

TEACHERS TALK, WRITE & REFLECT

Reflective Writing by teachers

Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

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Thinking Teacher

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Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School



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INTRODUCTION

March 2020. It was a strange time.

A tiny virus was holding the entire world ransom.

Those who had homes that they could stay confined in, did exactly that. "Lockdown" became an everyday word.

Suddenly, each one had to find the resources to stay safe, healthy and fruitfully engaged within the four walls of the house. For six weeks!

To keep people busy and housebound, numerous opportunities opened up. While several websites made it possible to freely download an abundance of books, others offered virtual tours of world-renowned museums. Still others streamed plays and movies.

And many offered courses for free.

It was at such a time that THINKING TEACHER decided to offer a free course on REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS.

The rationale was that teachers, being the busy people that they are, seldom get this kind of at-home time to reflect and write down their thought processes. No sooner was the announcement made on social media than ten teachers (the maximum capacity for the online course) from different parts of India signed up for it.

And so it came to pass, that for the next two weeks, a class of ten teachers met with their instructor online every alternate day. They read pieces of reflective writing together, crafted their own, critiqued these and their peers' writings, and forged bonds with each other in a short time. To quote from their end-of-course feedback:

"As the course progressed, the assignments became challenging and more insightful."

"This course is helping me become more reflective in my personal life and moulding me into a receptive feedback taker."

"I now think and reflect while I am writing. I make an effort to introduce new vocabulary in my writing. I edit it as many times as possible before I turn in my work."

"I had no idea there was a specific form of writing called reflective writing. I knew what it meant to be reflective. But now I understand it is deeper than I had initially thought, it is more a valuable life process, not just restricted to academia or research."

"This course has definitely allowed me to overcome my fear of writing, my hesitation to share it, my inability to write precisely and enhanced my appreciation of objective reflection."

Given the dearth of published material by Indian teachers, here is an end-of-course compilation of selected writings by the ten participants of the March-April 2020 run of the course. While some writings are actual assignments that formed part of the course, a few are more spontaneous expressions of the teachers' feelings during this unique phase that the world went through.

Nine of the participants were teachers or teachers-turned-administrators, while only one participant was an administrator. The latter was also the only male member in class, and he writes about how it feels to be in such a minority. A Principal recalls how she was an average student in school, written off humiliatingly by a tyrant teacher. A School Correspondent rues her thoughtless use of authority to dismiss off an anxious mother's concerns.

Flip through this book, for much more ... This compilation is deliberately being made freely downloadable, so that teachers who read it feel inspired to write, too.

And if they wish, they can sign up for the course by contacting THINKING TEACHER at thinkingteacher22@gmail.com !

PYRRHIC VICTORY



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

She was tentative when she sat down, but her inherent sense of determination came across. M's parent was meeting the teachers and me during the 2nd Parent Teacher Meeting at our school. I, too, stiffened and mentally decided on my course of action. A sense of power – the power wielded by heads of schools, flowed through me and filled me with confidence. My job was to soothe her, convince her and send her packing.

A little background - M, a 6-year-old, had joined our school that very year. This was his 4th school. He was bright, but very distracted. He just didn't settle down to choose any work – maths, language, geography. Instead he floated in and out of the class, explored places, (including forbidden ones), picked up insects, hid them in his pant pocket and spun yarns. His yarns were imaginative, full of deep meaning, expressed in a vocabulary and style characteristic of a much older child.

His class teacher was at her wits end. However much we knew that this child needed to explore and float, that he needed to develop a trust in us and a desire to learn before he could do any “productive” work, we were also conscious of the fact that unfettered freedom could lead him into worrisome areas – what if he

wandered off to the roof, or scaled the boundary wall, what if he experimented with something dangerous? All these are out of bounds for our schoolchildren, but here was a child who didn't recognise rules or boundaries. He found ways to wriggle out of all the safety measures that had been put in place. Hence, his teacher and I decided that he needed to be in the classroom. However, he would be given the freedom to work/not work or to do work of his own creation. He could draw as much as he liked, create origami, tinker, lie down, sleep whatever. But going out unsupervised – no. That was a non-negotiable.

We had informed the parents of M's unwillingness to choose work, to sit and listen to the teacher's presentation for any length of time or complete any task independently – all characteristics that Montessori students have developed before graduating to Elementary. The parents had taken offense to our feedback and there had been quite a kerfuffle.

Now this was the 2nd meeting with the parent and frankly, the teacher was dreading it. So, as is our policy, she requested me to be present during the meeting.

The mother began by inquiring about the work that M was doing in the classroom and raised her concern that his weekly workplan was often blank. I reassured her that he was still settling down and would work when he finally felt like. At that point, she revealed that he couldn't even complete the worksheets that she had been making him do at home.

Frankly, I saw red. We have a 'No Homework' policy at our school. Additionally, we make parents sign an

agreement at the time of admission, that they will not try to teach their child anything at home or send the child for tuition – the reason being that an overloaded child will become disinterested in learning. And here was this mother, clearly violating our policy after having signed on to it.

I think I barely restrained myself from giving her a tongue lashing. But my long-winded reaction to her statement was strong enough to convey my opinion without any ambiguity. I talked about how her child's disinterest in work at school was a direct result of her intervention at home. I explained how her intervention had made the job all the more harder for the teachers, and that she was holding us accountable without keeping her part of the deal. I laid out in no uncertain terms how her untrained and ignorant approach was damaging the child's love for learning. I emphasised how bright M was, but with her attitude, would never become an independent learner. I realised I had come across too strong, so I rounded off my diatribe with soothing words on how unique her son was, how she should be grateful to God for a gift like him, how she needed to be patient and wait for him to discover his hidden strengths and passions.

And like most unpleasant incidents, I shut it off from my mind. Closed the door firmly. Hid it out of view. Massacred any chance of examining it and my own role. And today, I've opened that door again.

In hindsight, wasn't I extremely insensitive to a mother's very natural concern for her child and his academic progress? Should I not have given her the opportunity to articulate those worries which had compelled her to violate the school policy?

Yes, I should have given her the space to speak. And the respect to hear her point of view. It may have revealed her insecurity about our bizarre approach to education – which violates every principle of what is typically considered to be 'schooling' – no homework, no exams, no schoolbags, no textbooks, and even no uniform.

After years of conditioning in our Indian system, which adult wouldn't look in askance at our methods?

Moreover, I should have been more confident about our approach – after all we have had 10 years of documented payoffs that this system leads to better learning outcomes. So, what if a new parent at the school wasn't convinced about the results? Understandably, she needed to see it concretely in her own son.

My defensiveness, rooted in my passionate belief in our own homegrown pedagogical approach, killed any chance of a productive discussion with this parent. Very soon thereafter, the mother discontinued her child's schooling in our institution.

Even today, I wonder about him. He was exactly the kind of child who thrives in our system – active, creative, pondering, communicative. But those very traits will get him into hot water in a traditional school – and with years of that treatment, his very soul could be deadened.

Society's loss, my loss.

ANEESA JAMAL



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

One of the assignments in this course was for participants to read [Rilke's letters to a young poet](#), and then write a letter to an aspiring teacher.

What follows is a set of such letters that participants wrote.



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

Dear aspiring teacher,

First of all, I am so glad that there is this idea in you of wanting to become a teacher. I know that feeling exactly, because my journey as a teacher began with this thought, too. If I have known of an excitement which bears any semblance to this, it is that of a woman when she discovers that she is going to become a mother.

I still visit the reasons that led me to be a teacher and each time, that

introspection has empowered me. So, I believe there is great worth in savouring this idea itself.

Each of our lives is different and the same will hold true for our teaching lives. That said, it does not mean that sharing our experiences is of no value, rather our journeys get better and better mostly through such exchanges. Hence, I share some of my thoughts that hold great wonder for me. When I first discovered these insights, all I could think of was that they are my 'miracle' stones in the trajectory of my teaching career.

At the heart of my passion to teach is my faith that we can all be better human beings and can lead better lives. My work - as I see it - is to realize this. Initially, I had a very linear idea about how this could be achieved. All I thought I should do was to teach great things with utmost passion and sincerity. And as I foresaw, I would see visionaries in creation just by being a teacher, so much so that I would be able to switch on the prodigy in all my students!

You must have guessed that this was not the case at all. Somewhere around the end of, say, my first year of teaching, I thought the heavens must have descended already. I am currently in my fourth year of teaching. And invariably, each year has been a humbling experience. It

has taught me the intricacies of human life, the world and its ways of learning, in small, wonderful doses. I understand now that teaching is all about learning, through the tyranny of textbooks, the overarching education system, the internal politics of that organization we call 'school', the twisted households of the students whom we teach and even our own, about contrasting and contradicting aspirations and expectations, successes and failures.

And still, it is such an exhilarating journey to be on!

To understand what I mentioned before, and also to fathom many other things, I discovered that the prerequisite was simple and demanding. It was to empty myself from almost all prejudice that I had held so far, and this meant that I had to first accept the presence of such biases in me and *then* try and eliminate them. To erase the clutter that I inevitably brought with me, so that there is space for new meanings to thrive. Because we know that teaching is learning for tomorrow, it is important to keep a check on how our past influences us and our actions. I realize that my experiences and my expectations are my own, it is not anybody's liability to satisfy them.

It is only after this realization that my exhilaration began.

As I continue to learn about learning, I discover the importance of vulnerability and trust. All the learning that I am engaged in is connected with the intellectual realm of being. And what I came upon is that, in the path of knowing, emotions play the strongest role alongside competence. Learning is a wilful activity. Unless trust is established between the learner and the teacher, it is fairly accurate to say that no learning can happen, because the will to do so is practically absent. And that trust can be established only when the guard is let down on both sides. My junior school students helped me learn this. They helped me see that their learning is an act of compassion, generosity and will.

You may wonder how this happened. It was not any particular event. Gradually, I could see a shift in the way my junior school students interacted with me. Many of them were very defensive in the beginning. If they cared to do any activity at all, it was out of a fear of not knowing how I might respond if they refused. A little later, they rejected outright whatever I proposed, but then, they engaged with the activities that I had designed for them, and even showed great enthusiasm in sharing the progress of their work. Simultaneously, I saw how I shifted in my journey of understanding them. Initially, I was very hesitant, because

it was my first time with students their age. Then I tried to trust myself that I could do it and slowly, I started enjoying being with them thoroughly. We took time to trust each other and then learning and joy followed.

Among the last things that I want to share with you is the dramatic career that a teacher has. The teacher's gift is to have the opportunity to witness, scaffold, hold, play and revel in the growing of her students. And what a real work of art that is! When you can appreciate that, you will have with you the never-ending fuel to blow up all challenges that the journey throws up.

My most significant companion in this entire journey has been my patience. I learnt to practice it the hard way, that must have been quite obvious to you, as you read about my initial approach to teaching. I am still learning to be patient. I need to have this virtue to accept that the good takes its time to come upon and that Nature thrives in her profound slowness.

Finally, of course, as a teacher and as a human being, it is of utmost importance to take care of oneself in all realms of being. Because we teach what we are.

When you are a teacher yourself, you will know its worth for all your own reasons.

I warmly welcome you on board.

Warmly,

A proud teacher.

SUKANYA
MURALEEDHARAN



Photograph: Rati Basu, Santiniketan

A TEACHER'S TAPESTRY

Dear Dear Samina:

Many years ago, you had confided to me that you wanted to become a teacher like me when you grew up. At that time, I was flattered but I dismissed it as a childish dream.

And so, yesterday, when I received your letter seeking my advice before starting out on a journey as a teacher, I was absolutely delighted. It is a rare child who sustains a childhood ambition.

Teaching is a profession that seems to encapsulate all dimensions of human experience. When I first started teaching, I found myself explaining Maths, wiping noses, correcting spellings and even sweeping the classroom. I was alternatively the strict martinet and the friend, philosopher and guide. I discovered facets to my personality which I did not know existed, and a range of emotions that I did not know I was capable of.

As you will quickly realise, teaching is far, far more than just imparting knowledge. A teacher is an alternate parent in a child's life. In fact, in this day and age of parents who work long hours and scarcely have time for their child, you will find yourself becoming the shelter in some child's stormy life, the steady Rock of Gibraltar. You will have to listen to their wildly imaginative tales, spun for an absent parent's benefit. You will learn about each child's likes and dislikes, strengths and frailties. Multiply this 30 times – the size of a typical class. A teacher needs an inordinate supply of compassion, Samina.

Children may come to you with sniffles and scratches to which you will apply First Aid. But there will also be those with emotional scars and wounds, which you will have to dig deep to find. I remember the child whose mother was obsessed with his education, keeping him awake till 1am at night doing worksheets, to prevent herself from dealing with her husband's peccadillos. The child's (consequently) strange behaviour in school left us teachers puzzled. Or, another mother, who abandoned the children to an electronic babysitter, because she herself had to heal from the frequent battering that she received. And that child was inexplicably

hyperactive, unable to sit down and learn. We had to discover the horrifying truth, work with the child and try to undo the damage.

You, Samina, are no longer a child. Search your heart for the courage that you will need to face similar realities. Nurture the strength. Feed it with *dhikr* and *dua*¹. Because trust me, you will be the fortress which some child needs.

Teaching also needs patience. A good teacher needs to reach and teach each child. In each class, there is always a Rebel Without a Cause. The one who eyes you defiantly, refuses to complete work, and challenges your authority at each step. Then, there is the Disheartened One – so broken by our toxic education system – that she has lost all sense of self belief. The Politician – who can sway the class to his point of view with glib speeches. The Dilton Doily (to use an example from before your time), studious, capable and goal oriented. You will need to resist the urge to evaluate your success in the classroom through the achievement of your Diltons, but instead focus on the average performers. Teaching can seriously make you introspect. It's easy to feel like a failure if you truly care about your students and hold them to impossible standards. Always remember the maxim, each child is unique – a composite tapestry of many strands. There is no 'one right way' to evaluate or benchmark a child.

