

Michigan Teachers Book Club

Respite for Teachers: Reflection and Renewal in the Teaching Life

by Christine Pearson Casanave and Miguel Sosa

About the Authors

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Even though I was an art major as an undergraduate, I knew even then that I would not have a career either as a commercial or a fine artist. It just didn't feel right. I continued to draw however (until today, actually), because I found that there were some things I could not easily put into words. Some years later, I was studying Spanish and working in the mail room at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, when someone by chance mentioned to me that a local adult school was looking for an ESL teacher. I knew nothing about ESL, but taking that job changed my life. In the next several years, I constructed a life as an ESL teacher, changing my MA major from Spanish to education and applied linguistics, and eventually returning to school for a PhD so that I could become a university professor. After graduating with a doctoral degree, another opportunity presented itself to me—a chance to work full time at a private university in Japan. I took this chance, thinking to stay a few years, but the years stretched to thirteen. I taught EFL and applied linguistics courses mostly to undergraduate Japanese students, and worked part time in the MATESOL program at an American university in Tokyo. My teaching experiences, and ongoing reading, helped me find things to write about and publish. After all these years I am still not used to seeing my name in print—one of those surprises I never could have imagined as an undergraduate.

One of the initial challenges I had, and continue to have, was that of learning something about Japanese language, while still maintaining my Spanish (and my tenuous hold on French). Being a zero-level language learner in Japan, in a culture I had never lived in before, filled me with awe and respect for every ESL-EFL student I had ever met. How brave these students were! They were doing things I was not sure that I myself could do, and under conditions in the Japanese educational system that were not exactly conducive to inspired language learning. While in Japan, I opted not to take classes in Japanese, but to listen, look, and study on my own. In control of my own learning, without tests, boring textbooks, or debilitating competition, I kept my interest in Japanese high for most of the years I lived there. I am still learning.

But the constraints under which teachers worked in Japan seemed overwhelming. I began to wonder whether English teachers were seen by administrators, parents, and politicians only as technicians rather than as educators. It seemed so. At faculty meetings, and in

classes, people talked about logistics, about record keeping, and about how to do things, not about why, not about connecting with students. I wondered where the students were in the minds of administrators and even teachers, and whether there was any way to connect in a meaningful way with the individuals in large classes and with overworked colleagues. I wondered if there was any way to counter the testing craze that was sweeping Japan (and the United States). And then my father got ill and I left Japan, but I think I would have had to leave anyway because I was getting depressed at not finding ways to nourish my life as an educator. After my father left this world, I was invited to work part of the year at Temple University in Tokyo, which is what I am currently doing with pleasure. But the same questions haunt me.

When I met Miguel some years ago in an online course at Columbia University's Teachers College in Tokyo, where I had been working part time for many years, we began conversing about matters beyond the course material. We discovered that we shared certain anguishes and aspirations and ideals. And frustrations. We realized that teachers' lives are often taken up with so much testing and grading and record keeping that they do not have time or energy left for themselves and their colleagues—for nourishing, rather than debilitating, talk about teaching and learning. So we conversed by email and by phone and when possible in person, taking pleasure in talking about education and teaching and learning and about books we both treasured. We both felt transformed in some ways by these interactions. I found myself drawing more, and going on extra long walks to look at and listen to things I don't always pay attention to. Perhaps in part as an act of desperation, we wrote *Respite for Teachers* as a way to bring some of our thoughts to others, in the hope that they, too, would find ways to enrich their conversations about teaching and learning. Our desire is that this small book will resonate with book club participants and that you, too, will find ways to talk about the small miracles and transformations that people, both teachers and students, can experience in educational settings, every day.

Miguel Sosa
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“Being an artist-teacher means to live constantly working towards self-development and change. There is no other way. In music, the virtuoso is continuously engaged in uncovering new forms and ways. In teaching, it means the difference between being a tree or a rock. Change or die; the choice is individual.”

---M. Rabinovitch

In 1993, I began my teaching career at the University of Ottawa in Canada. It was almost by accident that I began to teach Solfège (sight singing). Little did I know that teaching people to how to read, listen to, and write music was going to serve as the basis for yet another career, this one in TESOL. At the time, I thought that teaching was easy. I thought that teachers were people who had an easy life, delivered the contents of books and did not have to care about dealing with other people after the end of the academic year. I had met a couple of people who inspired me, but not as teachers. These were

mentors who took an interest in helping me recognize and develop my potential. They opened the worlds of music and languages to me.

