

REFLECTIVE WRITING

DIWALI 2022 BATCH



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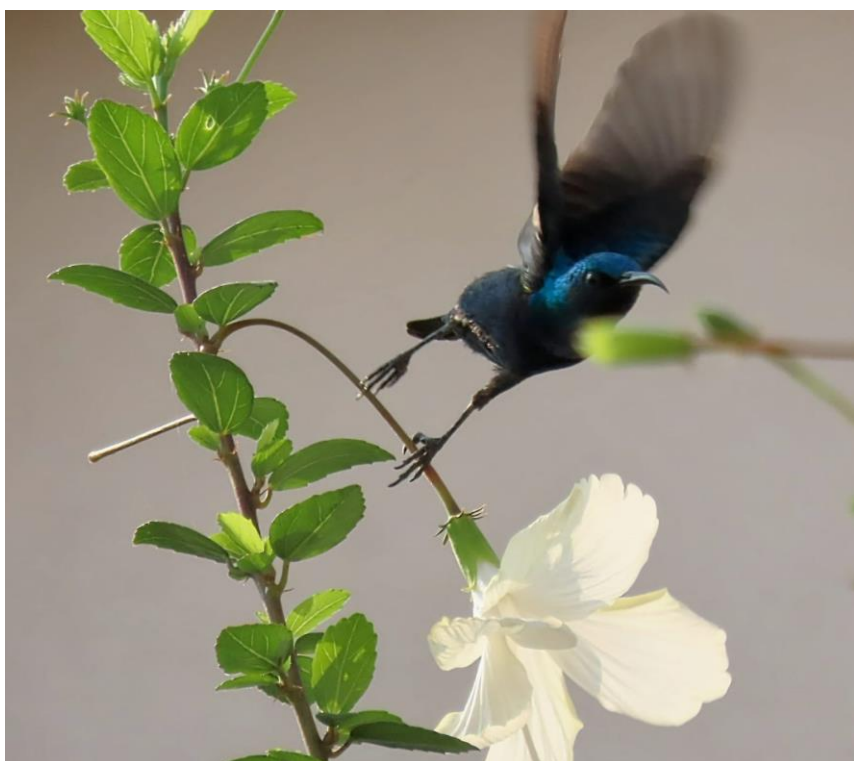


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Thinking Teacher

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I define Reflective writing as the processing of one’s own mind which has many unstructured ideas that may or may not have an outcome after the process. – Anitha Kamaladevi

What we learnt in our school – SAMUEL KHAIBA

I went to a boy's convent when corporal punishment was routine. As students, we got beaten in all sorts of ways. Sometimes, there was the use of sticks and rulers as weapons and sometimes, bare knuckles, fists and slaps. Like many of the events where we got beaten, there is this one particular incident that haunts me even to this day.

We were in grade 9 and were just about to resume our 4th period after the morning recess, when the school Principal stormed into the classroom with a paper plate in his hand demanding to know who had tossed it out of the class window that was directly above his office. An unfortunate gust of summer breeze had blown this forbidden paper utility into his office.

Naresh, a young idealist, raised his hand and without thinking, walked up to the Principal. His intentions, noble but naive, were to apologize sincerely, take that trash paper plate (that looked almost unused except for a faint smudge of ketchup on a tiny corner), toss it in the garbage can, walk back to his desk and resume the rest of the day of being a 9th-grade student.



Finding a peaceful area with beautiful music playing, lovely rose petals smelling all around, and a spot to sit down and write down your thoughts, ideas, or life experiences – these are my keys to reflective writing. – T Madhavi

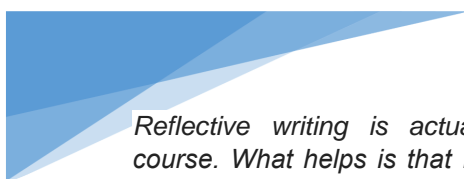
Thyammmm!!! A smacking sound brought the class to a standstill. Naresh was standing in a staggered stance with his left hand on his cheek, which had been the recipient of half of the instrument that produced the loud sound, and his right hand on a desk as a prop to hold his body weight up. His legs seemed uncertain to manage the job by themselves. The Principal continued to stare at him for another couple of seconds which lasted an eternity.

