

From: [Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation](#) on behalf of [Center for Faculty Innovation](#)
To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: The Benefits of Rotating Note-Takers
Date: Thursday, October 25, 2018 11:40:49 AM

The Benefits of Rotating Note-Takers

by Emily O. Gravett

In a brief “Quick Fix” from the journal *College Teaching*, [Mark H. Maier \(2016\)](#) shares his experiences requiring students to take turns serving as the class note taker. After starting out with a strong note-taker for the first class session, Maier assigns students alphabetically for the rest of the semester; by the end of the term, everyone has contributed notes at least one time. (In classes with larger enrollments, he assigns two note-takers per class.) Students are expected to post their notes on the course management system. Note-taking is a required part of the course and counts toward a small percentage (1%) of the students’ overall course grade. Maier scores the notes pass/fail. They are not intended, Maier emphasizes, to replace, but rather to supplement, the students’ own notes.

Maier found the following benefits for this assignment:

- Students report finding the notes helpful to study prior to tests;
- Lesser-skilled note-takers learn from the notes taken by more skillful note-takers; and
- Students who miss class can easily access what they missed.

Another benefit Maier found is that the office of disability services at his institution is “pleased that there are notes readily available without sending a paid note taker to my courses.” This a routine service provided by such offices all over the country. Indeed, our very own [Office of Disability Services \(ODS\)](#) coordinates a massive [note-taking accommodation program](#), with over 600 peers taking notes for nearly 1,000 courses each year. Hundreds of JMU students with disabilities request this service. (Click [here](#) to learn more about it.) Ideally, each student would receive notes from two of their peers, yet [Director of ODS Valerie Schoolcraft](#) tells me there are always classes in which the call for note-takers goes unanswered.

Since starting at JMU, I have received many of these requests. I always worry that no one will sign up. And, indeed, sometimes I have had to make several pleas to get just two note-takers. It’s stressful for me and, I can imagine, stressful for the student who needs the notes. So, this fall, I am experimenting with rotating note-takers in my own upper-level Religion and Film course. My courses tend to be small and discussion-based and I always emphasize that students should be taking notes on what they hear-- not only from me, but from their peers too. I rarely use presentation slides and I don’t come in to give a prepared lecture script, which I could share with students or which they could record with a [“smart pen.”](#) Note-taking, by my students, is a must.

This is how I presented the assignment in the syllabus:

Post class notes (10%)

Because we can all learn from each other, you should take notes not only when I am talking, writing, or projecting, but during discussion too. To try to reach a shared understanding about the important insights raised each day, and to create access for students who benefit from note-taking support, you will share your notes from class sessions at least 3 times over the course of the semester. Within 24 hours, you will type up your notes (if you wrote by hand), review your notes and fill in any gaps, and upload them into the folder whose link is provided on Canvas, along with your response to the question: what was the most important thing you thought we learned today? (To help us stay organized, it is important that you label your note files using a consistent format: MONTH/DAY – LAST NAME; example: 9/24 – Gravett.) You will receive full credit for detailed and timely notes. I recommend returning to them regularly. I may include questions on the quizzes and/or exams based upon them.

I also shared with students research (e.g., [Kiewra et al. 1991](#)) that taking their own notes and reviewing those notes will lead to better recall than simply reviewing others' notes without taking any of their own. I hope to emphasize that they should all still be taking notes, regardless of the other note-takers.

I'm happy to report that, so far, my students' notes have been amazing! They capture all of the main points from class each day, but in different ways; their peers would easily be able to use the different sets of notes to enhance, fill in, or complement their own. The students also reported that the notes helped their learning during a recent [Teaching Analysis Poll](#). With the midterm coming up on Monday, I hope these notes will prove even more useful, as students return to them to study over the weekend.

Dr. Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and an assistant professor in the [Philosophy & Religion department](#). She can be reached at graveteo@jmu.edu.

To unsubscribe from the TEACHING-TOOLBOX list, click the following link:
<http://listserv.jmu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=TEACHING-TOOLBOX&A=1>