A Study of the Note-Taking Skills of First-Year Community College Students

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The author, a student adviser in a Student Support Services (TRIO) program, took an introductory psychology course in order to study students' note-taking behaviors. The most important finding was that students copied the terminology the instructor wrote on the board, but failed to take notes on the examples he used to clarify the terms. Consequently, they were unprepared for the multiple-choice tests which required students to link terms with examples. She then experimented with a new way to share the findings of this study with the students she advises.

How well do first-year community college students take notes? As a student adviser, I needed to see for myself so that I could help the students in our TRIO program improve their note-taking skills.

When students told me they received a low grade on a test, I often said, "Would you be willing to let me see some of your class notes?" Without exception, they pulled out a spiral notebook with skimpy, difficult-to-understand notes.

A review of the literature on note taking in college classes confirms that taking inadequate notes is a pervasive problem. Williams and Eggert (2002) state that numerous studies have found that college students do not include many important points from their instructor's lectures. In fact, they cite studies that found that the percentage of lecture points recorded by college freshman is as low as 11%.

How important is it to students' academic success that they learn to take comprehensive notes while listening to instructors' lectures? The research confirms what most college instructors and staff assume. Kiewra (1985a) reviewed 56 experimental studies examining different styles of note-taking and listening strategies, and concluded that the process of taking notes more often than not contributes to success on tests based on lecture content.

I have a long career history of studying students' test-taking, reading comprehension, and study skills and over the years, I have found that what students actually know is considerably different from what I think they know.

My experience has been that if I have an accurate picture of what students know and do, I can significantly modify their learning behaviors so that they are more successful in college courses. Therefore, before developing a workshop on note-taking skills, I wanted to observe students' note-taking in a class setting so that my workshop would be relevant to students' needs.

I chose Psychology 1010 for several reasons:

- It is a college level course frequently taken by first-year students, often while they are still in developmental English.
- Many students find it a more difficult course than they anticipated.
- It is a lecture course that requires constant note-taking without the coaching often provided by developmental education instructors.
- Large numbers of students register for it because it is a prerequisite for popular career majors such as nursing and social work.

The first day of the course, I glanced at the notes of the four students seated near me. I saw that I had twice as many notes as they did. Were they lazy? Were they having difficulty taking notes fast enough to keep pace with the instructor? I resolved to change my seat at the next class session so that I could observe other students' notes.

During the second class session, I watched to see when students wrote and when they stopped. I observed that they wrote only when the instructor wrote on the blackboard. For example, when he wrote "Periodic fluctuations in physiological functioning," every student copied off the board. When he strode back and forth across the front of the classroom giving interesting examples of periodic fluctuations, they stopped writing. He talked about menstruation and the sleep/wake cycle. He explained how we often feel a little tired around 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon because our temperature drops slightly. The instructor is an effective lecturer, and students were alert and involved. They asked questions and made comments. But they did not take notes.

Students were consistent in this behavior during the entire 16-week semester. They wrote only when the instructor wrote on the blackboard or overhead. This finding confirms the work of Kiewra (1985b) who found that "most students record the general ideas but are less likely to record specifics related to those ideas" (p. 378).

The penalty for failing to include examples in one's notes came when we took the first test. It had a multiple-choice format and the questions required students to link psychology terms with real life situations. Here is a typical question:

When you tell your children to rub their arm after they've bumped it on something, the amount of pain they feel is actually reduced. This phenomenon is consistent with the theory of pain referred to as the

A) distraction theory
B) selectivity theory
C) opponent process theory
D) gate control theory
E) compensatory model

To do well on the test, one needed either an excellent memory or adequate notes to study from. Since I do not have a particularly good memory, I relied on a quick re-reading of my notes to get an A on the test. The students sitting around me apparently had neither a good memory nor useful notes. I saw some very low grades as the tests were passed back.

At the start of the next class session, I observed a remarkable event: The instructor passed out copies of his lecture notes. They were detailed and in outline form. As he began his lecture, I debated whether to take notes. I had in front of me a set of notes far better than any I could write. And yet, I knew that the very act of note-taking involves me in a lecture by making me a more active listener. So I put the instructor's notes aside and took my own notes. However, since I was playing a dual role in this class as both a participant and an observer, I was fascinated to see what the other members of the class would do. I looked around. Only one student took any notes for the entire two-hour class session. The instructor's intention had been to improve students' learning, but the actual effect of his assistance was to further reduce students' participation in the learning process.

After I finished the course, I invited students in my program to a workshop on note-taking. On the day of the workshop, I waited expectantly at the classroom door for students to arrive. No one came! It was difficult to accept. I had spent a semester preparing, and no one was interested.

The next day I came back to my office ready to fight rather than to give up. I knew students needed this information. The question was how to deliver it to them. How can academic counselors reach large numbers of students?

My solution: to build note-taking instruction into the second of the two sessions required for intake into our program. At this session, which is a one-on-one session, I included about ten minutes on note-taking. Students were very responsive. Now, after five years of tinkering with the process, I have found an effective, rapid way to get students involved in the process of improving their note-taking skills. It goes like this:

Scenario 1: Unskilled Note-taker

Dr. S: *I suppose you're a pretty good note-taker.* (positive approach)

Student: *Well, not as good as I need to be.*

Dr. S: *The more classes you take, the better you get at it. It takes practice. I've been taking classes for many years. Here's a sample of notes I took in a psych class a few years ago. People are always asking to borrow my notes. Why do you think they want to use them to get ready for a test?*

Student: (glancing quickly) *They're very neat.*

Dr. S: *What makes them neat?*

Student: (looking more closely) *You leave some space between parts… and you underline vocabulary words.*

Dr. S: *What else?* (pushing student to observe more closely)

Student: *You use bullets for the points.*

Dr. S: *What else?*

Student: *You put boxes around the main topics.*

Dr. S: *I learned something about students' note-taking habits in a psych class I took here at the college. I think what I learned may interest you.* (I relate the highlights quickly.) *Do you see examples in my notes? Where? Why do you think students stopped taking notes when the instructor handed out his lecture notes? How does taking your own notes help you learn?*

There are only a few ways to get information to your brain. Can you think of one or two of them? (visual, auditory, kinesthetic). *When we take notes, we look, we listen, and we write. Note-taking uses all three pathways to the brain. It's a powerful learning tool!*

You know, I gave a workshop on note-taking once, and nobody came! You and I just did that workshop together in ten minutes!

Scenario 2: Skilled Note-taker

Dr. S: *I suppose you're a pretty good note-taker.*

Student: *Yes, I am. I think I take very good notes.*

Dr. S: *Do you have a sample of your notes with you? I'd like to see them. I get a lot of good ideas on note-taking from my students. Sometimes I make a copy of a page or two so that my other students can see good models.*

Student: (pulling out an impressive sample of notes) *These are my English notes.*

Dr. S: *You ARE a good note-taker! I like the way you _____*
(mark potential test questions, include examples, use abbreviations, etc.)
I'm a good note-taker too. (pulling out a sample from Psychology 1010)
I have some favorite abbreviations I use so that I can keep up with a fast-talking instructor. What abbreviations do you use?

(We share our ideas in a lively, collegial discussion.)

Conclusions

Those of us who work daily with students have research opportunities that academic researchers do not have. We see our students in natural settings, and we see them often. Best of all, we can use the findings of our research to inform our teaching, advising, and tutoring. Our applied research is beneficial because:

» It is relevant to students' academic needs.
» It can be used to initiate two-way conversations with students.
» It can affirm students.
» It can provide models of academic success.

References

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