying the havoc that it was creating as it continued to spread its wings far and wide.

The virus exposed our weak health care system. People started to die due to a shortage of oxygen and a lack of hospital beds. Mass funeral pyres and grave diggers toiling throughout the day presented a chilling portrait of the surge in the COVID 19 cases. Crores of people lost their jobs due to the pandemic. In short, the virus brought the world to a complete standstill. I started to fear for the safety of my near and dear ones, especially your Dad, as he was very young then. Isn't it ironic that a small microscopic virus humbled the entire human race?

As the COVID 19 outbreak continued, businesses shut down, schools closed temporarily and companies around the world had their employees working from home. Because of fewer people commuting, Mother Earth healed the wounds that we humans had created. Air pollution decreased globally, the snow-capped Himalayan range was visible (for the first time in 30 years) due to restricted transportation and industrial activities. Animals were spotted roaming free as they got their much-needed space, the quality of the Ganga River water improved remarkably and – not to forget – the ozone hole began to heal amid the COVID 19 lockdown.

In short, the Corona virus acted as Mother Earth's vaccine.

The education sector was most badly hit during the pandemic. Crores of children all over the world were affected due to lack of access to the internet, in order to uninterruptedly avail of online learning. Being an educator by profession, the rapid transition from physical to online classes was quite stressful and challenging for me. As a teacher, I faced several challenges – reshaping teaching-learning strategies to make lessons more fun and engaging, speaking to cameras instead of live students, spending boundless energy to motivate passive students while also juggling personal responsibilities. In spite of all these challenges at my work front, the pandemic gave me an opportunity to think, pause and reset myself. It helped me get creative with my teaching strategies, gave me an opportunity to explore various online resources and most important of all, it gave me an opportunity to develop a closer relationship with my students. I was among the lucky few who could help students continue their learning.

It is true that the virus devastated many lives but, at the same time, it taught me many valuable life lessons. It helped me rediscover

Reflective writing for me is like listening to morning ragas on flute, pausing and pondering over the memories, and trying to rewrite them, while experiencing nostalgia.

- Sangeeta Roy

the bond with family members. It gave me an opportunity to spend quality time with your Dad – the little Roy. It made me realise the importance of health, hygiene and self-care. It made me appreciate and cherish the little things in life. It taught me to become self-sufficient, listen more, care more and keep my hopes alive. Most importantly, it made me realise that protecting the environment is a must.

You may wonder how your Dad fared during the pandemic. He often threw temper tantrums as he was forced to stay indoors. We played, danced, cooked and read aloud together to cheer him. We often did a car wash together to wash away his bad mood. I still remember the mischievous smile on his face when he splashed water all over me. Let me tell you one thing about your Dad which may sound hilarious – he was just 3 years old but never did he forget to squeeze the sanitizer bottle and make the tutor sanitize her hands before they started their home tuition classes. He always reminded others to wear their masks. Your Dad eventually learnt to follow routines and become independent.

Gradually, a number of vaccines were developed and people started to get themselves vaccinated against the Corona virus, but sadly, no vaccine gave complete immunity. As the years passed, COVID 19 ceased to be a public health emergency in the world, but people continued to wear masks and maintained social distancing for many years.

As I write this letter now, I am glad to tell you that we survived the COVID 19 pandemic, but sadly, we lost many of our near and dear ones. The world is now vaccinated against COVID 19. COVID 19 has become seasonal and is causing mild to moderate illness, such as cold, cough and sniffles.

The pandemic served as a grim reminder of how humans have exploited Mother Earth. Unless we learn to co-exist with Mother Earth, Nature will continue to find extreme ways to reclaim her space.

All I wish for you and the generations to come is a pandemic-free life and a pollution-free planet. Wishing for a pollution-free planet looks like a distant dream but always remember to stand by Mother Earth and don't let the world melt away.

Love you always!!

-Grandma

PS: Never take anything for granted. When times get tough, you will see what really matters. Cherish the little things in life and hug the ones that you love!

What is education?

Mary Samuel

"Madamjee, I fixed the A/C," Gowda *Bhaiyya* stood at the door and declared with the air of a triumphant winner.

I stopped what I was doing on my laptop and stared at him for one full minute.

"You what?" I asked him again.

"I fixed the A/C, Madamjee", he replied, this time with a smile playing on his lips.

