Transforming notes

We're talking about taking all your notes and creating a way to organise them. More than that, we want to look at how we can change them into a different format to create an even better learning tool.

Filing

The key message for your notes is to organise them in a way that will work for you. Here are some basic 'must dos' with your notes:

→ Plan a structure from the start. This should include page numbers and consistent labelling of pages.
→ Make sure you can read everything you've written. Don't think you'll just remember what it meant later.
→ Remove irrelevant notes (unfortunately, the flowery border you spent so long on does not necessarily enhance your learning experience).

A very important step is to turn your notes into an electronic resource:

→ Scan notes onto your computer
→ Label each set of notes with a file name e.g. '2016.04.16 Psych 101 Week 3'
→ Double check your hard copy with each of the scanned files to make sure everything matches and is labelled correctly

Sacha Chua provides an excellent overview on how to take your handwritten notes and properly organise them to allow better access and content at your fingertips.

Tools to upgrade your notes

Hopefully you have now gotten yourself noted up and are ready to really make use of all this brilliant information. There are many tools to allow you to use those notes to better synthesise the content so you can recall it at those crucial times.

Flash card apps

Flash cards are nothing new and have been used for years to help students remember content. But now there are also some very handy electronic versions that provide the same functionality but are more easily accessible. Some common online services are:

→ Quizlet
→ FlashCard Machine
→ Flashcards+ (iPhone app)
→ Anki

Spaced repetition system

Spaced repetition is based on the principle that to learn information you need to be exposed to the concept just before you forget it. This further cements the information into your long-term memory.

This technique is an active rather than passive technique (e.g. recall versus just rereading). It is commonly used now in quality flash card apps that deliver the word at the right time for you to remember it. If you seem to be not getting the word correct the app increases the frequency until you can show you have committed it to memory. For more information on spaced repetition and the apps that can be used, follow this link to Spaced Repetition.

Mnemonic devices

Although we've touched on the fact that mnemonic devices are perhaps not the most effective technique, we need to acknowledge that it may be a way of learning from your notes that works better for you personally. Therefore it should not be easily dismissed.

Congos (2005) from the University of Central Florida outlines nine different types of mnemonics. As they all rely on different cognitive abilities, you may just find one that is perfect for your learning style.

Mind maps

Never underestimate turning your notes into mind maps. It can help to turn a mess of written information into a cohesive linked structure that will help you learn what you need. File them away with your notes and you have a full suite of information ready to help you get the best out of attending your lectures and tutorials.

Peer discussion groups

Let's face it, with the pressures of working, social media, and blended learning modes of content delivery, we spend less time at university with our peers. Due to the fact that we don't get to spend a lot of time on campus discussing the finer points of the day's lecture, we need to transition to other methods. Whether this is by discussion through eLearning platforms available at the University, or on online platforms like Peerwise, students need to get talking again.

The University of Edinburgh (Bates et al., 2012) found that the use of 'PeerWise' for student discussion and collaboration helped to improve students' attainment of key information from their studies. This was regardless of what they were studying.

A point to note: discussing content from your classes with peers is OK, but ensure you keep a level of scholarly awareness when it comes to sharing your own work online. This could inadvertently lead to some degree of plagiarism if someone uses your work.

References

Bates, S. P., Galloway, R. K., McBride, K. L., Rebello, N. S., Engelhardt, P. V., & Singh, C. (2012, February). Student-generated content: Using PeerWise to enhance engagement and outcomes in introductory physics courses. Conference Proceedings conducted at the meeting of the American Institute of Physics.

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