Then in 1995, I was invited by the Japanese Ministry of Education to do research on Music Education. I moved to Yokohama and slowly began to go through the processes of re-inventing myself in a new culture and of learning a new language. A few years before, I had done something similar in Canada and in France, but the languages seemed to connect, somehow. This time however, things were completely different. Thanks to that change, I realized that until then, I had thought that learning a foreign language was something that required a tremendous effort on the part of the learner and that foreign language teachers were there to tell students what their mistakes were.

As I continued to do my work, I met many people who, like me, were trying to communicate in a different language. The people I was paid to observe and help were students of *koto*, *shamisen* and *shakuhachi*, Japanese traditional instruments. These students had great difficulty reading Western music notation. Here I am not referring to *Ars Musica* from Texas and Tennessee. I am talking about European classical music. Many of my colleagues (most of them people educated in France), referred to those students as "hopeless" cases because, they could not "speak" European music. As an outsider, I began to reconsider the entire learning process, this time combining what I had learned from learning music and languages. It was then that it became clear that one of the many roles of teachers is to learn with students.

As a student of Japanese, I began to observe teachers and their ways of teaching. I then realized that teaching is not that easy, that it requires tremendous (almost out-of this world amounts of) patience, and that from time to time, teachers need to find space to think and renew themselves. I then realized that if I wanted to help people learn to speak, think and write European music, I had to learn to learn. This led me to become a student at Teachers' College, Columbia University in Tokyo. This was the beginning of my second career, this time in TESOL. I have since worked at several high schools and universities in Tokyo and Yokohama, while continuing my career as a pianist.

As I interacted with other language teachers, I began to hear from many of my colleagues stories about how stressful it was for them to do their work. They were unhappy with a school system in which excessive curriculum demands and meaningless school duties were the norm. As a result, many of my colleagues found themselves harboring feelings of inadequacy. In our conversations, we often arrived at the conclusion that the challenge is for us to learn how to work creatively within a system that doesn't always support change, and to do our job without endangering our position or losing our students' trust.

A couple of years later I met Christine and we began to converse online. These conversations became long email texts in which we discussed books we had read, as well as ideas and questions we had about teachers and teaching and students and learning. We wrote a lot. By the time she came up with the idea of writing a book, we had probably exchanged over a thousand pages of written conversations. During that time, texts we exchanged were having an interesting effect on the way I did my work not only in the

classroom, but also on the way I prepared concerts. I began to appreciate more the books we read, and the short bits of space and solitude I could make from time to time. It became quite clear that how we perceive ourselves reflects how we project ourselves in our interactions with others. This includes looking inside as well as embracing uncertainty – two inherent aspects of teaching. Understanding that in teaching there are no recipes is probably the first step toward experiencing respite.

One message that we hope to express in *Respite for Teachers* is that teachers do not need to become prisoners of school systems in which the focus is on what 'should or must be done.' Rather, we would like to remind teachers that one of the best gifts we can give ourselves is to take time to reflect on what we have learned from our reading, from our experiences in the classroom, and even from our reflecting. We often talk about a cycle that integrates what we know, what we can do, and the kinds of teachers we want to be. Our experience has taught us that this delicate combination is an art form that we need to keep learning throughout life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1. Roadside Weeds

1. How do you describe your own students who don't fit the conventions of the educational system or who don't meet your expectations? What metaphors, in addition to 'weeds,' can you come up with?
2. What do you see as the central message of this chapter? Does it resonate with you and your students?

Chapter 2. Grading

1. Consider the grading systems you have used. What are these systems like, and how fair do you think they are to you and your students?
2. If you could choose an ideal way to grade students fairly, free of imposed constraints, what would that be? What would your rationale be for that system?
3. What are your views on ways to assess and evaluate students without grading them?

Chapter 3. Loathsome Things

Add your own choices of loathsome things to this list.

Chapter 4. Difficult Students

1. How do you define 'difficult students' in your own teaching experiences?
2. Why do you think that some students have become difficult in the ways you described in your response to question 1?
3. How successful have you been in your efforts to deal with difficult students? What are some ideal ways to deal with them?
4. When you cannot reach a difficult student, what have been your responses? (What have you done? How have you felt?)
5. Think about a difficult student. Review the situation. How would you respond if that situation repeated itself again tomorrow? What would you do differently?

Chapter 5. Anti-depressants

Add your own choices of anti-depressants to this list.