“Is this what you are learning?” He shouted, pointing that paper plate at us, waving it for all to see, (he may as well have been pointing a shotgun) and paused as though waiting for an answer. It would have been a disaster to answer that question. Only later in life would we learn that such questions had a name assigned to them - ‘rhetorical’ and this was a *dangerous* rhetorical. Being somewhat satisfied with the answer that he received - a dreadful silence accompanied with lowered eyes of all the students of grade 9 - the Principal stormed out of the classroom, exactly as he had stormed in.

That day, both Naresh and I learnt how important it was to lie and protect yourself rather than speak the truth and get punished. Some of my friends had learned this lesson in their early years and they could tell how foolish it was for Naresh to admit his mistake. When we enrolled, we had been fearless, innovative, bold and reckless kids and after a decade in the institution, we graduated as young men, tamed and compliant to those that we were taught to recognize as 'people in power' and to be afraid to tell them the truth but to nod our heads in ways that would please them and to be able to read their expressions so as to adjust our behaviours accordingly. The better we learned these skills, the further we would be able to climb the stairs to a 'successful life': that's what we believed and that's how most of us would behave in society.

Our students are always learning something. They are learning what *we think* we are teaching them and they are even learning *what we are failing to teach them*. The turning point for us as teachers like Holt and Hull would be to pause and ask ourselves where we are trying to get and whether whatever we are doing is truly getting us there.

The teachers of the school that I went to never even asked themselves where they were trying to get us, let alone reflect on the ways in which they were trying to get us there. Sadly, many schools today are also operating without deeply thinking about where they are heading and questioning themselves about the why's and how's. Even admitting that the students are not learning anything is a revelation in itself, despite not being the whole truth. I fantasize about a day when all students score zeroes on their assessments and teachers in bewilderment ask themselves this essential question about where we are headed - and a new revolution in education is born.



Reflective writing is actually a discovery course. What helps is that I don't define the destination beforehand but only embark upon the journey and do my best to match the speed of my thoughts to the speed of my typing. Contrary to the sound of silence, preferred by most of my colleagues, what is more comforting to me is the clickety clack of my keyboard, like that of a train headed somewhere unknown but revealing bits of the landscapes, frame by frame...

Samuel Khaiba

Letter to an aspiring teacher – ASHU THREJA MALHOTRA

25th Dec'22
New Delhi

Dear Aspiring Teacher

My best wishes to you, for being in the phase of life where you're about to take the most crucial decision regarding your choice of career!

Congratulations for considering “teaching” as one of these choices!

I take this opportunity to share with you what it means to be an educator, based on my own experience in the profession. I have worked as a Mathematics teacher across all school grades for 11 years and as a Mathematics teacher educator for 12 years.

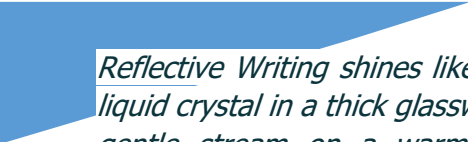
I believe we all look for a career which promises us beauty, benefit and ‘the good’. Beauty refers to the vocation that I love to be engaged in and thoroughly enjoy being a part of. Benefit, as the word suggests, refers to that aspect which ensures financial stability, independence and growth. The ‘good’ indicates an opportunity to create value in my own life and also for the society that I am a part of.

Teaching as a profession has given me an opportunity to enjoy beauty, benefit and the good. I am sure, if you too are in search of beauty, benefit and the good, you have chosen the career that will ensure you all of these.

If the journey of a teacher has to guarantee the above, it requires us to develop as intrinsically humane individuals, concerned with intellectual and emotional needs of individual learners. It requires me to respect the individuality of each and every learner in a class with a huge number of students - and respect their living emotional and creative identities. I am challenged every moment to facilitate the teaching-learning process, and I try to use every moment to reflect on myself, to build and sustain a creative and constructive environment, while encouraging all my learners to participate in building their unique individual capacities.

Teaching is an innovative and creative endeavour. It will develop an urge to be a lifelong learner in your chosen field of study. I constantly update myself regarding the pedagogy and content of the subject that I am teaching. You see, I have to be responsible for my own constant learning.

The victories and achievements of your students are your own accomplishments. You have ample opportunities to inspire many with your disposition as a mentor in their lives.



