

Teaching at USMA

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Why Cadets Don't Take Notes

Getting the students' explanation is often instructive. USMA faculty members frequently bemoan the fact that cadets fail to take notes in class, but one enterprising first-year instructor, CPT Brian Bailey of G&EnE, asked his yearlings *why* they were not taking notes. The cadet response was, "Why take notes? All the information is in the book."

This cadet perspective indicates a far deeper issue than simply the failure to take notes; it gets to the heart of how today's student sees the learning experience and how different that perspective is from what we know of how people learn. LTC Scott Hampton of BS&L recently referenced this statement in his work in PL100:

Students may fill their heads with facts, data, or some expert's ideas, but true learning will not have taken place until students create meaning for themselves from those facts, data, and ideas... Learning only occurs when students create understanding through relevant experience rather than through the accumulation of facts received from others.

- Black and Ammon 1992, as cited in Hughes, Kooy, and Kanevsky, 1997)

While we know that the learner must "create understanding," researchers have documented the fact that today's undergraduates typically function as consumers of information rather than producers of knowledge (McGuire & Williams, 2002). They see their role as simply absorbing information to be regurgitated on exams.

Their failure to read textbooks is rooted in the same misconception. There is a common misconception—among students and, sadly, often faculty members as well—that reading expository prose is a process of meaning *taking* when it is, in fact, a process of meaning *making* (DiGisi & Willett, 1995). Effective reading in the disciplines—both science and humanities—is an interactive/constructive process.

The student reader needs to become familiar with the vocabulary of the discipline and needs to be creating schema in response to the conceptual demands of the text. If one looks at used student texts with large segments of the prose simply marked with the ubiquitous highlighter, it's apparent that undergraduates are generally less oriented to the interactive/constructive process of meaning making and merely try to *take* information from the text.

And since that information is there to be taken at any time, it is also characteristic of college freshmen to delay retrieving it until it is needed—i.e., immediately before a graded event, rather than as assigned for individual lessons (Leamson, 1995). Thus both the failure to take notes and the frequent failure to complete assigned readings are the students' logical response to their perception of how learning happens. Why spend time and energy on this material when it won't be needed until the exam? It's always there waiting to be *taken* from the text when needed.

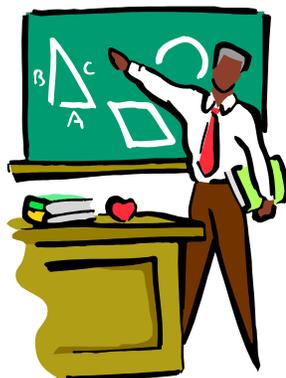
Of course, faculty members are complicit in this process if they create exams in which students need only regurgitate what they take from the text the night before, hence affirming the students' belief that their system works effectively. If we are serious about trying to facilitate learning, then we need to address what our own conception is of what constitutes learning in our disciplines, how we should teach for that end, and how we should test to see that it has been accomplished.

Here is how one cadet (a cow) described his academic experience several years ago, part of an unsolicited essay that was subsequently published in the CTE newsletter.

In too many classes, however, they give us set methods of solving problems, we memorize these methods as gospel, use them to pass the class, and, in the end, all we have gotten out of the class is a particular method for solving a particular problem. Six months later, most of us have forgotten these methods. In an effort to make us experts in each respective subject, the academy, in most core courses, throws far too much information at cadets. As a result, we feel overwhelmed and bogged down in facts. To help us get through it, most professors feel obligated to package it and feed it to us in digestible doses.

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Time for Interim Feedback!



While course-end feedback from students is common in higher education, many educators emphasize the value of interim feedback from students while the course is still in progress. Depending on the questions asked, an instructor can learn such things as what the students believe they are learning, what techniques or course components they believe are most valuable, and what they might like the instructor to do more (or less) of in the course. Keep in mind that

eliciting feedback doesn't obligate an instructor to make any suggested changes, but it is good practice to respond in some way to such suggestions—for example, by explaining why you will *not* do what is suggested.

