



☰ Menu

Search Articles...

[Home](#) [About us](#) [Advertise](#) [Author Guidelines](#) [Resources](#) [Worksheets](#) [Archives](#) [Category](#) ▾ [Subscribe](#) [Contact Us](#)

The evaporation of ideas

Alex M Thomas

Much of my working time is spent distilling ideas from economics texts of various kinds – classics, books and articles on the classics, government documents, financial reports, newspapers, textbooks, and books written by economists for the non-specialist. The process of distilling takes many forms. It often begins with pencil notes on the margins of books and ends with copy-pasting extracts from electronic texts or manually typing out the extracts onto a word document safely stored in the cloud. I make extensive notes because I fear that parts of the idea might evaporate and can never *ever* be retrieved. These notes then require to be condensed into an argument or a thesis. However pregnant the notes might be with ideas, it is only on the completion of the first draft that the idea is born.

In my classes, I repeatedly emphasize the importance of taking down notes during the lecture and the subsequent revision of class notes while reading the required material after class. I know of an undergraduate student who even notes down verbatim the jokes we tell in class. The following are rare but examples nevertheless of the importance of taking down notes. Today, our understanding of Adam Smith's views on jurisprudence and politics is richer because a student took down notes in Smith's lecture, which was posthumously published as *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms* (Clarendon Press). Likewise, we are able to understand Keynes's transition to *The General Theory* better because of *Keynes's Lectures, 1932-35: Notes of a Representative Student* (Palgrave), a synthesis of lecture notes taken down by his students in the 1930s.

Over the course of my studies, I have known several friends who read texts diligently but forgot to make notes. When it came to writing the final essay, dissertation, and thesis, recollection proved unsuccessful. Also, writing in haste tends to leave sources unacknowledged.

That ideas can evaporate is something all of us know. The only way to contain them is to articulate them in writing (or voice recordings). In my advanced writing class, several students shared stories of how they had thought about several ideas but lost them because they were not noted down. This being a course on writing, for the academic essay, the students had to produce two drafts and one presentation before the final draft.

Ideas do not take shape in a vacuum. The value of comment and criticism by peers cannot be emphasized enough in the sphere of knowledge production. An attempt to inculcate this in students was made by making each student provide structured feedback on another student's essay. The essays and end-of-semester feedback suggest that students have learnt the importance of organizing their reading and writing, acknowledging sources, providing useful feedback, and engaging with criticisms.

In short, I am motivated to read, write, and teach because I am scared that ideas – to better our society – might evaporate.

The author teaches undergraduate students at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. He can be reached at alex.thomas@apu.edu.in.

📅 [November 2017, Teaching Practice](#)

Leave a Reply

Logged in as 21-07-20-012701. [Log out?](#)

Comment

Post Comment

Archives

- » ▼ 2020 (114)
 - » June (32)
 - » April (20)
 - » March (20)
 - » February (19)
 - » January (23)
- » ► 2019 (251)
- » ► 2018 (237)
- » ▼ 2017 (246)
 - » December (21)
 - » November (22)
 - » October (18)
 - » September (30)
 - » August (20)
 - » July (17)
 - » June (35)
 - » April (20)
 - » March (20)
 - » February (21)
 - » January (22)
- » ▼ 2016 (245)
 - » December (19)
 - » November (19)
 - » October (25)
 - » September (21)
 - » August (23)
 - » July (18)
 - » June (37)
 - » April (21)
 - » March (20)
 - » February (19)
 - » January (23)
- » ► 2015 (253)
- » ► 2014 (243)
- » ► 2013 (276)
- » ► 2012 (232)
- » ► 2011 (239)
- » ► 2010 (475)
- » ► 2009 (156)

