



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

TRADITIONAL NOTE-TAKING MEETS INNOVATIVE NOTE- CREATING

Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, as the old adage goes. However, this “monkey-see, monkey-do” mentality has not transferred to effective note-taking skills that today’s students seem to lack.

It’s a frustratingly perennial issue: students arrive to class, sit in a customary spot, and proceed to stare listlessly at you, their arms idly folded at their sides, or, if one is fortunate to be in a computer lab, their fingers busily clicking away at something immaterial to your presentation. I do not mean to be cynical toward all students; some are quite adept at taking notes, understanding them, revising them, using them, learning from them, and even questioning instructors about their context and purpose. Yet, on average, students do not engage well or at all when necessary—when a teacher writes on a board, repeats key words or phrases in a lecture, or provides the passive note-taker’s windfall: the PowerPoint presentation.

Thus, a crisis emerges: a breakdown in active, effective learning that is critical to academic success. Where the fault here resides is similar to the blame-game in the 2008 subprime crash. Were consumers at fault for benign ignorance or were lenders culpable for purposeful, predatory practices? It need not matter in this context. As Mark C. Taylor (2010) insists, with every crisis there arises opportunity.

In any course, it is as paramount to demonstrate a variety of effective note-taking techniques and tips as it is to explain the gospels of one’s syllabus. Once this undertaking concludes, the innovation emerges: by using Microsoft Word software such as italics, bold-type, underlining, text-boxes, highlighting, and electronic comments, students can interact with transmitted information to create transformational knowledge. Similar to how students in reading courses are taught to look for clues such as bold-typed subheadings or footnotes in an article to infer the purpose of the piece, students using these aforesaid note-taking strategies are

actually creating their own clues and cues on what is important to understand and apply.

Below are five general tips for educators who wish to apply innovative note-taking and note-creating strategies:

- Provide note-taking tips sheets at the beginning of a course and thoroughly explain traditional note-taking methods. A simple Google search will provide myriad techniques and advice on note taking. Use, revise, and, of course, credit the original source if reproducing documents.
- Require the completion of a note-taking assignment periodically throughout a course. Doing so keeps students “on their toes” if note-taking comprises a substantial part of a course. Also, it provides students with an easy opportunity for credit.
- Electronically provide a brief analysis of something in your area of specialty, such as an excerpt of a paper, on which students can use MS Word features to highlight, bold, italicize, underline, and label. Have them save this document as a blueprint for future similar activities. Repeat this activity for future assignments, eventually eliminating the need to prompt students verbally to create their own notes using MS Word features.
- Convert PowerPoint presentations into interactive MS Word documents that students can complete using the aforementioned MS Word features to promote active learning and deep-processing (memory) skills—concepts related to *critical thinking*. It goes without saying that there are drawbacks to overusing PowerPoint presentations in any class.
- Revise lecture scripts to be in interactive note-creating formats, following similar guidelines to those above. This could be as simple as converting a script into a short-answer activity. It is the instructor’s discretion as to what is plucked from the original lecture and what should remain for the benefit of the students.



From my experiences over the past five years, students have shown significant improvement in their retention in courses, ranging from remedial to accelerated, using these tips and technologies in note-taking and creating strategies. Papers, projects, and presentations reflect an imitative yet innovative panache from previous instruction that defines jazz legend Miles Davis's credo, "first you imitate; then you innovate."

These tips are just the beginning to better engage students in active note-creating strategies. Investigating and using newer or more technological innovations when wanting students to take notes are sound practices for all educators. This mission we call "education" is a cooperative and collaborative endeavor, and specific materials and models for the aforementioned information can be obtained easily upon request.

Todd R. Anderson, *Instructor, Liberal Arts*

For further information, contact the author at Iowa Central Community College, One Triton Circle, Fort Dodge, IA 50501. Email: anderson_to@iowacentral.edu