

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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## *"Takeaways" for Reflective Student Learning*

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The student written “takeaway” is a tool I have used in several classes over the past five years with arguably good success. The takeaway, usually 1-2 pages in length, is written by a student and can be in reference to a guest appearance, assignment, term project, or any other undertaking during the semester. I find that the takeaway gives the student the opportunity to reflect on their learning process and reinforce those processes that yield insight and perspective. I provide the students with a “take away guideline” sheet at the beginning of the semester. For each course, I tailor the guidelines slightly. In this first example, the guideline is oriented towards guest speakers and includes four student takeaways from prior classes.

### ***I: Course Takeaway Guidelines***

*A. Takeaways* – a definition: Takeaways, in this instance, are what you have learned from listening to each guest or host including and then beyond any initial reaction. Takeaways, for example, can include but do not have to be limited to, how you:

- Were surprised or heard something that has enabled you to think outside the paradigm you came in with.
- Had one opinion of the host at first and then that changed as you listened. Or you had an opinion about what they did or their field and that shifted from your meeting them. It might even be that you had a shift in your own thinking about what you are doing?
- Might have had your class work further deepened or made real.
- Thought of something in a different way than you had thought about before.
- Had a deep impression made on you and what you might think or realize as a result.

Length: these are best a minimum of about 125 words per person and have no maximum word limit.

How and When to do them: It is best to write them up based on notes you take. Let them settle in and then write them up while things are still somewhat fresh in your mind!

*B. Examples- Guest Appearance Takeaways:* Here are three (3) composite examples of prior student takeaways. I have included ones that I feel provide different approaches and a fine framework for you to use as you please:

1. "Smith Takeaway" Example 1: "John Smith's talk shifted my view of my own work as an entrepreneur. Something that he repeated that I'd heard before but never quite in such black and white language was to, 'look for the pain' because there is opportunity there. I have always assumed that pain is a roadblock to entrepreneurship. I've assumed that pain is something to be managed before anyone is able to throw themselves fully into whatever project they are passionate about. Certainly, you hear many stories in the news of people enduring great tragedies and going on to create opportunities or businesses out of their misfortune. The story is usually told, however, that they overcame this pain and then became determined that no one should suffer similarly and went on to accomplish their great deeds. A clear order is established in these 'heroic tales' that the protagonist overcomes his or her past and then goes on to greatness. For some reason, the way that John Smith told his story made it resonate with me that entrepreneurship could be its own healing."

2. "George Takeaway" Example 1: "I found myself warming up to George as he warmed up to us throughout his stay in your office Friday morning. It definitely made me think about how I'm quicker to judge and stereotype adults older than me more quickly than adults my own age. Learning about his background and his achievements as well as struggles really made him human over the course of the hour and I felt much less intimidated by him upon his exit. Rather, I felt a certain respect for him that doesn't usually happen with someone in such a short amount of time. That's called presence – on his part – that takes talent. I enjoyed George's comments about public speaking and not using paper. If you can't speak from your heart, you won't be truly reaching the hearts of others. That will stick with me from now on – even if I need some paper to guide me from time to time."

In my experience about 20-percent of the class need to have their first takeaway redone. Oftentimes, the takeaway is a judgment on the speaker or other criticism, without any self-reflection or use of that criticism to challenge their own thinking. Sending it back with a few comments and perhaps an example of another student's successful takeaway has always yielded results. And the student is glad to redo it, as the first time around, they didn't feel the benefit.

## ***II. Final Project Takeaways***

In a new class last fall semester, the final project had several parts to it. One was the student team's design project and another the student team's case study as well as teaching notes for that case study. In this assignment, the "takeaways" were required of students for both their design projects and case studies. By creating two separate takeaway exercises, the students were supported in better understanding what they learned and how the different assignments held different learning opportunities. Takeaways also become an invaluable class assessment and tool for improvement of the class, as they are reflective and are not based on criticism but rather what the student learned.

This was how the takeaways were tailored for the case study part of the final assignment:

### *A. Final Project Takeaway Guidelines:*

Last, you are expected to hand in, individually, your takeaways. Takeaways (250-500 words) are what you have learned from doing this project. Below are a few points that might help you think about that:

- By building your own case, you have placed yourself in the shoes of students, teachers, protagonists and everyone else. What has that been like?
- Report on surprises or findings that have enabled you to think outside the paradigm you came in with.
- Did you limit your thinking when you first read the assignment and if so, how might you have broken through that?
- What distinctions have you noticed between being a consumer of cases versus a producer of one? Are there opportunities you hadn't seen before?

