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Why take notes?

It seems that fewer and fewer students are taking notes in favour of just 'listening and experiencing', or alternatively snapping a photo of the whiteboard or projector display. Whilst both of these are effective tools for learning, if they are not used as part of a suite of tools, they do have some shortfalls.

We've gone over active listening (PDF, 445 kB) and how to make it a part of your repertoire of skills to help you get the most out of the classes you attend. But we have to acknowledge the next logical step of active listening, which is note-taking or note-making. Let's explore some of the reasoning behind note-taking and its importance.

The nature of a lecture or tutorial

A lot of lectures are now being recorded for your convenience to view when you want. However, there are quite a few that are still not recorded. Also, other teaching delivery methods such as tutorials, practicals, and online discussions often are not recorded. These generally only happen once, that's it, and you don't get that time back. If you don't take notes in these classes, you're relying on your memory to have captured all the crucial content. Unless you have a photographic memory or some variation, your memory of the event won't be enough.

Also, you may find that quite often the recorded content doesn't show the lecturer or tutor. You are therefore missing many visual cues that are crucial to the understanding of what is being said.

How your memory works

Understanding your memory and how you store information is important to understanding why notes are important.

Think back to the last time you had a really awesome breakfast, the kind that you wish you had time to indulge in every day. What made it so memorable? Why can you remember that specific breakfast over the countless others? That is your memory at work making 'notes' to aid in recalling a notable (excuse the pun) moment.

Your brain has registered a number of different elements that stood out from the normal everyday toast or cereal and linked them together at that moment in time. For example, you would likely have experienced the following:

Table 1. Examples of cognitive and sensory experiences in memory.

Experience	What's happening
Repetition	Maybe it's your favourite all-time breakfast and you ordered it because you always do. There is an existing memory lurking.
Focus	Perhaps you've been thinking about this breakfast for the past month, just waiting to order it, building anticipation.
Sight	The ultimate bountiful breakfast visually stimulates your brain and confirms your previous assumptions.
Hearing	Maybe it was a café vibe or the sound of bacon sizzling. Hearing a distinctly different sound to what is normally heard at breakfast makes it memorable.
Smell	Aroma has a significant impact on our memory. It can cause you to recall events long forgotten just by a simple scent.
Touch	Maybe it's a specific type of bread or a gooey egg. The texture is unique, or maybe it's just that texture linked to the other senses.
Taste	Of course, taste! Suddenly all of the above has culminated in this point in time.
Reflection	You're licking your fingers and lips and reflecting on how awesome that was or even how awesome it was again and sharing that experience with others. You are solidifying the experience now.
Connections	Lastly, your brain has been building connections between all these points to take all those sensory experiences as well as cognitive functions to store this breakfast as a distinct memory.

What you are ultimately doing is shifting this memory into long term storage or 'long-term memory'. You need to try and do this for the information being presented to you in class. Without some of these sensory triggers and other helpful cognitive functions that we have in our breakfast example, you need notes to fill in the gap and help to create those long-term memories.

So to put this in simple terms, you need to find a note-taking method that ticks the right boxes, and that facilitates you shifting from sensory and short-term memory into long-term memory. Your long term memory is then sorted by the following types:

Episodic	Past events and experiences that you've had, e.g. that ambience when you experienced the world's best breakfast.
Semantic	Specific dates or facts, e.g. the date you first had that awesome breakfast.
Procedural	Set of steps in routine actions or thoughts that your body takes, e.g. the specific order in which you eat the awesome breakfast items.

Figure 1 below gives a basic overview of your memory pathways. You need to be storing information from lectures, via note-taking, into Episodic, Semantic, and Procedural memory.

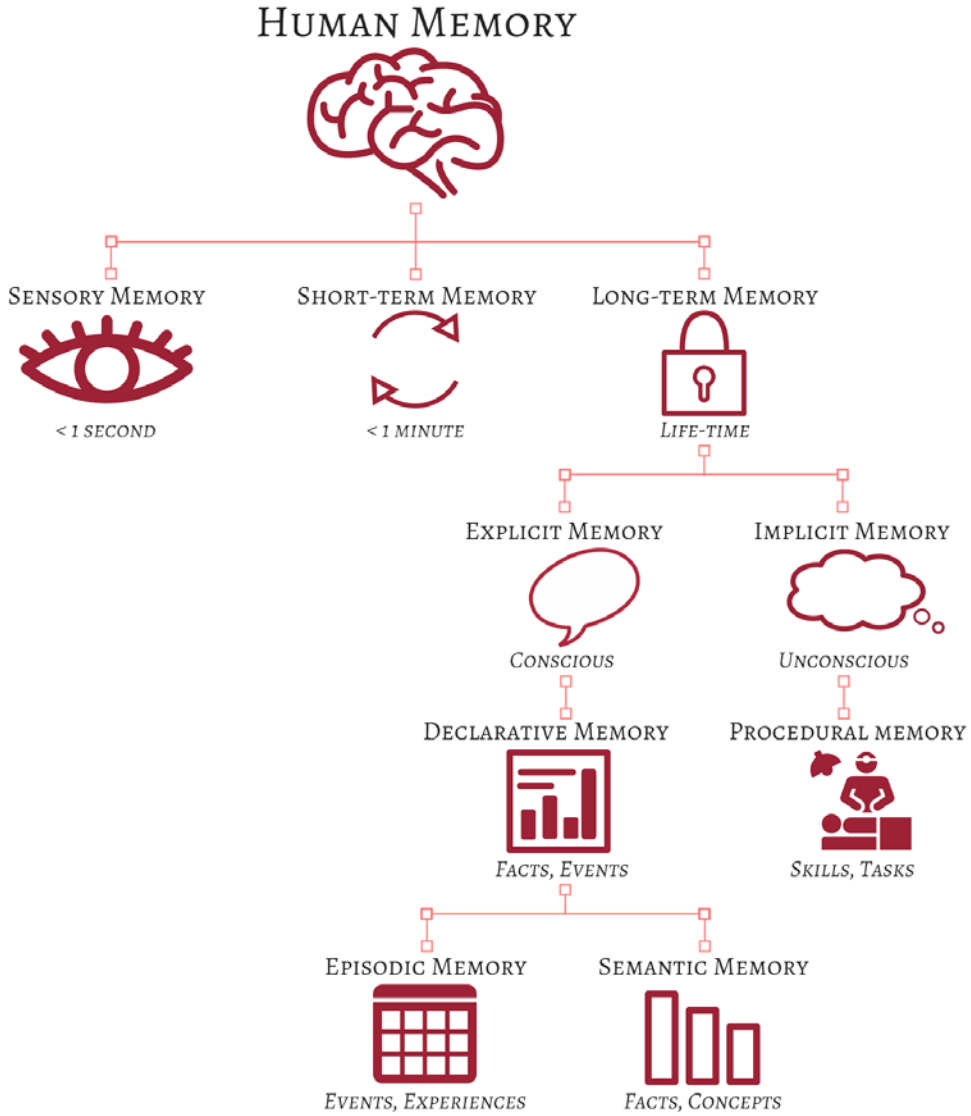

Figure 1. Basic Structure of Human Memory.
Adapted from *Types of Memory* by Mastin (2010). Copyright 2010 by L. Mastin.

Hopefully you now have a good grasp or have at least scratched the surface as to how your memory works and subsequently why taking notes is important to retain knowledge. Check out Approaches to learning (PDF, 50 kB) to find a strategy that works for you.

References

Mastin, L. (2010). Types of memory. Retrieved from http://www.human-memory.net/types.html