

---

## Book Review

### How Mistakes Can Work for You!

SUNANDA ALI



All of us remember in excruciating detail how humiliating it was to make mistakes as students. Mistakes, usually in English and mathematics, were often received with laughter (loud or stifled) or condescension from our peers. We were given the ‘correct answers’ with the unspoken conviction behind it that we were not smart enough to know better. Our mistakes were never scrutinised for the thinking behind them, and they were certainly never looked at as being necessary steps to the correct answer.

*The Reflective Learner*, a collection of four teachers’ experiences, compiled and edited by Neeraja Raghavan, is a brilliant approach to mistakes. Seeing mistakes as ‘missed takes’, turning our usual approach to mistakes on its head, this book proves that teachers can look at students’ mistakes with a discerning eye, and see them as steps to better understanding.

As teachers we often feel like giving up when we see students ‘not improving’ or ‘repeating the same mistakes’, and even when we see that it is imperative to change our method of correcting and giving feedback (and therefore facilitating better learning), we do not see the path to it. The dual pressures of ensuring better grades for students, and the crushing need to finish the syllabus, prevent us from even thinking about anything which may take our time and attention away from these pursuits.

Neeraja Raghavan, (Founder-Director of Thinking Teacher who has compiled and edited this book) in her role as facilitator, uses the Action Research framework to focus on how mistakes can be farmed for their undeniable—but not much recognized—potential. A group of teacher-educators designed the Reflective Learner Programme ‘with the intent of utilizing the entry point of mistakes’. Four teachers chose to work on this and documented their work using the ‘broad framework of Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect’. These case studies show us how looking at mistakes as opportunities brought new understanding to students as well as teachers.

Two English teachers (Prerna Pradhan and Michael Moses) and two math teachers (M. Gopalakrishnan and Kanchana Suryakumar) devised methods to make use of the potential mistakes can hold. Their overriding objective was to ensure that mistakes are not repeated. Prerna identified three ‘struggling’ students from grade five who had a range of language difficulties. She made a list of these difficulties before thinking of how to approach them. She never took these students out of class, but through the period of research followed their work with particular attention.

The first thing she did was to establish a ‘fear-free environment’ and this helped her to create an ambience where all the students became more comfortable about acknowledging their mistakes. She then used various strategies to draw their attention to their mistakes by using display charts and games. When the need arose, she decided on a specific strategy to deal with a student’s particular problem. For example, Anita, a student who was interested in reading aloud to students of a lower grade but was not interested in writing was inspired to start writing her own stories when she was told that she could read them aloud later.

Prerna saw an improvement in the three students’ self-confidence, ability to spot their mistakes, and willingness to evaluate their work. At the end of three months, Prerna saw an improvement of 50–100 per cent in all the areas which had earlier been problematic for them.

“Fighting the prevalent emphasis on speed and the right answer”, Gopalakrishnan (Gopi) decided to focus instead on getting his students to think mathematically. Especially concerned about seven ‘struggling’ students, Gopi decided to adopt the Reflective Learners Programme to examine how he could help them. His driving passion was to get ‘into the minds of his students’. He used a fascinating range of methods—deliberately inserting errors into worksheets, getting students to break down the working of their math problems into four stages, asking them to write down the reason for a particular step, and several others—for students to observe their working and analyse it. Here, too, Gopi had to first create an ambience where students had to stop worrying about making mistakes. At the end of his ten-month effort, Gopi saw an increase in students’ interest, confidence, skills and understanding. Most importantly, students realised that understanding was more important than getting the right answer.

Michael was teaching English in grade seven and he adopted the Reflective Learners Programme because he wanted five students to write

correctly. When he realised that students did not know what to look for when they proofread their work, he first gave them a checklist of errors. On observing that this task was too difficult for them, he told them to look for one error at a time. He next wrote down the kind of error it was (in the margin) without saying where exactly it was. This was a game-changer; Michael saw that once motivated to find her error by herself, the student had to focus on her work and reflect on it. The whole process was an eye-opener for the teacher too, as he was forced to be disciplined and focused in his corrections.

Kanchana and her colleague Hemalatha think that, “disproportionate stress on facts and methods” in the math curriculum has “robbed the subject of the beauty and elegance it can have”. Making a small beginning at amending this situation, they tried to get their students to obtain a better understanding of the logic in the subject. They designed self-assessment forms where students had to rate their level of understanding, encouraged them to work out sums on the board, gave them incorrect answer keys deliberately, carried out several other strategies to identify habitual errors, and eventually empowered students to analyse their errors so that there was less recurrence. Kanchana’s documentation has an exhaustive list of student errors and a methodical analysis of the success of the strategies used.

Each teacher-researcher devised methods which were carefully chosen to fit the subject, the age of the students, and the specific kinds of mistakes made. However, what is common is their passion for their work and their determination to find the best ways to help their students.

This book is a must-read for every teacher who wants a way out of the never-ending vicious cycle of mistakes-corrections-same mistakes. It gives numerous examples of students’ work, checklists, tables and graphs that comprehensively document the teacher-researchers (and the students’) journeys. Considerable care has been taken so that no question in the reader’s mind is left unanswered. We are told how much time the teacher-researchers spent on this programme on a weekly/monthly basis and we can see that, though English and Math are the two subjects talked about here, the approach (with necessary modified methods) is equally valid for other subjects.

The book mentions that in the West some research has been done on student errors as resources to promote learning (a bibliography of research on this area has been included in the book). However, in India, most people

are unaware of this approach. Mistakes have only been looked at as avoidable and shameful aberrations, or at best as diagnostic tools. In this book, we see how much can be done if teachers learn to look at mistakes with an analytical and discerning eye.

The first crucial step all the teacher-researchers took was to create a fear-free ambience in the classroom. This meant that they too had to be very careful never to be judgemental, condemnatory or condescending. Where mistakes lead to ‘low marks’ and where success in exams is seen as the only guarantee of a ‘bright future’, this meant that the teachers had to examine their conditioned response to mistakes. This was not easy, but the effort revealed that many pre-conceptions they had about students and their learning were not true.

Most importantly, they realised that their feedback and corrections must be framed so that students can have a space for reflection which will then lead the way to taking greater responsibility for their work. There was a dramatic change in the teaching-learning paradigm as teachers learned more about what constitutes good teaching from watching how their students think.

This book needs to be in every school library and read by every teacher who wants to do justice to her students, to herself and to her profession. And, lastly, if you are a teacher, do read this book to remember why you chose to be one.