

Is Note-Sharing In Class Unethical?

Crichton Rockwell, age 14

The Harker School, Los Gatos California, USA

Note-sharing has become integral to the middle school experience. These notes cover information from textbook summaries to insights from class discussions and are shared among friends and classmates, especially when preparing for tests and examinations. The practice of sharing notes is facilitated by the advent of digital platforms, such as Google Drive and messaging apps. This has revolutionized the exchange of information, making note-sharing easier and more prevalent for students to collaborate and support each other's learning. While this collaborative practice can foster community and potentially enhance collective understanding and academic performance, it also raises a critical question: Does note-sharing promote meritocracy—a system where success is based on ability and effort—or does it undermine educational goals and individual responsibility for learning, leading to academic dishonesty?

On the positive side, sharing study notes can be a valuable tool for students, promoting collaboration and enhancing learning outcomes, leveling the playing field, and providing equal opportunity to cultivate merit and achieve academic potential. This approach allows peers to help each other understand complex topics, ensuring everyone can access the same information. It can be particularly advantageous for those struggling with certain subjects or having less time to study due to other responsibilities and commitments. The note-sharing practice encourages a sense of community and teamwork and can reflect real-world scenarios where collaboration is often crucial to success. Indeed, according to Harold Orndorff, students who participate in collaborative note-taking receive, on average, a full letter grade higher than those who only use their own notes (Orndorff, 2015). Additionally, it can foster better study habits and deeper learning, as students can compare notes while learning from each other and fill in the gaps in their own understanding, leading to a more comprehensive grasp of the material.

Unfortunately, while note-sharing can be a valuable tool for collaboration and learning, it raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding academic integrity. It can foster a dependency on others' work, preventing students from developing their own study skills and critical thinking abilities. Perhaps this is why some teachers prohibit such practice and encourage students to create their own study guide, considering there is a risk that sharing might lead to plagiarism, where students submit work that is not entirely their own, undermining educational goals and individual effort. Inadvertently, it can also exacerbate inequalities, as students with access to better resources or more thorough notes gain an unfair advantage over peers who don't belong to groups where note-sharing exists. Such practices can dilute the meritocratic principles of education, where grades and achievements are meant to reflect personal effort and understanding.

Discussion Questions

1. What distinguishes ethical collaboration from unethical behavior in the context of note-sharing in class?
2. How might sharing notes impact the potential long-term effects on students' academic and personal development?
3. How can schools, educators, and parents collaborate effectively to foster a learning environment that prioritizes both cooperative teamwork and the development of independent, ethical learners?