RESEARCH ON STUDENT NOTETAKING: IMPLICATIONS FOR FACULTY AND GRADUATE STUDENT INSTRUCTORS

Deborah DeZure
Matthew Kaplan
Martha A. Deerman

Introduction

Notetaking has been a staple activity of academic life, particularly in lecture courses, for decades. Despite its widespread use, notetaking has generally been taken for granted by both instructors and students. However, in the past few years, changes in the landscape of higher education, such as the proliferation of commercial notetaking services, have led instructors to ask questions about the efficacy of notetaking in promoting learning and their own role in the process. These questions reflect instructor concerns not only about notetaking services, but also the apparent decrease in student notetaking abilities, the introduction of active modes of learning within lectures, and the ease with which instructors can post their lecture notes online for campus-based courses or distance learning.

The purpose of this Occasional Paper is to review what research tells us about the impact of notetaking and how the review of notes affects student learning. The paper also explores the role that instructors can play, suggesting several specific strategies to support students.

What Research Tells Us About Notetaking and Review of Notes

Research on notetaking indicates that taking notes in class and reviewing those notes (either in class or afterward) have a positive impact on student learning. Not surprisingly, the preponderance of studies confirms that students recall more lecture material if they record it in their notes (Bligh, 2000). Students who take notes score higher on both immediate and delayed tests of recall and synthesis than students who do not take notes (Kiewra et al., 1991). Moreover, the more students record, the more they remember and the better they perform on exams (Johnstone & Su, 1994). In summary, notetaking facilitates both recall of factual material and the synthesis and application of new knowledge, particularly when notes are reviewed prior to exams.

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Deborah DeZure is Coordinator of Faculty Programs at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan.

Matthew Kaplan is Associate Director at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan.

Martha A. Deerman is a graduate student research assistant at CRLT.
STUDENT GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE NOTETAKING AND REVIEW

Good notetaking is much more than fast writing. Good notetakers listen actively while they write, think while they listen, and make conscious choices about what to record. In general, they capture as much of the lecture content as possible. They take notes they can use for effective learning, and then, most importantly, they review those notes regularly and with focused attention.

BEFORE CLASS

Do assigned readings.
- Check your syllabus.
- Reading before class will help you identify, understand, and organize main points and content in the lecture and class discussion.

Organize.
- Keep one notebook per course.
- Loose-leaf binders with pockets give more flexibility in organizing your notes and allow you to add handouts and other material in a useful order.

Engage fully.
- Be positive about learning.
- Plan to start listening as soon as the instructor starts talking: tune in, have your pen and paper ready, do not let others distract you.

DURING CLASS

Listen for structure.
- Listen for introductory and concluding phrases and transitions indicating how the lecture is organized (“Today’s topics will include…”).
- If the instructor begins lecture with questions, write them down, then listen for the answers.
- Listen for repetition.
- Listen as closely to the end of the lecture as to the beginning. The instructor may summarize the most important points (“Today we discussed…”).

Be complete and accurate.
- Write down key points, theories, facts, theorems, definitions, etc.
- Write down examples and indicate the point(s) they demonstrate.
- Write down anything given in list form (“Three causes were…”).
- Write down what is written on the board or projected on screen.
- Pay attention to the instructor’s body language and tone of voice. Note when she or he uses the most emphasis or enthusiasm.
- Listen for main points, but generally, writing more is better.

Keep up.
- Abbreviate! Every subject has words that can be shortened. For example, use S. for Shakespeare, b/c for because, w/ for with, or re: for regarding).
- To save time, use a system of symbols. For example, use ➔ for resulted in, = for is equal to, ➔ for is greater than, :: for therefore. Develop your own symbols too.
- Leave space if you fall behind or get confused. Circle terms you do not understand. Write question marks next to places you want to clarify later, but do not stop taking notes.

AFTER CLASS

Review within 24 hours.
- Compare notes with classmates to supplement or clarify what you wrote down.
- Locate gaps or confusion. Ask peers, GSIs, or the instructor for help in class or during office hours.
- Check for accuracy of material (especially formulas, definitions, spelling of terms.).
- Identify connections with what you already know and with material from previous class meetings. How does the material extend or clarify your knowledge? What is the “big picture” that is starting to emerge?

Reorganize and rehearse.
- Reorganize your notes visually. Create an outline, diagram, or chart to show relationships among concepts.
- Use different pen colors or highlighters for different types of material, or to distinguish your ideas from the instructor’s.
- Try writing brief summaries of the information in your own words.
- Review your notes regularly to improve your understanding and to prevent cramming at test time.
- Make up and answer possible test questions.

Evaluate your method.
- Are you finding a lot of gaps and errors?
- Do your notes help you study? Did they help you on your exams? If not, what can you do to improve your notes?
- If you feel that your notes are not helping you learn, and you do not feel that you know how to improve them, seek the assistance of your instructor or GSI.