Chapter 6. Fear and Curiosity

1. What fears do you perceive that your students have—fears that may prevent them from moving ahead with their own learning?
2. What fears do you have that prevent you from taking risks in your life as a teacher?
3. How do you critique your students' work, and how do they respond to your critiques? How do you respond to critiques from others? What are some tricks to critiquing that do not discourage you or your students?
4. How do you conceptualize the relationship between fear and curiosity?
5. Can teachers spark curiosity in students? Or is curiosity something that people just have or don't have?
6. How curious were you as a child? As an adolescent? How curious are you now as an adult? What are some examples of your current curiosities? Do students see you as a curious person?
7. What do you think of the idea that children begin to lose their curiosity soon after they enter school?

Chapter 7. Subversive Acts

1. What are your views about the role of humor in the class? Should it be part of a teacher's "bag of tricks"?
2. What are your views about the role of sarcasm or cynicism in the classroom that is directed at things that neither you nor students can change?

Add your own choices of subversive acts to this list.

Chapter 8. Conductors, Orchestras, and Choirs

1. How do you respond to the extended metaphor of the teacher as a conductor and students as orchestra or choir members as we presented it in this chapter?
2. Whether or not you find the conductor metaphor useful, how do you envision and practice ways to get a group of diverse individuals to work together? What ways have you found to value students' uniqueness?
3. A good conductor adapts to a group's limitations and also sees the possibilities within it. What ways have you found as a teacher to do this with your own classes?

Chapter 9. Embarrassing Things

Add your own choices of embarrassing things to this list.

Chapter 10. Connections

1. In this chapter, we describe some teaching environments as full of people but paradoxically isolating. Have you ever had this reaction to your own teaching environment? What made it so isolating in spite of being filled with people?
2. This chapter gives examples of two ways of connecting with others—one through language, and another without language. In your own lives, what parallel examples can you give that have taught you something about teaching and learning and about connecting with others?
3. Miguel found that telling stories was a good way to connect with his students. Over time, they got to know him and he them in ways that built connections. What stories have you and your students shared and what have been the long and short term effects of this sharing?

Chapter 11. Things to See in Mirrors

To what extent does the mirror metaphor as a way to examine your own life resonate with you?

Add your own choices of things to see in mirrors to this list.

Chapter 12. Mentoring

1. What mentors, if any, have you had in your life as a student or teacher? In what ways have they affected your views of yourself and your practices as a teacher or lifelong student?
2. What do you perceive to be the qualities of a good mentor? To what extent does a mentoring experience also depend on qualities of the mentored one?
3. Have you kept in touch with any of your students or met any of your grandstudents (students of your own students who have since become teachers)? If so, describe what made these mentoring relations special. Have you met, or would you like to meet, any of your grandteachers? Is the metaphor of passing the torch appropriate in any of your cases?
4. Not every teacher can be a mentor, certainly not to every student, and not every student will have mentors in his or her life. What can teachers and students offer to each other in place of long-term mentoring experiences?
5. In conjunction with Question 1, on a piece of paper, draw a graph or write a list outlining the timeline of your career. Include all the people who have mentored you in any way. Also, include the people you believe you have mentored. Explain why you believe the people you included on your mentors list should be there. Similarly, explain why you believe you are seen as a mentor by those you listed mentees.

Chapter 13. Thoughts to Savor

1. From your experience, what words of wisdom (a pithy quote) would you like to share with someone entering, or in, the profession?

With colleagues, compile a list of your own favorite quotes from readings that inspire you.

Chapter 14. Things to Wonder At

Add your own choices of things to wonder at to this list.

Chapter 15. Solitude

1. What ways have you found to nourish your mind and emotions in your teaching career?
2. If you are someone who feels nourished by spending time alone, describe these feelings and try to show how solitude works in your own life to nourish you. If you are uncomfortable being alone, describe those feelings as well.
3. What constraints are there in your life that make it difficult to create balance between your work and time for yourself? In what ways can you reevaluate these constraints and make adjustments in your life?

Chapter 16. Epilogue

1. Reread Hiroshi's email in the epilogue, p. 152. If you were to get an email like this from a student, what would be your reaction?
2. How do you conceptualize students' success and failure in your own (language) classes?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Think about the way you learned something you consider important in your life. Was that learning characterized by spontaneity, improvisation, and unpredictability? By systematicity, regularly, and authority? How does the way you learned at that time apply now to your own teaching?
2. What readings have you done that express a philosophy of teaching that suits your personality?
3. Do you see any difference in second and foreign language teaching between being a technician and being a teacher? How do you characterize each?
4. In your opinion, what is the value of bringing other disciplines and or knowledge (consider your own background) into your teaching?
5. With others, discuss the possible difficulties and rewards that may occur while you are living and teaching outside your home country.
6. What have been your own experiences learning a foreign language?

7. In what ways might you conceptualize your teaching career as a work of art?
8. How do you find respite from the burdens and obligations of the teaching life?