

Coda

## MANAGING THE COMMONPLACE BOOK ASSIGNMENT

### PUTTING THIS VOLUME TO PRACTICE

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MANY OF THE contributors to this volume first began discussing how to use commonplace books in the classroom at the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan. In a roundtable format, we shared a variety of strategies for using commonplace books as a pedagogical tool, primarily in the British Literature 1 survey classroom. In the course of that discussion, one of our panel participants commented that pedagogical scholarship sometimes has a tendency to present a given strategy or classroom technique as a panacea. We read pedagogical scholarship hoping for the approach to teaching, the assignment idea, the insight that will jazz up our classroom, engage our students, improve retention, and make our lives as teachers easier with lightning-fast assessment. Many scholars of pedagogy write with an enviable optimism about how their ideas will accomplish all of these things.<sup>1</sup> Of course, no teaching strategy is perfect. There are a number of issues that may leave readers hesitant to integrate commonplace books into their teaching. In this coda to the volume, I hope to address some of the inherent challenges of using commonplace books that tend to surface when using this assignment. I will synthesize and

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<sup>1</sup> That said, there are important exceptions to this tendency. See Phillip Dawson and Samantha L. Dawson, "Sharing Successes and Hiding Failures: 'Reporting Bias' in Learning and Teaching Research," *Studies in Higher Education* 43 (2018): 1405–16; Gwen Shaw, "Bending So As Not to Break: Pedagogical Flexibility as an Asset," *Visible Pedagogy*, February 24, 2017, <https://vp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2017/02/24/bending-so-as-not-to-break-pedagogical-flexibility-as-an-asset/>; see also the recurring series, "Teaching Fails" in *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, <https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/category/teaching-fails/>.

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propose strategies for dealing with each of these challenges, which range from finding the time for yet another assignment in an already-full course, activating student engagement and, of course, grading.

### **Scaffolding: Fitting the Commonplace Book Assignment into a Packed Syllabus**

When teaching any course, but perhaps especially a survey course, we all lament in unison: it is impossible to fit everything into one semester. Many of us make agonizing decisions each time we update a syllabus, as we try to stuff all of the content our students simply must encounter into a short fourteen- to sixteen-week term.<sup>2</sup> Given the content demands of an early British literature survey course, the idea of adding yet another assignment seems counterintuitive. The contributors to this volume have proposed a number of low-effort/high impact ways to fit commonplacing into the course, all of which integrate the commonplace book into aspects of the course that you may already have developed. These include:

- Schumacher-Schmidt’s idea to use the commonplace book as a reading journal where students can synthesize themes and concepts across course readings by creating their own headings and indexing system.
- Hagstrom-Schmidt’s class activities that allow students to discover thematic connections across readings by using the commonplace book for in-class group work.
- Integrating commonplace books into the discussion and group work portion of a given class. For example, writing in the commonplace book could be the “think” part of a think, pair, share, [square] activity. Students could copy a short poem into their books before beginning a class-wide discussion. During these activities, instructors can circulate and check on what students have written, sketched, or outlined, though it is important to do this with a spirit of curiosity and encouragement rather than as a looming policing figure.

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**2** John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993) is a foundational work on this issue. See also Wendell V. Harris, “Canonicity,” *PMLA* 106 (1991): 110–21. My thanks to Jessie Hock and Emily Vasiliasukas for their insights on this topic.

- Eckhardt’s proposal to replace the course textbook with a commonplace book of poetry that students compile from freely available digitized primary sources.
- Silva’s strategy to make commonplacing a part of the research paper assignment as a place for brainstorming and documenting the research process (for both student and instructor).
- Schumacher-Schmidt’s suggestion to develop test questions based on what students have been writing in their commonplace books.
- Cumulative final exam presentations of the student’s commonplace book, as Schumacher-Schmidt outlines.

## Grading

When introducing any new assignment, instructors must consider the logistics of assessment. Though no single chapter of this volume focuses exclusively on assessment, many contributors suggest ways to make the commonplace book assignment less onerous for the instructor to grade and more beneficial to the student’s learning process, as opposed to a last-minute project.

