Collaborative Note-Taking: A Tool for Creating a More Inclusive College Classroom

M. Brielle Harbin

To cite this article: M. Brielle Harbin (2020): Collaborative Note-Taking: A Tool for Creating a More Inclusive College Classroom, College Teaching, DOI: 10.1080/87567555.2020.1786664

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2020.1786664

Published online: 01 Jul 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 34

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Collaborative Note-Taking: A Tool for Creating a More Inclusive College Classroom

M. Brielle Harbin
United States Naval Academy

ABSTRACT
Collaborative note-taking is a pedagogical technique that asks students to rotate note-taking responsibilities during class meetings in a shared document. Implementing this technique helped me, as an instructor, better leverage my students’ strengths and weaknesses in an introductory American government class—though the benefits should extend to a wide range of disciplinary contexts. In particular, collaborative note-taking helped level the playing field for students entering my classroom with wide-ranging levels of prior preparation. It also provided a consistent access point for evaluating student comprehension and learning and improved the quality of classroom discussion. As a result, implementing this pedagogical approach can help foster a more collaborative, inclusive, and equitable learning environment in university classrooms.

Implementing a collaborative approach to note-taking in my introductory American government course was one of the best pedagogical choices I made my first semester on the tenure track. The course is required for all first year students at my institution, which means that individuals vary considerably in their level of investment in the course material. The fact that the course has an institutionally-mandated attendance policy further complicates my mission as an instructor. Moreover, I was charged with teaching students in their first semester of college. This meant engagement was not my only issue—I was also guiding students through the often-overwhelming transition from high school to college (Kirst 2004; Sadler and Tai 2001). Finally, I was navigating these dynamics within the larger context of my own transition into a new city and unfamiliar institutional context—a service academy—as a new assistant professor.

Collaborative note-taking was an indispensable tool when responding to these challenges. In this approach, students rotate note-taking responsibilities during class meetings in a shared Google document that I create and manage. For each class meeting, the section leader—a student who is taking the class and is elected by their peers—assigns two students to note-taking duties for the day. Students who are assigned note-taking duties can take notes by hand or use their laptop. If they use their laptop, they can either take notes in Word and drop the notes into the shared Google document or work in the shared document directly. In either case, the day’s notes must be available within 24 hours of the class meeting. Everyone else in the class is required to take notes by hand. The note-taking schedule is coordinated using an Excel spreadsheet that is posted on the course learning system (e.g. Blackboard).

While it is not crucial that instructors elect a section leader and delegate the task of assigning note-taking duties, I believe it conveys from the outset of the course that an instructor is committed to resisting highly authoritarian approaches to teaching and learning. As hooks (2003) notes in Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, authoritarianism in the classroom “dehumanizes and thus shuts down the ‘magic’ that is always present when individuals are active learners [and] takes the ‘fun out of study’ and makes it repressive and oppressive” (pg. 43). In other words, by positioning themselves as the only person with influence and authority in the classroom, instructors center themselves in the learning process, replicating harmful hierarchical power dynamics that discourage learning and collaboration. Indeed, hooks laments the importance of educators examining “the ways in which we support, either consciously or unconsciously, existing
structures of domination … because of the way that learning is organized in institutions” (hooks 2003). Thus, adopting collaborative note-taking into one’s course can foster a more democratic and inclusive classroom climate by sending the message, from the very first day, that students are members of a learning community and will play an active role in their own as well as their peers’ success in the course.

With that said, the decision to delegate decision making when teaching is inherently riskier for those with marginalized social identities. In my own case, I probably did not spend enough time thinking about the challenges that might arise given my various social identities: civilian, Black, and female assistant professor teaching at a service academy. Indeed, a vast literature on teaching and pedagogy suggests that instructors’ race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and physical attractiveness can affect how they are perceived by students including their level of credibility, competency, legitimacy, and other stereotype behaviors (Anderson and Kanner 2011; Arbuckle and Williams 2003; Bavishi, Madera, and Hebl 2010; Burns-Glover and Veith 1995; MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt 2015; Smith and Anderson 2005).

As a result, some instructors are more vulnerable to student backlash and bias, which are often reflected in student evaluations of faculty members—a metric considered in tenure and promotion decisions. Still, I believe the benefits of this approach outweigh the potential costs—especially because there are at least two ways to mitigate concerns about diminishing one’s authority when adopting this approach. First, instructors can create a list of necessary attributes of a student leader and nominate students who fit the criteria based on probes of students’ level of motivation, prior preparation, and/or previous leadership experience. Second, instructors can select the student leader themselves.

