Classroom Learning Techniques

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Abstract

One of the basic skills in learning in college is to be able to listen properly. Listening is the first step in learning. Bad listening habits are as easy to cultivate as good ones. In this paper, I will present ten bad listening habits to be avoided. Just because we hear something, doesn't mean we are listening. We don't have to hear to learn, but we do have to listen to learn. We don't have to learn to hear, but we have to learn to listen. Listening involves concentration. Concentration involves holding a central issue or problem in mind and having ideas that are related to the issue.

Why take notes? Because listening and note taking are inseparable partners. Any experienced reporter will confirm this. The only way to take notes is to listen, the only way to listen is to take notes. Listening without taking notes and you'll quickly forget. The object in taking notes in class is to capture the instructor's ideas and information in the order in which they are presented; to be able to retrieve those ideas and information months and possibly years from now.

I will present a technique for note taking that I feel is one that you should consider passing on to your students.

Introduction

What goes on in the classroom is just as important as what goes on in the textbook - and sometimes even more so. Yet many student's don't see it that way. Sometimes it appears that students just study the textbook chapter by chapter in preparation for the next examination. Or even more serious is the "mind skipping" that goes on in the classroom; that is, letting the mind wander aimlessly with the attitude that they will read the textbook chapter later. This creates a take-it-or-leave-it climate in the classroom. Although most students “take it”; far too many “leave it”.

This leaves no room for critical discussions or academic challenges. The student’s attention needs to be focused at all times, not just on the speaker, but more importantly on the subject matter at hand.

Ten Bad Listening Habits

Many students develop bad listening habits from an early age. Ralph G. Nichols, an internationally known expert on listening, identified these ten. Eliminate them, and your students will become better listeners. [1]

1. Calling a subject dull. A poor listener will "turn off" as soon as he or she decides a lecture is going to be dull. And such a decision is usually based on ignorance rather than knowledge about the subject.

2. Criticizing a speaker. A poor listener will find fault with the speaker in any way that he or she can think of, and therefore infer that such a speaker can't have anything important to say.

3. Overreacting. A poor listener will become so involved in disagreeing with the speaker that he or she will miss most of the lecture.

4. Listening for facts only. A poor listener wants only facts and considers the "big picture" as nothing more than someone else's opinion.

5. Outlining everything. A poor listener tries to force every lecture into a rigid mold through detailed outlining. He or she is so busy with form and style that the content is missed.

6. Faking attention. A poor listener will lock his or her eyes onto the speaker and then relax, expecting to get the information out of the textbook later, i.e., during study time.

7. Yielding to distractions. A poor listener will use every little distraction e.g. a footstep, a door opening or closing, a cough, a dropped pencil, as an excuse to stop listening to the speaker.
8. **Selecting only the easy topics.** To a poor listener, it's too much trouble and hard work to follow the instructor's complex arguments and ideas. This student wants entertainment, not learning.

9. **Overreacting to emotional words.** A poor listener overreacts, almost blows up, at personally emotional words, such as communist, income tax, Nazi, or evolution. His or her blood pressure rises, and listening comes to an end.

10. **Wasting thought speed.** Even a poor listener realizes that thinking proceeds at a much higher rate than speech (actually about four times as fast). The poor listener usually moves along lazily with the speaker or uses his or her thought speed to solve personal problems. Often, this results in the poor listener falling behind the speaker and giving up for the rest of the lecture.

**Ten Good Listening Habits**

Listening is a skill which can be improved and mastered. In order to do so, the ten bad listening habits need to be eliminated and in their place, the student is to be instilled with the following ten good listening habits. As a good listener, the student will:

1. **Not prejudge the subject.** A good listener will listen closely for information that can be important or useful, even in a seemingly dull presentation.

2. **Critique only the material.** A good listener will realize that a lecture is not side show. He or she will look for ideas, not things, to criticize.

3. **Listen with an open mind.** A good listener will listen with the mind, not with the emotions. He or she will jot down a disagreement, to ask about it later, and then go on listening.

4. **Hear everything.** A good listener wants to see how facts illustrate principles, how examples illustrate ideas, and how evidence supports arguments. He or she realizes that facts are important, but only in relation to principles, ideas, and arguments.

5. **Takes notes in a freestyle manner.** A good listener adjusts his or her note taking to the speaker's topic and organizational pattern.

6. **Pays strict attention.** A good listener realizes that each lecture is a chance to get in minutes, facts and ideas that the instructor took hours to assemble.

7. **Shuts out distractions.** A good listener disciplines himself or herself to shut out distractions and to concentrate on the speaker's message.

8. **Seeks the challenging parts of a lecture.** A good listener is intellectually curious, wants to see how the instructor proves his or her points, and is not afraid of tough or complex ideas.

9. **Controls ones emotions.** A good listener hears the same emotion laden words but will listen even more intently, to follow the message or argument and see where the instructor's prejudices lie.

10. **Optimizes the thought speed.** A good listener uses his or her thought speed and any pauses in the lecture to distinguish supporting material from main ideas, to make fast summaries of the instructor's highlights, and to anticipate the instructor's next point.

**Why Take Notes**

By now, you may have noticed that a key issue in all of the ten good listening habits is the ability to take good notes in a reasonable fashion.

