5 Steps to Capturing and Storing Your Ideas

AN AN ACADEMIC, you need a system to effectively capture and curate your ideas. Such systems are infinitely flexible–part of the fun is playing around with different components until you find a set that fits you. That said, I suspect that the following components are pretty much universal in any such system: OK, here's my system in, of course, 5 parts:

Scribble Scribble Scribble — Hipster PDA — Desktop Inbox — Moleskine Gridded Notebook — MacBook Pro — Home — School — Precise V5 Extra Fine

YOU NEED A MEANS OF CAPTURING AN IDEA ANYWHERE:

Every academic needs an instantaneous recording device. In fact, one way of recognizing yourself as an incurable academic is the near painful nakedness you feel upon discovering out in the real world without anything to write with. *Because you never know when an idea will hit.* Let me reemphasize that. ***You never know when an idea will hit.*** Never. Driving to work. In the middle of the night. Sitting on the john. As a consequence, there are only a handful of scenarios where I can't at a moment's notice reach out scribble on my Hipster PDA–a bunch of 3×5 filecards clipped together–with my Pilot V5 Extra Fine. Sure there are other technologies, like real PDAs or voice recorders, but nothing is faster, simpler, and less costly to replace when it goes through the wash. (Yeah, I know what you're thinking–"whatabout the pen?" So far, the caps my trusty Pilot V5s have stayed on).

YOU NEED CENTRALIZED, TEMPORARY STORAGE:

One insight of GTD (*Getting Things Done, The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, a book by David Allen) is the importance of a physical repository for the paper that enters your life. I throw ripped out magazine pages, bills, journals, essays to be graded, and, of course, scribble-filled index cards, in my inbox. Since I have two desks, one at school and one at home, I have two inboxes. The goal is to process all items in the inbox by the end of the day. The reality is that it may take 'til Friday. But, and this is the important point, I know where my stuff is. Loose papers that need to be processed always pass through the inbox.

YOU NEED AN ARENA FOR RIGHT-BRAIN PLAY:

My Moleskine notebook, a high quality bound notebook, serves two functions. First, it is my upscale Hipster PDA. It goes with me to every seminar, faculty meeting, and waiting room–any place where I will be sitting for more than a 20 minutes. But it also serves as my analogue computer–a place to jot down ideas and connect them with arrows, to draw, to think visually and spatially. Every seminar/meeting/waiting room get's a new page and heading (usually where I am, or a particular problem I'm trying to solve). The sequential nature of my Moleskine entries let's me return to a where I left off and quickly get up to speed. When I'm working on a big project, the Moleskine sits (as it's doing right now) between me and my keyboard so I can go back and forth, analogue and digital, right brain/left brain.

YOU NEED AN ARENA FOR LEFT-BRAIN PLAY:

Thank gawd for intel Macs. I can now run my two PC-based programs, SAS and SigmaPlot, on a machine with an OS built by folks who understand how I work. I use one computer because my work is not CPU intensive–I don't do a lot of simulations, and my graphics are simple and straightforward. Thus I can get by with a decent notebook computer and I don't have the hassle of transferring files back and forth between my notebook and desktop.

YOU NEED LONG-TERM STORAGE:

Storage memory is incredibly cheap, your ideas aren't. A notebook used in two offices allows you to effortlessly keep your backup's in two places against the awful, finite probability that one of those two places will be obliterated (hey, I live in tornado country). I use LaCie backup drives because they look cool (I'm a MacHead), but the quality of backup drives is starting to converge on "pretty good" all around. Add a program like SuperDuper! (yeah, I know… MacHead) that does progressive backups (backing up your entire hard disk once, then only those files that have changed or been added subsequently) and you have as close to a guaranteed, painless system of protecting your data as is possible for about $200.

So that's my system to capture and curate ideas. I'm pretty happy with it. Ultimately the system you use will be driven by your taste, budget, and work habits. But you need a system.