As I read my outpourings, I think I may have painted an extremely disheartening picture.

Let me go on – and show you the other side.

¹ *Dhikr* – Litanies, *Dua* - Prayers

The children will shower you with love. Boundless, selfless, unrestrained love in the form of gifts. You will find handmade bracelets tucked into your books. A tiny flower, half wilted with the heat, on your desk. Inexpertly made envelopes with little messages “I Love You Anty” scrawled on them. Do you remember the beautiful origami that you presented me with, when you graduated? The one that had secret messages painstakingly etched onto each fold. I often open my drawer, pull it out of its case, and read and reread it, with tears rolling down my face. What love it took from you to create that piece! That love is like a candle warming my days in old age.

Children are fun, Samina. Their enthusiasm and energy are infectious. Trust me, every morning, you will discard your sorrows and worries at the portal of the school – as your students come running to you. Some to share a story, some to describe a visit to a zoo, another to just give you a hug. You will find a wellspring of energy in yourself which will charge you through the day.

And they will make you laugh with their mischief and antics. Children think they can fool the teachers, but their ill-hidden secrets shine through their faces. Do you remember how you all bullied that Ustaad²? Did you truly believe that he didn't know exactly what you were up to? Do you remember how your class tried to convince Noushin Aunty that there was no homework for submission? And she pretended to go along with the deception? I remember when Laiq mistook Passive Speech and explained how he was learning Passion Speech in class! Oh, how we laughed!

Don't teachers get tired, I can see you wondering. Oh, of course we do. Terribly exhausted. What with skipping our snacks, forgetting to go to the bathroom, constantly dealing with chatter, struggling to bring a class to order – oh yes, yes, indeed we get tired! Sometimes, we wonder how we can muster enough energy to return home and attend to our domestic chores. You, too, will many a time wonder if it is all worth it. But then, as I said earlier, you will go back the next day, and just the sight of the bright faces of your students will infuse you with energy and make your determination and love for your profession surge forth! .

One of the hardest challenges will come, not from children, but from adults. Co-teachers, management, parents. Sometimes those interactions can be debilitating. Especially when you have poured all your creativity and enthusiasm to innovate, to change the moribund traditions of schooling into something more child-friendly, you will be pulled up for ‘not completing the syllabus’. Or a parent may accuse you of ‘neglecting’ their child. Worse still, you may be asked to abandon your originality and simply stick to delivering what you are *told* to deliver in class. How incredibly stultifying! Samina, you are an incredibly creative person. Your creativity was reflected in your writing, your artwork. How will you handle such a lack of imagination? Before you dive into the teaching profession, identify the school which will give you the freedom to work as you please. Research the school thoroughly and examine if its goals are aligned with yours.

Teaching is not going to make you a millionaire. God knows, teachers are paid

² Male Teacher

peanuts. You should know that come middle age, you may not have the bank balance to build a house, finance a car or even replace a broken fridge. This is a reality you should evaluate. Yes, many teachers make a hoard of money by giving tuitions at the end of the day, but I always wonder, isn't that doubly exhausting? I chose not to go that route, because I wanted to be mentally fresh each day for my students. But each teacher must make that choice for herself.

I seem to have poured my heart out with all my pieces of advice, homilies and caution. Dwell on these words and reflect. Examine each aspect cold bloodedly. But finally, let your heart guide your choice.

With lots of love,

Aneesa Auntie **(ANEESA JAMAL)**



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

Dear Siddhant,

It was great to read your message on Messenger. Sorry that I missed your phone call as I was preoccupied. Also, I thought instead of calling, I should catch up with you through a letter, as I know that you always loved to receive old-fashioned hand-written communications.

Do you remember our last conversation? You were so worried about the future and confused about so many things. I did not feel that that was an opportune moment for me to advise you. You were understandably not in the listening mode.

It seems to me that this is the right time to share with you my own thoughts about your career choice, as you are about to finish your Master's in physics.

While I was thinking about this, I began to reminisce about you. You see, you were in the first batch of students that I taught in school as well as in Junior College.

I still remember your energy, your zeal for learning new things, and almost, shall I say, a greed for knowledge. You had always been the apple of my eye! You were so well connected with the rest of the students and so focused as you played the role of 'Student affairs Captain'.

When I look back at our last discussion, I cannot help feeling that you should do something in the field of education: be it as a teacher or as an administrator.

I will first start with sharing what (I think) being a teacher entails.

You may come across many who will not support this, as they feel that teaching is a thankless and underpaid job. Those who will support it might inform you about

‘positive’ aspects like paid vacation, structured duty hours, etc. But believe me, being a teacher is way above all these materialistic things.

I would never say money is not important: yes, it is! Now the scene is changing. There are so many international and alternative schools that are welcoming teachers who have a different approach and are innovative. You would get decent remuneration in such schools and also have a sense of gratification.

You will sometimes feel disheartened, demotivated not getting your due - but where does this not happen? We need educators who will raise the bar for teaching and learning.

Being from a physics background, your exposure to numerous competitions gave you rich experience, which, I feel will be underutilised if you do some other course or join an industry. Also, you have substantial intelligence and I am very confident that you will do wonders if you join any school as a teacher.

Nevertheless, you still have enough time in to decide. Discuss with your parents, and if any query comes to your mind, I am always there. Never hesitate to reach out.

However, if you wish to pursue PhD then it will only add value to your profile. Take enough time, just do not jump on any conclusion. Whatever you do, just do it with 100% honesty and dedication.

God bless you! Take care and wish you all success on your path.

Waiting for your reply,

DEEPALI BHAGWATE



Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

Dear Priya,

I am reaching out to you, as you had mentioned in our reunion about your inner conflict in choosing the right career. I hope you will find this letter helpful in reaching a decision.

I recollect as a little girl that you had expressed in one of the 'pick and speak' events titled 'My favourite play at home', that you always pulled your mother's veil and wrapped it around yourself like a sari, as you pretended to be a typical teacher. I know that most of the girls, play *Teacher aata* as a game! So now I see that that game may be turning into reality!

Priya, I know that after you completed your B Sc, you were not

prepared to take up a routine 9-7 job. Yet you tried to attend a few interviews. Initially, you were carried away with the glamour of the IT jobs. Now after two years as a medical transcriptionist, you want to pursue a professional degree in TEACHING?

Priya, I am eager to lend a hand and support you in the shift that you are looking for, however I also want you to seriously contemplate a few aspects.

I am not trying to be judgemental, rather, I am speculating aloud about the basis of your career shift, as I thought that you had equipped yourself well with the requisite skills to be a medical transcriptionist. After all, the two professions are poles apart, now, aren't they?

Are you making this switch simply because you find medical transcription to be too challenging? If so, what exactly are those challenges that you are facing? Are they work-related or concerning perks? If you think that teaching has several advantages like paid vacations, shorter working hours, more of family time due to the holidays that one gets for all the festivals etc, then I think you will be doing a disservice to the teaching profession, regardless of how many years you invest in it.

On the other hand, if you have decided to take up teaching as a career because you love to be around

children, spend quality time with them and nurture their innate abilities as you see them enjoy the learning process, then, by all means, you should follow your heart's desire!

Whatever the case, since you have written to me personally to guide you in your choice. I shall be sincere in my feedback and advice.

Priya, like any other profession, teaching has both advantages and shortcomings. If you can recall your student life, you will remember the roles that your teachers played.

Being a teacher myself, I have derived great happiness from my work. If you ask me what I would have become if I had not become a teacher, I can honestly say that I would have become a trainer, who is again working with students and is thus related to the teaching field. You see, I have always loved to be around little children, to make an impact on their lives, to ignite the spark in them, to be surrounded by their laughter and love! I marvel at the creativity in the little minds which, I see, can be tapped by committed teachers. I love it when students feel empowered and have control over their newly acquired information. Teaching has given a new dimension and a purpose to my life.

As a teacher, one has to find, deep within oneself, the mesmerizing aspects of their own personality that

will help children connect with them. Not all of us need to be great teachers like Anne Sullivan, but we all do need qualities that encourage students to trust and believe in us. If you chose to teach because you can talk for days about literature, or because you enjoy sharing your likes and dislikes with other people, or because you tend to be a happy person and make others happy, then you are perhaps on the right track.

Yes, having said that, I must add that there is much more!

If becoming an effective teacher was like drawing up a regimen and dutifully practicing it, then everyone would have turned into the stereotypical teacher, and you can easily find such a teacher in every classroom. However, there are certain attributes that distinguish the most effective teachers.

To be a teacher, you must primarily be happy and cheerful. This is not an occupation where you can easily show your emotions and dent the little minds that spend a major part of their waking time with you in school. You need to switch roles constantly - be a buddy to one student and a stern guide to another.

Teachers do much more than just teaching, and their impact extends far beyond the classroom. As a teacher, you are more than just an educator: you are a mentor, a confidant and a friend. One of the

most common reasons to become a teacher is to make a difference in the lives of as many students as you can.

This job also requires loads of patience and commitment, as students in the age group of 6- 9 are most influenced by their teachers. What you wear, what you do or say, your likes/dislikes - in fact, even how a teacher conducts herself with her own colleagues - every small detail is captured by the living cameras with two lenses that are scattered across the campus, corridors and classrooms! You will also find these cameras moving around you or behind you, sometimes even when you are in a market or in a movie theatre. Such is their radar!

On the other hand, teaching has become more and more complex and challenging these days. The tolerance level of students is declining while rudeness, argumentation, disobedience and a short temper are on the rise. The reasons may be many, but we are here only to help children overcome their challenges by first accepting them and constantly working on them so as to bring out the best from our students.

As new teachers, many are bound to feel nervous and overwhelmed. Having a positive attitude, working to build a good rapport with colleagues and a proactive mindset will help you to

overcome several blocks. Compassion, confidence, critical thinking, and joyfulness turn classrooms into places where children feel inspired, happy and encouraged.

Priya, remember, whether they recall minor details about the story that you narrated or the tricks in division sums or how to draw and label the parts of a flower - these are not the things that really matter in the long run. Their confidence and joy for learning matters!

In the process of educating and empowering children, you will realise that while the importance of scoring marks cannot be ignored, it is damaging to focus on good grades alone. Students should be encouraged to fully incorporate and amalgamate their knowledge and skills across various disciplines so as to develop the ability to apply these in real-life situations.

Finally, yet most significantly, I would wish to suggest that, acquiring a professional qualification alone will not help you in this job, if you lack the desire to enhance your skills as a teacher.

It reminds me of a famous quote by Abraham Lincoln “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.” He goes on to explain that a sharpened axe is a strength multiplier. You can be the strongest lumberjack in the

world, but with a dull axe, you are in serious trouble! The same logic applies to all professions, especially in teaching field. Ultimately, go where your passion lies and the rest will follow. For that is the sharpest axe that you can own!

Priya, if you are certain that you can do justice to the little minds and take them through the journey so as to help them carve out their future ... go ahead and acquire skills to be that teacher, who inspired you!!!

You have my blessings,

LALITHA BAI



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

Another assignment in this course was for participants to read [a summary of a research paper](#), which describes the transformative experience that South African teachers had, when they each wrote a letter to the schoolteacher who had impacted them the most.

Having read this, participants were invited to engage in a similar letter-writing exercise.

What follows is a set of such letters that participants wrote, to the teacher who had impacted *them* the most.



Photograph: Rati Basu, Santiniketan

IN SISTERHOOD

Dear Mrs....

Forgive me. I've even forgotten your name.

But I have not forgotten your anger. The sheer anger on your face when you lashed out at me. I do not assume for a minute that you would even recall the incident. It was just one of the daily trivial irritations that plague a teacher's life, the proverbial last straw on the camel's back. I know that, now that I am a teacher, working with children all day. There are days when my nerves are absolutely frayed, and I also give a tongue lashing to some poor soul who happens to be in the firing line.

But to me, your anger was cataclysmic. It forged a painful memory which cannot be easily erased.

To recall, I had just stepped out of the bathroom designated for teachers. You had been waiting to use the bathroom. When you saw me, a student emerge from the toilet, it really enraged you. You had waited, all this time, for a mere student? A young good-for-nothing had kept you waiting, while taking all the time in the world to finish her business? You simply exploded. The tongue lashing was humiliating. It was the capstone on the entire edifice of shame that a young teenage girl undergoes when coming of age.

Yes, I knew we were not supposed to use that restroom that was reserved for teachers. But, if you recall, the student

bathrooms were tiny. They had no garbage cans. No space. So how was a girl, who had newly started menstruating, to change her pads? How was she to wash up? How was she to dispose a napkin, wash her hands – thoroughly, almost furiously, with soap? There was no soap for us students.

How was she to will away this betrayal by her body? To manage her private shame in a school?

Today, I understand your fury. You must have been in a hurry. Needed to use the bathroom right before enduring another 45 minutes with a roomful of monkeys who were least interested in your class. The daily drudgery of teaching a “third” language, which everyone knew didn’t count towards anything, the need to keep the children focussed and stuff their heads with whatever the syllabus ordained. The loss of hope and enthusiasm as year after year, the new batches never changed their overt disinterest in your class. You must have been at least 55 then. Me in five years’ time. I can imagine the disillusionment. The reason behind the ready temper. The constant irritated expression on your face.

But I wonder, if at that time, or even later, you brought to mind what it meant to be a 13-year-old? Did you recall the first year when you had started menstruating? The shock. The realisation that this event would come back to haunt you month after month. The disgust. The shame. The silence. How no one talked about it? Older women referred to “it” in vague terms. How no one in the school, no teacher, no staff, thought to put any

facilities in place in bathrooms catering to 1000 girls in a school? Did they just want to wish away a fact of life? Did you remember the sense of foreboding with which you would have to check your clothes again and again to see if there was “staining”? Did you remember the horrible cramps, which made concentration and participation in class, an impossibility?

