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The End of Note Taking?

Digital transcribing tools just might free students up to do more beneficial things with their time in class, write Perry Samson and Fred Singer.

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Just as speech-to-text technologies like Amazon Alexa or Google Home can answer your questions in the kitchen about the latest news and weather report, the same algorithms are now powering a new age of speech-to-text transcription that means all classes can now be transcribed, so students don't have to take notes. Tools like Amazon Transcribe can automatically generate transcripts that are nearly 90 percent accurate and can be tagged and integrated with learning materials. These digital transcripts can then be downloaded, shared or studied.

For many of us, the prospect of not being forced to read our terrible excuses for notes is a huge relief. These tools have also sparked debate in education circles, raising two interesting questions: What is the actual role of note taking in learning, and do we need it anymore?



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The traditional argument among researchers is that [taking notes by hand in cursive](#) is the best way to cognitively learn new material. *The New York Times* recently [reported](#) on a host of new legislation requiring cursive be taught again in schools, though [researchers and educators are debating](#) whether those efforts are being driven by nostalgia or learning science.

This debate misses the real point. Taking notes in any format -- whether it be in cursive or digitally -- can be a valuable experience. The real question is whether our view of note taking is still locked in 20th-century learning principles and overemphasizes a single element, such as taking cursive notes, in the chain of engagement and learning.

The question is not whether note taking is bad or good, but rather what else could students do with their time that is more productive for their learning. Note taking is known to impose significant demands on [students' working memory](#), and its usefulness compared to full attention with availability of a transcript is debatable.

For example, if students are not burdened with note taking, they can spend more time asking questions. This is the foundation of engagement, which is the best predictor of academic outcomes. In addition, if students can ask questions anonymously using their computers or phones, their engagement level really begins to escalate, particularly among groups of students with traditionally low participation rates.

[Recent initial research](#) at the [University of Michigan](#) shows that all students are more likely to ask questions if they can do so anonymously from a computer or phone, and an anonymous back channel eliminates gender bias in classroom inquiry. In addition, if students are able to ask and answer each other's questions, student engagement goes up even further, because it turns out that the process of teaching your classmate the concept is yet another good way to learn. After all, this is the pedagogical foundation of the study group. So even if taking notes is a good practice, asking and answering questions is potentially an even a better use of time for student learning. The second bigger benefit is that digital transcription allows students to explore the content in real time by searching, hyperlinking to e-textbooks, bookmarking, indicating confusion and generally connecting material taught in class to the vast library of information readily available on the web. Digital

transcripts allow a real-time connection between the class and the rest of the world.

The old model required students to leave class before they could actually take advantage of basic topic exploration. For example, with digital notes you can hyperlink and search on concepts that you might think are connected. Schools can create word clouds on topics and students can see where other students have focused. The analogy is to how you likely watch TV today. Have you ever watched the TV and wondered about a person or a place that you just saw? What do you do? You search the subject matter on the web, and then you likely share your discovery with others watching the TV.

This is exactly what can and should happen in a classroom. With digital transcripts, the material is connected to a broader set of information either in an e-textbook or on the web. All this just drives engagement, which in turn drives real learning.

Note taking may end at some point in classrooms not because it is a bad experience but simply because the ability to interact with digital transcripts is a better use of time and represents a new set of more engaging workflows for 21st-century learning.

It was not long ago that someone would clip a newspaper article for you to read. Today, with a digital news article, it can be shared at the click of a button. The fundamental workflow of consuming our news has now changed. It may be that the way we learn in classrooms will change just as drastically, and that means rethinking what good learning processes should be in a world of mobile content and easy interaction. In that world, it may be the end of formal note taking in class, and for all those people with bad handwriting, poor working memories and limited attention spans, that may not be a bad thing.

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