Why implement a collaborative approach to note-taking?

Beyond my desire to draw students into a shared learning community, my rationale for implementing collaborative note-taking was practical. First, I wanted to avoid the sea of laptops that often hinders lively discussion in college classrooms—in my case, even more so because students are issued a standard laptop when arriving on campus. While scholars generally agree that laptop computers can be helpful for taking notes and promoting class participation (Caron and Gely 2004; Granberg and Witte 2005), they are frequently a source of distraction (Ravizza, Uitvlugt, and Fenn 2017) as students send text messages, check social media sites, play games, browse the internet, and write emails (Burak 2012; Ragan et al. 2014). More, research suggests that this distraction not only affects students who are multitasking, but also those who are sitting nearby (Sana, Weston, and Cepeda 2013). These findings are troubling in light of research demonstrating that distracted learning can degrade academic performance (Fried 2008). From this perspective, collaborative note-taking has the potential to improve student performance by minimizing the number of distracted students.

More than this, I hoped that collaborative learning would encourage students to view one another as resources in their learning process. Collaborative learning refers to “working in a group of two or more to achieve a common goal, while respecting each individual’s contribution to the whole” (McInerney and Roberts 2009, 205). The benefits of collaborative learning are well documented (Laal and Ghodsi 2012). Research suggests that teaching and learning that encourages students to work together to complete tasks is positively associated with learning outcomes (Terenzini et al. 2001) as well as students’ openness toward diversity (Cabrera, et al. 1998)—an important prerequisite to more inclusive and equitable university learning spaces.

In my own classroom, I noticed that collaborative note-taking fostered greater rapport as students learned one another’s names and independently created a group chat to coordinate note-taking duties. As the semester progressed, students used this medium to discuss issues related to the course more generally. I benefited from this practice in two ways. First, the group chat encouraged students to discuss aspects of the course that were confusing or difficult, which prompted students to communicate common concerns during class and office hours. Second, students turned to their peers first to answer questions, which decreased students reflexively emailing me with questions I knew their peers could answer.

Finally, I wanted to create a mechanism for checking in on students’ comprehension in a manner that avoided chipping away at my limited time with students in class and or adding another graded assignment. My class met for 50 minutes, three times a week. As most instructors know, this is not a great deal of time—especially when teaching an introductory class. In this regard, collaborative note-taking provided another access point for evaluating students’
comprehension without taxing my already limited class time or adding to my course workload.

**Benefits of adopting collaborative note-taking in your courses**

Over the course of the semester, I identified three benefits of adopting collaborative note-taking: leveling the playing field for students with different levels of prior preparation, providing a consistent access point for assessing student comprehension and learning, and improving the quality of classroom discussion. I describe each benefit in detail below.

Collaborative note-taking helped level the playing field for students entering my classroom with wide-ranging levels of prior preparation. The transition from high school to college expectations is dizzying for most students and can be insurmountable for those with limited prior preparation (Moore et al. 2010; Welton and Martinez 2014). Indeed, existing literature suggests that students may find the quick pace of college courses, especially those that demand deep, critical, and analytical thinking, both jarring and overwhelming (Conley 2007).

In my classroom, I had students who had not taken an American government class since their first year of high school in the same room with students who passed the advanced placement exam but had not validated their scores. Given their prior preparation, students in the latter category displayed a stronger command of core concepts and topics and were better able to synthesize ideas presented during lecture. As a result, these students took better notes. In a traditional classroom where students work independently, less prepared students would likely to flounder in isolation with unhelpful notes at the end of each class meeting. However, in my class, students could learn from their peers’ approach to note-taking and use the collaborative note-taking document as a learning resource.

For the most part, students confirmed that collaborative note-taking enhanced their learning when providing anonymous feedback. While students expressed different preferences regarding the note-taking format, note-taker assignment process, and using the collaborative notes to prepare for exams, they generally acknowledged that these notes were a good idea. Students shared that the collaborative notes were helpful because they provided a background on classroom discussions and information they may have missed. Students also explained that the collaborative notes allowed them to double-check and cross-reference their own personal notes. Thus, collaborative note-taking provided students with a consistent and low-stakes way to check their comprehension of the course materials, which ultimately helped level the playing field for students entering my classroom with different levels of prior preparation. More than this, students remarked that the collaborative notes helped them stay engaged in class discussion. They explained that collaborative note-taking allowed them to participate in classroom discussions more than they would be able to if taking notes on their own. This, in turn, helped them understand topics more clearly.