Today after years, as I revisit the incident in my mind, I empathise with you. I apologise for all the silent imprecations I hurled at you. I finally let go of the suffocating feeling of shame, dread and anger that still welled up in me when I recalled that memory. It wasn’t your fault. It was a systemic, institutional erasure of the hallmark of emerging womanhood.

Looking back, I thank God for your anger. The experience enabled me to ensure that no girl ever goes through that experience again in the school that I run. I ensure there are no bathrooms designated as “Teachers’ Only”. Girls’ bathrooms have a stock of sanitary pads and a garbage can. The school keeps extra supplies. Girls can approach their teachers for pain relief medication or a “break” if they have cramps. Sometimes, even for a friendly massage or home remedies.

In our life experiences there are valuable lessons. The positive and negative encounters create a praxis for our teaching practice. Thus, our encounter had led to greater good for our shared common identity as women.

Thank You, Ma’am!

Best regards,

ANEESA JAMAL



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

Dear Ms. Saradamani:

Warm greetings and trust you are in the pink of health.

I am one of those students who used to sit with wonder and awe in your Tamil classes, without even realising that a big bug actually entered my open mouth one day! Such was the interest that you aroused in me towards Tamil literature!

In your classes, not only did I learn the semantics and grammar of the beautiful Tamil language, I even smelt the sweet fragrance of our historical Tamil land, heard the elephants trumpeting during the war, saw the busy markets and sprawling rice fields, and admired the beautifully adorned artists as they entertained enthralled crowds.

My favourite part was your story-telling sessions, during which I walked with beloved Rama and Seetha through Poet

Kamban's verses, lived with Thiruvalluvar and Vasuki in their quaint hut, greatly admired the king Pari when he offered his chariot for the unattended jasmine creeper en route to the temple, wailed and raged with Kannagi at King Pandiyan's court, took pride in the lives and conquests of our great and compassionate kings, and remained awe-struck at the grandeur of the Tanjavur temple ... oh, this list can go on!

While I was utterly grateful to you for creating such an appreciation and vivid imagery of our Tamil history, I am still stuck with a certain fear that was sown in me, as a result of your approach towards getting us to complete our homework: **the fear of consequences!** Even 27 years after schooling, and well after having been entrusted with a responsible position that demands my managing multiple tasks, I feel that most of my actions continue to be propelled just by this 'fear of the consequence'. This concrete fear does not allow me to venture into new things or think laterally, as I am persistently reminded of the verbal abuse that I had to helplessly receive, when I tried a new and creative approach for one of the assignments that you gave in my 9th grade. Hampered by this strong fear that was created over several interactions during my high school years, I feel that I am not tapping into my creative side. Above all, I don't enjoy most of my work, as it is done out of fear, not out of interest or out of a desire to explore.

On the other hand, this fear acts as a constant reminder for me to be alert not to plant such a fear in my own students. This same fear also makes me think of creative ways for my students to enjoy the whole learning process, lest they, too, get crippled by the fear of consequences.

While I am slowly figuring out how to dispense with this fear, there has not been a single moment when I found myself falling short of the knowledge and the curiosity that you inculcated in me. Also, As Roy T. Bennett, rightly said in his book 'The Light in the Heart', "The past is a place of reference, not a place of residence; the past is a place of learning, not a place of living. For me, life is a great teacher that always nurtures in me the capacity to hold different lenses over the very same things that I had earlier viewed as impediments. Also, like the indefatigable Kannagi that you introduced to me, I too will wage a battle so as to win over this impairment rather than yield to it.

So, as my life unfolds, I hope to gain a positive perspective about this fear as well and move on.

Thanks for the wonderful world you created for us to cherish, during our school days.

Your wonderstruck student,

GANGA B

In the middle of the course, participants were asked to evaluate the writings of their peers. This called for a great deal of open-mindedness, especially as they had then only met each other online for a few classes. In the next set of writings, participants reflect on what this exercise of peer evaluation demanded of them – and what it gave them ...

AN ARDUOUS ARTISTRY

I embarked on this journey of reflective writing in order to understand my own teaching effectively, reflect on it and improve upon it. As I had done both reflection and writing before, I was complacent about it and the words 'Peer Evaluation' did not evoke much alarm in me.

First, I was given a report that I needed to reflect upon. I drafted my observations, read and re-read them, and presented these to my teacher. She gave her comments with a rubric that guided me to reflect on my experience and helped present my flowing thoughts better.

The next assignment was to convert a personal or professional experience into reflective writing. The experience that I had chosen to reflect upon was a class

activity that I did with my fifth graders to develop their critical thinking and survival skills. I picked up my reflective sketch book, walked between tall buildings in the older recesses of memory, ambled down the tree-lined avenues, behind passageways, and down a narrow alley which led to the treasured pond of memory that I had wanted to reflect upon. I sat in front of the pond and reminisced about that day's events.

Thoughts flowed and several strokes filled my canvas with detailed illustrations of the still water, the showy, fragrant red lilies that floated, surrounded by the rounded, notched, waxy broad leaves on slender stalks, well above the water, encompassed by a ledge with rocks that lined and protected the pond. I submitted my filled canvas to my teacher, which triggered her curiosity to seek further details.

I now perceived that I had been unsuccessful in conveying a clear picture as the reader (my teacher) was unable to visualize the entire event and was left unsatiated with my image. So, I now set about incorporating the missing particulars, and at the end of this effort, I was happy with the outcome. Satisfied

that I had now painted a vivid picture, I presented my work of art for peer evaluation.

I must mention here that it was just our third class, and for the first time, we were being called upon to assess each other's work. So, I was a little concerned, as I wondered if my peers would be able to see my viewpoint. Yet, I was eager to send it in, so as to get a different perspective and improve my narrative with their inputs.

With bated breath, I waited for the feedback and when it came, I opened my email with tingling fingers.

One of my peers praised my work - naturally, that immediately warmed my heart, but I was disheartened to note that she could not see me or my finesse in writing. Her words resounded in my ears, "Where is Naqeeb? I cannot see Naqeeb in the writing." She was able to visualize the activity as it unfolded, but as a teacher herself, she yearned to see my emotional state reflected in the writing. That was a genuine assessment.

My other peer disclosed that she saw the flow of thoughts and nothing 'flummoxed' her; nevertheless, she suggested altering individual expressions and rearranging text so as to enhance reader engagement. She went on to indicate a million details that I had not added. Was the water clear to bounce off the reflected sunlight or was the pond surrounded by tall trees as sentries that rejected the sunlight? Was there driftwood or plants that grew around the wood? Was the water cool to touch and were there reeds and cattails where multi-coloured butterflies fluttered around?



Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

As I read the feedback, I was taken aback. I considered the features that they saw and which I had missed. My contentment was shattered and consequently, it quickly disappeared, distorted in the ripples created by my thoughts. Did I really reflect enough, I asked myself, as I seemed to have left several questions unanswered in the mind of the reader?

Now, I was left with the laborious task of dissecting my reasoning and presenting it to my peers, as I integrated their feedback into my writing. So, sketch book in hand and feedback pulsating in my mind, I went back and sat beside my pond. First, I took a deep breath which calmed my soul. I touched the water and set off ripples, while the coolness travelled up my fingers. I sat there pondering for hours and gradually my vision sharpened. I glanced into the water, the ripples gone, and now, I saw more clearly the image that I had to reconstruct for my peers.

It was not easy for me to go through the task, but I persisted with grit to finish the job. I refined my writing and gently poured out my explorations - the conviction for critical thinking, my expectations, my dilemma, my apprehensions, my fears, and my endless reflection. I recounted how I had embarked upon my class activity with assumptions lurking in my mind but had emerged from it open-minded and enthralled by my students' resilience.

This arduous undertaking made me aware of the varied aspects of reflection as well as presentation. Indeed, the teacher and peer feedback created in my imagination a thousand delightful scenes that I had missed. Aha! Was that a water strider glide by? I exclaimed with delight as I saw that little fishes swam in a school under the lily

leaves. Insects buzzed, butterflies fluttered, and cattails swayed. I gained insight into my own mettle when I set myself on the path to turn my initial draft into a cogent piece of writing. As the painting emerged with all the intricate details portrayed, I was delighted at my reworked draft post evaluation and ever so grateful for peer evaluation.

NAQEEB KABIR



Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

INTROSPECTION - THROUGH ANOTHER'S LENS!

Of late, the SARS CoV-2 global pandemic has led us all to follow very strange lives in a nationwide lockdown. Quite contrary to our nature as social beings! This was a response to stimuli of a very different kind ... something that man hasn't experienced in 150 years on this planet!

While I personally enjoyed quiet time to myself, indulging in some of my creative pursuits and reading, there was only so much that I could handle, being a butterfly

myself. Fortunately, there came an opportunity to learn more about reflective writing for teachers from a guide, whom I had enjoyed working with in the past.

Here was a chance to connect and learn with several others in the field and I, for one, wasn't going to let it pass!

And so it was that I enrolled for a course titled REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS.

I was familiar with what 'being reflective' meant, something we, as teachers, have been doing while writing every student's report. But to ponder over how it is received (by a student and parent) is something else! This was in fact the content of our very first assignment. As we progressed through the course, I realized that it wasn't only about a teacher being reflective, but also of her being a writer! I began to see the difference between penning our ideas beautifully and seeing how a reader received it.

A whirlpool of thoughts arose in my mind - could the reader visualize and experience what I felt? Would (s)he be able draw connections with my flow of thought? Could what I was grappling with, make any sense to him? Was my work gripping enough, or would (s)he be happy to skip reading it altogether? Should I necessarily convey something positive, or leave the reader with a question to mull over, at the end?

The excited, yet anxious, writer in me began typing with gusto! I had my first piece ready in the next hour and was personally very pleased with what I had managed. Before I hit, the "SEND" button, I believed that I had thought over every aspect to make it a piece worth reading.

But I soon received feedback that spoke otherwise: my course instructor seemed to find some of my work slightly amiss. Suggestions and amendments quickly followed.

A day later, we were up for another challenge: send out our work for peer review. This was getting to be even more exciting! I thought that I would love to receive a critique from my classmates, to see if I was as effective a writer as I imagined myself to be. Having someone view my thought process through their lens, would help open windows for me as well. But my only worry was: what if they would just pass judgments, and not seek to understand where I was coming from? To my relief, I had a very congenial group to work with. Though we didn't yet know each other personally, this exercise did break the ice, to some extent.

We began having engaging brainstorming sessions to understand the cognitive approaches adopted by each of us, in our

respective write ups, before providing "constructive" feedback - not just *any* feedback.



Photograph: Rati Basu,

Now, why do we use the word “constructive”? I would like to think it’s because there was definitely something to learn, a takeaway for the writer as well as the reader. This was possible only because we were open to sharing our thoughts without inhibitions and were willing to hear the other side of the story - which did not necessarily come through in our first drafts.

This did help each of us gain some clarity, as well as glean a few insights. It even led us to question some of our earlier notions about writing. Now an iterative process was set in motion. With each passing edit and incorporation of valuable suggestions, I began to see my work getting more and more refined. What seemed like a challenge - before I got to know these teachers - plateaued in no time! Here we were seeking each other’s feedback, and so it was definitely fruitful.

In hindsight, I’m glad that I took up this course at time when I longed to interact with like minds in the field of education.

To learn something new, from another’s lens! That was peer evaluation’s gift to me!

GEETA VISWANATHAN



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

As the course progressed, some teachers expressed the difficulty that they experienced in meeting the challenge of writing fluently in a language (English) that they had not been schooled in. Two teachers who had studied in the vernacular medium in school chose to write about this in the next piece.

OPENING THE DOOR TO A NEW UNDERSTANDING

“Akka, it is circle time!” As soon as Krithik’s loud reminder rang in my ears, Shreya and Yash dashed to my table to grab the bell.

Ring the bell to make an announcement is one of the most exciting things for my class 6 students.

“Guys, it is circle time! Wind up your work and sit in a circle in front of the board.” Shreya declared after ringing the bell loudly.

Circle time is a 30 minute-slot allotted every week for students and teachers to have discussions on various topics, to help them sharpen their perceptions and collectively build values.

I quickly ran through the instructions and discussion points for circle time, while glancing at the story that I had planned to read and then discuss. As the students were settling down, I requested Keerthi to write '*Vernacular medium of instruction = medium of education in a local or native language*' on the white board. After arranging the scattered papers on my table, I went and sat in a circle along with the children.

"Akka, what are we going to do today in today's circle time?" A few students promptly raised the usual question.

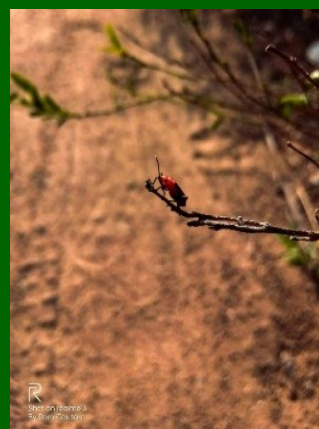
"I am going to read a true story called *Meeting a challenge*. I want all of you to pay attention and as always, please reserve your questions for the end. This story is written in the first person. The narrator of this story, Ganga, is the main protagonist, a tenth grade English teacher in a school that is 123 years old." After this necessary prelude, I started reading the story aloud.

----- *Meeting a challenge* -----

Right after my X-A English class, I rushed to the staff room, trying to organise my thoughts that ran like a crazy, aimless horse. Only after I had structured my jumbled thoughts into a few actionable check list items, did I start paying attention to my

surroundings. It was lunch time and the students were as happy as a clam at high water, enjoying their 45-minute-break, buzzing around making tumultuous noise.

