

Preface

People are not what they appear to be. The way we are taught to “package” ourselves prevents others from seeing us as real people. This is why we need to make a conscious effort to uncover whatever treasures we and others have to offer. We need to do this every day with everyone, starting with ourselves.

—Mihail Rabinovitch, personal communication

*T*his small book consists of a series of short thought-provoking literary-style essays on topics related to teaching and learning in culturally diverse settings. We discuss, both literally and metaphorically, phenomena in education such as listening, questioning, conversing, observing, grading, taking risks, “conducting,” and connecting. The book is grounded in a well-established educational philosophy that stresses the importance of reflection and engagement with students and colleagues for a satisfying teaching life, and that considers our own ongoing learning as essential for intellectual and emotional renewal and growth. The essays in themselves are not designed to teach readers anything (in other words, they do not consist of “infor-

mation” as such). Rather, we hope they will inspire teachers to take a few moments out from busy lives to reflect on what it means to teach, to learn, and to connect with students, with colleagues, and with their work in meaningful ways.

We have tried our best to stress our belief in the importance of looking at the ways we teach and learn from the perspective of the observer, who—like an owl or a hawk—observes everything from a distance and records the scenes for later reflection. The morsels we selectively notice and digest nourish our spirits just as food does our bodies. Too many of us get caught up in the routines prescribed by others—administrators, governments, textbooks, and methods—routines and prescriptions that presume to create a sense of community and order within the school. A true sense of community, however, often eludes us. Moreover, we often get sucked into school politics and the never-ending spirit-sapping obligations that surround the work of teaching. The result is that we neglect to reflect on our own learning and to listen closely to our students or to look up from our work occasionally and marvel at a new moon or become absorbed in a piece of music. Our lives, our teaching and learning, are diminished as a result. We hope that the morsels in this book will encourage teachers to hone their skills of observation and reflection.

The writing style of *Respite for Teachers* is not only accessible, but multivocalic and stylistically diverse, much like a verbal quilt. (Unpredictability helps stave off boredom, in all aspects of our lives.) Some portions are presented as lists rather than essays (a deliberate choice), following the writing style of Sei Shonagon, a 10th-century court lady who documented Japan’s Heian court culture in a fascinating stylistic masterpiece, *The Pillow Book*.¹ Her keen powers of observation of objects in nature and routine events in her life have helped us understand how important it is to practice seeing the

ordinariness of our own lives with new eyes. *The Pillow Book* is an excellent example of curiosity at work, and Sei Shonagon's simple yet detailed descriptions can be a source of delight and renewal. Her unusual way of describing the "usual" in the form of witty lists reminds us that curiosity is a way of seeing that one recovers from childhood and then cultivates.

Many of our own examples of teaching and learning also stem from our experiences in Japan, partly because a large span of our teaching careers has taken place in that country. As guest teachers, we have witnessed how heavy bureaucratic requirements and emphasis on test scores result in particularly distressing situations, such as lack of motivation by students and teacher burnout. These phenomena, we believe, however, will be familiar to teachers in many countries. We all need a bit of respite from these burdens, which we hope we can provide readers of *Respite for Teachers*.

We purposely have kept the essays very short. They can be read in a few minutes. They can also be read selectively rather than sequentially. In other words, teachers do not need to find large blocks of time to read this book but can use it as needed to help them step back from the stress and routine of the teaching life for a moment of thought and reflection. We have also included several cyanotypes (lensless works of art) by photographer Martha Casanave and line drawings by coauthor Christine Pearson Casanave to provide readers with additional sources of contemplation.



In the spirit of honesty, we would like to conclude our preface by sharing how this book came to be. The essays grew out of electronic conversations we had with each other over a period of two and a half

years. We feel it is important to let readers know that we both are highly skeptical about e-conversing for obvious reasons: The email culture has redefined the way most of us communicate; most of us settle for short bits of cold text, unfinished sentences, incomplete paragraphs, and the sense of urgency that accompanies most email traffic on the very crowded (gridlocked?) email highways.