Reflective Writing shines like warm shiny liquid crystal in a thick glassware beside a gentle stream on a warm breezy day smelling of wilderness. Reflective Writing wanders around in my head like little leaf-hustles. – Sabitri Sanyal

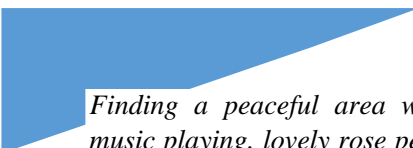
Teaching - a human endeavour, a collaborative effort of all - requires

consistent engagement with parents, fellow teachers, the learners themselves and all other members of an academic institute that we are a part of. The ultimate purpose of the engagement is the development and happiness of the learner, so that the learner is facilitated to explore his/her true potential.

A challenging endeavour but definitely a fulfilling one!

Wishes for a life ahead with incredible moments of accomplishment and happiness as an educator, Aspiring Teacher, do share your experiences as a novice teacher and your joys and challenges too!

Regards
Ashu Threja Malhotra



Finding a peaceful area with beautiful music playing, lovely rose petals smelling all around, and a spot to sit down and write down your thoughts, ideas, or life experiences is the key to reflective writing.

– **Madhavi**

Reflections on John Holt's description of repetitive correction – Anitha Kamaladevi

As an educator I very well resonate with this incident as it happens frequently in my classes, especially in senior school, where we follow standardized exam procedures. The students have to face internal assessments in almost 10 subjects and the projects require extensive writing. Although most of them manage to present reasonably good work, a few students actually struggle with writing and presentation.

I would like to recollect an incident which happened recently in one of my classes. This has to do with a student whose father is in the Civil services and hence expects the child to follow in his footsteps. The child has been studying in this prestigious school which is quite well known for its alternative learning methods and “no exam- pressure” system.

I met this student in class 9 and he was facing the ICSE syllabus in its full glory. He had to do projects which involved lots of writing in 10 subjects. Right from the beginning of the year, I noticed his reluctance to write and his inability to concentrate in theory classes. After talking to his previous teachers and reading his reports, I gathered that he had been facing this problem from class 7 onwards. In spite of these reports, neither the parents nor the school had taken any concrete steps to find a solution. The school had just let it go, hoping that the parents would take some action, whereas the parents were reluctant to accept his condition. The poor child was struggling with insecurity and under confidence, which manifested as arrogance and he was soon labelled as a ‘difficult’ student.

Initially, I was angry and frustrated with the student which (of course!) had no effect on the child. Instead, he just got worse. I had multiple talks with him to find a strategy. He was

reluctant to open up and often, our conversations ended with him in tears, trying to protect his image of being a studious learner. Teachers gave him continuous assignments and the whole process started getting tedious with his inability to meet deadlines for written submissions. He was sent out of class, asked to rewrite, taken out of games, etc. – all as part of the grind.

As time went by, I could detect some brilliant sparks in him during the Chemistry classes which made me reflect. As a class teacher, I took the liberty to write to his father directly and shared my observations in detail. This had some effect and in the next PTA session, I had a meeting with him along with the coordinator, who also supported me in presenting the boy's learning difficulties. The father agreed to take the child to NIMHANS for an evaluation. He came back after the winter break as a changed person and told me that he was diagnosed with ADHD problems, for which some counselling as well as medication had been prescribed. The second half of the year was an eye opener with this child who took so much interest in my subject that soon, I had to give him advanced work in Chemistry. His writing also improved drastically in all areas. This happened because he had the latent intelligence in him which had to be triggered with proper medical help. Unfortunately, there are many parents who are closed in their views and push their children to achieve certain standard goals.

In the article the turning point to the teacher seems to be the question: "Where are you trying to get, and are you getting there?" which made him review the whole situation. As educators, we invest a lot of effort in teaching and naturally expect students to respond according to the desired standards, ready with our rubrics to determine the quality of their work. [I still remember my mother (also a teacher) passing strong remarks about my children not writing at an early age.] Most of us strongly believe that "copy writing" is very essential to improve handwriting and spellings. Both my children never wrote consistently until they reached an age when they themselves, were able to see the need. Finally, when they started writing, it came out naturally and was quite legible.

WHO IS AN EDUCATED PERSON? T Madhavi

In layman's terms, someone is educated if they can write and read.