Deepali's unusually glum face caught my attention as soon as I entered the crowded staff room that had been recently painted. The strong odour of acrylic distemper which still hung in the air contrasted sharply with the pleasant peach coloured walls. The moment she spotted me, Deepali came running and requested me to have lunch with her at our 'quick discussion' (or QD) spot, where Deepali and I would retreat whenever we wanted to unwind about matters that bothered us. I instantly agreed as I understood that Deepali had something important to share. After excusing ourselves from our other colleagues, we hurried there.



Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

Although Deepali had joined our school only 6 months ago, she had easily befriended us all, with her warm and friendly nature. Deepali loved to be around people and could almost instantly engage in conversation with anyone. Her subject prowess and confidence gained her a good amount of respect among the teachers, even though she spoke English with a heavy regional accent, with occasional grammatical errors. I particularly tried to spend more time with Deepali to make sure that she was comfortable in the new environment - something I would always do with any new recruit. Above all, both of us shared the same background of having been schooled in the vernacular medium, and so this gave us common ground to discuss the challenges that we faced in the prevailing English-speaking school community.

Our QD spot was a little square clearing under a big peepal tree in the north corner of our school. Other than the constant calls of a group of excited babblers on the trees, the place was quiet as usual.

"Ganga, the IX A students are so mean. They laughed at my pronunciation and made fun of my broken English." Deepali started in a vexed tone, wiping the tears trickling down her cheeks. My mind

immediately went back to one such incident in my own experience and began conjuring up images of what may have transpired in Deepali's case.

"Deepali, come on, they are just children. Don't take them so seriously. They might not have meant it!" I tried to console her, feeling a wave of pain pass through me.

"I agree. My language is not as good as the others'. I am unable to express my thoughts in English, as effectively as I do in my mother tongue. Over the years, I have inferiority complex and living under the pressure because people judge me. I am uncomfortable because people laugh at my strong regional accent and make fun of my broken English. My fear for writing is even bad. I cannot able to write properly. But how I can make my students to understand that these all are because of my vernacular background, something I have never felt bad so far?" Deepali solicited my counsel genuinely.

"Deepali, you are not alone. I had exactly the same challenges as you and I could overcome them. In fact, you are open and courageous enough to admit your own limitations, unlike me. I was so timid and clueless. Yet, with persistent

effort of practising regular English writing and oral exercises which were suggested by one of my undergraduate professors, I reached where I am today,” I confessed.

I could see a new light in Deepali’s eyes as we started walking back to the staff room, hearing the end-of-lunch bell ring.

-----End of Story-----

A silence prevailed as soon as I ended the story which usually meant that the students were still assimilating it. I waited for their responses.

“Is it really a true story, *akka*? Is Deepali *akka* still working in the same school?” Advait was the first one to inquire.

“Yes, it is a true story and Deepali *akka* is very much working in the same school.” I answered calmly.

“Do teachers also have inferiority complex? I thought they know everything and always look confident. This is new to me.”



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

Ananya was puzzled, as she rolled her eyes. A few other pairs of hands shot up, concurring with Ananya.

“Yes Ananya, as you heard in the story,” I confirmed, “teachers are just grown up versions of you. They are also human beings.”

“I guess, Deepali *akka* scolded her students for being so mean. They are not supposed to be mean to the teachers. They are very bad.” Anshit, a moralistic child, chided Deepali’s students.

After addressing a few other questions on the vernacular medium of instruction, I proceeded with the following discussion leads by eliciting students’ responses:

1. *How many of you liked/did not like the story? Please give at least one reason for your answer.*
2. *Is it ok for teachers to have such challenges when they are expected to know everything?*
3. *Suggest a few ways for Deepali akka to make her students understand her challenges.*
4. *Imagine yourself as Ganga akka’s professor and suggest a few writing and oral exercises for Deepali akka to practice and overcome her challenge.*

5. How many of you have faced/are facing challenges similar to Deepali akka?

The students' responses varied from just being sympathetic to offering a plethora of suggestions for Deepali akka to act on. Some wondered how Deepali akka had managed in her college, studying all the subjects in English and this led naturally to their sharing their own experiences of embarrassment and being judged when *they* did not speak English fluently. Overall, it was an eye opener for the students to know that teachers, too, can have such challenges and they also strive to overcome their limitations.

As they dispersed quietly, their hunched shoulders indicating deep thought, I recalled all the students' responses and found them to be quite enlightening. I realised that all through my teaching years, I had always felt that letting students know my own shortcomings might make me too vulnerable before them. Perhaps this was because I had never seen any of my own teachers confess to their own vulnerabilities ... But many of the students' responses today had proved me wrong, as I could clearly see that several were ready to accept Deepali as she was, and they genuinely understood her challenges. I could sense that the

students had included Deepali as one among them. This made me fathom that they can actually become more empathetic and accommodative, when they get to know that even adults encounter challenges. Instead of disempowering me as a teacher, this had forged a stronger bond between us!

I sensed a great feeling of release as I saw the possibility of a new understanding emerging between teachers and students.

GANGA B & DEEPALI BHAGWATE



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

THE HARD PILL THAT I SWALLOWED

“Ganga Akka, Dr. Chitra will be meeting you @ 6 pm today along with Aashna to discuss about her recently taken blood test.”

Over the intercom, the nurse from our school clinic fixed this appointment without giving me any option to reschedule.

Even though such meetings go on for more than an hour, being a house parent of 20 girls, I usually don't mind - provided they don't clash with my music class. But on that day, however, there was exactly such a clash.

Choicelessly, I walked with Aashna to the clinic. Aashna was in the 6th grade and she had mild Mongolian

features, her short and sturdy physical frame highly complemented by light brown, shiny, straight hair.

We reached well in time and settled down on the wooden bench in the small waiting room. Having no expectations from the meeting, Aashna was happily enjoying her comic book by occasionally asking me for the meanings of a few words and phrases that she read. In the meanwhile, I was trying to recall and hum the recently taught *varnam* verses to compensate my missed music class.

Oftentimes, a teacher can get stuck in the groove of mechanically ‘correcting’ the student, a habit that is eloquently described by John Holt in the chapter titled “How Schools Fail” of the book “[HOW CHILDREN FAIL](#)”.

Participants read this chapter and then reflected on times when they took the easy way out with their students, as they hurriedly tried to ‘fix’ the error. A Principal made a connection to the expensive mistake that she once made ... these are some of the pieces that follow ...

Wondering whether we would be called in on time, I noticed that the clinic was particularly crowded on that day, as many children were waiting and like us, appeared also to be wishing to go on time. Given the crowd, we were lucky to be called in at 6:05 and we rushed into the well-equipped doctor's room. After exchanging a few pleasantries, middle-aged and slightly plump Dr. Chitra started to discuss Aashna's case in her usual calm and clear tone.

Turning towards Aashna, she looked at her narrow eyes and patiently explained to her that she had become extremely anaemic, while showing her blood report readings and mouthing some medical jargon. From Aashna's blank look, the doctor immediately realised that she needed simpler words. I quietly appreciated Dr. Chitra's presence of mind and found that she could recall that Aashna had been receiving full time 1-1 learning support from the education support team.

"Aashna, you need to start to have a lot of green vegetables, cooked vegetables and *ragi kanji* regularly. Will you? I am going to check on this with Ganga *akka* regularly." The doctor made it sound much simpler now, as she spoke in a comforting voice. Still looking blank, Aashna nodded in agreement and listened to the doctor as the latter explained the

medicines and supplements that she had to take.

On our way back, my left hand was stuffed with medicine covers and I gently placed my right hand on Aashna's shoulders. I tried to make the child understand the word "Anaemia" and its implications, especially if she did not follow the doctor's advice.

"I know you hate vegetables. Still, you must have them for the sake of your own health. Please do not bother about the taste." I tried to convince her and also suggested that she makes a checklist of the prescribed food items as a daily reminder. On the same night, with the help of her friend, Aashna gingerly made a list of medicines and dietary recommendations that she was expected to follow for the next two weeks. I checked the list thoroughly and assured her that I would support her through regular reminders, for which I instantly initiated timely alerts on my phone.

We were both very meticulous for the first few days. As soon as I started to get busy with other things (and therefore stopped checking with her) Aashna started slackening in following her checklist. Things came to light much later when I came to know from the doctor that her second blood report readings

were unchanged from the first – in other words, there was no improvement! Confused and irritated, I probed Aashna about the prescribed list, only to face the shocking truth that was now revealed to me. Let alone *more* vegetables, Aashna had not even been eating the basic serving. Worse, she had been trading her vegetables with her friend. When I checked her medicine intake, that also showed that Aashna had not been regular in taking them. As always, unable to look into my eyes, with her head down, the poor girl was absolutely quiet throughout the conversation.

A sense of utter failure swept over me and I immediately tried counter that by switching to (what I saw as) an easier approach. Adopting a stern tone, I said: “From tomorrow, you must take triple portions of vegetables. Only after finishing the vegetables, will you be served the main dish. And from now on, for each time that you try to slip, I will increase one more portion of vegetable for each such lapse.” I also commanded another girl to keep an eye on Aashna in the dining hall and report to me of any deceitful acts.

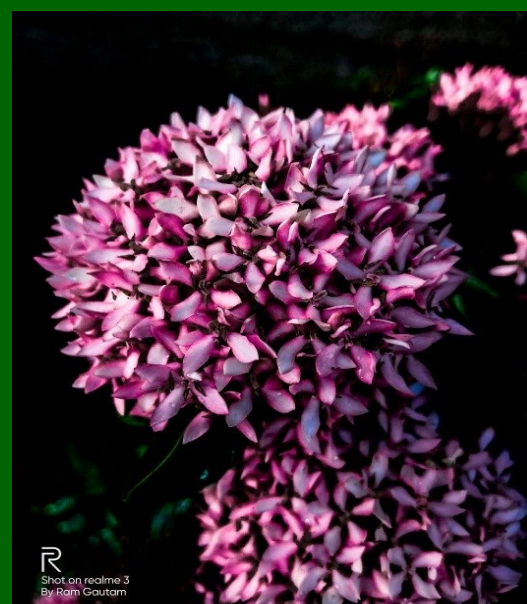
Under my vigilant eye, things appeared to go on well for a while and whenever I found any slippages, one more portion of vegetable was

promptly added. Aashna quietly underwent this regimen, occasionally getting away with a dose of trickery.

Soon it was time for us to meet the doctor again for the periodical review of the blood report, and I summarised the recent events to the doctor, with Aashna alongside me bearing the same blank expression. With the report showing better readings this time, Dr. Chitra asked Aashna about the whole incident.

“I hate vegetables! I find them disgusting. Yet, I was getting used to them slowly. But, when the portions were increased, it became more difficult and I could not handle so much vegetable at once,” Aashna mumbled.

My heart sank and tears welled up in my eyes, and this time the doctor



Shot on realme 3
By Ram Gautam

Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

gave *me* a bewildered look. Aashna was also looking at me. Unable to meet their eyes, I held my head down, feeling like running away from the room. At the same time, I wanted to give Aashna a tight hug. I impugned myself for not able to understand the children's tender feelings. The doctor's look silently injected a question in me, "What are you trying to prove?"

I swallowed the hard pill on that day and on the pill cover, it read: "This pill does not work, if commanded or demanded. It works only with tender loving care and understanding." In taking the easy way out, I had made use of the power that a teacher can wield and forgotten the love that she can far more effectively give instead.

GANGA B

SOME MISTAKES CAN BE EXPENSIVE!

It was that time of the year which is dreaded by all parents: the time for announcement of the school fees for the new academic year.

The school management had decided to increase our annual fees by 10% and the same was communicated to all parents via a circular and an email in March. As expected, there were many

parents who came and expressed their concern about the fee hike. One such parent was Mr. Raj, whose children are enrolled at the school.

Like most parents, Mr. Raj was a parent who wanted the best possible education for his children and outstretched himself to pay the school fees. However, he was also pugnacious and combative in nature. As a principal, regardless of the temperaments of different parents, I always have to maintain a decorum of courtesy and diplomacy, keeping in mind that the 'customer is always king'. To my satisfaction, over a period of two years, Mr. Raj had begun to appreciate and compliment the school, as he noticed his children's progress and the kind of activities that were conducted.

Mr. Raj was unfortunately also known for his aggressive nature because of which the administrative staff were always reluctant to communicate with him. In April he sought an appointment with me, a month after the increase in school fees had been conveyed to the parents; presumably the reason for which he wanted to meet me. Keeping this in mind, I too, prepared myself, just as a batsman would before going onto the field, with my visor and leg pads. As expected, Mr. Raj expressed his concern of the hike in school fees and admitted that it would be difficult for him to comply. As the principal of the school, I justified the increase to the best of my ability, but he was very defensive. Mr. Raj insisted that it should be reduced to 5% and he should be allowed to pay it over 4 instalments, as opposed to the biannual fee payment policy. Almost after an hour of

discussion, in which both of us held firmly to our respective stands, I concluded the meet by offering to take up this matter with the school management, promising to convey their decision later to Mr. Raj.

In February, whilst the administrative staff were following up on all the outstanding fee payments, they also reminded Mr. Raj to settle the amount by sending him an email. Mr. Raj promptly replied by asking us to refer to the email sent by him to the school the previous April. Immediately, I asked the staff to bring forward the said email and we discovered that in it, Mr. Raj had calculated the fees based on a 5% increase and he also stated that he would be paying the fees over 4 instalments. The administrative staff and I had overlooked this deliberate miscalculation of Mr. Raj and replied that the fees could instead be paid over 3 instalments. Even though there had not been any communication from the school about a reconsideration of the fees for him, this parent had assumed such a decision in his favour, and worse, this had gone unnoticed by our staff! There was evidently a miscommunication and admittedly also a lapse on the part of the school.