A second benefit of adopting collaborative note-taking was establishing a consistent access point to assess student comprehension and learning. A frequent challenge instructors face is more vocal students dominating classroom discussions, which leaves little space for reserved students to assert their ideas (Hollander 2002; Soranno 2010). This dynamic is especially problematic in light of research suggesting the roles students adopt in class discussion can be predicted by their gender, race, and nationality, which reinforces troublesome social hierarchies (Eddy et al. 2015; Wildman 1988). Furthermore, Jensen and Lawson (2011) find that when lower-reasoning students participate in peer discussions with higher-reasoning students, high-reasoning students exhibit greater learning gains. Beyond stifling the contributions of students from disadvantaged groups, classroom discussions that are dominated by a few students provide fewer opportunities for instructors to assess less vocal students’ comprehension of course readings and concepts. Thus, collaborative note-taking provided a useful evaluation opportunity. Because students rotated note-taking responsibilities, I could review the document and see what more reserved students viewed as takeaways during a given class meeting. This allowed me to engage directly with shared takeaways during the next class and one-on-one when students attended office hours.

A third benefit of incorporating collaborative note-taking was improving the quality of classroom discussion. Rather than hiding behind their laptop screens, students learned one another’s names, looked at one another when speaking, listened more closely to one another’s ideas, and engaged them when talking in class. While there were certainly students who checked out from the learning process despite my efforts, several students shared that in other classes they did not know their classmates’ names, but they could easily recall the names of their peers in my class. Naturally, as students became more familiar,
they also came to view one another as resources in preparing for course exams and assignments. This observation is significant in light of work that finds student civility is linked with more positive classroom climate and connectedness, instructor rapport, and cognitive interest (Myers et al. 2016). Additionally, work in this area finds that increased perceptions of civility enhances students’ perception of the value of diversity in the classroom (Ocon 2013).

**Issues to consider when adopting collaborative note-taking in your courses**

While there were clear benefits of adopting a collaborative approach to note-taking in my course, I also encountered problems I had not anticipated over the course of the semester. In this section, I discuss four issues to consider before instructors incorporate this pedagogical approach in their own classrooms.

**Issue to consider #1: Different levels of prior preparation affects quality of note-taking**

The most important observation I made over the course of the semester was that different levels of prior preparation translates into variation in the quality of note-taking. While it was not possible for me to help struggling students match the note-taking skills of their better prepared peers, I found that adopting a predictable lecture format helped fill the gap. Adopting a predictable lecture format requires instructors to be much more intentional about their syllabus choices on the front end; however, I found that over the course of the semester it became much easier (and faster) to prepare for class when I used this structure. More importantly, when I moved to a more predictable pattern, I noticed that students took better notes irrespective of their prior preparation.

I ultimately incorporated three recurring slides into each lecture. First, an “On the Horizon” slide was at the start of each class meeting. It contained bullet points of the topics for class meetings for the next week as well as upcoming due dates. Besides forcing me to be intentional about how I sequenced my lectures, I found that this approach provided a regular opportunity for me to mention how the readings related to one another and field students’ questions about these connections. I also found that students were better able to understand the day’s learning objectives when I made this broader context explicit at the beginning of each meeting.

Second, I included a “What We’re Doing Today” slide in each lecture. This was the second slide and contained bullet points of the specific topics and/or activities we would cover in the day’s meeting. This slide signaled the main headings for the class notes for students. It also helped students (and me) note where we ran short of time and needed to revisit a topic. When revisiting a topic was not possible, these bullet points flagged for students points to revisit in the readings for the day.

Third, a “Question to Consider” slide was either third or fourth during each meeting. I varied the placement of the slide based on whether there was a warm up discussion question or activity that I used to frame the lecture. In either case, I included a single question that students should consider during the class meeting. At times, I gave students one or two minutes to write down their initial reactions to the question. At the end of the class, I returned to this question and asked students to share their initial answers and how their thoughts changed (or not) after the day’s lecture and discussion. In some cases, the students’ thoughts remained the same, but in almost every case, I found that they expressed their viewpoints in a manner that engaged more directly with course materials rather than their preexisting beliefs or outside sources. Moreover, I noticed that students wrote these questions down in the collaborative notes and created issues to consider when answering, which encouraged some to continue thinking critically about the question when reviewing their notes and preparing for course exams.