I work at a small, liberal arts institution in northeast Florida, and my contract requires me to teach four classes per semester. Each of those sections typically has 19–22 students. Even if only two of those sections are completing commonplace books, the assessment can sometimes feel overwhelming. Commonplace books, as this volume demonstrates, are major projects. Most of them reach into scores of pages and thousands of words. If your students choose to use analogue media, as most of my students do, you can find yourself lugging what feels like hundreds of pounds of antique-looking leather journals around, sacrificing your spine to the gods of good pedagogy. Here are some ideas from the volume and from my own experience that can make assessment more manageable:

Ask students to trade their commonplace books and give each other feedback at several points during the semester, either in class or as a take-home assignment. In addition to mimicking early commonplace book practices, this gives students an opportunity to see what their classmates are doing and get peer feedback. (See Corrigan for a peer-assessment assignment; see also Schumacher-Schmidt, Eckhardt, Silva).

Require informal check-ins with students. Silva recommends that these can take place a couple of times during office hours and/or just before or after class.

Make indexing a key part of the assignment. This is another practice that draws on early commonplacing, and it allows students to practice organization and retrieval. I also like to pitch indexing as a way for them to find what they have written and learn good note taking habits in other contexts, but this also helps with assessment. If you develop a rubric with a certain number of required entries (e.g. some instructors may want students to copy so many lines of poetry or to write so many words per week in reflective essays), a well-indexed book allows you to find exactly what you need to grade more quickly, especially since some students enjoy commonplacing so much that they will develop pages and pages of reading notes.

Use colour-coded post-its to leave commentary. For example, yellow could signal a “needs improvement” and include a quick comment about what to expand, while blue might signal “great work!” I first came up with the idea to use post-its because I felt extremely hesitant to write in my students’ books when many of them were so exquisitely artistic. For example, I asked students to draw a picture of Penshurst based on Ben Jonson’s country house poem, and one student’s drawing was so beautiful that I wanted to ask if I could have it framed. Post-it commentary allows me to give students feedback on their work and signal that I had taken the time to engage with it while leaving the commonplace book itself in the hand of the student. That said, I know that many contributors to this volume invite cross annotation, and we know that the history of commonplacing itself was rarely single-authored. In terms of instructor feedback, though, I found this method to be minimally intrusive, foregrounding the voice of the student, but also efficient for the grader.

Use a holistic rubric. The rubric I developed adopts a typical grid model moving from “excellent” to “needs improvement.” For my commonplace book assignment, which serves more as a reading journal and study tool than as a replacement for exams and papers as some use it, I outline criteria to assess the index, quotations, creativity, and required written assignments (see the rubric in Appendix below).

To save your back, you might consider requiring students to turn in pdf scans of their books for periodic assessment as Eckhardt’s essay recommends.

To avoid having to carry commonplace books home for grading, I allow a flexible due date. In a Tuesday/Thursday class, students can decide to turn them in either day, or to leave them on my office door at another time dur-

ing the week. This allows me to space out the grading, which I do entirely on campus, and students respond well to a little self-direction in choosing their due date.

Pasupathi points out that integrating commonplace books into the research paper process has made her student's writing more varied in terms of both topics and choice of passages as argumentative evidence, which in turn makes grading the research papers more interesting for the instructor. I have also found this to be the case.

## Learning Outcomes and Student Engagement

Each of the chapters in this volume emphasizes the fact that students tend to embrace the commonplace book assignment. Though students are sometimes resistant to unconventional assignments with new assessment criteria, nearly all of my students have tended to cite the commonplace book as their favourite part of the class. In addition to teaching them about early notetaking practices, they learn to synthesize the course material while feeling empowered to make it their own. Commonplacing also signals to the students that I encourage creative thinking, and since integrating it into the assignments, students have tended to feel empowered to select more creative research topics for the final research paper assignment.<sup>3</sup>

Commonplace books have been used to good effect in writing classrooms to help students develop their own style, to help them learn to develop multiple perspectives, and to help students synthesize the fragmented way that they encounter information in the modern world.<sup>4</sup>

These outcomes can be transferable to the literature survey course as well, since that course typically builds on the writing sequence at most universities. For example, Gaillet argues that commonplacing is one way to encourage students to think about style, which offers a useful way to tackle the stylistic differences between medieval and early modern writing and contemporary prose. In asking students to pull one quotation per reading (i.e. two per week in a class that meets two days a week), copy it out and

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**3** See the chapter by Pasupathi in this volume.