It was now left to me to clarify matters and set things right. I asked the office to fix an appointment with Mr. Raj. He refused to come for a meeting, and I was forced to speak with him over the telephone. I explained to him that he had to pay the 10% hike and that there was a common fee policy which he had to abide by. During the whole of the next month, I applied all possible negotiation and mediation skills that I

had learnt in my seven years of being a toastmaster member. Despite all these efforts, Mr. Raj refused to come and meet the school authorities and in due course, he even became uncivilized and vulgar in all his interactions with the school staff.

This incident taught me a very valuable lesson in life: any communication made with parents must be done with utmost care. Before me, I could now see two options: one, I could stand my ground and deal with the parent in a shrewd and professional manner, and two, I could involve the management and take their advice. However, as a leader, I had to own moral responsibility for the situation. Hence, I decided that the administrative staff and I would pay the remaining 5% fees, that Mr. Raj had refused to pay for both his children.

In my opinion, fighting a battle with parents like Mr. Raj was not worth the ugly confrontations and negative publicity that could then ensue. This result was clearly due to miscommunication, and indeed, it proved to be an expensive mistake but certainly one that has made me all the wiser. By paying the balance amount, the office staff and I took responsibility for our lapse, and realized that in future, especially when dealing with figures, we must ensure that our calculations and communications are unambiguous, precise and crystal clear.

Most importantly when certain decisions cannot be altered, one must be upfront and learn to say 'no.'

We literally paid for this lesson!

VIDHYA NAGARAJ



Photograph: Rati Basu, Santiniketan

The only non-teacher in the group wrote a letter to an aspiring leader ... this piece follows ...

Dear Annies,

I am filled with joy and delight to hear from you, and even more so to know of your desire to become the Youth Secretary of our Church and lead the group. It takes a lot of courage, will power, and steadfastness to lead the youth fellowship in many activities and especially to nurture them spiritually. I've also been hearing about your endless zeal to work for the betterment of the community and raise financial grants for the education of the unprivileged. Your compassion for orphans and homeless people is truly remarkable!

I remember having the same zeal and passion, earnestly wanting to do something meaningful, when I was your age. That euphoric phase also brought to light my skill of switching into different personalities, sometimes bold and strong,

and some days meek and gentle so as to gain the approval of the Church executive committee. Being a Youth Secretary isn't easy and one must bear all the burden and responsibilities of taking care of each young soul's spiritual health, individual problems, and yes! sometimes you'll get tired and weary of processing files for awareness programs and workshops to get approvals on financial grants, as you pave the way for your heart's desire to be realized. Remember your greater cause must be heard and felt by the committee and it takes a lot of steadiness to reach there. A youth secretary isn't just a tag that comes with power, but a tag that warrants greater responsibility. One must be selfless, unconditional, loving, and forgiving.

In the coming days, you will realize that being a leader is far more than just standing and preaching. A leader lends an ear to a troubled heart and listens to the other's struggle. Now, where people are less engaged in real conversations and even their parents and friends are so active in social media that they rarely give them time, small wonder that heartaches and insecurities are growing. You'll be their antidote and resting place. Far from being crushed after getting to know their unsettled hearts and minds, you may well be overwhelmed. A leader sometimes needs to act like a lion, bold and strong headed, taking risks for the greater cause even against existing odds.

As you will meet and converse with many young hearts, you may find it extremely hard to figure out what they really want, but time and patience will surely bring you there. Soon you will find yourself listening and advocating both to parents and their children, as you realize that it is difficult to be unbiased and take any one's side. I remember dealing with one child whose parents were constantly fighting, resulting

in his turning into a pessimistic introvert. The amount of pressure that he was handling was such a burden that it took months for him to heal – but all it took was my continuously reaching out and simply listening to him! And, thus, there were many others with similar backgrounds, wanting to be free and loved. It was tremendously difficult to convince parents that their tangles were affecting their child's life. It's not a noble job, certainly; in fact, you will have to face wounding words and emotional turbulence, but you will need to step out of these for the greater cause.

Well, that's just one part. You must be thinking about the bigger picture of the community, orphans and many awareness and charity programs. I must confess that this part is way more challenging than you could ever imagine! It will bring you face to face with your core values. People in the committee won't be loving goody-goodies; rather, you'll be faced with numerous queries which you will have to answer very humbly to obtain the committee's approval for hosting spiritual and awareness programs.

Angels (who understand your zeal for humanitarian causes) don't live among us, and therefore, it is all the more critical to note that your will and perseverance will determine your approvals. Make sure that you don't fall into the trap of standing for your own cause (as this might lead you to a personal battle and resentment), but always keep before you the better and greater cause.

Annies, there are other parts to this job that will yield real joy and satisfaction. To see one soul flourish and breakthrough their struggles and find inner peace is something that cannot be compared with material riches. The amount of trust and the strength of the bonds that you will build with young

people will bring you much bliss and peace. These are things that cannot be traded or bought. It is a rich character that you'll be carving within yourself.

Yes! Leaders have their own limitations and they do grow weary. I too was weary, disappointed, tired, and wanted to give up. But then, I prayed for strength and the heart of a lion, ready to face any dire situation. All it takes is for one soul to flourish, one soul to smile, one soul to be heard and that will keep you going!

You might have to compromise on your individual plans and put others' concerns first. It might sound unfair and disappointing when put thus, but I say this because many have lost track of the real meaning of leadership by giving into their personal ambitions. I chose a different path and exposed myself to ground realities, renouncing the podium with all its preaching and glamour. When I look back, I can honestly say without any remorse, that it was worth comprising everything for the greater cause.

I pray that you heed and ponder what I have penned. May you be a leader with great humility but with the inner strength of a lion.

With much love & prayers, Moses Dada

MOSES KARTHAK



Photograph: Rati Basu,
Santiniketan

[Eli Finkel's talk on the Marriage Hack](#) was viewed by participants as part of one assignment. Following this, they were asked to **reflect on a conflict**, by describing it from a third party's perspective ... these pieces follow ...

WEDLOCK CHOP

My personal experience of doing this exercise was awesome and powerful.

I liked how he started this video clip explaining marriage and a long-term romantic partnership. I just felt like I needed to watch this video because someone I know recently filed for divorce. This clip gave me a chance to think harder about the conflicts that they were facing as a couple.

When they were having difficulties, I think they forgot about human behaviour and how it changes during different phases in life. Instead, this person's family kept on trying to resolve their minor issues, but the major conflict was the expectations that they each had from the other. Both were unwilling to step back and reflect on where they were being unreasonable. As a third person, my view is that their conflict should not reach the court because it can be resolved. I don't see it as a major conflict. It is so common that probably 85% of married couples face this issue.

Their conflict started with a lack of communication and their spending inadequate quality time together. Therefore, there was a change in each one's

behaviour with the other and they felt the need to come out of this frustrated married life. They were both expecting the same sort of engagement with each other as when they were dating 12 years ago. These changes could have been stressful, and I can see that they must have become destructive over time. This person never let on that his marital life was stressful or that they were having these conflicts - nor did he ask for any intervention to save his marriage.

How I wish today, I could show them this video of **Eli Finkel's The Marriage Hack!** Especially during this lock down, when both of them have ample time to reflect and save their marriage.

When I was watching this video, my thought was 'how I wish I could rewind this person's life again and support him on another level, so as to save his marriage!' Another question in my mind is - from where does Dr. Neeraja get these videos and articles ...?

DONKA SHERPA



Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

RUMINATIONS ON ROLE REVERSAL

Is it possible that the same heart that overflows with so much love for someone gets so enraged that it wants to crush that very person's defiance with all its might?

This is what happens to me whenever there is a conflict between my son and myself.

The word 'conflict' brings to my mind the struggle that ensues from opposing feelings. I wonder if it is possible to entirely avoid a conflict. But since when did having differences of opinion become so grim, especially to one like me, who had always believed them to be healthy?

I now see that the conflict empowered me with a position of authority, while the other was defencelessly dependent on me, and that was precisely when the boundaries of thoughtfulness and regard seemed to blur. His inconsiderate behaviour, rudeness and disobedience filled my heart with such rage that before my mind could begin to process my agitation, the words flew out of my mouth and the damage was done. Alas! My raging heart's blindness blamed him, putting myself on a self-righteous pedestal, and hence, the need for self-correction never occurred.

Recently, several heated arguments between my son and me had left him in tears and me exasperated, infuriated, guilty and choked with self-contempt. We always went back to our daily lives, but the incidents weighed heavily on my conscience and it was never the same. Any reminder of the incident put us both on the

defensive, which only ended in one of us again condemning the other. I knew that I could not continue like this because it spoiled the home ambience and I felt I was setting a bad precedent for my other children.

After one such altercation, I could not sleep. To put an end to this, I pondered deeply on the reason for my son's behaviour. Though initially maddened by his seeming indifference to my point of view, I examined myself and asked, 'How does my son feel through this argument?' After all, he is otherwise a cheerful, sensible, kind and polite young boy. With determination and integrity, I sat down to analyze the issue from a neutral well-wisher's perspective.

I paused to recollect his accusations against me. The dejected voice rung in my ears accusing me of demanding blind submission, holding me responsible for not seeing his point of view, complaining of my self-righteousness proving him wrong, my being unapologetic, unreasonably strict and habitually unleashing my anger on him.

As these words swam across my mind, I could see a very familiar silhouette emerge. Desperate to gain clarity, I was startled at my newfound truth. With the obscurity gone, I saw how I had transfigured into my own strict, demanding mother, who I had so vehemently opposed as a child. Flooded with anger at myself and remorse, my river of emotions burst its banks and engulfed me in self-awareness. A two-edged sword now pierced my heart.

As two intensely contrasting realities dawned on me, even while the world was enveloped in darkness and sleep, I felt a

dazzling aura of enlightenment encompass me. Now, I simultaneously felt my mother's love and protection for me along with my son's frustration with me. I realized that with changing times, my conservative possessiveness was suffocating him, and I could clearly see his struggle to outgrow my clutch.

Thus far, my husband's advice that I needed to let go of my fears and allow our son to bloom beautifully into adulthood had fallen on my deaf ears. He required space and confidence to navigate his decisions and to experience trust in his judgments. Had not my mother, like me now, also wanted to defend and protect me from the big, bad world, by invading my independence - which I had, at that time, so ferociously defended? I could see that I was now making the very same mistakes, by travelling the path that she had traversed.

Comprehending my folly after this soul-searching, I decided to rectify my mistake.

Pouring my heart out to my son the next day, I honestly apologized for having smothered his independence with my own fears and insecurities. Though setting foot into his rebellious teens, he now saw that my intention had been to safeguard him from any harm.

My introspection brought immense relief and peace in all our lives. It does not mean we do not have arguments anymore, but I consciously exercise self-control, respectfully letting my son exercise his judgment, within justified limits, so as to let him grow into a confident young adult.

All it took was to do a role reversal and be in his shoes for a little while! **NAQEEB**

KABIR



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

SHARPENING MY INNER LENS

One morning, my friend of fifteen years, Vidhya, called me and suggested that I enrol for an online course titled REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS, that was being offered by a well-known research scholar.

Frankly speaking, I had no idea about reflective writing until then, though I had attended few sessions in creative writing in the past. As a science teacher, I was familiar with terms like 'reflex action', 'reflection', 'reflective surface' and other such words with the root 'REFLE'.

Since I have known Vidhya for long, I quickly registered for the course and then forgot about it, until one fine day we received details of the course

from the Course Instructor. The course began with an invitation to fill in a Google form, which helped the Course Instructor to get familiar with the participants.

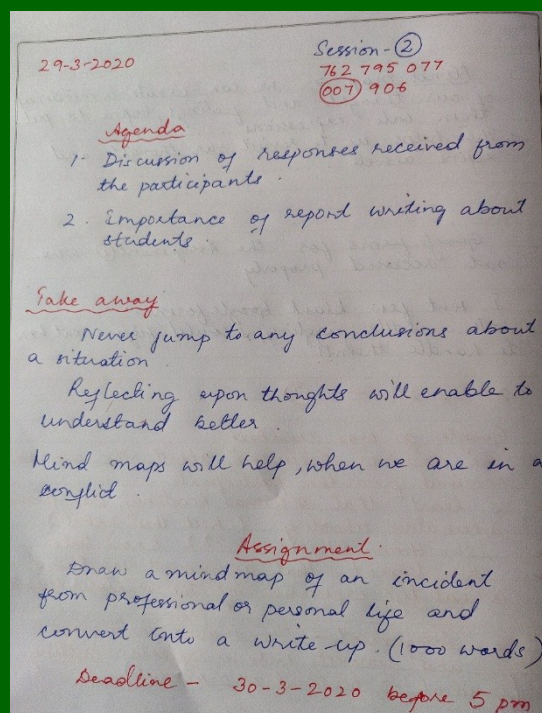
I was at first sceptical, as I doubted if the course would enhance my skills and wondered if I would be able to derive any advantage as a teacher, administrator or even just as an individual.

Nevertheless, being a diligent learner, I genuinely prepared for each session and even started maintaining a learning journal, updating my understanding from each session. This practice of mine helped me keep track of every correspondence with the Instructor as well as the other participants.

To cite just one outcome of this practice, I would read and revisit the reading material sent to us along with the assignments especially from Parker J Palmer's 'An Anatomy of Fear', where the author speaks about multi-layered fears, conflicts and how fear makes the fearer porous!

And now let me come to the ASSIGNMENTS!!! These were my most intense experience throughout the course.