The objective in taking notes in class is to capture the instructor's ideas and thoughts in the order in which they were given, so that the student can take them back to his or her room to study and master.

You will probably hear the comment from students: "If I spend the time taking notes, I won't have any time to listen to what is going on". NOT TRUE. Taking notes actually forces the student to pay strict attention to what is being said.

In other words, they have to take notes or else they will forget what they've heard. Hearing is mechanical. We don't have to make any effort to hear. And just because we hear something, doesn't mean that we have been listening. For example, we are jolted when a loud noise occurs around us. We heard it all right. But were we listening?

**How To Take Notes**

Taking notes doesn't mean taking down the lecture word for word. Instead, have your students write in a telegraphic style, using both their own words and those of the speaker. Students can't get around taking notes by using a tape or cassette recorder. They will end up spending more time reviewing the material; and making efficient use of time is
what the act of taking notes is all about. When a lecture is recorded, it can't be reviewed in five or ten minutes, you have to replay the entire lecture or spend time shuttling around until you find the section that you're looking for. Moreover, the benefits of note taking will be lost - the attention, the concentration, and the organization that the act of note taking provides.

There is not one perfect system for taking notes. Have your students develop a system that will be most effective for them. Above all, notes should be complete and legible. Complete enough, so that they can make sense of them several months later; and they should be neat enough so that a classmate who missed the lecture can understand them. A scribbled, illegible page of writing will be of little use when they are trying to review and recall the information from that lecture. Thus, when reviewing the notes and trying to concentrate on their meaning, their mind will not be bogged down in deciphering those notes. With messy notes, they'll have to review some, decipher some, then review some more and decipher some more. Not only will time be wasted, but this will seriously drain energy doing unnecessary work.

**Review The Notes**

Note taking not only helps one to concentrate on the lecture, but it also provides a valuable learning resource for the future. To use this resource to its fullest advantage, the student must review their notes several times.

They should begin as soon as the lecture is over. While walking to another building for their next class, have them try to recall the points that were made by the lecturer. Then later that evening, have them review their notes carefully. Have them visualize the classroom and you - concentrate, they need to get in the right frame of mind - this will help them set your points and ideas and clarify vague points. With the lecture still fresh in their minds, have them fill in the gaps in the notes, and/or try to answer some questions that arose during the review of the lecture session. They need to write down unanswered questions that may come up during their review. They should then arrange to see you either before the next class or in your office to discuss these questions. Add these answers to the notes. Use this review to complete the overall picture of the lecture, and to find the central point or idea. Have them add to their notes as necessary to make them complete. This review should take no more than fifteen to twenty minutes.

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**The Cornell System**

One note taking system that I have found useful and which I stress to my freshmen classes, is the Cornell system [2]. This system takes a little time and effort, but the result is a set of well-organized, easy-to-read notes.

**The First Step: Preparing the system**

Use regular size (8 1/2 x 11) loose-leaf paper and set it up in the following format prior to the lecture. Use one side of each sheet only. Draw a vertical line down the left side of the page 2 1/2 inches from the left edge, stopping 2 inches above the bottom of the page. Draw a horizontal line across the bottom of the page, leaving a 2 inch space between the line and the bottom of the page. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1. The Cornell System Format**

The 2 1/2 inches on the left is the recall column, where the student will jot down cue words and questions after the lecture. The 2 inch space at the bottom is for summarizing the information on the page. The 6 inches to the right of the recall column is for recording actual notes during the lecture. This 6 inch space is the only area of the paper that will be used during the lecture.
The Second Step: During the Lecture

During the lecture, record the facts and ideas that are perceived as being the most important. Leave a blank line between each new main point. Underline, capitalize, or use other symbols to make the major points stand out. Do not try to outline or use complete sentences, but write legibly. Just make sure the notes will make sense to them after the lecture is over.

The Third Step: After the Lecture

After the lecture, have them reduce their notes to key words, phrases, or brief questions, and write them in the recall column to the left of the corresponding information. They can also use mnemonics in the recall column. In making this recall column, have them rethink the key information in their own words, and possibly come up with words or phrases that will work best for them.

Finally, summarize the facts and ideas in the summary section at the bottom of the page. Actually, there are three options here. First, you can summarize at the bottom of each sheet; second, you can summarize the whole lecture at the bottom of the last sheet; and third, you can summarize at the bottom of each sheet and then summarize the whole lecture at the bottom of the last sheet.

The summary sections will yield the greatest reward when studying for an exam. Your students will be surprised how easy it will be to review and to prepare their sheet of test notes, if you allow that.

Conclusions

The key to learning in the classroom is to discipline oneself to be as attentive as possible during the instructor’s lectures. Taking good notes forces a student to pay strict attention to the material at hand and to not let their minds wander. Taking good notes also requires that a minimum amount of preparation be done by the student before class, both in their mental attitude and in the physical preparation of a lecture note book.

The benefits of note taking are therefore threefold: increased attention to the instructor, increased concentration on the subject matter at hand, and increased organization of the review and study material.

A good set of lecture notes, that is, ones that are complete and legible, will be a great asset when it comes time to review for a test. An orderly set of notes will minimize the amount of time and the frustration spent recalling the important parts of the subject matter, and will make reviewing for a test a more pleasant experience.


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