An educated person, in my opinion, is not a bookworm. He /She knows that books are only one source of knowledge. He is interested in people, mixes with them, and observes them. He tries to live as full and varied a life as possible, acquiring wisdom and maturity from experience. He is capable of love and friendship and respects people whose customs and opinions differ from his own.

A person may be considered educated if he develops his knowledge and skills in such a way that they ultimately result in a positive contribution to his

community. Acquiring knowledge and using it for the happiness and good of society is what makes a person educated.

He pays attention to his health. A person who neglects his health or ruins it by falling prey to vicious habits cannot be called educated. An educated person is aware of the intimate connection between the mind and the body and believes that neglecting one's health is a crime. In order to be physically fit, he either plays games or does some form of exercise.

According to me, education inculcates knowledge, beliefs, skills, values, and moral habits. It improves one's way of life and raises one's social and economic status. Education makes life better and more peaceful. It transforms the personalities of individuals and makes them feel confident.

Letter to most impactful teacher – Sabitri Sanyal

Dear Debjani Aunty,

Hoping you are in good health. It was your kind face and warm encouragement that motivated me to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Little Women* in my second grade. I remember how you invited me to read *Tom Sawyer* in front of the entire class, even after I was punished (by Sharma Aunty) during my previous history class, for chewing gum. You never judged me (like Solomon or Shelly Aunty) for standing on the bench with my hands on my ears.

After I shifted to a small town due to my father's transferable job, and secured admission in the fifth grade of a new school, my soul always searched for your replacement but, alas, I could never find one! I came across Indrani Aunty - very similar to you, always encouraging, motivating with an optimism to see the good in every child, but it was never *you*. I missed you! Less as a teacher, and more as a pillar of respect, kindness and warmth.

I grew up one day and realized that the best I could do was to *become like you*, to create that sense of safety in children - which I missed throughout my school days. I only had you for two years (grade two and three) and yet, the impact of your presence lasted in my heart till I

completed my academics and started my career. I searched for you on the internet and social media but could never find you.

Perhaps this letter-writing assignment is another failed attempt to find you, but your face and your classes have been innocently carved into my neurons that take me back to my happy childhood. I still blame my parents for that shift in location and I feel somewhere, this attachment is buried deep. I sometimes feel scared thinking, what if this attachment suddenly shifts from its dormant phase and rises up like Jack's beanstalk - to move up, up and up?!

Much later in life, I developed a coping mechanism of letting go, (of even the most prized possession) only to avoid the birth of an 'attachment monster'! When I was speaking with my childhood friends last, they told me that you had taken a voluntary retirement long back, around 2008. I wonder how many children felt the mental wreckage that my tiny self felt once!

Every time children (with whom I work on a regular basis) are able to share laughter or a moment of happiness with me, I see my young self in their eyes and always respond, as I presume Debjani Aunty would have done! This is probably my way of revisiting only the pleasant memories that I have during my early childhood. Thank you for touching my life with so much sunshine and love!

A child who misses you and an adult who has learnt to treasure these missing hours of joy,

Sabitri

An assignment a day keeps my longing anxiety away! Thank you once again, Neeraja Akka, for this beautiful assignment 😊

The class as in my class – frosted glass panes, tall dusty fans (like the ones we find in Government Registration Offices!) and thin tube lights on a yellow green walled room flooded with little children wearing white shirts and grey pants or skirts appeared in front of my eyes as I wrote my letter. 1997 summer was affectionately warm for Kolkata but not warmer than Debjani Bose. She always asked us questions like – *what do you think the character was thinking when she said this or what would you think if you were there or why do you think he said such and such?*

Overwhelmed with aliveness was what I felt then and now. Less memorable in my nervous system, more by my *felt sense* was what came up for me as a part of this exercise. One thing I could feel while doing this was how I became aware of my breath – there was no long sighs but moments of deep inhalation and exhalation reminding me to experience self-compassion, gratitude and compassion. A giver, nurturer and a teacher are the connecting dots to form our mind maps!

WHAT IS EDUCATION? – Rajshree Pradhan

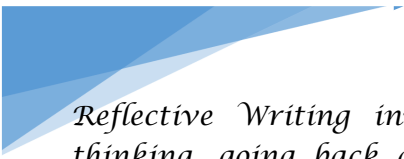
I worked as a teacher for three months, four years ago and have been a student almost all my life. So, it would be much easier to write about my understanding of education as a student.

