

Making the Most of Notes

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I have taken my fair share of notes throughout my years as a student and a professional, and have my students take notes almost daily in class. But when it was time for them to use notes (for an assessment, project, help, review, etc), I found less than 25% of my students would actually take them out and use them. This was always a puzzle to me; I reviewed my notes when in school, so why aren't they doing the same thing?

For the past six years, I have been an AVID Elective teacher. I teach my students in the AVID Elective how to be better students so they can reach their career and academic goals. Part of the elective is teaching students how to take notes and use them properly. It is silly to admit, but I would teach my AVID students all of the phases of taking focused notes, yet never realized I should do the same for my math students. Aren't best practices best for all students?

I finally had my V8 moment (remember those commercials?) and started using strategies to help my math students really build on their learning and see their notes as a resource. Here are a few of the strategies I am trying in my classroom:

1. Students do not copy anything from me. I give them a general outline, but have them write down what they think would be best for their future selves. To help them reflect on quality, I show student examples when I see strong and weak notes, and we give feedback to help improve them. I do this in real time with real notes from my students (I cover names so it can remain anonymous).
2. Top 5: Once students take notes over the course of a few days, I give them a few minutes to browse the notes and make a list of five ideas or key words that they think are relevant in the notes.
3. Question Writing: Since I am an AVID teacher, I use Costa's House to help students understand the different levels of thinking. Depth of Knowledge is another structure people use. I have students look through their notes and write three questions of different levels about the topics. We talk about how these questions can be used to help them strengthen their understanding.

I am still in the infant stages of trying these strategies, but am excited to see if these help students take more ownership of their learning and see their notes as useful.