To make things more complicated, at the time when we started conversing, we did not know each other; we had shared only a brief weekend class meeting at Teachers College, Columbia University, in Tokyo, in early November 2003, as part of an online class in a master's program in TESOL.

Then from January 2004, as our online class drew to a close, we continued our email conversations. We talked a great deal about our students and other people's students. We talked about colleagues and about administrators. We talked about books. With each exchange, we began to uncover shared interests, concerns, and questions, many about teaching and learning in spite of the fact that our academic backgrounds seemed unrelated. Miguel's first background is in music, and Chris's main career is in applied linguistics. Gradually, we uncovered the fact that the combination of themes in our conversations—about art, language, and teaching—was enlightening for us both. We like to use the term *uncover* in lieu of *discover* for the simple reason that quite often we found ourselves directing our thoughts toward an issue that we had already read about, thought about, and at times, debated about. We did not discover anything new, in other words, but found insights and inspiration in the familiar territory of our teaching and learning, and of our reading and conversing about them.

In our conversations, a lot of questions arose. For example, we found ourselves wondering how teachers manage to survive

in difficult and often enervating working conditions, why mindless bureaucratic regulations that steadily rob people of their humanity cannot be changed, how we can find ways to reach students in spite of constraints, whether we see our teaching as nourishing our own learning and living, and whether and how we see our own learning as feeding back into our teaching.

At the same time, we uncovered the value of having experienced life as temporary guests in various countries. We uncovered the fact that communication often needs to enter uncharted waters, and here we came to recognize the usefulness of having had to learn English and Spanish, French and Japanese. Though we composed email primarily in English and Spanish, we regularly used expressions from all four languages, a practice that added spice, humor, and personality to our exchanges. Moreover, this practice reinforced our belief that language teachers benefit greatly from being lifelong language learners themselves.

Several months into our conversations, we learned that we each find solace and inspiration in a single small book that we reread regularly. Miguel told Chris about Theodore Zeldin's *Conversation*.² Chris told Miguel about Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*.³ We both responded to each other's choices with a sigh of "*naruhodo*" (the Japanese expression for "I see, I understand"). Shortly thereafter, Chris was walking along Iris Canyon in Monterey, California, admiring the roadside weeds of late spring, and the idea for this volume descended on her intact. She recognized that teachers need a small book, one that is about teaching and learning—or teaching as learning—a book that teachers can read whole or in part at a sitting, and continue to read and reread throughout their careers. She envisioned this book as one that is designed to provoke thought, provide spiritual respite, connect hearts and minds to other hearts and

minds, and offer opportunities to look at what we do in a different light, but without forgetting to address the practicalities of our classrooms for too long. She emailed Miguel instantly, not offering many details so as not to dissuade him from what she knew would be a commitment of several years of hard work.

Between piano concerts, a recording project, and a full schedule of English teaching, Miguel responded that it would be a pleasure to add another project to his already full seven-day week. He plunged in. (Poor Miguel, Chris thought. I wonder if he has any idea what this journey will involve.) (Poor Chris, Miguel thought. I wonder if she has any idea that she won't be able to get rid of me once we get started.) After many more conversations, after sharing ideas and early drafts that literally traveled back and forth across the Pacific many times, and after shared adventures in reading from a growing list of books we treasure, new themes began to appear in our email conversations and to develop into further ideas for essays for a book. By the time we had our second face-to-face meeting in early October 2004, we had written and exchanged more than one hundred pages of email letters. We stopped counting as we entered the second year of our electronic conversations and as we added conversations by phone to our modes of communication. Drafts of essays continued to fly between California and Japan. The work often felt slow and intermittent. But at our third face-to-face meeting in January 2006, Miguel handed Chris a printout of a manuscript that finally looked like the draft—rough, to be sure—of a book.

That is how we crafted this volume, which we offer as a gift, imperfect as most works of art are, to the teachers we know and to those we have yet to meet.

Notes

1. Morris, Y. (1971). *The pillow book of Sei Shonagon*. London: Penguin.
2. Zeldin, T. (1998). *Conversation*. London: Random House.
3. Dillard, A. (1989). *The writing life*. New York: HarperPerennial.