This was the same air conditioner which was visited by two mechanics of the company and still stubbornly refused to stop making the loud and terrible whirring noise. The neighbours were disturbed, especially during the calm stillness of the night and, of course, we were greeted by a volley of complaints every morning. We had spent a considerable amount of money trying to fix it. Now fed up, we were thinking of

disposing it off to an ignorant buyer via OLX and that's when Gowda Bhaiyya, my husband's orderly walked in and declared that he had repaired the A/C.

"But how?" I asked.

"Oh Madamjee, the A/C was a bit tilted and so, when the fans operated, the front panel vibrated too much, so I just re-adjusted it and fixed small rolls of paper in between all the panels," he said.

And yes, our 25-year-old A/C had stopped coughing and wheezing and was now running smoothly like a teenager!

I looked at Gowda Bhaiyya and smiled. He was pleased to know that I was pleased! But a nagging thought lingered in my mind throughout the day, which my husband voiced that evening.

"Gowda passed where 2 engineers (that's the both of us) and 2 professional mechanics failed. What is his education?"

Bingo! The lingering thought broke open from its shell and started to hatch in my mind. I started to think, "If it's not degrees and certificates earned, then what is education? If one's education does not enable one to find practical solutions to problems, then what is it?"

If education does not empower and embolden a person to stand for what is right, then what is it? If education does not act as a tool to cut out the thistles and thorny growth that obstruct your horizons, then what is it? If education does not help one see the other side of the story, then what is it? If education does not help one to break away from the chains of meaningless and choking traditions and beliefs, then what is it? If education does not help one to accept and embrace "the otherness" of one's opponent and agree to disagree, then what is it? If education does nothing to add to the depleting source of empathy, then what is it?

These days, I hear many fancy words floating in the world of educators – *critical and creative thinking, innovative and out-of-the-box thinking* etc. Fantastic ideas, for if the present generation is encouraged to think, question and challenge, then I know that the world will be a safer place.

I also know that Gowda Bhaiyya, a 10th pass, is much more educated than I am!

What is education?

Sangeeta Roy

EDUCATION brings liberty of every kind. For me, education is not what we gain in class rooms, colleges or universities only; it has much greater meaning for me. We are educated when we learn how to really learn, listen and imbibe. Gathering knowledge from books is only a part of education. To prepare the ground for learning to be made possible is also a part of education. When we start learning to relate with other individuals as equals, without having a trace of violence, I think that is the real meaning of education.

An educated person is one who has wisdom, open-mindedness and total acceptance for all kind of human beings, coming from all walks of life.

For me, an educated person is one who has an impact on me, or on a bunch of people, without any aggression, so that one can see his/her point in total freedom of oneself, and hence, can try to make it a part of one's day-to-day life.

A person, who can put aside his/her prejudices or experiences and try to see/listen with tolerance, where the other person is coming from. If a person can see his/her own conditioning and not allow it to hinder the present, that person is free and is really educated.

One who can understand his (as well as others') limitations and knows how to respect them is wise, and wisdom goes hand in hand with education.

An anatomy of fear

Sonam Topden Bhutia

While reading this chapter, fear is something that I could connect to, as I have sensed fear within me as well as my students. Fear is something that could help one get better but it can make things worse as well. For example, when I started to coach the girls' basketball team, it was very exciting for the girls. They were simply delighted.

As the training progressed, most of my students were improving and they could see the transformation of their skill. I started to check on their academic performance, because I cannot take the students for tournaments if they are struggling with academics or have issues with behaviour.

And indeed, there were students who struggled in one or the other aspect, and as a result, the hostel wardens started to take away their training sessions. The students' performance then began to drop both in academics as well as their behaviour, as they were agitated about the consequences that they were facing. They wanted me to speak to hostel wardens about this and the hostel wardens wanted me to speak to the students.

I spoke to both of them as it was affecting my training sessions. I found that students hated their wardens and wardens also had no affection towards the students.

I started to help my students with extra study time, in the hostel. They felt cared for and started to become more comfortable with me. During recess time, we would meet in the court and start with quick basketball games to implement what we had practiced in training sessions. I didn't realise that I was getting attached to my students until one student came up to me and asked: "Why do you always play with these girls only?" Though I answered her, this particular question forced me to enquire why she said this or felt that I was always with these girls.

That evening, I spoke to one of my colleagues about the question that this student had asked, he told me that the question was too obvious, as I was spending too much

time with them. After that conversation, I had many questions in my mind about my teaching methods and my work.