As a student, I think, education starts to set in as the teacher enters the classroom and begins slotting students as ‘good’ and ‘bad’. It teaches us that some people are better than us, which results in low self-esteem. It starts when a teacher humiliates us for giving an incorrect answer rather than applauding us for trying. It teaches us to try and be a perfectionist - which results in never trying anything new, because we are crippled by the fear of failure. It starts when a teacher is abusive towards us - which teaches us that it is okay to hurt someone emotionally, mentally or physically, as long as we are in a position of power.

It starts when a teacher says “good job”, “I am proud of you”, “your opinions matter”, “you tried and that is enough”, “yes, I was wrong and you were right, thank you for correcting me”, “you are all equal in my eyes”. It starts with a little kindness and validation which teaches us to be confident, kind, respectful and overall a better human being.

For what is education, if it fails to first make us human?

Education for me is an anchor that either uplifts you or lowers you to the level of the world.



Reflective Writing involves deep thinking, going back and peeping into hidden thoughts, to colour them blue and make them clearer and clearer. I can listen to the sound of silence when I sit for reflective writing, during night hours, no matter which season it could be.

- **Jasneet Kaur**

REFLECTIONS ON AN EXTRACT FROM PARKER J PALMER'S 'COURAGE TO TEACH' – JASNEET KAUR

This is one of the most classic readings that I have read so far, which talks of situations which usually remain with us so trivially that one hardly thinks deeply about them (at least for me, I can say that is so).

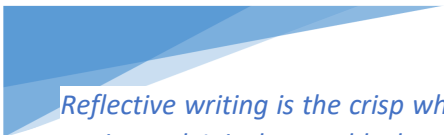
In this chapter, Palmer described how he came out of situations causing fear among students, teachers, adults and children. Though it was a deep reading - and some of the terms were somewhat beyond my understanding - I found that I could connect with the assertions like fear created among teachers and students due to systemic structures and academic institutions.

He also expressed how situations are created in the world so as to avoid live encounters. The reason for such avoidance is to shut out different views or thoughts of people around us, so that one may stay comfortable in one's own zone of thinking and remain satisfied that what one is thinking is 'right'. A second reason to avoid

live encounters might be that it would draw out an empathetic attitude, one would then have to think by putting oneself into others' shoes and, for that, it would be necessary to come out of one's own shell so as to adopt others' views. This situation may not be welcoming for many, because of the kind of thought process that one is living with while resisting a more flexible attitude towards the world.

This reading reminded me of a live encounter that I once had with a girl, Rama, in my maths class. She was the one that I met first, in grade IX and she was a back bencher. I did not know why her face attracted me in the early days (may be because of a certain kind of innocence that I saw there). I tried seeking responses from her many a time during maths classes, but she would only give me a light smile (with mixed expressions of fear and joy) but she never responded with anything more. I thought perhaps she might be very shy to respond in front of the whole class. So I asked her peer to take responses from her and help her, whenever she faced difficulty in understanding the concept. Soon, I realized that she was afraid to respond in class because of her weak foundations in Maths. Till that time, I was not aware where exactly she was facing a problem, then the Covid pandemic started and everything shut down. No more live encounters left!

After a long period of time, I met her again in the mid-year of grade X, post Covid. This time, I thought that I would sit with her for some time, to know what exactly she was lacking in. I



Reflective writing is the crisp white pages of my journal. It is the vast blackness I see when I close my eyes. It is the quiet I hear when I stay still to gather my thoughts. Reflective writing is a mixed bag of emotions for me- it can be daunting, yet calming and epiphanic at the same time. Reflective writing is personal. It is an experience, an exploration, a process of looking inward. - Reshma Thapa

talked to her personally, and it was like a shock for me, when she told me that she only knew counting till 20 - that's it! She could understand nothing else in Maths.

I asked her: "Why so?"

She burst into tears and told me: "I was good in maths till my III grade, and after that, a teacher came in IV Grade. She was such a bad teacher that I could not understand anything after that year."

I asked her, "Why did not you ask your teachers in grade V, VI, VII, VIII...?"

Her reply was: "No one paid any attention to me. I was always kept like a labelled piece of 'not knowing anything in mathematics'. Sometimes, the teacher would ask me to write counting or do some addition sums. That's, it!"

