

# What's the takeaway from a class?

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**A**s teachers, don't we want to understand the individual takeaways of each one of our students?

Don't we wish that every student – however shy or inarticulate – could reveal to us the unique ways in which he or she has received (or *not* received) whatever has been transacted in class? Better still, don't we all want our students to chew the cud, so to speak, by turning over in their minds whatever they have learned, so as to reflect on it and glean their own insights?

If your answer to any of the above questions is in the affirmative, then, read on...

In this month's research paper, you will encounter a well-known (and yet rarely used) method for getting students to reflect on what they have learned. As part of a course on Academic Writing in a University in the

**Paper:** BlankaKlimova (July 2015) *Diary Writing as a Tool for Students' Self-reflection and Teacher's Feedback in the Course of Academic Writing* *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences* 197:549-553

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282599532\\_Diary\\_Writing\\_as\\_a\\_Tool\\_for\\_Students'\\_Self-reflection\\_and\\_Teacher's\\_Feedback\\_in\\_the\\_Course\\_of\\_Academic\\_Writing](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282599532_Diary_Writing_as_a_Tool_for_Students'_Self-reflection_and_Teacher's_Feedback_in_the_Course_of_Academic_Writing)

Czech Republic, this teacher employed the simple task of diary writing very effectively. Although the intent of this course was to help students develop fluency of expression in English, I found that this paper offered any teacher a methodology that can be adopted even at school level.

What began as a means to solicit student feedback about the course ended up as an institutionalized practice. This teacher first spent an entire 90-minute class at the end of the semester asking students to write a self-reflective essay (in the first person) about their experience of the entire course, what they learned and what they wished they had learned. This essay does not have any fixed format, the teacher hastens to point out, and language mistakes are not corrected as it is *not* graded. This allows the student to write unfettered so as to express personal feelings and opinions without hesitation. Students are asked to write not only about what they learned in the course, but also about how they perceived the teacher during the course. Thus, they write this essay during their last face-to-face encounter with the teacher, and they have the entire 90-minute class for this task.

This exercise proved to be a success, both in terms of understanding student difficulties during the course as well as in drawing out student feedback about the teacher. This prompted the teacher to invite students to attempt diary writing *during* the course, when it

was offered again the next semester. This was mainly because diary writing allows free flowing expression and lends itself well to venting out personal feelings.

What prompts one to write a diary? According to the teacher-researcher, the reasons could be many: fear of expressing feelings to another, worry about forgetting most of the things that one has done, or perhaps, one is ashamed of one's secrets and just doesn't want to reveal them to anyone else. And a diary gives one a safe place to store them...

Whatever the case, once this space was opened up for students and they were told explicitly that they did not have to feel compelled to share the diary with another (if they did not feel so inclined), but had to write in it at least once a week – interesting things began to happen. A few guidelines were given by the teacher to kickstart them, and they were also told that their diary entries (which could even be in their native language, viz., Czech) should be *connected to their experience of the course*.

Out of 15 students who enrolled for the course, only 4 were willing to share their diaries with the teacher. Despite this low number, the teacher researcher recommends adopting diary-writing as a reflective practice, quoting Race (2002)\* as below:

Reflection deepens learning. The act of reflecting is one which causes us to make sense of what we've learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning took place. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment of learning to the wider perspective of learning – heading towards seeing the bigger picture. Reflection is equally useful when our learning has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong with our learning, and how on a future occasion we might avoid now-known pitfalls. Most of all, however, it is increasingly recognised that reflection is an important transferable skill, and is much valued by all around us, in employment, as well as in life in general.

One student wrote thus: In the Course of Practical English the pace is too fast, so I do not even have time to think about anything. I can't manage to read a sentence out loud and at the same time to think what word suits the gap best! I need a bit more time to think about it. I will have to have a look at it at home so that I could know at least something during the lesson. The only thing I knew was listening. But that was probably a coincidence because I have never been good at listening.

I was struck by the remarkable element of meta-analysis in this short diary entry. Here is a student who is putting her finger on the exact problem that she is currently

\*Race, P. (2002). Evidencing reflection: putting the 'w' into reflection. Retrieved May 30, 2013, from <http://escalate.ac.uk/resources/reflection/>.

### Now bring it into the classroom!

1. If your students are not yet acquainted with some very famous diaries (The Diary of Anne Frank, for instance) and diary writers (Mahatma Gandhi), get them to browse through these.
2. Spend one class discussing with them the pros and cons of diary writing.
3. Throw open to the entire class the option of writing a diary, emphasizing that they need not share it with anyone if they do not feel comfortable.
4. Explain that the diary will allow them to safely express their discomfort over the day's lessons, or their feelings about a certain assignment or teacher, etc., without their having to worry about writing it in grammatically correct English.
5. Suggest a minimal frequency of diary writing, as this teacher did: once a week, for example.
6. If you like, join them in this exercise for a short while, by reading aloud your own diary entries about your classes, once a week.
7. Now start encouraging them to share their dairies with their peers, if not you, and make note of any resultant loosening of knots in class.
8. Frame some reflective questions from the few diary entries that you get to see, and pose these questions to the entire class. (Go through the *Guidelines* in the paper for ideas.)

Please do share your responses to these suggestions at [thinkingteacher22@gmail.com](mailto:thinkingteacher22@gmail.com)

facing, and is even coming up with a possible way out of the problem. I could not help wondering if this would have happened without diary writing ...

Yet another student wrote: Today I had the first lesson of Academic writing. It was rather interesting. I understood that I do not know quite a lot of important rules of official writing.

What a valuable lesson this student has learned! And what a gift he has given to the teacher, by clearly spelling out what he *does not know*! This rather short research paper is freely downloadable and sets the reader thinking.

Would you like to bring this into your classroom?

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher ([www.thinkingteacher.in](http://www.thinkingteacher.in)), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research out of the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research into the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at [<neeraja@thinkingteacher.in>](mailto:neeraja@thinkingteacher.in) .