

A Comparison of Two Note Taking Methods in a Secondary English Classroom

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Recent educational research and scholarship calls note taking one of the research based strategies that help improve student achievement. I reviewed some of the literature on note taking and found that researchers agree that note taking is useful. I found descriptions of several different methods of note taking, and I wanted to investigate the relative usefulness of some of the methods. After studying some literature about two different styles, the Cornell note taking system and guided notes, I taught these methods to two different classes. I then gave both students the same test over the same content and found that students' performances differed depending upon which note taking method they used.

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) identify note taking as one of the research based strategies for increasing student achievement. Although researchers seem to agree that note taking is beneficial, they may disagree on the reason for this effectiveness. Beecher's (1988) analysis of note taking research identified a common theme: encoding versus external storage. If, as researchers such as Stahl, King, and Henk (1991) suggest, encoding is the most important aspect of note taking, then note taking helps students learn through additional processing of information—the process of a brain transferring the information into a different format helps the student learn the information. On the other hand, researchers who support the “external storage” benefits of note taking suggest that the primary benefit of note taking is that it allows students the opportunity to review relevant information in an accessible format when necessary—such as in preparation for a test.

My research suggested several different note taking methods, and this research focused on two of those methods: guided notes and Cornell notes. Guided notes provide a framework for students to locate relevant information in a text or lecture by using prompts such as fill-in-the-blank statements or partial outlines. This system focuses on the “external storage” benefit of note taking because it requires a low degree of processing on the part of the student. Cornell notes (named for Cornell University, where the system was developed) are more learner-directed, for they do not prompt the student for information. Instead—as documented by Cornell's website (2002), students divide a page into three sections: one for notes, one for questions, and one for a summary. During the lecture or reading, students write important information in the notes sections, then write questions about the information in the questions section, and finally, summarize each page of notes in the summary section. This method focuses on the “encoding” benefits of note taking, for it requires a high degree of processing on the part of the student.

Experiment

After reviewing the research and considering needs of my students, I focused my research into the following question: how does the effectiveness of the use of guided notes compare to that of Cornell notes in my classroom? I planned my research by selecting two sophomore level English classes, each with twenty-nine students. The overall mean class grade of both classes was similar, and the male to female ratios were also similar.

The experiment began with both classes completing a survey regarding their attitudes and perceptions about note taking. For the next step, both classes read a selection and take notes in whatever manner they chose, then took a quiz after studying those notes. I used this activity to gain information about student performance and attitudes before they studied either guided notes or Cornell notes. Next, I taught the two selected note taking

systems to the respective classes (One class learned guided notes; one class learned Cornell notes.) Each class then had a “practice” session with a second reading selection to gain experience with the note taking methods. After the practice story, both classes read a third selection and took notes using their new note taking strategies. Again they were allowed to study their notes before taking a quiz over the reading. Once students learned their scores on the final quiz, they completed a post-survey (the same as the pre-survey) to again measure their attitudes about note taking.

Results

Students in both classes performed better on the quiz after the intervention (learning the note taking method). Students using the guided notes method showed a larger increase than the Cornell group, from 51 percent correct to 84 percent correct. Students in the Cornell group showed a smaller increase, from 56 percent to 61 percent, but students in this group were better able to answer higher-level questions than those in the guided notes group.

Discussion

Based on these results and observations, I find that both of these note taking systems has the potential to be an effective classroom tool. The increase in scores from the pre-intervention quiz to the post-intervention quiz among the students in the guided notes class is compelling, especially when the Cornell group did not show such an improvement. Many student comments from the guided notes group indicated the students thought they learned more using guided notes. They were undoubtedly better able to recall information than the Cornell group, especially when the quiz prompt matched the notes prompt. This type of recall may be particularly useful when students need to learn new information that can be memorized, such as names of people and places in history classes, or characters and their traits in English classes.

My observations indicated that the Cornell method, on the other hand, may be more valuable to students when they need to synthesize and apply information, but the results on the post-intervention quiz (which primarily included recall questions) were below those of the guided notes group. The Cornell system should be useful in classes such as mine, in which I often ask students to synthesize information or make connections between a text and their own lives.

Conclusions

Based on my research, both of these note taking methods have the potential to be effective teaching and learning tools. The guided notes method should be more effective when information requires knowledge, recall, or basic comprehension, while the Cornell method (once students are able to use it properly), seems to be more effective when the synthesis, application, or evaluation is required of students.

References

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