That was the reason why she would hide behind the benches, notebooks and her teachers, in turn, would hide behind the pretence of objectivity! I also want to mention that that girl never missed school and I do not know how she could manage to sit in the alien world of Mathematics which was not making sense to her at all.

THE SINGLE STORY – Reshma Thapa

It is natural and common human behaviour to group people and things into categories, and author Chimamanda uses the phrase "single stories" to describe the false perceptions we form about individuals, groups or countries, based on our prejudices.

Most of us have single stories of others, just like others have of us. Growing up in our Sikkimese society, we heard of so many stereotypes associated with different castes and communities. These stereotypes came up in almost every conversation. Some of these stereotypes were referred to in hushed tones, while others were spoken out boldly and with a lot of ease. The use of these stereotypes is so commonplace that it is almost normal to pronounce judgements on people and their shortcomings based on them. Some examples that I heard growing up and which are still present are: Thapas are simpletons and dumb, Pradhans are miserly, Rais are cold, Tamangs and Sherpas are selfish, etc., etc. Because one has heard them being used repeatedly since childhood, one almost becomes indoctrinated into this idea of single stories about these communities. In Tara Westover's words - "you become encaged in these beliefs" - and no matter your education, your accomplishments, how hard you try to suppress it - these stereotypes are so ingrained in us, that they involuntarily come up in some of our (if not all) interactions with people.

I had an interesting experience during my first professional development trip to the US. One night, our host and his African-American girlfriend took my two other colleagues and me to an Indian restaurant because we were craving good-old rice and daal. All five of us drove to the restaurant, in his car, and when we got to the place, we saw three Caucasian males standing outside the restaurant smoking. As soon as we got out of the car, they started laughing and I heard them say, “These people came cramped in one car. I think they will eat from the same plate as well.” We went inside quietly and ordered our meals and started talking amongst ourselves, ignoring their comments. Throughout our stay, they kept staring at us, laughing and saying things to each other. When we got ready to leave after the meal, they quickly got up from their seats and waited for us outside, laughing and smoking once again. As we walked past them, we heard them say, “They are going back in one car” and other comments that we did not hear after the car doors were closed.

We sat in quiet disbelief for a long time on our drive back, until one of us finally asked our hosts what that was all about. Their interpretation was that because there was an African American and four people who looked Asian, they took us to be immigrants and therefore not able to afford individual cars and individual meals. The fact that most of us looked raggedy and exhausted after a long day of school visits might not have helped the situation either. This was their single story of whatever group they associated us with. We too had a single story about America until that night - a positive single story. Every person we had met in America until then had been kind, open, curious about us and non-judgemental. Our single story that the whole of America is what we had experienced so far got busted in that single night outside the restaurant.

Letter to most impactful teacher – Kiran Kanwar

Dear Sir:

I wouldn't have ever attempted to analyse my true admiration for you, had I not been required to write my feelings down as part of a *Reflective Writing* Course that I'm pursuing lately.

I remember so many new experiences as an 11th grader.

Having science divided into P, C and B.

Entirely separate wing, dedicated to us.

Our well-equipped Biology lab and the beautiful specimens in there.

I remember notes being dictated even for block periods. I also remember how we were expected to remember the Periodic Table with all its intricacies: even the transition metals and rare elements. The deadly carbon and its bonding capabilities. But I hardly remember any biology or chemistry class in particular.

Sir, with you, things were quite different! As a non-math student, I had this mental block that physics is nothing but a more complex extension of Math and that it is simply beyond me. But seeing you so deeply engrossed while teaching was quite a treat!

You had begun our first class, in my 11th grade, saying we will be understanding 'natural phenomena' in detail. At that time, this phrase too sounded exotic and far-fetched. But with you putting your heart and soul into the subject, my perception gradually changed. You made a topic as plain and dull as 'Light' so dynamic that if I, to date, have an option of choosing a physics topic as my demo lesson, it is my favourite one. The introductory statement of the famous Byju's physics teacher for the topic is – 'light is always in a hurry' plus the animation and sound effects making the ray of light come to life. More than 25 years ago, you too had started the topic, saying light is quite focused and takes the shortest possible path to wherever it can reach. You had been as effective even without all those frills that Byju's adds.

