Note-Taking and Note-Making in Freshman Composition

BY MARK FARRINGTON

When I decided to teach note-taking in my linked English 101 course, I didn’t know what to expect. I’d taught close reading before, of literary texts, persuasive articles, even textbooks, and close reading requires that students take notes. But my freshman composition course is linked to Psychology 100, a lecture course with over 300 students which covers mostly factual material. They have a textbook, which they can reread and highlight and write in (although many are surprised when I tell them they not only can, but also should, do this). But the most important notes they take come from the forty or so 50-minute lectures that fill (along with tests) virtually all the time they spend in class.

It would be hard for any professor to critically evaluate notes a student took on that professor’s own lecture. Teaching a linked course gives me another context, since all 44 students in my two sections of English 101 are among those 300 enrolled in the same section of Psychology 100. So I announced in my classes that we were going to study note-taking. I selected a Psych 100 lecture and told them they were required to attend that lecture, and they had to take notes. I would be attending the lecture, too, I added, and would take my own notes. Then, in the English class immediately following the Psych class, we would look at the notes each of us had taken.

My plan wasn’t to hold up my model as the “correct” notes for the class and show each of them where they’d gone wrong. I was genuinely curious to see how their notes would compare to mine, what differences might arise, and why. I participated so that we would all have the same experience, and the same frame of reference. In showing them my notes, I could explain why I had taken them a certain way, or why I had chosen to take down one thing and not another, or what kind of note-making I had done in response to the note-taking. And just as I could explain why I made certain choices to them, they could explain their choices to me.

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Before the Psych class, I checked the Psych 100 syllabus, found the pages in the text that most closely related to the lecture, and read them all. This seemed like such an obvious first step to me that I never even thought to mention it to the class.

The subject of the lecture was memory. The professor used Power Point slides and most of the terms I recognized from the reading. I took down these terms anyway, along with the definitions the professor gave. I also took down things like names and dates that I might have encountered in the text but did not recall.

This was my first experience taking notes in a lecture in more than twenty years. I discovered that it did not seem unlike reading an article for the second time, except it was my ear, not my eye, that was seeking out the “important” information, and skimming the rest. Then, rather than underlining printed words, my pen had to write those words in my notes, but again, the process of listening critically to extract what is important felt remarkably similar to the process of reading critically to do the same thing.

Because most of the information a.) was familiar to me and b.) seemed to be common sense, I also had the opportunity to engage in note-making along with my note-taking. When the professor gave a definition, I wrote down her words. Then I wrote the definition again in my own words. (If I couldn’t rewrite the definition quickly, I decided I must not really understand the term.) At other points, I was able to make connections between information given and my own experiences, or jot down some of my own examples. At one point, after writing the professor’s words that “short-term memory can hold no more than nine digits at one time; i.e. zip codes and social security numbers,” I wrote off to the side, “That’s why I get mad when some company gives me an account number with 15 digits and no dashes, and then expects me to write it on my checks.”

In English class, I made some interesting discoveries. Many students, even a few of the best ones, had written down virtually every word the professor said, in complete sentences; one girl had 13 pages of notes (mine had totaled about a page and a half). “I have to write down everything,” she explained when I asked her why. “If I don’t, then she might say something I’ll miss.”

“What will you do,” I asked, “when it comes time to study your notes for the test?”

“I’ll read through them all and highlight everything that’s important,” she replied.

“So you’ll take notes on your notes?”
"I guess so," she replied, though I don't think she'd ever thought of it in that way before.

How much information to take down turned out to be one of the key decisions each student made, whether consciously or not. Some students who'd written several more pages of notes than I did had left out what I believed was key information. Only a handful had written the date on their notes, and almost no one—not even the student with 13 pages—had taken down information about the upcoming test that the professor had given in response to a question asked by a student near the front.

How students laid out their notes proved important, too. Some used a traditional outline form, while others preferred something closer to a map. In both cases, the layout of the notes helped key terms stand out as important and showed how related concepts were related. But some students wrote their notes in paragraphs, so that every word looked exactly as important as every other word, while one student's handwriting was so illegible I refuse to believe even he will be able to decipher what he's written a month from now.

Perhaps the greatest difference I noticed between my notes and my students' was the fact that almost nowhere did any student engage in note-making. Students did not rewrite definitions in their own words (in fact, at times, when I asked students to explain in their own words a definition they'd written in their notes, many couldn't do it.) There were no comments written, no connections made, no questions asked. "We don't have time," several students explained. "We're too busy copying things down to think about them. Besides," they complained, "the professor goes too fast."

