

Column: Teacher Reflections

What truly motivates a teacher to teach?

by Devon Arthurson

Have you been contemplating something about your teaching or classroom experiences? In this column, we invite anyone to share their reflections with us. Please contact the editor if you would like to contribute an installment or if you just have an idea you would like to run by her. We look forward to the next installment of “Teacher Reflections.”

Nearly ten years ago, I became an English teacher for a purely selfish reason: to escape being a social worker. At the start of my last year studying for my bachelor’s of social work in Winnipeg, Canada, I traveled to Japan for a two-week holiday. How could I not be charmed by Tokyo, a city technologically-advanced, pristine, incredibly safe and full of incredibly cute products? The Japanese people I met were so kind and obliging. Living in downtown Winnipeg, life often seemed bleak as I was surrounded by social and systemic problems stemming from oppression and manifesting themselves in poverty, addiction, and violence, particularly for those of low-incomes and belonging to indigenous groups. Also, I was always concerned about my personal safety as the city has a high-crime rate. The more involved in community development, homelessness alleviation and policy change I became, the more I realized that it was simply luck that prevented me from living in poverty and experiencing other social issues. Though I was incredibly grateful for my many blessings, the realization that it was only grace that gave me those blessings left me in continuous anxiety as my fate could abruptly change at any given moment.

Upon returning from Japan, I applied to the Japan Exchange Teaching Program and nine months later I was working in Osaka City at two high schools. Life was fun, safe, and seemingly free of the social problems I had so often seen in Canada. In regard to teaching, in the over five years I was in Osaka I worked with many incredible Japanese English teachers who mentored me in the Japanese educational system and EFL teaching. Their experience and insight helped me to understand how to teach Japanese students and, as I concurrently studied Japanese, I was able to gain some understanding into the challenges that the Japanese students may feel. In those five and a half years, I learned to be a teacher.

Nearly four years have passed since my time as an Assistant Language Teacher in Osaka. Now I am working as an English language instructor at a university in Tokyo. As a result of using a unified curriculum, participating in faculty development, having supportive program managers, and working with enthusiastic colleagues, I have more concretely developed my EFL teaching skills. I have been able to further explore learner autonomy and understand that in Osaka I was already experimenting with it in my lessons. Guided by the ethic of social work study, I always want to ameliorate power imbalances by sharing the power I have as a teacher with my students through giving them opportunities to make decisions related to classroom management.

Soon after arriving in Tokyo, I started my Master of Arts in Integrated Studies with a focus on community studies and global change. As I kept learning, I began to wonder if I should try to return to the field of social work by perhaps working at a non-profit organization. At the same time, I began volunteering at my church with outreach for homeless people and at an organization that



The staff room

spreads awareness about human trafficking. It became more apparent to me that Japan also has social problems but they just seem to be more hidden than in Canada. The more I learned from my studies, specifically about global education, the more I comprehended how powerful being a teacher could be. I began to realize that the way I act and think in the classroom was significant to my beliefs and values outside of the classroom. I understood that teaching and social work practice can be combined as one action if one has the awareness of the possibility.

In October 2017, my co-worker and dear friend asked me if I wanted to go to Uganda with his NPO to visit his Ugandan friends' community and possibly work with schools in February 2018. I had never considered visiting Africa but I knew immediately that my answer had to be "Yes" as I wanted to learn more about life there. After paying for my ticket, I did not give the trip a second thought for a while, as I found myself with so many things to do with my new-found freedom such as volunteering and writing after completing my master's. In January 2018 I got my visa, vaccination for yellow fever, malaria pills, and planned a lesson for elementary school students about Canadian animals. The next thing I knew I was in Uganda. Uganda is a beautiful country rightly named the Pearl of Africa with many incredibly kind people who welcomed us into their community and homes with gracious hospitality. However, economic problems and limited government funding into services and infrastructure leave many Ugandans facing numerous challenges such as high unemployment, poverty, limited access to education and health care.

