

Teaching Tip

November 12, 2004

Student Note Taking

I often hear faculty say that they are frustrated when student balk at taking notes in class. “Isn’t note taking part of being a student,” faculty ask? “If so, then why do some students insist that faculty provide all the notes for a lecture? The answer to the questions can be complicated if only because the learning environment for students has been changing over the years. One thing is becoming pretty clear about student resistance to note taking. If the students think that they will be tested on the notes, they want to make sure they have all the answers. This sounds fair. For example, if everything they need to know for a test will be in the Powerpoint presentation, then they can’t see why the presentation can’t be made available. And while we are considering making those slides from our lecture available you might also be prepared for the comments “...Even before the actual presentation please!” What’s a faculty member to do?

There are a lot of issues to sort through here that get thrown into to mix of the issue regarding note taking. In this one teaching tip we can’t possibly cover the interesting and complex topic of whether, for example, we should or should not use Powerpoint to present our lectures...or whether faculty should provide a full set of lecturer’s notes to students. A more thorough reading of the topics needs to be made available. So, for a more complete discussion about this topic, I invite you to read the attached PDF file that was provided to me recently by the CRLT at the University of Michigan. In the document, the authors make a solid case for student note taking—under certain conditions. For example, student do benefit from notetaking. (Bligh, 2000) In fact, one could easily argue that students who notetake are involved in the process of active learning—which we know has a lot of support in the higher education arena. Conversely, however, this document points out that some researchers make the argument that providing lecturer notes to students can also be beneficial. (Kiewra, 1985)

As I said, the issue is a bit more complicated than we would like to think. For the students and us as faculty, the world and learning environment is changing. The most important thing to consider when discussing the merits of notetaking is how it might contribute to student learning. If notetaking comes down an issue that, for example, accurate notes are necessary in order to pass a test, then students might just resort to hiring someone else to take notes so that they have a better chance of doing well in the class. If, however, students are actually learning from the notetaking process, then set up the learning environment that complements this process. At any rate, reflect on why you want students to take notes and then do all you can to support the process that you deem most important. For different perspectives on this topic, please refer to the attached document.

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Teaching Tip

December 3, 2004

Note Taking Revisited

Recently, I discussed the topic of note taking and how such practice can lead to better learning for students in particular situations. I received several emails after the last tip on note taking from faculty asking for some different methods for showing students how to take notes properly and strategies/techniques for note taking that might be most effective. On the one hand, each class has its own goals (learning outcomes) and its own strategies for achieving and measuring those outcomes. Consequently, methods for note taking are adjusted for each class. On the other hand, there are some methods and strategies that have proven effective within and across disciplines in higher education.

One example that fits very well with notions of Active Learning is a method of note taking used at Dartmouth College. The Dartmouth method is basically a method based on dialogic principals espoused by many theorists, including Anne Berthoff (Rhetoric/Composition) in the 1980s. I have seen this dialogic method applied in curriculums of the life sciences, English, and business from many different universities, but Dartmouth has helped perpetuate this method by developing a mini tutorial for faculty and students that explains the how to's and why's of the "split page" or dialogic method. In essence, students draw a line down the middle of an 8 ½ x 11 inch page and write their notes on the left side of the page, and on the other side...check out the following video for a clear description.

Here is a link at that will allow you to access this clear and short video:

<<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/success/videos.html>> You'll need Quiciktime player to view this video. Enjoy it!

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