This is a good time in the semester to obtain interim feedback from your cadets about their experience of learning in your course. Anyone can use the Interim Feedback system on the CTE website (under Cadet Feedback) where there are complete instructions for its use.

If you prefer to collect through another means, you still might want to check the questions listed for our system because they were initially developed in response to UMA instructors' requests for questions ask to get quality feedback. We offer "20 questions" to provide sufficient variety for any instructor but advise asking only 3-4 questions on any one survey.

What does interim feedback offer you? It's an opportunity to see if the cadets' experience of the course is consistent with your objectives, and if the techniques you are using for instruction are helping them learn. Let me offer an example from my experience with EN101R, composed of cadets who have failed EN101, the freshman composition course. I do frequent writing in the course, and I emphasize the effective organization of expository prose as well as writing correctly according to the conventions of standard American English. Here's how I summarized one class's responses for reporting back to them:

The most important thing I have learned in this course so far is...:

Correctness
Organization
Confidence

The aspect of this class that is the most helpful for my learning is...:

In-class writing
Writing practice
Feedback

The part of the course that I have liked the most so far is...:

Writing every day

Note how unanimous the cadets are in their response to what they "like" in the course.

From such feedback, I am assured that the cadet and I share a similar perspective on the work of the course and that the cadets are focused on my basic learning objectives. However, the fourth question that I typically ask provides an opportunity for me to correct any misconceptions cadets may have about how the course will proceed, and it sometimes gives me valuable ideas as well. I have found it helpful to always include the following question during interim feedback:

I have the following questions or suggestions for you [class instructor]. . .

This question often elicits a few suggestions based on the cadets' experience in high school English classes, and my feedback to them about why I do not plan to do these things helps them overcome their nostalgia for activities that are familiar to them but irrelevant for learning to write effectively. However, sometimes cadets offer excellent suggestions based on their experience in the course.

For example, one semester, when I had two international cadets in an EN101 course, I received a suggestion that I find an opportunity to have a class session in which the American cadets could ask the international cadets questions about their home countries. That not only provided an extremely valuable class during which the American cadets asked remarkably interesting questions about culture and student experience in those countries but led to a very successful writing assignment as well.

If you haven't already collected interim feedback from your cadets, it's not too late to try it now. You may be surprised at how valuable this process is for improving the learning environment in the course for both you and your cadets♦

Teaching is the achievement of shared meaning.

- D.B. Gowin, *Educating* (1981)

Why Cadets Don't Take Notes

(Continued from page 1)

By trying to conscientiously insure that cadets “get it,” faculty members implicitly reinforce the cadet perspective on learning—that the role of the student is to simply be a consumer of information rather than a producer of meaning. Thus, while we may bemoan the fact that cadets don't prepare for class or fail to take notes and seem to just “spec” for exams, we need to recognize that this is behavior entirely consistent with their understanding of what learning is all about. If we know differently—and we should—then we need to explore ways to change their perspective on learning.

Let's take a look at some typical learning objectives, most of which are written at the knowledge level because that's what instructors expect cadets to glean from their reading. Here, for example, are the objectives for a lesson from IT105, the plebe course in information technology:

- Describe software and multimedia piracy and piracy prevention techniques.
- Describe computer viruses and virus prevent techniques.
- Identify privacy issues in information technology.
- Describe different techniques to protect your privacy.

These objectives are clearly stated and would give a student guidance in the assigned reading. The key issue is whether or not the students can simply find the answers readily in the text.* If they could simply copy the correct response to each item, this would reinforce the mistaken notion that learning is a process of “taking” information from a text or instructor and regurgitating it on an examination.

We know that students find the higher cognitive levels more engaging, and those levels require the student to “do” something with the information. For example, rather than list the objectives, suppose the student had the following directive:

Your grandfather has recently decided to join the 21st century and he's purchased his first computer and now subscribes to AOL as well. He's become excited about all the resources available online and is now considering upgrading from dial up to broadband service. He's concerned about both privacy issues and problems he might encounter with computer viruses. He's asked you for advice. From the assigned reading, write the advice you'll send your grandfather for dealing with both these issues.

