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Notetaking Habits of College Students

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■ Notetaking is an accepted phenomenon of the American college scene. For some time, however, little interest has been given to the specific practices of college students in recording lecture notes. The majority of the research work in notetaking was done in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Once the value of notetaking as a tool for learning in most educational settings was established (Corey, 1935; Crawford, 1925; Greene, 1934) the interest waned. With the exception of three reported studies concerning the utility of notetaking in the fifties (Armstrong, 1956; Danskin and Burnett, 1952; McClendon, 1958), little other recent attention in the area of student practices has been evident. The effort reported here attempts to assess current student attitudes and practices in the area of notetaking, and to compare these to earlier findings.

Surveys of students indicated that notetaking was a common practice but was not, in the opinion of some students, essential to learning success. Charters (1924) found in a study of college women that most used

notebooks but did not consider them necessary. In a later study (Charters, 1925) of junior college women, the same researcher found that 221 out of 258 surveyed thought they would do poorer work if they did not keep notes. In a survey of the study habits of superior students, Danskin and Burnett (1952) found that 89 percent took lecture notes. A study of the opposite extreme, failing college students, found forty-five of sixty failing freshmen reporting never having taken notes prior to entering college. In addition to the lack of previous experience with notetaking, these failing students were found by an examiner to be unable to tell the important from the unimportant in a lecture (Armstrong, 1956).

Materials used for notetaking were of interest because the majority of how-to-study books (Bird, 1931; Bird and Bird, 1945; Dolan, 1945; Estabrooks, 1927; Headley, 1926; James, 1967; Pauk, 1962) advised the use of loose-leaf notebooks, and in most cases recommended paper of the 8 ½″ × 11″ size or larger. How the appearance of the spiral-bound notebook, which was introduced after the publication of most of the above references, has affected the adherence to these recommendations was a current concern. Research on notetaking has largely ignored the problem of how and where students learn to do it. Exceptions to this were the efforts reported by Palmatier (1971) and Woodhouse (1967). They dealt with methods for teaching notetaking, but did not answer the question of where notetaking skills are, or should be taught.

To assess the current perception of students as to the utility of taking lecture and reading notes, a survey of successful students was completed. Questions similar to those in earlier studies reporting student use and evaluation of notetaking were given, along with additional questions on specific materials used, and incidence of formal training in notetaking. The purpose was to assess the notetaking behavior of students in the C to B average range as compared with students in the B to A average range.

A sample of 223 students attending the University of Georgia, including eight sophomores, 131 juniors, sixty-four seniors, and twenty graduate students was surveyed. Students enrolled in courses in diagnosis and correction of reading difficulties during the fall quarter of 1972 comprised the sample. The instrument used contained an initial section asking for basic identification variables such as class standing and grade point average, and a second section requesting opinions as to the necessity for notetaking, as well as information related to the extent of use, type of materials, and training in notetaking methods. Five items were relevant to the objectives of this investigation:

1. Do you take lecture notes?
2. Do you take reading notes?
3. Do you feel that notetaking is an essential practice for success in college?
4. What type of notebook do you use?
5. Were you ever given instruction in the techniques of notetaking?

When asked about their own notetaking on lectures (question 1) 220 of the 223 students (99 percent) replied in the affirmative. Only 160 of the 223 member sample (71 percent) reported taking reading notes (question 2). Two hundred fourteen of the 223

respondents (96 percent) felt that notetaking was essential to success in college (question 3). Of interest is the fact that apparently six students who did not place great value in the taking of notes felt compelled to do it anyhow.

Type of notebook used (question 4) varied widely with several respondents using more than one kind. Fifty-one students used a spiral notebook 7 × 10 inches or smaller, 152 preferred the 8 ½″ × 11″ spiral, thirty-four chose the loose-leaf type, and eight used legal pads or other material.

Only thirty-seven of the 223 students surveyed (17 percent) reported having received any formal instruction in the skills of notetaking. Further, in most cases the instruction was of extremely short duration, thirty minutes or less, and was in effect more warning as to the necessity for taking notes rather than instruction on how to do so. High school English teachers usually provided whatever instruction the respondents had received.

A comparison of notetaking behavior between groups divided by grade point average revealed no real difference in notetaking behavior between students in the "C" and "B" average categories. Of the 105 students whose grade point average ranged from 3.0 to 4.0 (on a four point scale where 3.0 = B) seventy-seven (73 percent) regularly took reading notes and 104 (99 percent) took lecture notes. Of the students with averages below 3.0, eighty-three (71 percent) reported taking reading notes while 116 (98 percent) indicated the regular use of lecture notes.

The findings of the present survey largely replicate those done twenty or more years ago. If anything differs it is that more students today report regular notetaking on lecture and reading material. There also seems to be an increased understanding among students that notetaking is an essential practice. The reasons for this increase may be due to the increase in amount of information available for study today, as opposed to even twenty years ago. On the other hand it may be due to instructional procedures which continue to place increased emphasis on the lecture method. It might also be due to the fact that professors provide information in their lectures which cannot be acquired elsewhere.

Those familiar with the American college scene should not be too surprised at the high percentage of students who take notes. The lack of differences in notetaking behavior between successful and highly successful student groups (based on grade point averages) may indicate that while most successful students take notes, there seems to be evidence of marked differences in expertise in taking and using notes. This conjecture is consistent with what is probably the most significant finding of the study—that literally no one teaches notetaking skills. The existence of a near total lack of following expert advice on notetaking materials (recommended use of large loose-leaf notebooks) reinforces the belief that lack of exposure to notetaking training is common. A study in which groups of unsuccessful students are compared with successful students is needed to evaluate adequately the question of differences in notetaking behavior between poorer and better students. Further research is required to determine the effectiveness of the recommendations found in how-to-study texts. Likewise, experimentation

with instructional procedures aimed at incorporating training in notetaking into the regular school curriculum seems a major priority. A learning aid so universally used by students deserves more attention from researchers and instructional scientists.

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