

Taboo List of Phrases – The Clichés of Reflection

v.1 (4/06)

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What exactly constitutes a “good” reflection? To answer this question, we compiled a list of phrases and tips from students’ reflections from past classes. These and other similar phrases were often used due to students writing the reflections at the last minute and not having spent time actually thinking about the broader implications and takeaways of their experiences. We offer this list as a starting point for you to think about what comprises a meaningful and deeper perspective of a design experience based on this list of rather superficial and rushed thoughts. We aren’t saying that you shouldn’t use any of these phrases when you write your reflections but please keep these phrases in mind and perhaps give some thought as to how they could be used more effectively, precisely, and thoughtfully.

Taboo Phrases about Individual Tasks:

- “very productive and effective”
- “insightful”
- “interesting”
- “creative”
- “put my creativity to the test” & other clichés like it
- “tried very hard”
- “which I thought was great”
- “I learned so much . . .”
- “. . . learn a lot . . .”
- “so much”
- “I learned that things don’t always happen the way you plan them.”
- “not that much I can say I wish had gone differently”
- “we needed more time”
- “went pretty well”
- “running pretty smoothly”
- “most important thing I learned along the way”
- “I learned how to think . . .”/ “I learned more about how to design . . .”
- “I wish I had put more time into . . .”
- “much more engaging”
- “think outside the box” & clichés like it
- “work more efficiently”
- “allowed us to look at design in a new way”
- just paraphrasing the words on the assignment sheet
- in general, avoid clichés or common sentences in responses
- excuses (for illness, business, or whatever) don’t need to be in the reflection

Taboo Phrases about Group Work:

- “everyone worked hard to meet”
- “discussed our plans thoroughly”
- “different perspectives and ideas” ++
- “open minded”
- “workload was divided evenly”
- “achieved our goals”
- “everyone played an integral role” / “everyone had an equal voice”
- “everyone worked well together”
- “communicate well with your group”
- “listen to others”
- “work effectively in a group”
- “I feel our group did a good job of ...”
- “improve on working together”
- “two heads are better than one” – or any cliché like it.
- “I liked working with a team”

A Few Examples of Better Reflections

The examples of better reflections we found from previous Designing the Human Experience students were characterized by greater depth and explanation through specific examples. We also found that the use of unique noun phrases is often a sign of good reflection. Through this review process, we also realized that we (the teaching team) need to ask better questions in order to elicit a more complete and thoughtful response. Here are a few examples:

- *Larry’s tenet of ‘always doing something’ does not mean ‘always doing anything’. I wish the tenet read, ‘always doing a pertinent task’ or ‘always making life worthwhile.’*
 - **Feedback:** The student could have explained how he came to this conclusion.
- *It is not merely the practice of finding a solution to a problem, but the art of creating experience.* needs to be expanded
 - **Feedback:** Again, it would have been interesting to see what influenced the student to come this conclusion, perhaps including a specific example.
- *I learned that it is always beneficial to think more about emotional and humane constraints rather than physical ones.*
 - **Feedback:** Clarify further and support with an example from the student's experience

Context and Reference:

This list was developed by Helen L. Chen and Jonathan Gabrio as part of a guiding activity for scaffolding student reflection in *Designing the Human Experience*, an introductory freshman seminar on design engineering at Stanford University taught by Professor Larry Leifer. For more information about this course or the Folio Thinking research program, please contact Helen L. Chen at hlchen@stanford.edu.

Chen, H.L., Cannon, D.M., Gabrio, J., & Leifer, L. (2005, June). *Using Wikis and Weblogs to Support Reflective Learning in an Introductory Engineering Design Course*. Paper presented at the 2005 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference & Exposition, Portland Oregon. *2005 ASEE Design in Engineering Education Division Best Paper*