In class, the instructor could use the cadet responses in a variety of ways. For example, a group of three cadets could

*Please note that this example is not intended as a comment on IT105; these objectives are being used out of context. The examples in this article are intended to show how our instruction can be more successful in promoting student learning if it helps students develop the habit of constructing learning rather than simply regurgitating information.

decide which member of their group has been the most thorough, can augment that cadet's response in any way they deem necessary, and present their “best” response to the class as a whole for review and discussion. Each group could also be asked to submit one question on this topic that they would like the instructor to address. Once the basic information has been affirmed, the instructor could proceed with the questions from the groups to supplement the reading.

Note the difference in the following questions from the course guide for American Politics on a lesson's assigned readings, one by Howard Zinn, and the other a response to Zinn by Sidney Hook :

- Why does Zinn maintain that “the ideal standard is the pragmatic one?”
- Why does Zinn feel that representative government is, by its very nature, undemocratic?
- In Zinn's view, what corrupts the “spirit of cooperation” in our society, and prevents Americans from enjoying the substantive elements of democracy?
- What are the differences between Zinn and Hook's definitions of democracy?
- How does Hook respond to Zinn's criticism of representative government?

In this case, the lesson objectives have been recast as questions to guide the cadets' reading, but, more importantly, the cadets are asked to infer from the readings—or at least read closely—(Why questions), and also to make comparisons between the two readings (definitions of democracy). The student must “construct” rather than copy a response and will be led to see learning as this active process of creating meaning rather than the essentially passive process of taking the correct response from the text. In this situation, CPT Brian Bailey's yearling cannot assume that “all the information is in the book,” and in class this cadet would be more apt to see a purpose in taking notes.

Clearly, there is no one way to promote cadet active engagement in the learning process. But so long as we make it possible for them to simply take information—from either the text or the instructor's PowerPoint slides—and reproduce that same information on tests, we are simply perpetuating their wrongheaded notion of the learning process.

References

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- DiGisi, L.L. and Willett, J.B. (1995). What high school biology teachers say about their textbook use: A descriptive study. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 32, 123-142.
- Leamson, R.(1999). *Thinking About Teaching and Learning: Developing Habits of Learning with First Year College and University Students*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- McGuire & Williams, (2002) .Meeting the millennial student, *To Improve the Academy* . Vol. 20.

A Publishing Opportunity!

We received the following message from a colleague at the Coast Guard Academy, and it seems to be an excellent opportunity for USMA faculty members. The website lists the deadline for submissions as an unusually flexible (or vague?) "March or April 2004," so you may want to contact Dr. Waid if you're interesting in submitting.

The first military education edition of *Academic Exchange Quarterly* (AEQ) is planned for Summer 2004. AEQ is a double blind peer-reviewed journal published in the United States.

If you have an idea for an article on teaching in a military setting, whether at a Service Academy, in a ROTC/JROTC program, or any other military venue, I hope you will consider submitting it. Details can be found at: <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/rotc.htm>

For more on AEQ, you may check out their main website: <http://www.rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/>

Or, see a listing of the articles in the current (Summer 2003) issue at: <http://www.rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/sum2003.htm>

Feel free to contact me to discuss article proposals or to get further information.

Thank you for your consideration.

Very Respectfully,

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Next CTE "Brown Bag"

Thursday, 2 October and Friday, 3 October

Grading Without a Curve

Presenter: LTC Ray Nelson, D/Physics

The DPOM on grading calls for "criterion referenced" grading a USMA which means that we should not curve grades or otherwise evaluate cadets in terms of each other's performance but strictly in terms of specific course criteria or learning outcomes. This is easier said than done. The D/Physics has a story to tell about their experience with this process of testing and grading and how they've "cracked the code" on outcomes-based evaluation. This is a story that will be of interest to everyone who has responsibility for academic evaluation. Join us for this informative session.