Here is an example of student's Final Project takeaways:

"After reading all of the case studies this year, I had a perspective on them in which I was solving problems, identifying barriers and critical issues, and synthesizing ideas out of bits of information from throughout each study. Writing one, on the other hand, was a completely different experience. It was extremely valuable.

First of all, although I definitely have honed my skills of critical thinking and open-ended problem solving in this class, creating an open ended problem was a different kind of learning for me. Trying to delineate the critical components of the case while presenting the reader with both reasonable choices and enough information to fully grasp the meaning of those choices was much more challenging than I thought it would be. The finances section, for example, even though it was not the main focus of our case, could have probably been its own 20 page case study. Deciding how to narrow that part down and focus on what we were trying to teach through the case was a big takeaway because I am now able to see different implementation focuses along with their respective critical issues from a higher dimension. I was able to see how the finances related to the other aspects of the design and case study, and having to select the important material gave me a good grasp of the relationship between the different parts of the case. If I removed one paragraph about ABC's, for example, then a whole other part of the case study would be affected. It was very valuable to be a creator of a case study because I have a much greater grasp of how critical issues are contingent on a number of contextual factors in any given case. Often times to solve a case it is important to sort through these contingencies and see if there is some way to align them with the vision for the case study or design project.

I also had a big takeaway from trying to craft such an intricate case study with four other people. I learned how valuable good communication skills are, because we each had different visions of the case and the design coming into the project. Being open, honest, and supportive as a team helped us to take the best parts of each of our visions and translate them into the case.

One final and very important takeaway was also that I had never crafted a written piece like this before. Although I've written essays and lab reports many times before, I think that I entered this project in a different mindset than I have now. I've never had to juggle so many issues at once and keep track of how they all relate. What's amazing, though, is that now it all doesn't seem so incredibly complicated anymore. I feel like after writing just this one case study, I am much more proficient and the issues feel much less elusive and difficult than they would have when I came into this project."

### ***III. Developing a Learning Community***

I also ask students after they have written their takeaways if they have any objection to my posting them on our class "my courses" website. Usually there are no

objections. Students eagerly read these insightful pages and I find it deepens their individual ability to assess how they learn.

Last, I oftentimes compile selections of the takeaways and send them along to guests as a much appreciated "thank you" for their time and for making a big difference to the students' ways of thinking.

#### ***IV. End of Course Feedback on the Takeaway***

Two examples of final end of course student takeaways reflect the sort of reflective student learning which "takeaways" inspire.

"Entrepreneurship and Good Work" has changed the way I approach the world and my life. I have a drive to take on challenges, and be less wary of my choices. Throughout the class I was able to explore why certain things are meaningful to me. By comparing various systems of my life that I often view as complex and chaotic, I have been able to discern how they connect. I no longer identify myself by boundaries whether they are national, social, professional, academic, but have realized the various facets of my life are more fluid. Development is not linear, but is constantly changing and should be open to development.

I valued the emphasis on listening throughout the class. As I listened to my peers' experiences, I began to distinguish and deconstruct different forms of listening. Listening isn't just about two people talking nor is it about seeing yourself in someone else's shoes, rather it is about understanding a more complete view of a person, and where their ideas come from. Being open to the fact that their influences can be very different from yours. With listening comes a sense of open mindedness, and I allowed myself to be open to transformation.

I strongly appreciated the group dynamic in the way I learned in EGW. I was able to see peer support and coalition building first hand. Our mutual interest in each other's work fostered a form of support and care. It was in this environment that I was able to learn, and take risks. I was much less concerned with a folk pedagogical view towards happiness, and began to deconstruct what I look to for personal fulfillment.

I entered class on the first day, with a passionate desire to improve civil society within the Middle East specifically in Israel-Palestine. I was so deeply entrenched in this subject that I could not distinguish myself from it. However, throughout the class I realized that the Middle East does not own me. While I still feel an emotional involvement in the conflict in Israel-Palestine, I am not bound to it. My emotional well-being and success does not correlate to the Middle East conflict. Rather my involvement in the Middle East as a

place where I grew up and as an academic study is a strategy to work on the things I value, and to create a space that fosters communication, trust, and mutual respect among people.

As I leave Brown University next year to England, I am prepared to carry in my suitcase (framework project) insights, challenges, tools and resources. What is inside this suitcase will not only be used at its future destination, but is open now. As "It is more important to realize who you are than where you are going. Where you are going will certainly change." Thank you!"

*Ed. Note:* It will be no surprise to readers that Prof. Mittleman was honored by his colleagues in the department of Engineering for his development of the "takeaway" with the inaugural *Engineering Impact Award* in May 2008.