Letter to most impactful teacher

Syeda Ashraf Unnisa

Dear Krishna Rao Sir,

How are you? Hope this letter finds you in good health and happiness.

I am surprised I did not think of doing this earlier.

I have been asked to write a letter to the teacher who influenced me most. I did not have to think of who I should write to. The word 'teacher' has always brought your image to my mind. Consciously and sub-consciously, I find myself emulating you in my teaching style.

The earliest picture I have of you is when you entered our classroom on the first day of my ninth grade. It was your first day as a teacher and we were excited and impatient to meet our new teacher who would teach Biology. As is common with students of that age, we were hoping to get a teacher who is fun and can teach us in a new way. Many of us had made trips to the staff room since morning, peeping in to catch a glimpse of the new teacher, but no one was successful. Finally, after lunch period, it was time for Biology.

Our principal, Mr Simcock, walked in, with you following him. They say first impressions last for ever – I wonder if that is true? When we saw you at first, we were disappointed because you did not match up to the image that we had built. We saw a thin, young boy, who looked nerdy and was visibly nervous. In that period, awkward introductions were made and time was spent in asking unnecessary questions. After class, I remember our conversations in groups, disappointment was evident and some notorious backbenchers were confident that the next class would be fun as they planned ways of disrupting and taking advantage of this young teacher.

The next day, as we waited for you to come in, I was devoid of any excitement and had resigned myself to go through a torturous class where students would make it difficult to understand a single word that you said. You walked in and addressed the class, and the moment you started teaching, all my apprehensions disappeared. I was so engrossed in your class that I did not want it to end. I looked around and saw the same effect on all, including the back benchers, whose huge plans of disruption were now laid to rest. That was the first day when I had fallen in love with biology; which otherwise was an embarrassing subject.

Once you took over, every biology class was a journey in itself. We learnt through questions, you would pose simple questions which gave us answers to difficult

concepts and processes. Every class was logically sequenced and we never felt the effort of learning difficult concepts. Embarrassing questions were encouraged and answered factually, clarifying misconceptions that otherwise brewed in whispered conversations. I remember you teaching us tricks to draw complex diagrams, learn tongue twister terms and perform dissections in the lab. It was a fascinating experience.

Even though, later on in my life, I did not continue with Biology as my subject, I still consider your classes as the most enriching ones in High School. There were many teachers later on in life who have left a mark on me, but you Sir, are the one I will never forget. I wish I could follow in your footsteps – I hope I have been able to make an impression on at least one child, like you made on me. You ignited the passion of teaching in me, which I finally discovered years later. I remember you telling me that teaching would be the best option for me. I had ignored it at the time, but when I took the decision to step into the shoes of a teacher, your suggestion definitely made a difference. If you had limited yourself to only teaching concepts and not lent an ear to listen to our other (and oh, so many!) conflicts and confusions, many of us would have been lost in the cacophony of unintelligible voices pushing us in myriad directions.

You still encourage students to do their best in whatever they like, never imposing your views and always providing the guidance and space needed for self-discovery. The pictures on Facebook and student posts every year on our alumni group are testimony to how influential you are on the young minds. I am one of the thousands you have guided and encouraged. I remain indebted to you for life.

Reflective Writing means taking a pause, revisiting the depths of my mind, re-living memories and self-contemplation. It is an out-of-body experience. – Syeda Ashraf Unnisa

Yours,

Ashraf

Letter to most impactful teacher

Blandina Priyanka

Dear teacher (my father)

You may wonder why I am writing this letter to you, and even addressing you as my teacher. I have been asked to write a letter to the teacher who influenced me the most. When I look back on my school/college days, sadly, I fail to recollect the names of most of the teachers. I realise that I was hardly influenced by any of them! The moment the topic was given to me, the only name that came to my mind was yours, so I am writing this letter to you.

At the outset, I would like to thank you for being my life-long teacher and the guiding light in my life. Thank you for giving me the gift of life and the most beautiful and memorable childhood that anyone could ever have asked for. I recall my early school days when you accompanied me to school. You would take me there one hour before the reporting time! I hated this, but now, I realise how precious those moments were and today, I know the importance of time. Even today, I fondly remember the parapet where we sat together and revised the concepts taught in school. You had a unique way of teaching and could make complex topics easy. Despite working night shifts, you made it a point to not only drop me at school but also help me with my lessons! I often wonder how you managed to do it! Another lesson that I learnt, through your simple acts, was the importance of dedication.