I clearly remember many analogies that you made, your spontaneity and how you got furious once because your rhythm was broken by a student passing chits to the ones sitting in front of him in the class. I never knew the extent of your influence on my subconscious until I sat down to jot down the reasons for my reverence for you and this drew out so many perceptions.

Four months ago, for my class observation at the school that I joined recently, where I should have chosen a topic from English or Biology, I chose Light instead.

I realise now that it was not only your contagious love for the subject that made me your ardent admirer. I'm sure you must have been doing something every single day to make us focus on the lesson.

In fact, you are the one who made me sure of what I want to be. You are the most important reason for my being a teacher.

With loving memories and lots of love,

KIRAN

MY REFLECTIONS – Neeraja Raghavan

It is a New Year and supposedly the time for starting afresh. This (eleventh) batch of students in the Reflective Writing Course have certainly brought home to me the need to do so – at least in the way that I run this course!

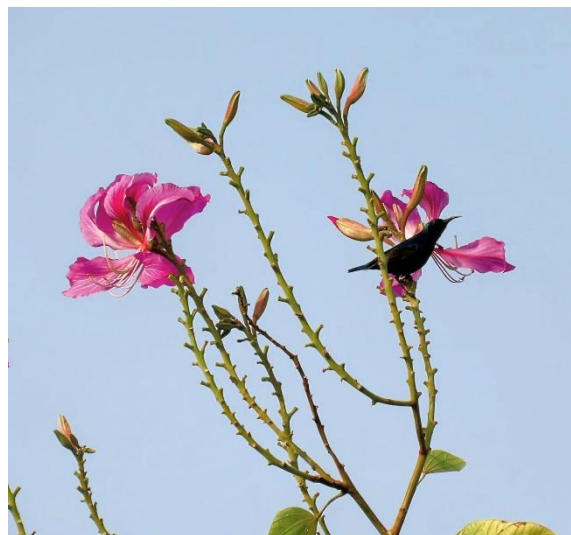
To say that I found this batch challenging would be an understatement. All through the ten weeks of this course, I was almost always walking a tight rope: trying to honour those who were regular attendees (and doing all the assignments on time) while also engaging with the erratic attendees who seldom turned in their assignments on time, and often not at all!

What did this batch compel me to revisit and rethink? A lot, but to name just a few things:

Was I being too strict? Am I living in a bygone era where punctuality, commitment, rigour and an eye for detail are valued? Or *do I simply define these terms very differently from today's generation?* Whatever the case, both from the class discussions as well as some end-of-course feedback that I received, I came up with this list of points that I need to hereafter be cognizant of:

- **Expectations (mine):** Despite the fact that the Course Brochure and FAQs describe the structure of the course in detail, people may enroll for the course without reading these documents carefully. So I need to spell out the fact that this course *expects participants to write* as demanded by each assignment, as their voluntary enrolment in a course titled Reflective Writing necessitates that. [Of course, participants will never be compelled to do them!] I also need to add that my mode of teaching requires eye contact with all, and therefore *keeping the camera on during the sessions is a non-negotiable*. (An initial toolkit on how to use Zoom can perhaps be circulated.)
- **Expectations (of the participants):** Participants will never be coaxed and cajoled into doing the assignments, as this is a voluntary enrolment and they will receive the full benefit of the course *only if they undertake to do the assignments*. [A natural consequence of this is that engagement between the Course Instructor and participants will be more heavily tilted towards those who write compared to those who don't.]
- **Assumptions (mine):** Since this is a course for teachers, I have so far worked with the assumption that the *basic elements of writing* need not be taught in this course. However, since each one comes from a different background, I need to at least spend fifteen minutes on the importance of writing complete sentences, punctuation, using MS Word's grammar and spellcheck, etc.
- **Assumptions (of participants):** In a course on Reflective Writing, many people enroll assuming that the craft of writing will be taught. While I thought that I did factor this in with a short PDF titled STAGES OF WRITING, perhaps I need to do more in this regard: either by giving more detailed feedback on assignments or spending an extra half hour on one day, to describe what constitutes good writing.

In many ways, this batch has been an eye-opener for me! It showed me the mirror to my own limitations and I am very grateful for that! Thank you, All!



Photograph Courtesy: Anjali Krishna