

The Great Lecture Notes Debate Part Two – The Case Against; Notes vs. Knowledge

As I mentioned in **yesterday's post**, students are once again requesting that lecture notes be circulated in advance, something I have always resisted. Here is an attempt to explain (not least to myself) why I find this objectionable.



Tim Forsyth, Professor of Environment and Development, teaching in one of the classrooms in LSE St Clement's in the Department of international Development. [LSE in Pictures on Flickr](#)

What exactly do you have when you have 'the lecture notes'?

I must admit to a feeling of mystery about why students want lecture notes in the first place. What exactly do you have when you have them?

To begin with, there is no such thing as 'the lecture notes'. What you get are my lecture notes. Don't get me wrong, my lecture notes are fabulous. But they're mine. They are, in effect, my speaking prompts, a list of things I may not remember when I'm standing in front of you, which I write down to avoid forgetting. They complement all the stuff in my head that, for whatever reason, I'm less likely to forget when I'm standing in front of you. As between the two, the latter tends to be more important. But that's the stuff I don't write down. So when you bring my lecture notes to class, what you have is a rough catalogue of aspects of the topic I consider less important.

The main point is that there is no such thing as 'the lecture notes' – master notes that work well for everyone. The relevant lecture notes are your lecture notes, processed by your brain for your brain. This is because, especially for Masters level work, each individual brings a different mix of knowledge, experience, beliefs and priorities into the lecture hall with them. You all take different notes, and well you should. Some of the things your professors say are obvious to you, and you don't bother writing them down. Other things are interesting or mysterious, and you do write them down. This is exactly as it should be, and explains why reading through someone else's notes can seem so frustrating. We've all had this experience at one time or another. Your brilliant classmate takes notes that bang on about things that don't need recording, and then – suddenly – ~~fall~~ of a

cliff into paragraphs or bullets that don't connect, leaving huge gaps. That cliff is the divide between what she knew and didn't know walking into the lecture hall. It's different from your divide. You and she know different things, you care about different things, and you take different notes. If you missed a lecture, by all means get her notes. But don't pretend they substitute for your notes. They never will, and neither will mine.



Professor James Putzel teaching students from the Department of International Development in the Hong Kong Theatre, LSE Clement House. [LSE in Pictures on Flickr](#)

Notes Are Irrelevant, Learning is Hard

The thing about notes – and this is the best part – is that they work by making themselves irrelevant. It's a bit like 'the best rules rarely need to be enforced'. The importance of notes isn't in the notes. The importance of notes is in taking the notes, meaning you went to the lecture, listened, engaged with original material in your own particular way, filtered the lecture through everything you know, believe, etc., and then wrote down an account of the material that is coherent and prioritizes what, for you, is most important. If you did all of that, and did the readings, and then reflected on both, you went most of the way towards learning the material. You may refer back to your notes later, as a reference, like you look up a word to make sure you know what it means. But not because the knowledge is in the notes. It's not. It's in your head. Which is the only place it can be useful.

I've had the privilege to teach here for nearly two decades. And so I know LSE students are a small sub-sub-sub group of the population, and are really smart. But I do sometimes wonder if somehow, subconsciously, students want lecture notes as a shortcut to knowledge. Because in the consumer culture, knowledge acquisition is somehow analogous to downloading a document or an app. If you have 'the lecture notes', then you somehow have knowledge.

This is completely wrong. The correct analogy is physical training. Like mastering a sport, acquiring knowledge is hard work. It takes a lot of effort. It's no joke that our brains account for something like **20% of the body's energy consumption**. Like a good workout, learning is hard and often painful. By itself, that no doubt explains much student frustration this time of year. The problem is, downloading notes doesn't help much. It doesn't get you knowledge. All you have when you have my notes is a small pile of paper.

My fear is that circulating lecture notes in advance gives students a false security that they 'have' the material, and so don't need to work so hard to learn it. When I sit amongst students **dx**ing a

colleague's lecture, I often see them scrolling through lecture slides, taking a few notes in the margins. It's possible that the information is being assimilated in some ordered way. But it's also possible that such students are coasting, disengaged, secure in the belief that they have the notes. The danger is that they coast straight through to the final exam, where they'll be faced with another small pile of papers, all of them blank.



Professor Jean-Paul Faguet

Not less important, just more specific. Many of our lectures contain graphs, charts, and tables that students needn't try to reproduce by hand. We have always circulated all such figures after the lecture, allowing students to focus on the main ideas and insights.

Any students with specific needs can of course request, and receive, lecture notes in advance.

Lastly, in my first year in this department, our then-Head warned that pre-circulating lecture notes increased the probability that students skipped lecture and stayed in bed, especially between December and March. I never found out how well-founded this claim is, but the little economist in me suspects it's true. I'd be grateful for empirical evidence one way or the other. If it is true, then the recent trend towards video recording all lectures must be exacerbating the problem.

Do you agree? Or have you had a different experience? Why do you find lecture notes useful? I'd be interested to hear your thoughts.

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