Though I had acquired the necessary qualifications to be a teacher, by



Scanned image of one page from the learning journal

studying in a regular school and college for 20 years, I hardly remember doing any assignments, researching for them and reviewing them multiple times before submitting them just a few minutes before the deadline - and then waiting with nail-biting anxiety for the Instructor's feedback, almost like a meritorious student hungry for the results. During these learning sessions and submission of assignments, I had to muster all my courage to open my inbox and click the new mail to read the instructor's comments. Another fallout was that I became familiar with the tools of 'Microsoft Word edit' only after the first assignment. My reserves of courage had to be periodically

topped with extra mettle, in order to click the 'PINK COMMENT BOX' and read the nature of each error and detailed suggestions to improve my writing.

The crux of the course, in my opinion, is to revisit each experience in all its detail, so as to lay it out in words as vividly, graphically and vibrantly as possible. Initially, I failed to comprehend the persistent endeavour of the instructor to point out errors as I had never had this kind of detailed analysis of my write-ups by any of my mentors or faculty during my formal learning years. Honestly, I never felt insulted with the constant pointing of errors from the instructor, as I was mindful of my limitations and I considered this course as a means to overcome them.

As I started to write thoughtfully, I attempted to convey my own views unravelling a style that was hitherto unknown even to me.

The most integral process of reflective writing is *thinking about thinking* and lingering over each thought, which leads to lifelong learning.

I also found that I could appreciate the reading material suggested by the Instructor and also discuss its essence with a co-learner. I think I experienced a natural shift in the

way that I now presented my thoughts.



Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

As the course progressed, I began to perceive afresh the way in which I usually send notes, circulars or any simple messages to my colleagues on our chat group or even over email. The more I began to reflect on my thoughts, the more my right brain came into action: and voila! I found that I could think outside the box, sometimes, as if the box did not even exist!

I realised that when I left a line hanging (a tendency that came to light during this course) without connecting to the next idea, my colleagues would be distracted and, when I failed to recognise this, I would wonder why they were not responding pertinently. I became mindful that I had too many long, never-ending sentences that I employed to convey instructions.

For instance: *Teachers, as per the circular sent from the department, we have to make a list of all the scholastic and co scholastic grades and fill the attendance details, then complete the classification that is provided in the instruction manual, also check the contact and Aadhar details of both parents and student.*

Instead, I could just say - follow the instructions and fill the details accordingly.

As I began to write the assignments, I experienced how tricky it is to express oneself in brief, and I saw that this was a cognitive act of a higher order. Conveying my thoughts while retaining the essence of the idea, instead of employing long sentences laced with a number of conjunctions was, I discovered, an act of great skill. I had to be much more attentive while writing than I was while thinking.

In one of the sessions, the Instructor emphasized 'chiselling' by quoting from the words of the famous sculptor, Michelangelo-"The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there; I just have to chisel away the superfluous material." This, she said, implied that like the sculptor, we too had to chisel away the unwanted words and expressions so as to retain the

essence of our expression, even as we keep it appealing to the reader.

Peer-learning and peer-evaluation were an integral part of the sessions. The write-ups shared by my co-learners gave me an insight of how thoughts on the same topic could be expressed in diverse ways by different individuals. Peer-evaluation encouraged us to accept criticism and tighten the expression of our thoughts precisely.

One takeaway from a session that stayed with me was when all of us began writing together, using keywords that we had each entered in the chat window. We began following the instructions of the Instructor and started sharing our freshly crafted sentences with each other online. In that short class, we could only come up with a few jointly constructed lines. This was followed by the crowning masterstroke, when the Instructor penned a masterpiece from some of the words and phrases entered during the session and emailed it to all of us after the class.

As Mark Twain said, "Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words." I think writing a hundred words probably requires more mental effort than writing a thousand, particularly if the write up has to be meaningful and appealing to the reader. Reflective writing has

allowed me to condense, distil, refine and purify my thoughts and chisel my expression even as I retain the essence of what I want to convey.

I would like to conclude with the following quotes to sum up my thoughts on reflective writing:

1. "I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter."
Blaise Pascal

2. "Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short."
Henry David Thoreau

LALITHA BAI



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

The lockdown due to the Corona pandemic set off some reflective writing by one of the participants. Her piece follows ...

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

MOTHER EARTH IS HEALING

GLOBAL PANDEMIC

LOCK DOWN

SOCIAL DISTANCING

NOVEL CORONA

QUARANTINE ...

What are these words? From where are they coming? Why do they sound so ominous? Why is everybody using these words everywhere, all the time?

As I have muddled thoughts on the topic of writing my reflective piece, I think about this destructive virus which has been my preoccupation ever since it was born. Lives have been lost. People are gravely ill. Others have been quarantined for weeks.

And as for me, I muster up some courage, as if I am going out to war, every single day.

My brain is sore.

How does one help the people who are infected with this deadly virus? Who/when/how are we going to find the vaccination or the cure? I can't help feeling helpless as I see that so many people have lost their lives and their families. How is anyone to help and support another through this pandemic? Just by taking precautions? Big questions are popping into my head. Didn't people who got infected also take these so-called precautions?

As I wake up in the morning, I see that there is bright sunshine and I feel like wearing my red dress to work.

Suddenly, I realise that I am homebound.

The scene outside my window tells me that summer is here. I peer out to admire the yellow flowers blooming on this bright and sunny day. Opening my window to get some fresh air, I go out to my sunny terrace with my child. I cannot go anywhere else, because there is nowhere to go. Most cars stay at home as they claim this is the only way that humankind can hold back destruction.

“Pray at home, stay safe.”

Who does not pray? Pray to whom? Follow which instructions?

All of us are clueless. At least, that is my feeling right now!

Many of us are trying to figure out actions that can be taken to protect ourselves, our families and communities but do we really know what will protect us? Our information feeds - television programmes, the Internet and social media - provide us with continuous updates about the unfolding crisis - some of them are accurate, while others are seemingly less so. I am trying to understand the situation and make the best decisions for my family. Oh, how I am struggling with this! Like, I have requested my maid not to come to my house or do the household chores, the milkman has discontinued home-delivery of milk, and I keep asking my son to continuously wash his hands or drink hot water (I suppose this is one of the remedies – but who knows? It might just be another myth!)



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

Normally, I am so busy— going to school, getting my child ready for school, and automatically following my daily schedule — that there is just no time to think about Mother Earth or Nature. But now that I am confined to my house, boundaries have been made. I know that everybody's WhatsApp display picture is Mother Earth healing in the natural process, but is there someone who can tell me when we (human beings) will heal from this pandemic? When will we heal from COVID-19?

That is THE big question.

As each day of this lock down passes by, I begin to see that a lot of things are happening within me. I just realised that I am struggling to play multiple roles: as a mother, wife, daughter-in-law, teacher and now, a reflective learner. One of the biggest challenges that I face is allocating time to complete my tasks both professionally and personally.

As soon as I wake up, I have to head down to the kitchen and prepare breakfast, plan for lunch and dinner.



Photograph: Rati Basu, Santiniketan

Then, clean up, dishes, laundry - gosh! So much work again at 1 p.m. Lunch means dishes and cleaning up again. With all these daily chores, I realise that homemaking is not an easy task. Usually, I do not have to do all these chores when I go to school, because my domestic help attends to them, but during this lock down I have asked my help not to come. But oh how challenging all this is! Then, I play the role of teacher, but now, in the Distance Learning Model, which we are following as a school, i.e. delivering lessons online. This degree of online tracking is new to me: checking students' work, giving them feedback and updating their tracking sheets, as I write my report about each student's progress. After this work, my role as a mother begins, with my sitting alongside my son and checking his assignment, then submitting it to his teacher through email and attaching his work for each subject – that is another challenge! As we do his homework together and talk about Covid-19, he says he is feeling bad for the family who lost their loved ones because of novel coronavirus. Unlike me, he likes doing homework over emails and is having fun spending time with his cousins (who stay next door) during lock down. He says he would like to thank the police and doctor for

facing the novel Coronavirus for us. He is not scared of this virus because he says he is taking precautions. In this conversation, I come to know that he is thankful to all his teachers for sending his homework and making him learn. Hopefully, my own students feel the same about me.

Another vital role, as a reflective learner, is learning new strategies to improve my writing skills which I have been struggling with during this lock down. But I am engaged in so many things that even before I know it, the online classes start and the deadline to submit the next assignment is upon me! No doubt it is worth taking this class, where I am learning a lot about writing with so many layers to learn and it also feels good to connect with the different educators who face several issues similar to mine. Receiving feedback from Dr. Neeraja on my writing makes me see that I have so much to learn. Currently, I might not have begun implementing all the new learnings, but definitely, there are so many takeaways. Every day, I have started writing a journal before going to bed.

I am very thankful to the course instructor that she initiated this course for us during this challenging time, so as to share her knowledge

and her time. She is truly an educator.

On the other hand, when I see my other family members, I see that for them it is a break - for spending time with the family, and they are enjoying staying at home. They say that the government is paying them to be at home. But somehow, for me it's just the opposite: no personal time, so many worries about school reopening, or about completion of my syllabus, or loss of my students' learning time, etc. I feel like a failure in playing these multiple roles, my school vision says we are life learners that is what I believe in and just like Covid -19 is a temporary phase for all of us, this challenging time too is a learning phase.

This is how Covid-19 seems to have infected my life!

DONKA SHERPA



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

What is the fate of those countless students who are written off by their teachers, parents or mentors, because they don't meet typical expectations? How often are they told that they are 'not upto the mark'?

How do they grapple with the struggle to prove themselves? Do they?

A present-day Principal who participated in this course writes candidly of how she was herself an average student in school ...

THE POWER OF 'NOT YET'

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a conference titled 'The power of the average'. As I watched the presentation, one particular slide caught my attention. The following is an extract from the presentation:

"All schools take pride in the success of their students, be it in board exam results, sports or other inter-school competitions. These are the stars of the school, and rightly so, since they bring glory to the institution! They typically constitute 20-25% of the student population. However, there is also another population, the invisible 75% majority, that is much larger. They are the 'average' students, who don't

shine or stand out, either in academics or in activities. They are quiet, reasonably well-behaved, not troublesome at all but not particularly interesting either. Simply put, they are quite forgettable. But like all other students they too have heads and hearts, thoughts and feelings. Their significance also lies in the fact that they form the biggest segment of students in any school."

It is not incorrect – in fact, it is but natural - for teachers and parents to aspire for the best for their children. But the problem is when they set their expectations very high, and children don't live up to them. Imagine if the entire class scored 90 and above! In my opinion, that would be a classful of



Photograph: K Natarajan, Richi Valley

robots, not children. This is because each human being is born unique and with their own identity.

So, what happens when the nurturers are authoritative and critical of everything that the child does? What happens when the child does not live up to their 'expectations'? The negative strokes break the child and it takes a lifetime to undo the damage that was done in childhood. I speak from experience! As a student, I belonged to the 75% average group.

I can vividly recollect an incident that happened while I was in Grade X. As I struggled to cope with mathematics, the teacher lost patience and told me before

the entire class, that I “would not achieve anything significant in life.” Hearing such a damning pronouncement in front of my peers made me wish that I could just disappear from the face of the earth without leaving a trace. That insensitive remark left me feeling incompetent and a total failure.

Interestingly, the turning point in my life came after graduation, when I drifted into teaching not by choice but by chance, like a stranded boat. . My teaching career began in a small low-income private school. Thanks to experiences like the one I just described, I had just one mantra: to become a better version of myself. I was always in the ‘not yet’ mode: I was not yet what I aspired to be. My competition was not with someone else, but with ‘my own self.’ I recollect reading this quote: “If you are doing the same things as you did last year, then you are not growing, you remain stagnant.” This anonymous quote had a profound impact on me.

I knew that being in the teaching profession demanded that I constantly upskill myself. Thus, I made use of every single opportunity that came my way to learn new skills, further my education and take up each new challenge with grit and determination.

They say that the journey of a thousand miles, begins with a single step. The ‘average’ me slowly advanced in my career. Over a period of 24 years, I can now say that I have a wide exposure from being a teacher in a low-income private school to that of a head of department, Academic Coordinator, Headmistress and now - the Principal of a school!

My formative years embedded in me a feeling of inadequacy and low self-confidence. To cope, I developed an insatiable thirst to learn. I constantly devoured books and to this day, at any given point of time, I have about 30 unread books. I sign up for more courses than I can possibly do, and I attend as many seminars as possible. At times, the efforts seem to be strenuous, but it is these efforts that have helped me become better at my craft, reinvent myself and stay in sync with the paradigm changes that are constantly taking place in the field of education. The zeal to learn, unlearn and relearn has developed a growth mindset in me and made me believe in the power of ‘not yet.’ I have understood that intelligence and capabilities are not necessarily inbuilt in us but can also be developed over a period of time, with the right effort.

I have come a long way from the average, obscure student who was dismissed off by her teacher, to now being the Principal of a reputed chain of schools, with a pan-India presence. I am happy that the stranded boat has finally anchored at the port of education. My career has shaped my life and personality. I look at my career that has spanned over two decades and pray that this journey in education should continue for another two decades, for I must still climb the summit and do not want to stop mid-way.

I am not the same student that I was in school or college. I have replaced my limiting beliefs with ‘the power of not yet,’ by which I mean that I have not shied away from failing and making mistakes. Instead, I have learnt to engage with my failures as

they alert me to my *not yet* having reached my goal. To cite just one example, most people learn to drive a car in one course comprising a few lessons. But I took two years and four subsequent lessons to master the art of driving. Had I given up after failing in the very first attempt, I would have never learnt how to drive. By not giving up and engaging with my failures, I kept the learning trails open. This has helped me grow beyond my own expectations and those of my teachers and family. This has had a favourable consequence in my present role, too. As a teacher and school leader, I do not easily label teachers and students as ‘successful’, ‘unsuccessful’ or average. For I know that each individual can also grapple with the power of ‘not yet’, and each one has some unique potential, so they eventually will learn to lead to spread their wings and fly when they are ready. I see that my responsibility is only to nurture them and help them see that they don’t condemn themselves with finality – the way my teacher did.