Do you remember our summer holidays? They were the most precious days. You made sure to spend time with us through well-planned family trips. Every trip was unforgettable and you ensured that we enjoyed it to the fullest. I remember those hot, sunny days when we would spread out a mat and sit in a cool, shady place, reading. Today I realise that you helped us imagine and dream. What fun those days were! Recalling these moments brings a smile to my face, I am sure it is the same with you as well. I fondly remember those silly science experiments that we would do together. A big THANK YOU for your extraordinary efforts and patience in improving my reading skills! Thank you for helping me think and do things creatively. Without your relentless efforts, I wouldn't have been what I am today. I can't find words to describe how grateful I am to you.

Most importantly, I would like to thank you for the life lessons that you taught me – to love unconditionally, be self-sufficient, dedicate time for family, strive for excellence and lead a simple and honest life. Thank you for supporting me and encouraging me in every decision that I have ever made.

Dad, thank you for being my first and best teacher. Thank you for being the Dad that you are. No matter how old I grow, I will always need your love, guidance and support! Thank you for inspiring me to be a better person and accept people for who they are!

Thank you not only for being the teacher that influenced me the most, but also for being the one who continues to influence me even today!

Lots of Love

Priyanka

Having done this exercise, what is your takeaway?

Ironically, none of the teachers influenced me. After doing this exercise I am thankful to God for giving me my dad; my best teacher and role model. This exercise helped me revisit my childhood days and realise the sacrifice and efforts of my dad in making

me the person I am today. The assignment helped me reflect on my attitude towards students, now that I am a teacher. Most of the time I question myself – Am I doing things differently from what my teachers did? Am I helping my students become a better version of themselves? Am I helping my students think and do creatively? Am I inspiring my students? Most important of all, will my name flash across students' minds when they are asked to write this letter?

A Single Story: of my mother

Mary Samuel

I looked at her – my Mom. She was sitting at her study table and furiously typing away the arguments that she had to present in court the next day. I could sense pride seeping into my mind and my whole being as I watched her – my Mom.

She is not the quintessential Mom that you see around – she is not much of a home maker either (though even I am not sure of the exact definition of a 'home maker'). She seldom cooks; one will never find her dusting or sorting the messy house anytime. She is not the "my husband my God" type either. All these were bones of contentions at home, when I was growing up.

I remember my dad wistfully speaking of a day when my mom would make coffee for him early in the morning – my mom guffawed at this and said that she'd rather drink the tea made by my dad.

So you see, there were many conflicts in my home – ideas, thoughts, and affirmations – always at loggerheads with each other. And being dad's little princess, I always thought my mom was in the wrong – not to mention the strong influence that the stupid serials, novels and stories had on me about "a woman" – her essence. I thought that a good wife should be cooking all the time, taking care of the house, the kids, her husband, her in-laws, her relatives – a good wife should be like the candle – melting away, burning away to form obscure black soot.

Whenever there was a conflict at home, I sided with my Dad who has such a strong and deep voice that he could overpower anyone with his voice. My mom never backed down – a petite, unassuming woman who made a mark in her profession, which ever department she worked for!

'You should always work,' my mom would often tell me. 'Always be financially independent,' she said.

It's only after I became a wife and then – a mother – that my perspective changed. I had my share of struggles too – trying to desperately fight the already rooted and established conventions, traditions and ideas. It's only then that I realised what a fighter and survivor my mom was.

I looked at her and saw a strong woman who, despite so many odds, ploughed along, not letting anyone's barbed comments de-motivate her. A fighter that she is, after her retirement, she took oath in the Bar council and is now a practising lawyer. She is learning keyboard and embroidery too during her free time. She is the treasurer of the senior citizen's council – Trivandrum chapter. She is also the committee member of

our church in Trivandrum. Her plate is full, even at the age of 65. Even though she has severe asthma and hernia problems, she does not let all that pull her down. And my dad, oh! He is so proud of her, even though he sometimes shares his wistful thinking and idea about how a woman should be, rather loudly, my mom guffaws too – rather loudly.

She gave me courage to stick to my choices. When the whole world was against my decision to be with my husband, I took a leaf out of my mom's life and did what I thought was correct and right.

My unassuming, petite mom – I looked at her as she closed the thick Law of Torts book with a triumphant smile. I knew tomorrow her opponent would be bashed in court.

Repetitive Correction

Maa Pratapi

I'm guilty of the same approach that is described at the beginning of the extract.

