

This is a précis of chapter 9 “How to promote effective note-taking” in Burns, T., Sinfield, S. (2004) Teaching, Learning & Study Skills. London: Sage.

Introduction

We want students to take and use notes. Students often realise that they will be required to make notes of some sort. However, students can experience confusion as to the sort of notes they should take, how notes are supposed to help them to study and what to do with notes once they have been made.

As tutors we often have high expectations of our students. We have found that if we want students to perform to the high standards that we have of them, we do have to support and scaffold their learning in some ways. With notemaking, we have found that we have to teach them how to make and use their notes.

Notes and creative learning

Making Notes should be an active and creative part of a student’s learning process. We stress that students have to **prepare** to make notes, that they should endeavour to make **active and creative** notes – and that they must **do something** with their notes once they have made them.

Why be creative when taking notes? Arguments we put to students.

- Adopting creative note taking techniques means utilizing both logical left and creative right sides of the brain (Buzan 1999) which encourages active learning.
- Traditional linear notemaking predominantly relies on the logical left side of the brain and does not therefore promote active learning (Buzan 1999).
- Key word notes that are mapped out non-hierarchically in a pattern of some sort allow more space for active engagement with the learning material.
- Such “pattern notes” facilitate the creation of mnemonics which make the notes more memorable.
- Creating pattern notes injects an element of play into studying. This promotes recall of the learning material and encourages us to play with ideas.
- One aspect of acquiring knowledge is the ability to *play with ideas*, or as Gibbs (1992) puts it, *to have sport with ideas*. Creative notemaking encourages playing with ideas and therefore encourages the development of knowledge.
- Being creative when taking notes allows us to rearrange information and means we rework and take control of it rather than remain trapped by the way it was presented to us in.
- If students only give back to tutors what tutors give them, they will never move beyond the attainment of an average grade. To achieve top grades you need to demonstrate independence of thought, which is inherent to creativity. By being creative in the way they take notes, students improve their prospects for getting good grades.
- To remember effectively and promote what Carl Rogers calls *significant learning* you benefit from regarding lectures and texts as opportunities to obtain answers to your own questions. Adopting a creative approach and viewing your notetaking as a record of some of these questions and answers will make your notemaking more effective and productive.

How we do it

This section covers how a tutorial about notemaking can be run.

1) Preliminary activity: the structured brainstorm

On the board start a pattern note by writing 'notes' in the centre of the board. Draw three lines from the centre, labelling them 'why?' 'When and where do we make notes?' And 'How do you make notes?' The accompanying handout (notemaking brainstorm handout 1 and 2) shows this. Ask students to answer these questions and write their answers on the board. The accompanying handout (notemaking brainstorm handout 2) shows answers that students might typically give.

2) Discussion of linear notes and patterns notes

Next we discuss different ways of notemaking and their possible advantages and disadvantages.

Linear notes

Linear notemaking means taking down information line-by-line.

Advantages are that if you can write fast such notes can be quite information packed and this can give a really comforting feeling.

Disadvantages may be:

- You can take down so much information you feel swamped by it
- You take so many notes you never have the time to read them again
- If you cannot write really fast you lose your place and may start to panic and miss more information
- If you leave things out you can feel like a failure
- All the information looks the same, it is difficult to focus on specific points
- Although you have not thought about the information, it already has a top-down hierarchy imposed
- You can be trapped by the way that the lecturer has presented the information – you might find it difficult to think about the topic in any other way
- It is a very passive form of notemaking – you do not have to think to write these notes, but you do have to think to learn
- It only utilizes half the brain (Buzan – left brain – logical, rather than right brain creative) - as such it is monotone – monotonous and even boring. It does not excite.

How to improve linear notes

Taking Cornell notes requires you to draw a line down the centre of the paper. On the left side write 'course aims & assignment' and label the right side 'notes'.

When listening to the lecture jot notes down on the right side. On the left side note where a lecture item relates to particular course aims and learning outcomes. Doing this helps us to understand how the learning is being structured and to take more control of our learning.

Pattern notes

You might like to point out to students that you have used a pattern note yourself on the board. Discuss possible disadvantages of pattern notes and possible advantages of pattern notes. These might include:

- You actively reduce information to keywords as you go (or as you subsequently revise notes). This means that you have to think about your notes
- Such notes are short and therefore more useable
- You do not need to be able to write quickly – you just have to learn to think on your seat
- Notes are not hierarchically ordered – you can think about them for yourself
- Each set of notes looks distinct from other sets of notes – and information is more easily located within these notes
- Buzan would argue that this is an active, creative notemaking system that utilizes the whole brain and thus prompts more learning.

Conclude this preparatory activity deciding as a class the sort of information that should be present in a successful set of notes.

3) Discussion of what constitutes successful notes

- Source – if lecture, title, lecturer's name, date. If text, Author, date, title, town, publisher
- Headings - capturing key sections
- Key word(s) – key points, examples, illustrations, names, new ideas
- Some structure – things that make the notes easy to read: patterns, numbering, arrows, highlighting etc – things that link the notes to the course aims, outcomes & assignment
- Mnemonic triggers – things that make the notes memorable – cartoons, colour, illustrations (the Von Rostorff effect – we remember that which is bizarre, funny or bawdy)
- Further reading – names highlighted in the notes or gathered in a specific place.