Our Ugandan friend took us to his village elementary school and high school that he attended, as well as the elementary school he had worked at prior to moving to Kanagawa. The staff and students welcomed us warmly. The harshness of the lack that I observed in the schools was overwhelming (forgive me for sounding like a privileged Westerner full of prejudices). Each classroom was a brick room with only an open doorway and windows, cement floors, long wooden desks and benches, and a chalkboard. There was no electricity, no computers, no overhead projectors, no whiteboards, no ergonomically-designed desks, no TVs, no DVD players, and no air conditioners. Nevertheless, the students were full of energy and the teachers had passion despite being paid a meagre salary. (See the answer key to a test we found nearby the staffroom on the next page.)

It was at that moment, when I looked into that classroom, that I realized what motivates a teacher to teach: to sacrifice all you have for your students and to expect nothing in return. It seems that the rest, the teaching theories, philosophies, textbook materials, classroom technology, bonuses and so on, are all extras. If you want to give everything you have to your students, you will seek out whatever you can do to help them and to make their futures better despite the challenges of the current situation. Instead of teaching to escape practicing social work in Canada, I now want to fully commit to my role as an English instructor providing my students with a positive and empowering experience of learning English. As I continue as a teacher, I hope that I can be true to this motivation.



Bio: I have been living in Japan for nearly ten years after graduating with a Bachelor of Social Work completing practicums in community development and research to affect policy change in Winnipeg, Canada. Recently I received a Master of Arts in Integrated Studies with a focus on global change and community studies.

Currently I am teaching at Rikkyo University in Tokyo where I have the opportunity to explore and experiment with fostering learning autonomy, developing inter-cultural awareness and using shadowing in English discussion classes. In my free time I enjoy volunteering to help the homeless, studying Japanese and doing yoga, as well as going to art museum and DJ parties.

1. hoe/ forked hoe
2. bathing/ brushing teeth/ washing clothes/ cutting finger and toe nails/ combing hair/ ironing clothes
3. cows/ goats
4. For; income/ meat/ eggs/ manure/ feathers/ etc
5. stools/ chairs/ benches (mark any material made from wood)
6. wind
7. Farmers use wind for winnowing/ drying clothes and harvested crops/ drive wind mills/ help in sailing boats
8. Gumboots
9. They protect feet from thorns, hook worms mud, dust/ etc
10. Housefly/ cockroach/ mosquitoes/ black flies/ tsetse flies
11. Queen bee
12. Moisture/ water
13. Latrine/ toilets
14. Shedding leaves/ leaves grow into thorns/ some leaves grow a waxy layer.
15. Mortar and pestle is used for grinding and pounding food like groundnuts
16. Splash erosion/ rill erosion/ sheet erosion/ gully erosion. V wind erosion
17. Heat energy/ light energy
18. Paraffin/ kerosene
19. A house gives shelter to people/ protects people from harsh weather and wild animals
20. Leaves
21. Mass is measured in grammes/ kilogrammes while weight is measured in newtons.
22. Enzymes
23. Loam soil
24. Salk (injectable polio vaccine/ IPV)
25. Scalds/ fractures/ electric shocks/ etc
26. Solids have closely packed molecules while liquids have spaced molecules/ solids have a definite shape while liquids take the shape of containers they are put.
27. Spiracles help the insect to breathe.
28. Bacteria have one cell.
29. Proteins
30. A rake
31. It is used to collect rubbish/ level nursery beds.
32. Mushrooms/ toadstools/ puffballs/ moulds/ rhizopus
33. Sight/ hearing/ feeling/ taste/ touch
34. White yams store food in the swollen underground stems.
35. A rack is used to dry washed plates.
36. Mark any drawing of canine tooth.
37. Ant hills hide termites that destroy crops.
38. Feeding them on a balanced diet/ washing them clothes/ helping them take medicine/ bathing them/ etc
39. Penumbra/ umbra
40. Biological changes are irreversible/ form new substances/ involve growth, excretion, respiration, etc

An answer key found nearby the staff room