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Preparing Lecture Notes and Handouts

By Richard James

Should lecturers distribute lecture notes or hand-outs? If so, when? What form should they take? These questions often concern lecturers. The decision to issue lecture notes is related to a number of factors:

- the teaching style of the lecturer,
- the nature of the subject matter, and
- the availability of written and other resources in the subject area.

The preparation of good quality lecture notes is time-consuming and their reproduction is probably costly – if it is to be done, there had best be justification for it. This being the case, what style of lecture notes might be valuable?

Approaches to the use of lecture notes

Copying copious information from overheads is seldom productive learning. Some students even rewrite lecture notes at a later time in the belief that this will assist them to “remember” the information. The approach to learning that this encourages is mere rote reproduction of data. We should aim for deeper learning, for students to develop the ability to analyse and synthesise information.

On the other hand, teachers shouldn't simply reproduce the content of lectures in printed form and issue to this to students. This approach may be common for conference papers and the like, but its role in promoting learning is dubious; it invites the reasonable question, “What is the purpose of the lecture?”

To create good lecture notes, a useful starting point is to remember that teaching should be a dialogue between teacher and students. Lecture notes should be part of this interaction. Students should view your notes as one learning tool, rather than the only learning tool.

Lecture notes should enhance or complement the lecture or class rather than *be* the class. They may explore the topic in a breadth and depth that isn't possible during the lecture. They may provide diagrams that would be either impractical or impossible for students to reproduce during class time. They may challenge students with specific learning tasks or questions. Or they may simply provide a connecting framework upon which students can 'hang' details during the lecture, in which case they must be issued before the lecture.



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Asking students to use lecture notes actively during a lecture will encourage and focus their concentration.

For this to be effective, you will need to spend some time discussing with students the most effective way to use the notes you provide. Make your expectations clear.

Evaluating lecture notes

The following checklist may assist in evaluating the quality and appropriateness of lecture notes (or, incidentally, textbooks):

- Are they written at an appropriate level?
- Is terminology introduced with which students may not be familiar? If so, is it defined in the notes? (Or will this be done in the lecture?)
- Do they enhance material presented in other forms in the lecture?
- Do they encourage annotation by students?
- Are headings used carefully, and links between sections stressed?
- Are questions posed to stimulate student learning?
- Are references for wider reading included?

Keep them 'fresh'

If you choose to prepare lecture notes, you should update them regularly. Student feedback on how they have used the materials can provide one means of revising and improving your printed material.

Recommended reading

Gibbs, G., Habeshaw, S. & Habeshaw, T. *53 interesting things to do in your lectures* 4th ed. Bristol: Technical & Educational Services, 1992.