**Issue to consider #2: Students benefit from explicit discussions of expectations and norms for collaborative note-taking**

Over the course of the semester, I noticed that students adopted vastly different approaches to note-taking and needed to clarify among themselves expectations and norms for the collaborative note-taking document. To my surprise, it took my prodding for them to have this conversation. But, once I did, students had strong opinions about the ideal norms and conventions. The liveliest debates centered on whether the notes should be verbatim or paraphrased and how to distinguish the notetakers’ reactions and students’ comments from points I made during the lecture. Ultimately, the students in all three of my sections decided to take notes verbatim and use a color system to distinguish (1) information I presented, (2) the notetaker’s reactions to the day’s topic, and (3)
comments made during the class discussion. Beyond helping students produce helpful class notes, these discussions encouraged students to think and talk about how they learn best—a crucial conversation given that students in my class were in their first semester of college. The collaborative note-taking approach made this discussion natural with the added benefit of making students invested in the outcome of their own and their peers’ choices.

**Issue to consider #3: Instructors should create and communicate a clear policy regarding the role of collaborative notes in the course**

A third observation I made over the course of the semester was that I needed to be more explicit about the role of class notes in the course. Most notably, I needed to state unequivocally that the collaborative notes are a crowdsourced resource, not a standalone authoritative study guide. I found that as students became more trusting of one another (a great achievement), they became too reliant on the collaborative notes—sometimes to the detriment of their motivation to engage the course materials themselves. As a result, some students came to believe that they could look at the collaborative notes instead of doing the reading themselves. It is crucial that you convey to students that class notes are not an acceptable source in class assignments and design assessments in a way that prevents against this tendency.

**Issue to consider #4: Instructors should use a pre-class survey to strategically pair notetakers**

A final observation that I plan to implement in future semesters is using a pre-class survey to assess students’ interest in the material and prior preparation. I made several adjustments to the implementation of collaborative note-taking as I learned more about my students and their needs over the semester. Upon reflection, a well-structured pre-class survey during the first week of class would have allowed me to strategically pair students in ways that balanced their strengths and weaknesses. From my experience, the most important information to gather is level of interest in the course topic and self-reports regarding students’ strengths in writing, reading, and note-taking. It was truly remarkable what I learned when I simply asked students how well they perform specific tasks. Because students have received feedback from teachers their entire lives, it was easy for them to tell me where they struggled academically. In future courses, I plan to gather this information during the first meeting and use it when working with the section leader to pair students for note-taking responsibilities.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, implementing a collaborative approach to note-taking in my course helped me, as an instructor, better leverage my students’ strengths and weaknesses in my introductory American government class—though the benefits should extend to a wide range of disciplinary contexts. In particular, collaborative note-taking helped level the playing field for students entering my classroom with wide-ranging levels of prior preparation, provided a consistent access point for evaluating student comprehension and learning, and improved the quality of classroom discussion. As a result, implementing this pedagogical approach can help foster a more collaborative, inclusive, and equitable learning environment in university classrooms.

Nevertheless, the benefits of collaborative note-taking come with potential drawbacks. For instance, in my class, students were not unanimous in their beliefs about how individuals should take notes, which caused some conflict. Most notably, there was a stark divide between students who wanted verbatim notes rather than notes that synthesized major themes and concepts. I found it useful to remind students that they could take their own handwritten notes and use the collaborative note-taking document as a supplemental resource. Also, dysfunctional group dynamics can emerge if students use the collaborative document and online communal spaces to sow discord. Unfortunately, this is a problem that is impossible to avoid completely. In fact, I experienced this downward spiral in one of my sections. While it was certainly difficult navigating this dynamic, I believe the benefits accrued from collaborative note-taking outweighed the harms. Moreover, disruptive student behavior can emerge irrespective of one’s teaching method. Rather than avoiding innovative teaching approaches, instructors should incorporate opportunities for students to provide feedback with the goal of communicating more directly with students about their pedagogical choices.

Beyond these considerations, implementing the collaborative note-taking technique might be more a natural fit in some disciplinary contexts than others. Whatever the case, I believe both students and instructors can benefit from some variant of this approach. The main question may simply be the
circumstances in which this choice makes the most sense for student learning. Regardless of instructors’ ultimate decision, I believe the question is worth considering the potential to make our classrooms more inclusive and equitable learning spaces for our students.

ORCID

M. Brielle Harbin http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4393-8122

References