4) The practice lecture

Now we give students a practice lecture followed by some note-revision guidance and practice. Obviously this can be undertaken with any lecture, it does not have to be the one that we give here. Our lecture is entitled 'Notemaking from lectures' and we usually encourage students to attempt pattern notes. If you choose to do this, tell students:

- To turn their paper sideways, landscape fashion.
- Write the title of the lecture, the lecturer's name and the date somewhere on the paper –attempt just to note keywords or phrases
- If possible to jot notes down in a rough pattern – or if utilising the Cornell system, only in the right hand column.
- That they will be acting on the information after the lecture, so there will be time to plug any gaps: they do not need to panic if they miss something as you speak.

Our lecture notes – do extemporise or develop your own:

Notemaking from lectures

Introduce the lecture

- What is active and passive learning?
- Why we make notes and why universities utilize lectures?
- How to make notes from your lectures: what to do before, during and after a lecture.

NOW STOP THE LECTURE

Ask students what use have they made of the lecture introduction/agenda? Emphasise that if a lecturer gives an introduction/agenda to their lecture, then it is beneficial to use this information. Suggest that students draw a margin (a second margin if they are utilizing the Cornell system) and quickly jot down the key words from the lecture's introduction. This will help to structure the notes as well as provide space to capture key names for further reading. Once students are aware that they should utilise your introduction, start the lecture again.

Notemaking from lectures

Introduce the lecture once again (as above).

Active versus passive learning

Passive learning is:

- Taking no responsibility for your learning
- Not knowing how a programme/module has been put together
- Not knowing what to do to gain the most from that programme
- Not knowing your reasons for studying
- Making no effort to understand the significance of what you learn
- Remaining unchanged by what you learn.

Active learning means

- Being conscious of your reasons for undertaking the course
- Attempting to determine how the course has been put together and why
- Striving to understand the significance of your learning material: what it means, what it tells you – and what else you will have to discover.
- Moving from surface to deep learning
- Taking control of your learning and enjoying it more
- Being conscious of your learning and being changed as person by what we learn

Why make notes?

- To record key pieces of information
- To support your active engagement with new information and thus promote your active learning
- To help you select and then understand new information
- To facilitate your thinking and research.
- To provide you with source material for discussions and writing.

Why lectures?

- Lecturers must not be passive learning experiences
- Historical tradition of students listening to, engaging with and reflecting on words of wise leader to develop their own knowledge
- In lectures the staff to student ratio is very high which makes it an economical way to deliver education
- Lectures give you access to the work of a researcher, a leader in the field, which gives you a shortcut to intense and significant information
- Lectures seed your thinking and research on a particular topic
- Lectures enable you to become familiar with the discourse of the subject – the language, the arguments and the evidence that apply in the subject
- If you engage actively with lectures they can be powerful learning experiences in which you learn how to think, how to construct arguments and how to use evidence within your particular discipline.

How to make notes

In this final section of this lecture we will cover what to do

- 1) Before the lecture
- 2) During the lecture
- 3) After the lecture.

NB it is useful to engage in these activities before, during and after your reading.

Before

- Preparation is the essence of good notemaking
- Check and review the aims, learning outcomes and overall syllabus of the programme/course
- Examine the assignment in detail and ask “*how does this lecture fit into all this?*”
- Immediately before lecture recall the course/programme as a whole and brainstorm “*what do I already know on this topic? What do I need to find out?*”

During

- Remain actively in tune with the lecture. Listen for new ideas and information selecting key points and key words if possible
- If lecturer mentions research evidence, or further reading note down names
- If you react positively or negatively to what you hear put in a question mark or an exclamation mark to remind yourself – tip: perhaps record these interventions/comments in a different coloured ink.

After

- Very important to do something with notes after a lecture as active revision will increase understanding and ability to remember the material.
- Always treat the first version of your lecture notes as a rough draft. Draw up shorter version notes – replacing phrases and sentences with key words. Consider doing this with study partner.
- Knowing that you will reviewing notes after lecture will relieve any stress during the lecture as it does not matter so much if there is something you do not capture or understand as you know you will be going over the material later.

Tip: use the revision cycle:

10 minutes after a lecture spend ten minutes doing a shorter version of your notes. A day later spend two minutes actively re-drawing your notes – plug the gaps. Repeat this process a week, a month and six months later. Doing this ensures you transfer

information from your short- to your long-term memory. After this revision process, use the Cornell system, that is, make connections between the information in your notes and your course as a whole. Highlight topics that will be useful in your final assignment and information that you will need to research further. Note when you will undertake follow up activities like extra 'reading around the topic'.

Conclusion

- Active learning, deep and significant learning and link to active notemaking.
- Why lecture
- What to do before, during and after lectures
- The importance to follow up lectures by reviewing and remaking notes and further reading

Invite questions from students

----- LECTURE ENDS -----

The next step

- Give students at least ten minutes to revise their notes – possibly in pairs
- If possible move around the room and encourage students as they work. Provide students with a handout of a key word version of your (this) lecture – or draw a copy of the notes on the board
- Encourage students to move around the room to see what notes other people have made – and to see what sort of devices they would like to adopt
- Consider giving students opportunity to discuss how they have found the whole exercise – and what they will do next to continue to develop as successful notemakers.

Practising it

- Tips: encourage students to make key word, pattern notes of television and radio programmes or to visit lectures that are not vital to their success. It will be easier to practice this technique if situations do not feel critical to their success or failure as students.
- Encourage students to make pattern notes of all your lectures.

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