

Can Different Note Taking Strategies Contribute to Student's Success?

By Lola Parsapour



Some psychologists and neuroscientists believe that writing by hand will impact students' performance in class, for the better. Photograph: shixart1985 licensed under CC BY 2.0

The blaring buzz of your alarm clock awakens your slumber; however, you snooze that appalling sound before it is time to start class. You wait until the very last minute to actually reach across your bed-side table to turn on your laptop. It takes a few minutes for your eyes to adjust to the brightness of your screen. Instinctively, you pull up a Google Docs to begin taking notes. The constant clicks and pounding of the keyboard drown out your professor's voice. The sound of the keyboard becomes an inevitable and frequent soundtrack. Whereas, your college-ruled notebooks and No. 2 pencils are sitting across the room accumulating dust. It is a time in which pens and paper may possibly seem old-fashioned or antique.

The global pandemic has created an unavoidable increase of digital use due to social distancing norms, especially in school settings. There is a distinctive rise of e-learning, in which teaching is commenced remotely and on digital platforms. Globally, over 1.2 billion students are no longer in an in-person classroom setting. However, not much attention has been brought to the fact that the rise of e-learning has also caused a shift in students' note taking strategies. It has become more convenient for students to engage in the digital world of note taking using technological applications like Google Docs or Microsoft Word, compared to handwritten notes. Although handwritten notes and digital note taking both have their quirks, students note taking strategies could possibly hinder or facilitate their learning process. In turn, it could also affect their ability to perform well in class, in terms of grades.

“What’s the point of buying those items when class is taught online.”

Seniors interviewed at the College of Charleston demonstrated that there was a clear shift in their back to school shopping. The essential back to school supplies used to be colorful pens, pencils, highlighters and notebooks. However, the top tier item of their lists was now a laptop. One senior exclaimed, “what's the point of buying those items when class is taught online.”

Before the global pandemic, most students had the option to choose their note taking strategy. There were usually two distinct categories of students: those who immediately pulled out their notebooks or those who pulled out their laptops at the start of a lecture. But now, students proclaim that they almost feel “forced” to choose the typing route because they already have their laptops in front of them. “I am scared to see my handwriting”, the 21-year-old Senior pronounced, because of how infrequent she writes now.

All the Seniors at the College of Charleston were well-aware of their shift in note taking. They depicted typing as an easier and more convenient method of keeping up with the pace of a lecture. One Senior realized that she was just “unconsciously transcribing” her notes. Another student described himself as a “zombie”, when in the process of typing his notes. Those who digitally type notes have a greater tendency to write verbatim. Although this note taking strategy may seem enticing, it has the capability to undermine students’ learning process.

College of Charleston students share that digital note taking harms their learning. Digitally typing can sometimes lead to an abundance of notes because of its face-paced nature. Whereas, handwriting notes can be a slower process. However, these college students claimed that when they used to handwrite their notes, they would first listen, process, and then summarize the information so they could concisely encapsulate the fundamentals of the information.

These college students had to summon a certain amount of effort required for handwriting that can promote retention and comprehension. Essentially, handwriting notes can necessitate various types of deeper cognitive engagement and in turn, influence learning. Whereas, verbatim note taking, through digital typing, encompasses a surface form of cognitive processing because there is not much thought behind the writing.

A [study](#) performed by Mueller of Princeton University and Oppenheimer of UCLA investigated the effectiveness of handwriting notes versus digitally typing notes. With a range of 67 to 151 students, those who had handwritten their notes largely outperformed students who had typed their notes on a laptop. There was strong evidence that suggested that handwritten notes could be advantageous towards a student’s success.

The study was broken down into three parts. In all three parts it was concluded that digitally typing notes can negatively affect performance on educational tests or assessments. Those who had handwritten their notes performed better on factual and conceptual questions. Essentially, this study realized that students who handwrite their notes are more proficient and have a studier conceptual understanding of the information or subject. Mueller and Oppenheimer declared that, “laptops may be doing more harm in classrooms than good.”

“Laptops may be doing more harm in classrooms than good.”

Even famous authors like J.K. Rowling and Stephen King prefer to handwrite their books over digitally typing them. The multi billionaire Bill Gates states that, “creativity allows people to be effective.”

Handwriting aids in promoting creativity and innovative ideas. The fluid movement involved in handwriting is interrelated to creative thought. In turn, handwriting could precede a further creative mind-set while studying. Thus, paving a way for a better performance in class. Not only that, you can now ditch that zombie feeling you catch while typing.

Does this signify that students will all of a sudden start preferring notebooks over the digital realm? The answer is still ambiguous. Despite living in a vast technological driven era, the opportunity for handwriting is still highly obtainable.

There are new methods to immerse handwriting and technology simultaneously so students can obtain the best of both worlds. Technological

advances, like styluses, are compelling students back to handwriting and their liaison with keyboards could just possibly diminish. It can even be perceived that the Stylus is now the new No. 2 pencil, and the thought of handwriting may not be so old-fashioned after all.