Dr. Mike Kaspari, Director of the Graduate Program in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Oklahoma, Getting Things Done in Academia, February 4, 2007, [http://eebatou.wordpress.com/2007/02/04/5-steps-to-capturing-and-storing-your-ideas/], July 16, 2009

Reading Assignment Strategies that Encourage Deep Learning

Maryellen Weimer

WHEN GIVEN A READING assignment, some students feel they have met their obligation if they have forced their eyes to 'touch' (in appropriate sequence) each word on the pages assigned. How can we entice students to read the material we assign, and how do we help them develop strategies for deep comprehension and retention of the material? Are there subtle ways we can prod them to read and help them develop literary skills—without spending our own precious time explicitly teaching 'reading?' (p. 125-126)

The problem originates in high school or sometimes even before that, when students are encouraged to read for factual information that can then be regurgitated. They develop "surface learning" strategies that do not lend themselves to college-level reading, which requires engagement and analysis.

Generally, these skills are not explicitly taught at any level of education. Sophisticated learners (like faculty) discover them through a trial-and-error process, but most students in college courses today are not developing these reading comprehension skills. The article attributes the problem to a confluence of factors, including the anti-intellectualism that pervades our culture.

The authors are especially critical of quizzes over assigned readings. "They encourage surface learning based on episodic memory—short-term memorization for a day or two—rather than deep learning that is transformative of one's perspective and involves long-term comprehension." (p. 127)

If quizzes aren't the answer, then how do instructors "make reading experiences meaningful so that students will want to learn via the written word and will develop an appreciation for the various strategies good readers utilize"? (p. 127)

The authors have developed an assignment strategy that certainly appears to move students in the right direction. Students complete reading responses for each reading assignment. Actually, there are 29 dates when reading responses are due; students are required to submit 25 of them so that if they have an emergency or a lot of work due in other classes, they can opt not to complete

a reading response. Reading responses may take one of five forms and students are encouraged to try a variety of these options.

• *Connecting to the text—This involves underlining key ideas and making marks and comments in the margins. Students then go back through the reading and write five "big" questions on key concepts in the chapter. They answer two of those questions or write a commentary on why they think these are the core issues in the reading.*
• *Summarizing the readings and visualizing the key ideas—Students make a visual or graphic organizer for content in the reading. (There are several examples in the article's appendices.) They can also make a chart or several lists that organize and categorize ideas.*
• *Reading response journal—Here each portion of the reading assignment is responded to with a question or comment.*
• *Studying as a group—Two or three students can convene as a study group. They discuss the readings, focusing on key concepts. Ideas are recorded and then written up.*
• *Create a song or a rap—Students create a song or rap about the assignment, which they then record and submit.*

The instructors use a simple grading scheme for the assignment. Minimal efforts garner three points, solid summaries and connections are worth four points, and extraordinary responses merit five points. In the beginning, they provide students with feedback designed to help them improve. Subsequently, students get the score only.

Seventy-eight percent of the students reported that they read 75 percent or more of the assignments. Students also saw a definite connection between having done the readings and being able to participate at a higher level in class. Sixty-eight percent indicated that by doing the responses they did learn something about themselves as readers.

The authors note in their conclusion that if faculty want students to read deeply, they must work to develop assignments that encourage students to make sense of what they read. Because students use different methods to gain understanding, it makes sense to give them different options.

REFERENCE: Roberts, J. C., and Roberts, K. A. (2008). Deep reading, cost/benefit, and the construction of meaning: Enhancing reading comprehension and deep learning in sociology courses. Teaching Sociology 36, 125-140.

Excerpted from Still More on Developing Reading Skills, The Teaching Professor, Aug.-Sept. 2008.

Too Busy to Be Kind?

I WAS TEACHING Better Business Writing the other day, and we were talking about communication style differences. An attendee told me something like this about her boss:

"My boss never says please, thank you, hello, or anything nice in email. He just tells me to do things. For instance, he'll send an email that says 'Don't forget to include these figures in the proposal' or 'Be sure this goes out in today's mail.'"

When I asked her whether she thought it was simply a style difference between them, she said, "Maybe, but it's very rude."

Could you be that rude boss? If so, take a few seconds to spread a little kindness. I timed myself typing the words below. Notice how little time it takes to communicate kindness and consideration.

Please. (2 seconds)
Would you please (3 seconds)
Thanks. (2 seconds)
Thank you! (3 seconds)
Good morning. (3 seconds)
Hello. (2 seconds)
I appreciate it. (4 seconds)
I hope you had a great weekend. (5 seconds)
Enjoy your lunch. (5 seconds)

Isn't it worth it to invest a few seconds to raise an employee's morale? If you are reading this blog, I bet you enthusiastically agree. But if the boorish boss is part of your team, why not share this post? Maybe he will even thank you. Good luck!