

SLA#1: A Letter to a Friend with Response

SLA Letter 2014

Hi, Delia,

I am writing this letter to you as part of a reflective journal entry for my SLA course. It will also give you an impression of my SIT Graduate Institute experience in general.

When I first arrived at SIT, I was introduced during orientation to the idea of experiential learning. At first, it was not clear to me what experiential learning exactly meant. Two weeks of courses, however, were quite enough for me to get a sense of the diverse meanings an experiential cycle can offer. I came to realize how important reflection is as a step in the larger scheme of the experiential learning cycle. Its importance lies in the fact that it provides the means through which we can isolate our emotional attachment to a certain experience in order to observe it with greater objectivity, think about it, and make meaning from it. In my SLA class, I had the chance to do all of that.

In the SLA class, I was introduced to different concepts, ideas, and approaches to teaching—some were new to me, and some I had encountered before. However, what was new to me was the way in which the professor approached these concepts and philosophies and introduced them in the classroom. When I try to create a metaphor for my learning experience in SLA, that metaphor would resemble the journey of **Siddhartha**, in the famous novel of the same name written by Herman Hesse. Siddhartha, the main character, steps out of his comfort zone to seek experience in the real world. His journey is one of enlightenment, where *knowledge* and *experience* meet to allow true meaning to emerge.

What Siddhartha and I have in common is the opportunity to not only see, listen, and observe but also to feel. For Siddhartha, it is about being both “knowledgeable” and “experienced” in life; for me, it is about both understanding, living, and reflecting upon the experiences that Vygotsky, Krashen, Chomsky, and other educators have lived and articulated. The SLA class was about that—about this rare learning opportunity where a time gate opens for us as students to live and experience what these influential educational figures once lived and experienced. What makes the SLA class very special to me are the live connections the professor creates—between us and these figures, their concepts, philosophies, and approaches—and how these relate to our own specific teaching experiences. I have always felt that I was not merely *taught* about something but that I *lived it*.

As I reflect back on the types of activities we had in class over the last two weeks, I realize how meaningful every single activity was to the totality of the learning we were meant to grasp at the end.

In one class, we had a dense and difficult reading about Lev Vygotsky to complete before class. I struggled to understand many of its ideas in relation to my own teaching experience. During class, however, we took an imaginary trip to Russia where we “lived” and experienced what Vygotsky himself had lived. We observed, as visitors, the historical, social, and personal context of his life. We had the chance to imagine his world and see the context that gave rise to the ideas we had been studying. I soon discovered that the concepts I had initially struggled with were not only there to ponder or contextualize but also to *live, understand, and internalize*.

The class was highly interactive and communicative, and as students, we were able to co-construct our own knowledge by learning from one another and reflecting on our experiences

rather than merely reproducing what we heard or saw. Every aspect of the theory—from principles and concepts to patterns and parameters—was seamlessly incorporated into the lesson plan. I was able to see the *whole picture*, which I found fascinating. It was a completely new experience for me.

In conclusion, the lessons I have learned from the SLA class are ones I have taken seriously as representing the best way we can learn. As teachers, we are never in shortage of books to read or educational contexts in which to thrive; it is all about what we can make of our own experiences in relation to a book, a concept, or a learning environment. Being mindful of our own learning experiences, and of the opportunities created through interaction and reflection, allows us to make sense of the whole picture and truly grasp meaning.

Thanks,

Mohamed Mahmoud Ahmed Lekrama

Response:

Dear Mohamed,

This is one of the nicest SLA letters I have read through the years. I treasure all these letters as they are all very personal and powerful reflections on what resonated from this class in each one of you (I just finished reading a letter from one of your peers who wrote to her mom who passed away a year and a half ago, hoping that her mom can hear her excitement and take comfort that her daughter has found a place where she feels excited, happy and stimulated)—letters like these are beyond touching and humbling and your letter is no exception in this respect.

What I found particularly powerful in your letter was your ability to so beautifully and succinctly capture the essence of experiential learning and our approach to teaching. With laser-sharp precision you have nailed all the key elements – I am not sure how much you are already familiar with Dewey’s writings but you managed to capture in a nutshell all of John Dewey’s key principles of rigorous reflection and experiential learning. I loved your reference to Siddhartha too. By a sheer coincidence I referred to him in reflecting on my own personal journey as a learner and language educator too (if interested, take a look at the short reflective piece I wrote for JALT (the Japan Association of Language Teachers) in 2013 as part of my featured speaker presentation, called “Grammaring: a personal odyssey perspective,” p. 32).

<http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/3143-jalt2013-plenary-and-featured-speaker-articles-non-password-protected>

It is such a joy to have you in my SLA class. Your comments and insights are always so thoughtful and rich, inviting the group and me to stretch our thinking a bit further and to acknowledge the power of context and the riches we gain from locally constructed knowledge, often gained under adverse conditions.

We are so blessed to have you as part of the SIT community. Let’s have lunch or tea sometime soon. I would like to hear more about how you got where you are, given the fact that, as you shared in class, your parents never got a chance to get an education and you described them as formally illiterate.

Many thanks for this wonderful letter and your delightful energy in class.

Best,

Elka