In Hamin Sunim’s book, ‘Love for imperfect things,’ , there is a quote, “Compare yourself not with others, but with the old you. Like yourself for making an honest effort. And continue to have faith in yourself.”

The old me would be astounded to meet the new me. Today I am a successful Principal and I have set up 2 schools: DPS Mysore Road and Delhi World Public School Tumkur road, building teams and nurturing talents amongst students and teachers. I am often invited to speak in various forums and occasionally also

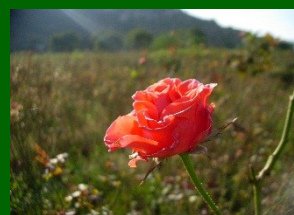
honoured. The new me is thriving in various aspects of life - the educational initiative that I have introduced was recently mentioned in the book, ‘The Reflective Learner’. My views on education have found a place in the book, ‘Teaching tales, learning trails’ and I am proud of creating a teacher portfolio for my team (<https://dwpstumkurroad.wordpress.com>) - one among the very few schools of this chain to start such an initiative. A pity indeed that my X grade teacher failed to see this potential in me! It was not yet visible, but it was surely there inside me!

The Japanese have a unique art form, ‘*wabi-sabi*,’- wherein imperfect and broken things are not discarded but fixed and accepted. None of us is perfect. But instead of discarding our imperfections and aspiring for perfection, what if we begin to engage with our limitations? What if we could convert our fear of failing into a strength?

The power of ‘not yet’ has made me believe that capabilities and intelligence are not fixed traits. They can be developed along the journey of life by nurturing our skills.

And so, my journey continues to grow with my eyes set to conquer newer heights and conquer them I will.

VIDHYA NAGARAJ



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley

How does it feel to be the odd one out? Especially if one is no longer a child, but an adult? The only male member of the group, and the only non-teacher, reflected on a familiar issue of wanting to belong ...

Do I feel Left out?

Do I feel left out? Maybe it's just a feeling.

Should I be concerned? Do I need to act smart and try to impress them? Am I already feeling insecure? What did I put myself into? I hope I am not surrounded by a group of hardcore feminists, am I?

I was already loaded with several projects and now, I had gone and registered for a reflective writing course, where I turned out

to be the only male member amongst a group of ten, with a female instructor.

Small wonder, then, that the above thoughts were rushing through my head.

In our first online Zoom call on 26th March 2020 at 11:30 am, I got a sneak peek of what was to come. There's a saying that the "first impression is the last impression". And my first impression here was that of being amidst smart people who were highly skilful in reflective writing. More than the course, perhaps due to my own insecurities, my preoccupation during the entire session was: "How should I present myself?"

Being the only non-teaching member in a group made up wholly of teachers whom you have never met is hard enough. I naturally found it difficult to connect with conversations around a struggling child, lesson planning, etc. But what was even harder to accept was that the group consisted *only* of females! By the end of the introductory class, my thoughts were running amok. Out of many aspects, there was one fact that struck me. In order to connect to conversations, surely there was a need to be likeminded and to share some common experiences? If this was a pre-requisite, I clearly didn't have it! Already terrified of the course (with a title like *Reflective Writing*) I had now also met a bunch of female teachers who seemed to be



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

equipped with vast experience and knowledge.

What am I going to do? Have I gone mad? Or should I rather have a private conversation with Dr. Neeraja and make some silly excuse to drop the course? No, No! I need to calm down and let time and a little bit of space guide me. All I need to do is to be calm.

So went my crazy mind.

Honestly, I felt so awkward to express myself in an online class with such peers, that I just remained silent most of the time and prayed that Dr. Neeraja wouldn't pick on me. Fear of being shamed held me back and the very questions stirring in my mind and piercing deep in my heart, hindered me in the online classes, even as they triggered feelings of fear and insecurity. It was and continues to be a battle for me!

Do I feel left out?

Isn't that crazy?

But now, recognizing that those were precisely my learning areas was like winning a great battle. It was an eye-opener for a person like me who constantly struggled with insecurities. Rather, it was like knowing my true potential hidden deep within, unsharpened and unnoticed.

Attending the online class and surrounded with wonderful souls made me realize that

nothing is worthless if you put in some effort. Only realizing didn't suffice; a constant push from my Course Instructor and words of encouragement from my colleagues lifted me up from my misery. The queries, conversations, and chit chats were launch pads for me. One needs to be reflective in order to ask the right question. Well, let me lead you through the parts, where I look somewhat glorious and redeemed myself to a certain extent. I experienced peer evaluation as a turning point. Until then, I had never thought that my reflections would be praised or even liked. Well, God surely blessed me in my time of need with great colleagues, who helped me see value in my own writing. It was the time during my peer evaluation where I didn't expect to hear praises from



Photograph: Rati Basu, Santiniketan

my colleague Ms. Aneesa, whom I regard very highly in terms of reflecting and writing. She praised my writing and wanted to use it as an example for her students who have been struggling with the same issues. Unlike them, I would not be able to use my learnings from this course in any classroom, but it surely helped me grow personally as well as professionally. Before joining this course, I could only reflect on my own viewpoint and never considered or valued others' opinions and perspectives. Now I can reflect deeply and think before I make any decisions as I find it worth my while to consider other's opinions, judgments, and perspectives.

Reflecting on myself and my work paved the way for me to be a good learner and it helped me pause during those times when I was hasty or felt pressured.

Do I feel left out?

Now? No, not at all. The very fear and intimidation do not hinder me now like they used to. I've gathered enough courage and am still building it up so to have conversations in the future, during online classes or in a group of highly skilled people, without any unease and self-doubt. Maybe I did not seem to participate much during my current online group conversations, but I can surely tell that the anxiousness of hiding so as to avoid being

called does not hover at all in my head. The course has equipped me to an extent where I don't need to worry much about presenting myself; rather, I find myself boldly speaking without any apprehension during my professional meetings. I believe everyone in the group was reflective and best of all, full of enthusiasm. The course and the people attending it have really shaped me personally and humbled me greatly.

I am grateful for all the kind encouragement and motivation that was showered upon me by colleagues and Course Instructor.



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

MOSES KARTHAK

Giving and Receiving Feedback

'Feedback' as we understand, conveys information about behaviour. We are continually receiving and giving feedback, whether explicitly (through oral or written language) or implicitly (by gestures or the tone of our voice). While it is easy to take feedback personally, striving to perceive it as a learning opportunity is quite another

thing altogether! Quality feedback has the power to reinforce existing strengths and help keep goal-directed behaviour on course. It can even increase the recipients' abilities to detect and remedy errors on their own.

Over the last couple of weeks I found myself engaging more with the process of giving and receiving feedback. I had taken up a course on "Reflective writing", and like any course, it involved assignments to get some practice in writing. Post each piece of written work, I sought feedback from my guide and peers. As this was the very first time that I was taking up a course in this genre of writing, I felt that receiving feedback effectively was important to enhance my understanding of the very process of reflective writing.

In order to make sense of the feedback that I received, it demanded the following of me:

- **Paying heed:** Being a good listener, particularly to critique demanded something from me. I had to ensure that I was more conscious than usual, not override someone's opinion by interrupting, and turn defensive with regard to the piece that I had written. Providing response to feedback without pondering over it could be futile. I had to remember that it was I who had invited someone to review my work, and so it was up to me to ensure that the process should not later turn cyclical, by giving feedback on the feedback received.
- **Seeing that barriers at times caged more than they guarded:** A written piece of work speaks to the reader and works on their imagination. Their thoughts breathe life into the content, making it linger longer than the spoken word! As readers, each of us is conditioned differently. The more barriers we were inclined to put up, the more caged our thoughts got. It was best to overcome these hurdles by being attentive, as this indicated that one valued and acknowledged what the other had to say. It also put both at ease. In one particular assignment, I realized that all that I had done was to find flaws in the other, and that I had barely reflected on what *I as the writer did*. I was completely off course, and I had needed someone to tell me that. I then began to see what another reader saw.
- **Being open to learning:** Being receptive to new ideas and different opinions was key, if I had to get through the course and learn from it. There were always more ways of doing something, and others could have a completely different viewpoint on a given topic. This was an opportunity to see another perspective and learn something worthwhile. For instance, I discovered that I had fixed some of the loopholes in one of my practice pieces, but it still missed reflection. There was more scope to refine it, with more clarity

of thought. I considered giving it, yet another shot later, only after I wrote something else to get my mind off it. The suggestions that came in helped me become more conscious of the way that I approached a piece of reflective writing.

- **Trying to read in between the lines:** As I received feedback on my assignments, I tried to make sure that I understood what was being said to me, especially before responding to the feedback. For instance, I would ask questions for clarification wherever I found it necessary. It helped to listen actively by repeating key points so that I knew that I had interpreted the feedback correctly and not taken it too personally. I kept watchful not to get carried away by positive feedback, nor too dejected by a negative one. I found it beneficial also to explicitly specify beforehand the areas where feedback was sought, so that there were no unpleasant surprises.



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

- **Reflecting:** Assessing the value of the feedback, the consequences of using it or ignoring it, and then deciding what to do because of it. As the writer, it remained my choice to respond. If I disagreed with a piece of feedback, it helped to solicit a second opinion from someone else. What I had learnt from the above exercise was that, if two persons' feedback were more negative than anticipated, there would definitely be more scope to refine the written piece. It had to be taken positively and not personally. Having said that, it was important for all participants in the course to be aware that feedback was a responsibility that was not to be taken casually. It had to be focused on the piece and not the individual, constructive and objective, and not just critical and generalized throughout the piece. A good amount of negative feedback could get demoralizing to certain individuals and make them question their innate skills in writing. It was nonetheless a necessary evil, if we wanted to improve in the quality of our written work. It was a course after all.
- **Following up:** There were many ways to follow up on feedback. Sometimes, my follow-up would simply involve implementing the suggestions that I received. In other situations, I would want to set up another meeting to discuss the

feedback, or to re-submit the revised work for still more feedback. Having a considerate team helped.

To conclude, I would like to believe that receiving feedback and engaging with it positively can help one enhance one's ability to learn across fields, regardless of the level of expertise. It may not have been the perfect written piece, work of art or craft or musical piece at the start, but it had to begin somewhere. Refining it was a process. Being open to learning something new may have its own challenges initially. It may seem trivial – petty, even - for a teacher to have her spelling, punctuation and tense errors highlighted. There was no denying, though, that so much meaning could be lost in a written piece, if we did not get our language just right.

GEETA VISWANATHAN

How does a teacher who seems to have lost her zeal regain it? Is such a thing possible? A teacher who felt like quitting after just one year of teaching shares her story ...

A teacher's toolkit

A circular was sent by the School Management on March 2016, asking us to indicate whether or not we would like to continue teaching in this school for the next academic year. And I, a teacher who was just about to complete one year of teaching, happily responded negatively.

When I wrote my resignation letter a week later, I experienced tremendous relief. No more lesson plans, no more noisy classrooms, no more shouting at the top of my voice, no more putting on a pacifying face before over-anxious parents, no more of all the sufferings that I had undergone as a teacher. I thought I was done with the painstaking, thankless and endless drama of becoming and being a teacher.

In my own assessment, I had failed miserably at being the revolutionary teacher that I had set out to be. It appeared to me that continuing as a teacher would do more harm to me than good, and my dissatisfaction at being in this profession would never escape the notice of whom so ever I taught. This rationale, I felt, amply justified my decision to quit.

But I wanted to understand why I felt miserable doing what I had always thought I would love doing (teaching). After all, my intentions were pure, passionate and well-meaning. I was not lazy. I worked as hard as I possibly could. So, I wanted to know what I had actually missed.

I enrolled myself for a Master's in Education in Azim Premji University to find the answer.



Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

The Masters programme widened my mental horizons about education. I realized that I need not necessarily be a teacher to engage in this domain. I could be a curriculum developer, a content creator, a teacher educator or even someone who works in an organization for school improvement. Alternatively, I could pursue a higher degree programme in education.

I was seriously contemplating one of these options, as soon as I became aware of them, which was from the end of my first semester. As you can see, the profession of a teacher was missing from my list. But I did learn to empathize with the plight of teachers, as I began to see that my recent ordeal was a common experience in the teaching world. Still, the idea of returning to be a teacher once again did not appeal to me even remotely. I waited for some more clarity to emerge by the end of my programme, so that I could select from the non-teaching roles that the domain of education offered me.

‘Knowing’ is a seamless phenomenon. So, I am not so certain when – and how - I picked up the courage to teach again. But I am glad that I finally did, for it honestly did hurt my ego to live with a failed passion, however far I had imagined that I could run away from it.

From that point onward, the journey as a teacher has been delightful. How much ever I respected and acknowledged the mystery of knowing, I began to understand that it is worthwhile to decode my transformation, so that I could return to it for solace and hope, whenever I have a bad day at teaching. And so, this is what I am now setting about to do ...

The most important piece of statistical data that haunted (and still continues to haunt) me is the fact that as a country, we have less teachers than we need. And that means that a lot of India’s children do not have anyone to facilitate their learning. And the problem only worsens if existing teachers simply walk out of the profession, simply because they see other lucrative career options! So, I argued, this was the first reason why it was significantly important for me to stay in the profession.

