Crib Sheets Help Students Prioritize and Organize Course Content

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD in Teaching Professor Blog

Most faculty are familiar with the strategy: students are allowed to bring into the exam a card or sheet of paper that they’ve prepared beforehand and that contains information they think might help them answer exam questions. I became convinced of the strategy’s value when my husband was an undergraduate. He and his engineering study buddies convened at our place the night before an exam to decide what they should put on the 4 x 6 note card they were allowed to take into a mechanical engineering course. They spent hours in heated discussion. They thought they were just figuring out what went on the card, but in fact they were sorting out, prioritizing, organizing, and integrating the content of the course. Their discussion accomplished that way more effectively than any review session I had conducted. Of course, being engineers, they decided on what they needed and then reduced the size so that when they got it on the card they needed a magnifying glass to read it.

Just recently it came to me that preparing one of these crib sheets might be an excellent activity for an in-class review session. If students attend the review session, they get to work with other students and prepare a crib sheet which they submit at the end of the session and will be returned attached to their exam. I think this would get most students attending the session and actually doing some substantive reviewing during it. If the activity started with a time of discussion (probably in a small groups) over what to put on the card, then the session could end with the blank cards being passed out and students having 15 minutes to make their individual cards.

I’ve talked with some faculty who call these cards “cheat sheets” and won’t let students use them under any circumstances. One told me, “Anything that’s on that sheet is something the student doesn’t have to learn.” I suppose it depends on the course and kind of exam, but in general, exam situations are pretty artificial. How often in your professional life do you have a limited time window and no access to resources or expertise? There are occasions, I know, but they aren’t all that frequent. And it seems to me that in this age of technology, we need to be purposefully teaching students how to access, organize, and apply information.

What students learn when creating their crib sheets

Students respond positively to the crib sheet strategy. They don’t talk about how preparing the sheet helps them prioritize and organize content. They see the cards as stress relievers. I remember one telling me, “I go into the exam with my card and I have at least three or four important things that I know I’m not going to forget.”

Another faculty member told me that he has students attach their crib sheets to the exam when they turn it in. He frequently finds on the cards information students needed to answer a question but they didn’t or couldn’t apply it to a particular problem. This situation makes a great discussion topic for the exam debrief session. After showing some examples, it’s pretty easy to make the point that a student can memorize material, or in this case have it right there, but if he doesn’t know how to use it, the information is pretty much worthless.

I’ve also heard of faculty grading the crib sheets, although I’ve never seen examples of the criteria used to assess them. I think it might be more beneficial to have students assessing the value and usefulness of the information they decided to put on their crib sheet. They could discuss or write responses to prompts like these:

- How many questions on the exam did your crib sheet help you answer?
- Did you have information on the crib sheet that you didn’t use at all?
- How did you decide what to put on your crib sheet?
- If you had the opportunity to revise your crib sheet, what changes would you make?
- What have you learned from preparing this crib sheet that you want to remember when you make the next one?

If you have experience using this strategy or opinions about the use of cribs sheets in general, please share in the comment section below.

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