



Step away from the paraphrase: teaching note-taking as a gateway to knowledge transformation

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Abstract

In this presentation, we examined the role note-taking can play as a gateway to knowledge transformation in the reading-to-write process and challenged an academic focus on the teaching of paraphrasing. Much research has been done into the role that note-taking plays in lectures (Morehead et al., 2019), the impact of longhand notes compared with digital (Allen et al., 2020) and student writing strategies (Wingate and Harper, 2021). Although notes play an important role in evidence-based writing, in both providing a clear record of a student's reading and increasing encoding and engagement (Voyer et al., 2022), very little research directly addresses the impact of note-taking strategies in the reading-to-write process. This study builds on work done in educational psychology by Cuevas et al. (2016) examining writing beliefs. It aims to understand student approaches to evidence gathering and explore links between their current practices and their writing beliefs.

Understanding current student practices and the link with epistemological beliefs will allow us, as learning developers, to more effectively create targeted activities and interventions to support student understanding and engagement with texts in the reading-to-write process. It will also provide a foundation for explicit discussion and reflection of student beliefs about the nature of reading and writing and the link between these beliefs and note-taking practices, encouraging students to see reading and writing as knowledge construction and, importantly, encouraging deeper cognitive engagement and learning.

Keywords: reading-to-write; student note-taking practices; student writing beliefs; reading skills; teaching paraphrasing.

Community response

The session was impactful upon delegates' thinking around the support they currently give to students for learning about paraphrasing in their academic reading and writing, and a number of significant takeaways were identified. The concept of encouraging students to consider how having a purpose when gathering information fosters more effective note-taking, was especially pertinent. Note-taking in this manner can enable students to develop their own clear voice, whilst still using evidence to support their writing. The emphasis on understanding rather than the mechanics of paraphrasing is a valuable message for students, and it would be a great idea to link this further to research into reading and information processing.

An asynchronous dialogue developed between author and participant around the concept of 'reading to write', a pivotal part of the writing process, especially when writing from sources:

Participant: This workshop was particularly interesting to me since I've begun to talk more about taking research notes both in a first-year 'Introduction to University' seminar I teach during the regular term and in a non-credit summer course offered to incoming university students. This summer course is called 'Reading to Write', and it focuses on introducing university students to reading academic sources not only for understanding and critical thinking but also for use in academic writing. One of the assignments in both the first-year seminar and in this summer course is writing research notes as they process a scholarly source. The sourced information is copied and pasted as a quote and may be processed in light of its purpose in the written assignment right away or later. Students are expected to justify and explain each note they take as it relates to their thesis. To keep track of the sourced information, the text is cut and pasted and the necessary quotation marks and tracked information are included so they can be referred to later if needed. I think taking notes in this way is useful for several reasons.

First, students record the information in its original form, which allows them to think about how the information might be helpful even at a later time. In this way, the scanning for useful information is only minimally interrupted,

which allows for better comprehension of the overall text since the readers do not need to take time to paraphrase the text or relate it to their own purpose immediately while reading. This is particularly helpful for readers with English as an additional language who can notice the relevance of the quote quicker since this is more of a receptive experience and later produce the language needed to paraphrase or incorporate the text into their writing in a meaningful way.

I would also challenge the idea that less engagement with the text equals a greater understanding of the text as a whole. In fact, I am not sure that we can get a real understanding of a text when we scan, especially if the text is presenting complex ideas. In research about reading, it has been shown that cognitive engagement promotes understanding and knowledge integration. Igo et al. (2005) did a really interesting study about the impact of copy-and-paste techniques on understanding and retention. The study, 'Exploring differences in students' copy-and-paste decision making and processing: a mixed-methods study' is a bit old and is not focused on reading to write, but it is still worth a read.

Author: Thank you for sharing your approach to teaching research notes. As you stated in your response, the approach promotes a passive/receptive approach to gathering evidence. If I'm right, it's a sort of 'gather first, understand later' way of reading. In the 'Reading to Write' course, are there follow-up steps that then promote active engagement with the ideas once gathered? I can see the approach being useful in gathering large amounts of information to read later, but perhaps it may encourage an approach more focused on 'using' pieces of text than learning from the text. Do the students find what they have copied easy to review? I wonder about your assumption that it's better for writers whose first language is not English to have the original text in front of them when they write. I would argue that it is actually harder for someone with less mastery of English to paraphrase from the complex original text and they may feel less free to move away from it and to trust their own voice. However, I don't have research to prove this! Would be something very interesting to find out.

Participant: Secondly, copying and pasting also allows them to find the information more easily since a page number is recorded. They can go back to the exact spot in the text and reread the text in context and process it more carefully at a later time. Keeping track of sourced information this way is consistent with all style conventions which require a page number for quotes, but not necessarily for paraphrases.

Author: I completely agree with encouraging students to record page numbers - so useful for going back to the original text if needed.

Participant: Finally, the quote needs to be processed carefully to consider its usefulness in their paper before they can use it.

Having the exact text is helpful for the precision of the interpretation and for choosing the exact section of the text that is most relevant. Taking research notes in this way clearly emphasises reading with purpose, which students often do not consider when reading academic texts.

Author: Consider adding an activity with students where they experiment with a copy-and-paste approach to note-taking and then an idea-based notes approach. Encourage students to discuss the impact each approach has on their understanding of the text and their experience of reading. You can build on the activity, asking students to produce some writing from their notes (either copy-and-pasted or idea-based notes) and find out which notes are easier to write from and why. In this way, we encourage students to engage in metacognition and to adapt their strategies based on what works best for them.

Next steps and additional questions

The session inspired one delegate in how she would approach the development of her institution's Academic Reading Toolkit, with the exercises demonstrated by Zephra informing one of the interactive elements of this toolkit.

Author's reflection

As a new presenter at ALDinHE and novice researcher, I was encouraged by the response from fellow delegates both during the session and in the following community discussion. During the session, I shared a practical exercise that gives students the opportunity to write from their notes and also challenged the traditional teaching of paraphrasing in an academic context. It was rewarding to hear several attendees explain how the example I had given helped to join important dots for them and I even had the privilege of later seeing and giving feedback on the exercise that one of the delegates used in her academic reading toolkit. I also appreciated the candour of one of the attendees who shared their practice of teaching note-taking to international students and who queried whether a copy-and-paste approach was more appropriate for students with English as an additional language. The discussion highlighted the importance of encouraging research in the area of reading-to-write to test our own hypotheses so that we can promote learning and student confidence in their own voice in the best way possible.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Helen Briscoe from Edge Hill University.

The authors and contributors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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