The second reason that must have played a vital role in rediscovering my love for teaching was my acceptance that I had been very crude in evaluating my first years’ experience of teaching. I had judged it too soon and too inhumanely. I wasn’t as compassionate as I was passionate about the enterprise of teaching. I had too few categories to classify my experience: I simply thought of them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. When I couldn’t help a group of students understand something, despite my best efforts, I blamed myself, and then suffered guilt. I was blind to the other factors, such



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

as the kind of support the students got from their families, the differences in the interest levels and the ability levels of students, the kind of instruction received or not received previously, etc. These feelings changed, when I read and learnt more about the nature of children and the nature of learning. Now, I appreciate *what is* instead of complaining about *what ought to be*. The journey to 'what ought to be' is always a work in progress, and I now accept that. These days, I feel good not just when my students perform very well in their assignments, but also when they share a little secret with me or just be naughty - as children are!

Finally, my biggest source of strength, that unfailingly keeps me on track in my passion for teaching, is the fact that I am not alone. Sure, this profession faces too many challenges! And equally and evenly these challenges are met day after day, year after year, by teachers of all times. Some of

them have generously shared their stories. And I find these stories to be extremely powerful. The awareness that a huge number of people fight the same challenges alongside me is very humbling and empowering at the same time. Though more often than not, they receive very little in return, economically and otherwise. And it is because of this conviction that I came upon, I share my story as a teacher through conversation or sometimes through writing to the bigger and larger teacher community. It is this eagerness that urges me to experience my journey as a teacher more, because I feel that it does matter for other teachers like me to know of people like themselves who continue to strive alongside one another in this enterprise that we call 'education'.

I am eternally grateful to all my professors who helped me see what I had missed initially. I am also thankful to my teacher friends and colleagues for delightfully sharing with me their own experiences, knowledge, techniques and compassion. And my respectful gratitude to all the researchers in the field of education and the writers, like Piaget, Delpit, Heath, Paulo Freire, Lortie, Sylvia Ashton Warner, to name a few. Each one of these writers, thinkers and researchers (introduced to me by professors through different courses in my Masters programme) did inspiring work that brings so much meaning and appreciation to the work of all teachers. And lastly, it is the unparalleled affection and cheerfulness of my students that I am grateful for. This singularly makes being a teacher a worthy choice, either because of everything else or despite it.

All I wish for myself and for my teacher friends is that we remember our reasons

for continuing on this journey, because this persistence is among the most important resources in the teacher toolkit! Hence the most helpful present a teacher can gift herself is a growing list of reasons to return *to* her work, on hard days, and return *from* on all the good days. And alongside persistence if there is one other thing that's equally significant, it is to *remember* to pick up the persistence whenever it seems to drop off or even wear thin for whatever reasons.

SUKANYA

MURALEEDHARAN

A REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

During the course REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR TEACHERS, assignments were submitted by participants for assessment by the Course Instructor. For most participants, this was a very rigorous exercise as the innumerable suggested edits from the Course

Instructor did not sit well with some, caused anxiety in others and challenged most of them to sit up and revisit their assumptions about their own writing skills.

In order to see whether this was a practice that needed to be redesigned, a conversation like the following was initiated, between the **Course Instructor (NR)** and a **student (SM)** in this course.

NR: What are your immediate reactions when you receive the edited assignment?

SM: The first thing I feel is repulsion. I do not like to go through it at all, it literally looks bloody to me and whatever is bleeding is my creation. For a long time, I sit and stare at all the red and black sea of letters, without comprehension and finally turn off the screen and walk away. The edits in red bother me a lot. Is there no way that I can escape that?

NR: As the Course Instructor, I see my role as one of showing the students how to write correctly, and reflectively. If I ignore considerations of grammar and language, it is like Michael Angelo deciding to chisel away only one part of the body and ignore the rest. The result would be an unfinished piece of sculpture. But I understand that seeing numerous edits (and that too in red!) must be very disturbing for the recipient of such a corrected document. May I suggest that you choose to write only for yourself, and not for any other reader – in which case, language need

not be corrected at all. Does this work for you, Sukanya?

SM: Of course, I would love to write just for myself. For my writing is a tool to organize my thoughts. In this phase of my life, I feel like there are too many things I want to write about to get a clear perspective. I know grammar is important. But I do not want to lose heart for writing seeing the corrections right away. I will surely re-visit my grammar proficiency at least a little after the practice of writing has taken proper root in me. And when I do not feel so vulnerable and defeated by something that should be helping me instead.

NR: Hmm. I notice that you are breaking writing up into two stages: one, when the practice of writing takes proper root in you, and two, when you can start focusing on grammar etc. If this were a year-long course, that would be totally possible. As it stands, the course is for ten online hours and 14 HW hours. The luxury of going stage by stage as you suggest is not available. I have to utilize the limited time that we have together to give as rigorous feedback as I possibly can. I wonder if you are guarded in the way that you give feedback to your students, Sukanya?

SM: I am guarded in the way I give feedback to my students. I do not try to mark the mistakes in red. I try to give my feedback in the end drawing attention to what they should work on. Surprisingly for me, my students prefer

that I mark their mistakes in the same place as they occur. I understand these are individual preferences. And in a class one instructor cannot cater to each of these.

As a student and as a teacher I know the primary use of feedback is to get better. So, I drag myself to see where I have gone wrong. But I can only feel sorry for myself that I have failed poorly at what I thought I did best. My escape from this suffering is to harbour the faith that I have my right to write the way I want; I do not care about perfection. After I scan through a few errors I have made I justify to myself that those are nothing serious. It is okay. I do not mind, and I do not care. I close the document once again.

NR: Ah! I am getting a clue now: the numerous edits are striking at the root of your belief in your ability to write well. ["I have failed poorly at what I thought I did best."]

I also see a defiant stand in the statement: "I have the right to write in the way that I want."



Photograph: Shreyas Ramanand Gautama

Let me ask you one question: as a teacher, would you grant the same freedom to your students to each write

in the way that they please? No grammar, no rules, no spelling, no considerations of language? If yes, what is your intended learning outcome for them, from a class on Writing?

SM: As a teacher I would love to give that liberty to my students. As a junior school language teacher, I do allow them such time, they can either draw or write for a while, without being bound by any language rules. The intended outcome of such an activity is meaning making, to make the exercise of writing less foreign, less intimidating, more approachable and more creative.

NR: I can see that you 'would love to give that liberty' to your students. But the question here is not what you would love to do, but what you are actually able to do. A one-off activity like that is very easily done. I could have done that too. But again, mine was a time bound course with very specific course objectives. Meaning making is so intertwined with the correct use of language, that I fail to see how one can ensure clear and unambiguous communication without any focus on language. If there are no compliments at all, and only criticism after criticism, then I agree that it is very demoralizing for the learner. Has that been your experience thus far in the course?

SM: Many times, I have found a few compliments interspersed in these comments only after three or four reading of the document! If at all there was a different colour for the good

things, it would have been helpful in reducing that much worry.

NR: I am fully with you here. As a habit (that formed right from my childhood), I am prone to spotting errors much faster than seeing what is worth appreciating. This has always been – and continues to be – my learning area. Thank you for pointing it out to me again.

SM: It is true that I enrolled in this course to improve my writing skills, but my priorities were different. I wanted help in capturing what I felt in words, not the re-ordering of my words so that it satisfies an arbitrary rule. I understand that grammar is important, making it easy for the reader is important, but in the first place when the writer is having difficulty in writing the thought that appears so fussy, first I think the help should be given to the writer to help herself to decode her thoughts, to draw them to words and then to string them beautifully comprehensible piece of writing. And then move on to the comforts of an imaginary reader.

NR: If your words were reordered 'to satisfy an arbitrary rule', then definitely you should feel free to reject the suggestion. This is why the edits were track changed, for you to *reject or accept*. However, in writing and editing for a readership other than just the writer, the commonly followed procedure is this: when English Grammar or Spelling dictate the change, there is no room for

negotiation. The change has to be done in compliance with the rules of the English language. On the other hand, when the suggested change is subjective - in that it does not 'correct' an error but merely suggests an alternative way of expressing - then the writer is free to reject that suggestion. This was explained during the course, I am not sure if I did it clearly enough ... obviously it did not get communicated clearly enough to you.

SM: The issue I have is that I tend to believe what you suggest as an edit to be better, when I see the red mark and the suggestion you have listed, I am not able to exercise my choice and feel that I could differ and not accept the suggestion if it is not grammatically incorrect. I realise what you say, but I am unable to practice it. With time I see that because I got so intimidated by the number of errors I was making, I forgot to exercise the choice where I could have.

SM: Isn't it ironical that the error spotting which is done as a correction measure is itself defeating the whole purpose of becoming a better writer and harbouring defiance?

NR: If this is what is happening, it is ironical indeed. Please could you suggest a way of becoming a 'better writer' without any error correction at all? And why does it evoke defiance? I smell something here ...

SM: This is simply because my ego is hurt so badly every time it is pointed out that I did not fare well as a writer.

Writing is the first thing I pride myself on. So, I can see myself getting defiant instead of having the humility to accept it. This is an area of improvement that I am working on. And I do realize that error correction is an important aspect of my development as a writer. And I also realize that I can be a good writer and can still make mistakes which I need to correct, instead of being careless about it. I am glad that this conversation is helping me see this point.

NR: I am glad of that, too! It is the easiest thing for me to ignore all those errors and just give cursory feedback. It saves me a lot of time and effort. I am doing what I do in order to help participants improve their writing at a faster pace.

SM: Like I shared already, I wanted a different kind of help, I wanted the attention to be drawn to the idea of what it means to be reflective and how writing can help it as discussion points. The hardships, not in terms of vocabulary or grammar but in terms of meaning-making of our thoughts and memories. The assignment questions probed into this realm, but the discussion did not move in this direction. I wonder, in any course how is it right that the instructor decides the priorities and the student bears the consequence of it? How democratic is that, to expect a student whose requirements are not even asked many

times to meet the expectation and standards set by the instructor? Where from is such authority drawn by the instructor?

NR: My role as Course Instructor is to draw the participants into reflective writing, and if I did not do that, then I have failed at my primary responsibility. I do recall more than one session where we deconstructed some pieces of reflective writing and discussed what made them 'reflective'. I also recall sharing a PowerPoint presentation on the stages of reflective writing. Obviously, none of these met your expectations. Please let me know what would have.

As for who has the authority, I have a question for you, Sukanya. When you teach your students, do you allow yourself to go along with each student's expectations through the course? Is there always total and complete democracy in deciding the agenda for the day? If yes, how do you tie it together cohesively? Especially in a class with twenty or more children, with each bringing their own expectation? Who has the authority in your classes? Someone must, right? Or do you conduct totally arbitrary classes where everything goes, there is no course objective, there are no errors made by anyone worth acknowledging and all is hunky dory? I would like to know how you keep alive the teaching-learning process if this is how you conduct your classes...

Email from NR to Course Participants

Dear All: I was struck by something that Nageeb shared in today's class (with the first batch).

She said she couldn't reconcile my observation (that she had made a huge shift) with the numerous edits that she then discovered when she opened the document containing my feedback .

I recalled an experience of one of the teachers whose work is showcased in my recent book, THE REFLECTIVE LEARNER. He found that as his eighth graders became more confident about writing in English, they moved from writing simple sentences to trying to write complex ones. This resulted in the number of errors increasing.

At first, he interpreted this as showing a negative shift. But when he looked again, he realised that there is greater scope for making errors when we write complex sentences. So it is inevitable that when anyone shifts from forming simple sentences to constructing complex sentences, they will make more errors. But surely the spike in self-confidence of the student who ventures to compose complex sentences is noteworthy? And so he gained a more nuanced understanding of progress: his eighth graders taught him that!

So it is that that chapter is titled TWO WRONGS CAN MAKE A RIGHT. So I wanted to share this analogy with all those of you who share Nageeb's doubt.

Your comfort with writing, the depth of your reflections, your palpable enjoyment in reading the readings: for me, these are all indications of a HUGE shift.

Those red font edits are just inevitable because you are now scaling taller peaks. There will inevitably be more frequent falls!

Best, Neeraja

SM: I cannot really say that my expectations were not met fully. I remember all the classes in which we did the activities you have described. I enjoyed them very much and they were very useful. And that is why I wished for more classes like that. And the disappointment of not getting it was what I shared with you in my feedback.

But I understand that the time constraint that this course is bound by gives us only that much flexibility. I respect your authority in these matters because it is impossible to customize this task to suit each participant.

As far as my classes are concerned, they are not democratic at all, for many reasons. First, my students are six to twelve-year olds. Next, what I have to do is dictated by the board the school is affiliated with and so many other reasons. But I wish there was more democracy. But I do have a small share of the authority, definitely more than what my students have, and I use it to decide what is best and possible for all of us.

NR: I think the Course Objectives and Course Structure are spelt out – or should be spelt out – unambiguously right at the start. People who feel these are in alignment with their own specific needs should sign up. Others should not. This is in my view, the only way that a course which is as time bound as this one can work. And my takeaway from this conversation is that I need to be more attentive to how I couch my criticism, and also be more generous in my praise. I need to be sensitive to the

fact that these are adults – not children, and so they have very well-defined persona which can easily get injured. What do you think of my takeaway? And what's yours?

SM: I am very glad that you understood what you have from the feedback I gave you. As far as my takeaway is concerned, I understand now that mistakes are a part of the learning process. And being defiant only stifles my learning curve. I thank you for sharing the conversation you and Naqeeb had about mistakes and learning (see textbox containing the email), that helped me to cement my understanding well. And I am now more accepting of the proposition that though there may be different parts to writing they necessarily need not be addressed exclusively. I can work on meaning making and grammar at the same time and not one at the cost of others, so that the writing gets richer and better.



Photograph: K Natarajan, Rishi Valley School

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Photograph: Rati Basu, Santiniketan

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