I've made students re-do their work to ensure that it adheres to prescribed notebook expectations.

Questions should be in black ink and answers written in blue. There should be a double header in which one should write the title of the entry and a right margin drawn with a scale and pencil where remarks can be written. Diagrams should be done only in pencil. Work should be neat and legible. The list goes on.

There are students who don't follow suit but who clearly understand and know the material. Still, I've made them re-do their work, to impress upon them the importance of maintaining a certain standard of presentation of their work.

If truth be told, it's quite a waste of their time!

Many a time, I find myself facing the same predicament as mentioned in the reading, that the students who are strong to begin with continue to perform well, and those that struggle continue to do so. As a teacher, at times, I applaud and take credit for those who are faring well, and distance myself from those who are struggling, attributing their poor performance to *their* inadequacies, not mine.

As a teacher, yes, I am guilty of trying to feed my students with content, not giving due attention to the context. My focus has often been on what they need to know to secure marks for their examination, and not how to think for themselves, and explore further. Over the years, I have encountered many students who have been far more intelligent than I am, but have seldom enabled or facilitated their learning beyond what was within my comfort zone of experience.

'I teach, but they don't learn.' It's on me, but to save my own sense of self-worth as a teacher, I have – all too often – displaced the blame on them, their supposed insincerity and lack of commitment.

When I look back at my own educational journey, I'm not quite able to ascertain how much I actually learned from my schooling. Most of what I have learned seems to be from experiences *outside* of the classroom space.

In school, my focus was largely on scoring good grades and being at the top of the class. I learned how to memorize chunks of information, and regurgitate it on tests, only to forget it, and move on to the next class. The students who were at the top of the class pretty much stayed the same, and those who struggled continued to do so throughout. My sense of achievement came from comparing my performance to others in the class and from the approval of my teachers.

When it comes to my teachers, what has stayed with me has not been any of the content that they taught me, but memories of some of the conversations or interactions that I've had with them, both constructive and critical, and their way of being.

College was a place where I learned how to game the system. I figured out which professors graded leniently, and how to write responses in accordance with what the professors wanted to read, not necessarily what I believed or generating any original thought. I completed my UG with a dual degree but no real understanding of either subject domain.

The irony is that now I am a part of a school, and have to re-evaluate what it is to be an educator, and reflect upon the purpose of schooling, without a personal blueprint or template to fall back on. Am I putting my students through the same level of absurdity that I myself went through? What am I teaching them? What should I be teaching them? Should I be teaching them?

Reflective writing is opening my memory box at twilight, quietly watching the changing skyscape of my mind, as it oscillates between light and darkness.

- Maa Pratapi

MY REFLECTIONS

Neeraja Raghavan

This batch faced so many more challenges than the others: with schools reopening and teachers juggling between online and offline classes! As a result, the attendance in all our sessions was never 100%, and consequently, assignments were also not turned in by all. And that proved to be MY challenge!

So I tried using this to our advantage by including two (instead of the usual ONE) submissions from each (regular) participant in this compilation. The lean attendance did lessen the richness of exchanges during our sessions, but it also gave me more time to go through each assignment.

I learned quite a few new lessons from this batch.

Firstly, that the quality of readings and assignments need to be greatly modified for Sports Teachers who may participate in the course. My apologies to Sonam for not thinking of this aspect before!

Secondly, I learned that a certain degree of flexibility is required when school suddenly reopens and teachers are in unexpectedly busier times than before.

I also learned to drop the expectation that participants should, at the very least, *inform* the course instructor, if and when they feel they can no longer continue with the course. [Barring one participant who dutifully informed me of his inability to attend the sessions, the others who dropped out felt no such compulsion! I belong to the old school in this respect, for sure!]

Quite a few assignments set me thinking: by having me revisit what education truly is, and looking afresh at my single stories of people in my life! And as always, there were participants who wanted pre-session readings to be shared, and peer assignments to be read *before* the sessions, with several others bemoaning the lack of time to even complete the given assignment, let alone do any reading in addition! *No, we can never please everyone*, is my repeated learning!

For the first time, there was more than one request from participants in this batch for a Course Completion Certificate. As always, I would like to restate that the emphasis on degrees and certificates in our country is something I would like to see us move away from. For this reason – among others! – I do not give any certificate, but the final compilation of your submissions will be uploaded on our website and this can serve as testimony for your having completed the course!

If the course has served to set a few of you on the road to reflective writing, it has served its purpose!

Thank you, all!