

Why Note-Taking by Hand Is Better for Your Brain

We all know Aesop's fable about the Tortoise and the Hare but few of us really believe, in the real world, that slowcoaches like the tortoise have a cat in hell's chance of beating those in life's fast lane. Few really believe, with John Milton, that "they also serve who only stand and wait." Those who stand and wait get left behind, stupid. You snooze, you lose.

Those of us who believe that time taken is time well spent are in a minority in our frantic and frenetic world. We are an endangered species. It is, therefore, refreshing to discover that even scientists are beginning to agree with us. Take, for instance, research psychologists, Pam A. Mueller of Princeton University and Daniel M. Oppenheimer of the University of California, Los Angeles. In a groundbreaking study, these diligent researchers have shown that handwriting is better than typing as a means of retaining information precisely because handwriting is slow, whereas typing is fast. Like Aesop's tortoise, Mueller and Oppenheimer have proved that slow and steady does indeed win the race, at least where learning is concerned.

Whereas earlier studies argued that laptops were poor tools for note-taking because of the many tempting distractions on the internet, this latest research illustrates that handwriting is better for the simple reason that it slows the learner down. The counterintuitive paradox is that slowing down with note taking accelerates learning. The tortoise really does outpace the hare merely by taking its time.

The irony is that a typist, sitting in a classroom, can transcribe almost everything that the teacher is saying without having to critically engage with what's actually being said. The transcription process requires no thought and

therefore no critical thinking. The fingers dance over the keys at dazzling speed, putting the words down on the page as fast as they leave the mouth of the teacher, and yet the brain is disengaged from what's being said by the teacher or written by the fingers. There is no active and proactive grappling with the material being discussed. The sublime gets lost in the subliminal.

As psychologists and educationists have discovered, and as those with common sense have always known, a failure to signal to the brain that the material is important will result in its being discarded from memory for the sake of mental efficiency. Why retain what seems to be unimportant because it was unengaging? In contrast, taking notes by hand is slower and, therefore, requires that the listener pays attention. He can't write down every word the teacher is saying so he needs to be selective, choosing significant quotes, summarizing concepts, and asking questions when something is not understood.

Drs. Mueller and Oppenheimer conclude from the data collected in their study that "transcrib[ing] lectures verbatim rather than processing information and reframing it in their own words is detrimental to [the student's] learning." Corroborating the results of this research, Stanislas Dehaene, a psychologist at the Collège de France in Paris, told the *New York Times*, that students who wish to succeed should consider leaving their laptops at home or in their dorm rooms. "When we write, a unique neural circuit is automatically activated," he said. "There is a core recognition of the gesture in the written word, a sort of recognition by mental simulation in your brain, it seems that this circuit is contributing in unique ways we didn't realize."

Such research is needed, even if the conclusions are somewhat obvious to those who haven't lost their common sense. For those who have long since abandoned common sense for hare-brained ideology, only scientific studies will make them see

the error of their ways. Meanwhile, as the hare-brained continue to think they can win the race by rushing around like a dust storm in a desert, the slow plodding tortoise, writing slowly but surely in the time-honoured cursive script, will leave the vacuous in their vortex, crossing the finishing line with gloriously unhurried decorum.

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