I offered suggestions for ways they might bring note-making into the process. Rewrite definitions in their own words. Try to come up with at least one example in addition to the examples the professor or the book provide. Do a 2- or 3-minute freewriting right after the lecture on anything that strikes them from the lecture. Find ways to relate what they are learning to the rest of their life (A big reason many students first become interested in psychology, I believe, is because it so readily connects to one's life.)

Finally, I got around to the question I probably should have asked first: "How many read the text before the lecture?" First we had to get through the jokers who asked, "You mean who has read some part of the text at some time before this lecture?" Then I got the truth: nearly three-fourths of them had not.

I thought a lot about what that meant. I didn't take it as an indictment of Psychology, as most of them had probably not read our English textbook either. But I could rectify that by giving quizzes on the reading, or requiring them to write logs, or in other ways. I was not their babysitter especially when they left my class. My job, I assured myself, was not to make sure they read their Psychology text.

But what was my job?

I decided it was to help students understand possibilities. I wanted them to know what tools are available, and what practices exist, for helping them to succeed. I could show them the experience; what they took from it, or if they chose to repeat it—those things were up to them.

First I decided to learn about their experience. I went to another Psych lecture and took notes. This time I purposely did not
read the text beforehand. In the lecture, I found myself scribbling furiously to keep up, writing practically everything the professor said, trying to copy all the diagrams that appeared on the screen. My notes were messy and poorly ordered. I took five times more notes than I had the first time, and I had absolutely no time to apply any of the concepts being mentioned because I was too busy copying down their basic meanings. My students were right all along, I grumbled. The professor goes too fast! I shared my experience with my students. I actually felt like commending some of the ones who had been diligently going to every lecture, taking copious notes, while not yet having read past Chapter 1 in the text. Then I selected one more lecture for them to go to, "When you come to English class the day before the lecture," I told them, "bring your Psychology books."

That day in English class, we read. I asked them to open the textbook to the beginning of the section the lecture was scheduled to cover and start reading. I told them it didn't matter if that was a hundred pages beyond where they'd last stopped reading; I wanted everyone in class to attend at least one Psych lecture knowing what it was like to read the text first. (Later, when I discovered how many students were even more than a hundred pages behind in the reading, I began recommending that they skip those pages and starting that day, try to keep up. "You can make up those missed pages later," I told them. "But you won't be able to make up the experience of going to lectures having read the text first.")

Lately I've been learning more about how to teach note-taking and note-making, and I'm particularly looking for ways to help students improve their note-taking skills. (I'm pondering, for instance, requiring students to use a dual-entry learning log in their Psych 100 lectures, which I would then look over.) But for now, I'm pleased with the results I've seen from this first-time effort. More of my students are reading the text before they go to class, and even those who don't are aware that it would help them and seem more inclined to accept responsibility when they do poorly on tests.

I hope their Psychology professor will be as pleased. In English class the other day, I overheard two students complaining about her. "That's practically all she ever covers," one student said. "Exactly what's in the book, what you've already read."

"I know," the other agreed. "I can't believe she goes so slow."

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**Imaginary Gardens and Real Issues**
—continued from page 7

problematic teachers must be the implementers of the new ideas. In this paradox East reflects education reform nationally over the last thirty years. A major study of federal reform efforts in the 1960's, 70's, and 80's identified as a "core irony" the fact that federal policies were based on "a fundamental mistrust of the judgement and knowledge of educators, but successful implementation of those reforms relies on those very educators" (Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988).

Efforts to improve language arts over the last 20 years — the waves in the wave theory — represent a particular instance of change efforts thwarted by fragmentation, overload, and mistrust of the judgement and knowledge of teachers. Writing process pedagogy can be seen as the paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. As the process gospel spread rapidly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, language arts curricula mandated process steps, peer response, and the author's chair. But without high-quality, sustained professional development for the teachers on the receiving end of these mandates, little systemic change resulted (Applebee, 1984; Graves, 1984).

Succeeding innovations — literature-based reading, "big books," whole language, the reader's workshop, DINSTAR, and others — met a similar fate. New ideas backed by strong research evidence were effectively adopted by small numbers of teachers, but their widespread implementation existed in name rather than in fact. A recent review of these efforts reached this conclusion:

It's clearly much easier to change the top half of the system than the bottom half. 'Reform' efforts are underway in every state in the country. It is less clear that these reform efforts have had any effect at the classroom level... At best, we can argue that the "sys-