

Second Career, Second Chance, Third Chance?

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Summary: This article describes my experience teaching English online to young women living in Afghanistan through the organization Girls on the Path of Change, and discusses how seasoned and second-career teachers may be uniquely situated to share their expertise as a way of pursuing professional development and giving back.

Keywords: online teaching, volunteer, Afghanistan, change, second career, professional development, giving back

It's never too late to be what you might have been.

I almost left it too late to answer my calling as a teacher. In 2014, after retiring from a business career, I attended Georgetown University and emerged with a certificate to teach English as a foreign or second language. More than 10 years have passed. I now introduce myself as a teacher. I have had a second career, and that career and the title of teacher feel real, satisfying, and fulfilling. My decision to begin a second career and become a teacher—my “second chance”—prepared me for my “third chance,” the story I want to share with you today.

In 2024, as I was getting ready to celebrate 10 years as a teacher, I had a health emergency. I quickly realized that I would need to refocus my priorities and stop teaching. This transition was very difficult and different from my earlier career transition. Teaching had become a fundamental part of me in a way that my first career had not. I wondered if I would teach again. Was this part of my life—and my identity—finished? The answer and my third chance came almost a year later from a distant and unexpected location: Afghanistan.

Girls on the Path of Change (GPC) was looking for experienced teachers to teach English online to young women living in Afghanistan. These young women could no longer attend school and pursue their education due to political changes in their country. For many, this meant that their studies in fields such as education and medicine came to a complete and jarring halt. GPC was started by Robina Azizi, who was forced to abandon her studies and to flee with her family from Afghanistan in 2021. She was determined to support her friends and sisters remaining behind in their shared country and founded GPC in 2023 (Azizi, 2025a, 2025b). More information on GPC is available on the organization's Linktree page (Girls on the Path of Change, n.d.).

I volunteered to teach the spring term. My initial class roster included about 20 students. Their English level was high intermediate to advanced. They ranged in age from teenagers to young women in their twenties. Some had not been allowed to finish high school; others were prevented from finishing medical studies. One student was the mother of a newborn. All were born in Afghanistan and most still lived there. A few lived in Pakistan or Iran. I also had an invaluable teaching assistant who lived in Abu Dhabi.

Anything I could tell you about the wonderful experience of teaching these amazing young women would probably be familiar to you. As teachers, we know that our students give us more than we give them, and that they often delight and amaze us. These students were no different. What was different was how they maintained their hope, resilience, and thirst for learning under the most trying of circumstances.

Because most students were based in Afghanistan, we faced many logistical and technological challenges. Internet service could be intermittent. Students joined, then dropped, then joined again. The time difference meant that the students were participating late in the evening, often in the midst of family activities with a lot of background noise and distractions. Any technology we used needed to be free and ubiquitously available.

I learned how to split the screen so I could enlarge and advance Google Slides. Google Classroom allowed the students to log on at a time convenient for them to review the class content. Google Meet was free for only the first hour. I scheduled the class in two sessions. Midway through class, students had to log out, then log in to a new session. It is a testament to their commitment that they all made every effort to log in and log back in as many times as necessary.

Of course, teaching (or learning) is more than simply mastering technology. The courage with which these young

women faced the challenges, not only of participating in class but of living their daily lives, gave me a new confidence that I could accept whatever a class situation might be and turn it into a welcoming learning environment. For the medical students, I taught a class on medical vocabulary using content based on similar classes in the United States. A licensed nurse practitioner co-taught the class with me. For the teenagers, I enjoyed developing classes on dance and nature, as well as using music clips from various pop and K-pop stars. They, in turn, proudly shared their national dances and stories they had written full of colorful imagery. We were creative together. The students took deep pleasure in being able to learn again and brought joy and celebration to our class time. I grew as a teacher and as a person.

These young women and so many others are brimming with vitality, talent, and dreams. It is my sincerest hope that they are given the opportunity to develop and share these gifts. I was pleased to be able to support that hope in the only way I could: with my teaching.

When I first started working, I had a traditional view of what work, a job, and a career meant. A job was, at its most fundamental, a structured time, in a structured setting, for which you got paid. The GPC opportunity was the opposite

in many respects. My embrace of it reflects, at least in part, my becoming a teacher later in life (Shin, 2016). I no longer had the same financial goals and family commitments, but I still needed to work to support my sense of self and to use the gifts I had been given. At different times in our lives, our work gives us different things.

Facing that health challenge and reflecting on the situation of women in Afghanistan also helped me truly understand that teaching is not simply a job but a calling. All teachers—even part-time, volunteer, and later-in-life ones—are responding to this calling. And with all the opportunities and challenges in today's world, the response of teachers is more important than ever.

My Afghan students gave me a third chance to become the teacher and person I am meant to be. My education is one of my most valuable possessions. I had dreamed of being able to help girls and women worldwide who are denied access to this opportunity. I am so grateful to have finally realized this dream. Yet I also understand that the path of change—and becoming what we might be—is the challenge and calling of a lifetime. GPC's mission speaks to me: I realize that I too am a woman on the path of change. Perhaps we all are.

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