

Too Many Screens? Try Collaborative Note-Taking

There are two major problems that face the modern professor. The first is students who are underprepared for note-taking or who, worse still, have no conception of it. The second is students who are distracted by multiple screens. Finding a way to break through the multiplicity of screens constantly bombarding our students with micro distractions is an unending battle for the contemporary professor. The increasingly typical response to the second has been to ban or limit laptop and tablet use in class. Recent research has popularly encouraged this approach. To the first problem there has been no unified response.

After pondering the problem for some time it occurred to me that maybe I could force myself onto that tiny screen. Be a distraction *to* the distractions instead of trying to unendingly and unsuccessfully pry those tiny screens from addicted hands. How could I get students engaged with technology? What if I told them to bring it and use it? What if instead of eliminating it, I just owned it? But how? Discerning how to break into that real estate was my new goal.

The Idea

The same year I was wrestling with the problem of student engagement, I was also serving on a college-wide committee that was tasked with rewriting some of the procedures for the tenure process. It was a complicated document, and there were many of us working on it. We ended up turning to Google Docs because of two features: a single unified file that was always updated and the ability to edit together in real time.

We could have the master document up on a projected screen, while on our own screens we could then work on the text simultaneously. The committee was one of the most productive on which I have ever served. It took hours of labor, but I was deeply proud of the document we produced. What made the document so unique? It was a completely collaborative effort. We had quite literally written it together—all in the same room. Nobody was checking student email. Nobody was texting. We all wrote together. There was not the normal “single author, everybody nods” issue that plagues so many committee-produced documents.

Then it dawned on me: why not use that same tool, or type of tool, to help students engage? Could I get students using Google Docs to take notes together?

Couldn't the same forces that got a room full of professors on task or off email and a mess of other micro-distractions work for a classroom of social media obsessed students? I thought it was at least worth a try.

The Setup

I had students group together to take notes on Google Docs collaboratively. At the beginning of the semester, I offered a single form of extra credit for participating in what I called collaborative note-taking. Students would be put into small groups and each would bring a device with them to class every period. They would create a unified document, and I would get access so I could track progress. Students who participated for the entire semester received extra credit. In short, I was *encouraging* students to bring those potentially distracting devices along with them.

Students experienced an initial learning curve. The common perception of lecture notes is they are private things—if students think about them at all. They enjoyed the ability to cross-talk and to “get everything.” But now all those micro-distractions were actually extensions of what was happening in class. If nobody in the group knew how to record what was happening, or if nobody else had an answer in the chat bar, then a hand would go up. Students asked bolder questions, asked questions in conjunction with each other, and were more present in the classroom.

Collaborative note-taking also helped students take fewer notes individually. Instead of trying to write down everything I said, each member of the group focused on a specific task. This was one of the very things that Muller and Oppenheimer were trying to accomplish in their study “The Pen is Mightier Than the Keyboard”—getting students to take fewer notes when using a digital device. Even more fascinating was what was happening behind the scenes. Students were discussing how notes should look. Note-taking was out in the open.

The Results

The results were positive. Students deeply appreciated taking notes collaboratively. They also loved bringing those devices more openly to class. But what did it achieve for the classroom? The data points to a number of important improvements.

First, students had to have discussions with other students about note-taking. They had to agree on what would be a good set of notes, an issue they would never have addressed alone. Students further had to figure out if they were going to traditionally outline or use some other method. It outed all those previously unspoken

strategies. In the qualitative feedback I discovered how much students had learned about what good notes look like. Poor students often never realized how inadequate their note-taking was. Why? Because they never thought about it or saw a better functioning model.

Second, students who participated performed better across the board in terms of grades. Students who took notes collaboratively did a half-letter grade better than those who did not when compared both to others in the same class or in those classes that did not participate.

Additionally, I compared how students performed on independent learning scales from grade. On these tests collaborators, again, did better than their isolated peers. Whether measuring by grades or by independent measures of knowledge, the collaborators outperformed their peers. In both instances, it was approximately a half-letter grade improvement.

Finally, having students take collaborative notes allowed for new insights into student performance. How often does a professor wish he or she knew how well a concept was understood by a class? With collaborative notes—because they were shared with the professor—I could actually peer into what was happening. Did every group seemingly not understand what social media was? It might mean I need to revamp how I am presenting my material. Or it could help me recognize when I had an off day. This real-time feedback was highly useful. Student notes offer far more insight into learning than waiting for the best student to come visit you during office hours.

Conclusions

If you are trying to wade through the mountains of distractions facing students, then you may want to consider collaborative note-taking. It is low- to no-cost. Google accounts are free, and many schools today use Google for their email and storage functions already. Any device can be used, and students are already eager to bring and use those devices when they come to class.

My recommendation is to keep the groups small—three to four students. Larger groups tend to have issues and two-person teams are often no team at all. Students will struggle early on in the process as they adjust to working together. Most of this is the issue of outing the process of note-taking. Give them a chance to struggle with the collaboration.

Finally, remember to check the notes yourself. Even if you don't peer behind the laptop wall too often, the fact you can will motivate students to have something there. Even poor students won't want to leave at the end of the day with nothing if they know you might peek at what they did. Take advantage of that fact.

Do students still look at Facebook and Twitter? Do they still send text messages? Yes. But the frequency is down. There just isn't time for such distractions when students are taking notes and interacting with fellow classmates. You can try to keep the screens out of your classroom, but what you are really doing is sending them underground. My advice: bring them out into the open.

Put students in small groups so they hold each other accountable. Force yourself onto that screen instead of trying to wish the screen away. I made myself and my material the biggest "distraction" on my students' screens and it has made all the difference in the world. And the greatest part was, students don't recognize what a coup d'état it really is.

Harold Orndorff, *Associate Professor, Social and Behavioral Sciences*

For further information, contact the author at Daytona State College, 1200 W. International Speedway Blvd., Daytona Beach, FL 32114. Email: harold.orndorff@daytonastate.edu

If you are interested in the technical and scientific details you can read the full published article (<http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE2035.pdf>) in the *Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*