Teaching with commonplace books and the Lockean Index

This project continues my interest in handwriting and its importance for idea development, integration of thoughts, concentration, and memory. My earlier project on Moravian writing practices already pointed to the significance and even therapeutic value of handwriting as a regular habit. My interest in this intellectual technology stems from the experience of extensive note taking that has allowed me to internalize my learning in my field, the history of political ideas. I continue to take pages of notes at almost any academic and political event I attend. In my home office, handwritten texts (and sometimes handmade books) have replaced the mass-produced texts that are bought, sold, and disposed of. In keeping with Marx’s theory of alienation and a Waldorf approach to education, I continue to explore how mind, body and soul can be kept together and nourished through intellectual creativity and embodied, material practices. As such, I see handwriting as an intervention in a society of information consumption. The student creates a book of her own; she is not merely the consumer of the thoughts of others or the mass-produced books of others. She is a thinker and writer in dialogue with other thinkers and writers.

The commonplace book project originates in my participation in the American Political Science Association’s annual Teaching and Learning Conference. This February, I participated in the two-day Teaching Theory and Theories track. It was here that I came across the research on commonplace books by Benjamin Mitchell of West Point. His conference presentation and paper entitled “Revisiting the Commonplace Book Model: Thoughts on How and Why to Integrate a Reflective Pedagogy” were key to my efforts this summer to prepare a commonplace pedagogy for all three of my fall courses. Mitchell’s work was the starting point for my reading and syllabus design this summer. The introduction of a commonplace book pedagogy not only offers the cultivation of an intellectual habit but also requires a restructuring of the course calendar, and the weight of traditional evaluation elements. To prepare the semester as carefully as possible, I worked with a student research assistant, Sakura Bolte, to experiment with instructions for entries, to create sample entries, and to create a clear and workable semester calendar that would integrate commonplace book instruction, entry writing, and evaluation. We also explored suitable journals and writing implements.
A standard journal entry is composed after reading a text and in preparation for
class. The required elements of such an entry:

1) Date formatted according to instructions
2) A correct bibliographic entry for a new text/full author name and full title
underlined for a continued text
3) Biographic information on the author, including places and years of life and
death
4) Historical context: two relevant events must be named
5) Thesis statement for the article or chapter(s) assigned that day
6) Three passages selected from the reading accompanied by questions and
comments for discussion
7) One-page reflection

Better reflections are raw and integrate personal thoughts and experiences with the
thoughts of the text. My favorite commonplace book of the past semester uses the
experience of playing softball and being on a team to explain almost everything we
studied between Plato and NATO. This student was struggling, but she found a way
over time to connect with the texts by going back to her book and taking the time to
make the connection in writing. A minimal reflection consists of eight sentences.
Summaries are discouraged. Writing entries late is discouraged as it compromises
the student’s encounter with the text in favor of my thoughts or the thoughts of
others in class. There is no limit on reflection length. Students who get into the
practice often write two pages. Average commonplace books were fifty pages long,
more developed ones were are long as 126 pages.

Evaluation of entries deemphasizes grades during the semester. My goal is to check
in on the completion of a regular thought process. My interest is in the habit. My
hope is that students start to own the theories they study by deepening and
recording thoughts on a regular basis in their commonplace books. I assign a check,
check plus, or check minus depending on the complete and correct status of the
entry and the quality of the reflection. Significantly incomplete or missing entries
receive no credit. At the end of the semester, I calculate a final grade based on a list
of entry evaluations and assign an overall grade for the book. As creating regular
entries is constant and time-intensive work, I assign 25% of the total grade to this
work. This means that writing is a constant during the semester. This distribution
of the final grade also makes my assumptions about what constitutes proper
preparation for a political theory class explicit and rewards that work.

The second core text for this project is John Locke’s A New Method of Making
Commonplace Books (1685). While the central instructions for commonplace book
entries were included in the syllabus distributed on the first day of class, the
instructions for the commonplace book were shared later in the semester. Once
students can look back on a number of entries, they can reflect on meaningful
themes. The indexing exercise encourages review and integration of entries.
Identifying themes means that students impose their own form on the learning of
the semester.
I found it necessary to introduce the commonplace book project slowly, especially in my two introductory political theory courses:

1) First meeting: Syllabus discussion with commonplace book instructions briefly indicated
2) Second meeting: Discussion of commonplace book instructions
3) Third meeting: regular reading and discussion without a commonplace book entry, labeling of commonplace books, setting a reward for a lost book
4) Fourth meeting: continued reading discussed on the basis of the first commonplace book entry, brief discussion of how much time it took to compose the entry and any difficulties with instructions
5) Fifth meeting: discussion of a new text on the basis of commonplace book entries
6) Seventh meeting: collect commonplace books in order to give feedback on first two entries. Feedback is brief and non-invasive. Checks and maybe a final comment.
7) Eighth meeting: return books
8) Then a period of four to six entries and regular class meetings
9) Return books and ask students to number pages up to current entry
10) After the middle of the semester: explain the index, purpose and process
11) Occasionally check and evaluate entries.
12) Throughout the semester, encourage student participation based on various elements of each entry. Text passages for discussion? Questions? Surprise connections in the reflection?
13) At the end of the semester, I completed evaluation of all entries and wrote a personal reply to each student about themes, improvement, and insights gained in the process.
14) Last day of class: return books and assess the experience with opportunities to rewrite the original instructions

Student responses were overwhelmingly positive to keeping a commonplace book. Students continuing on in political theory will be able to keep working in the same journal and to expand the index. All of my spring courses will include the use of commonplace books. I have collected student comments on using a commonplace book and hope to evaluate these for a publication on teaching political theory with commonplace books. I will continue to read about commonplace books, to look for pedagogical research on them, and to evaluate my own experiences with students.

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Khristina