Power Lesson: Note-Taking Stations

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Gathering the Resources

I gathered three types of note-taking templates: a concept map, a Doug Buehl-inspired graphic organizer called a magnet summary, and Cornell notes; along with annotation, these would make up the four stations.

At each station, we set up a completed example of that type of template so students could see how it’s done. To create the examples, we used pages from the students’ chemistry textbook. Abby chose one small section for each template along with a page for annotation, and I made one copy of the designated pages. She didn’t give me any directions or a quick lesson in basic chemistry; instead, it was up to me to figure out which template worked best for each page.

I decided to use Cornell Notes for the page with the most text. The Cornell template lent itself to text where the notes could be neatly arranged, writing key words or questions on the left side and definitions or brief phrases on the right side.

Cornell Notes
(These photos show student work, not the teacher-generated examples.)
Next, I chose the **concept map for the pages with pictures and text**. I wrote the main idea of the text in the middle box and used the surrounding boxes for details or formulas.

For the **magnet summary** template, I also used pages with pictures and text. Again, I wrote the main idea in the middle box and the details in surrounding boxes. Then I wrote a brief summary using the middle box as my topic sentence, and the surrounding boxes as sentence details.
Finally, I annotated the page with the most pictures and formulas, asking questions, making comments, or circling unknown vocabulary in the margins.

Annotation

I shared my completed note-taking templates along with the annotated page with Abby. After her review, we put the pages in plastic sheets to use as exemplars at each station.

IMPLEMENTATION

In this particular sophomore class, Abby had about 25 students sitting at traditional science tables. Students were given four new pages to annotate or take notes on. We didn’t want them to take notes on the pages I had used for my examples; rather, we wanted them to try four new pages from the text, but use the exemplars as visual representations.

We created four stations: one for each of the four note-taking styles, along with several blank copies of the template. At the annotation station, we made several copies of the chemistry page that students were expected to annotate. We decided students would spend
approximately 15 minutes at each station, including time to read the corresponding section from their chemistry text.

Abby described the directions and purpose for the lesson. She clarified that she wanted to introduce students to various note-taking templates in addition to them practicing different types. I offered brief directions for each template, demonstrating how to use each one with the exemplars.

Finally, Abby set the timer. Students began reading the information in their chemistry books and reviewing the exemplars at their tables. Next, they grabbed blank note-taking templates and began to write their notes. Abby and I walked around the room, observing what students were writing. We encouraged students to work together, to talk to each other and see how their peers were writing their notes.

Students work at the annotation station.

After 15 minutes, the timer went off and students rotated to the next station. For the first couple of minutes, the room was silent as students read the page assigned to that station. Then the room filled with chatter as students reviewed the exemplar, wrote their notes and shared their information. At the magnet summary
station, we noticed students sharing their summaries and verifying that they were similar.

**STUDENT DEBRIEF**

After students had visited all four stations, we gave them time to debrief with their peers about the lesson, then we asked their opinions.

- Was the lesson helpful? Overwhelmingly, students said yes! They liked the idea of stations and physically moving from one area to another.
- They appreciated having the opportunity to practice note-taking, especially with an exemplar to use as a visual reference.
- Students felt some of the templates did not lend themselves to the particular chemistry page at that station. For example, several students said the boxes on the concept map were too small, and bigger boxes would have helped.
- Students were split on writing a summary, which was part of the magnet summary template. Some appreciated putting their thoughts on paper in summary form, while others drew a flowchart in the summary text box to help them digest the information.
- Some students didn’t like using concept maps at all and would have preferred the Cornell template for all of the notes, or would have preferred to annotate all four pages of the reading; they felt the boxes were too restrictive.
- Several students commented that they would use all of the templates, but use them according to what was on the page. For example, if a particular page was text-heavy, they would use Cornell notes. If there were formulas on the page, then a concept map—of their own making—would be the way to go.
- Finally, many students shared how mentally “tired” they felt after reading and taking notes on about three-and-a-half pages of text. The reading, processing, note-taking and re-reading proved to be very brain-intensive for our students, which inspired Abby and I to plan several more note-taking lessons to help students hone this significant skill.
Students work at the concept map station.

TEACHER REFLECTION

Abby and I felt that this lesson was a success. Since giving the lesson, she has seen explicit improvements in the ways her students approach reading and taking notes. Those improvements include:

1. Their notes are neater, more organized and meaningful. Students aren’t just rewriting the text—they are adding their own thoughts, questions and images into their notes. They’re taking pride in their notes.
2. Students are varying their own note-taking styles to match the style of text. They’re creating concept maps when the class covers topics that are interconnected and not so linear, using Cornell notes when learning scientific theories and linear processes, and drawing out their ideas and processes instead of writing everything out.
3. Students are actually using their notes! They are editing and revising their notes as the class does more practice and examples. Notes aren’t just a thing they have to do in class anymore. Students are using them to review.
4. Students are more engaged with a text. Abby has found that she needs to limit the quantity of text that she asks them to read and take notes on to encourage this, but she’d rather take quality over quantity, especially at the sophomore level.
Their comprehension of the information they have read has increased, as has the depth of their questions in class.

5. Students can synthesize information more readily. One of the extension activities that Abby has done after the note-taking stations is having them consolidate a full unit of notes to a single page—front and back—of a graphic organizer or plain paper. This synthesis of information is now significantly easier and more meaningful for them.

Finally, as an instructional coach, I have shared this lesson, with content modifications, in other disciplines and with all student abilities. The opportunity for student ownership and the chance to choose is what makes this lesson timeless and engaging—exactly what our students need for success!