**4** See Lynee Lewis Gaillet, "Commonplace Books and the Teaching of Style," *Journal of Teaching Writing* 15 (1996): 285–94; Paula M. Carbone, "Using Commonplace Books to Help Students Develop Multiple Perspectives," *English Journal* 99 (2010): 63–69; and Anna Maria Johnson and Nusrat Jahan, "Assessing the Impact on Critical Reading and Critical Thinking: Using Commonplace Books and Social Reading Practices in a First-Year Writing Classroom," *Pedagogy* 21 (2021): 277–94.

write about it, their first instinct will always be to focus on content. That is an important part of the assignment and also central to the original uses of commonplace books, which organized quotations based on theme. Yet this focus on quotation coupled with reflection also encourages close reading skills. As Gaillet shows, it can even give students a place to think about what kind of writing style appeals to them and reflect on their own development as writers. Such writing assignments, paced evenly throughout the semester, can refocus students away from a “timed product-centred” approach to writing.<sup>5</sup> I integrate this element of personal style and the development of individual voice into the holistic rubric as a separate line item to indicate to students that this is one of the assignment’s goals, but also to show them that I encourage their creative development in the course.

As Carbone as well as Johnson and Jahan show, commonplacing also helps students to develop basic skills in critical thinking, such as encountering and considering multiple perspectives and evaluating multiple information sources.<sup>6</sup> At my institution, the British Literature survey is a course that can also count toward general education requirements for non-English majors, so I often have a student population that ranges from highly motivated English majors to students who feel less comfortable with literature and are only taking the class to fulfill a basic requirement toward graduation. The commonplace book allows that diverse group to meet the requirements within the purview of their current skill sets while also encouraging critical thinking, a key learning outcome for general education courses in the humanities.

Several contributors to this volume address the challenge of encouraging consistent student engagement with the commonplace book assignment.<sup>7</sup> Commonplace book assignments need to be developed in a way that avoids students’ tendency to engage thoroughly at the beginning of the course and then lose enthusiasm as the demands of the semester increase. I have two strategies for encouraging student engagement with the commonplace book assignment throughout the semester. The first relates to assessment. The commonplace book assignment in my current courses is worth a significant 20 percent of the student’s grade, but I collect it four times throughout the semester. The first collection takes place only two weeks into class, so that I can identify students who are not engaging with the assignment and work

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**5** Gaillet, “Commonplace Books,” 293.

**6** Carbone, “Using Commonplace Books”; Johnson and Jahan, “Assessing the Impact.”

**7** See the chapters by Eckhardt, Pasupathi, Hagstrom-Schmidt, Corrigan, and Schumacher-Schmidt in this volume.

with them to improve from the start. Four collection points also render each assessment worth 5 percent, rather than giving students a grade worth 20 percent at the end of the semester (as is traditionally done with, for example, the final exam or the research paper). Breaking the assessment down and giving students early feedback is key to setting expectations for the assignment and maintaining student engagement with their commonplace books throughout the term.<sup>8</sup>

Another strategy I used that worked to increase student engagement in my class was a class-wide competition. This competition for the best commonplace book helped to improve engagement from students who might otherwise procrastinate on the assignment.<sup>9</sup> For readers of this volume who may be hesitant to embrace the commonplace book as a central part of the class (and worth a majority of the grade) but still want to give the assignment a try, I recommend the competition as a way to encourage stu-

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**8** I also integrate the commonplace book into classroom activities, such as in-class commonplace book exchanges and response poems, similar to those used by other contributors to this volume. For concrete examples of such in-class assignments see the chapters by Hagstrom-Schmidt, Eckhardt, Corrigan, and Schumacher-Schmidt in this volume.

**9** Some instructors may be uncomfortable with the phrase “competition” and may prefer to describe the assignment as a “class-wide challenge.” Competition will create a negative pedagogical environment if it allows any public shaming. To avoid this, I do not rank the commonplace books or announce finalists. I simply build up the prize and announce it to applause at the end of the term. Because students are able to work at their own pace, this kind of competition avoids pitting students against each other or ranking them in any way. On the potential pedagogical benefits of competition see Rebecca Brown, “Promoting Cooperation and Respect: ‘Bad’ Poetry Slam in the Nontraditional Classroom,” *Pedagogy* 11 (2011): 571–77; Michael Pennell, “The H1n1 Virus and Video Production: New Media Composing in First Year Composition,” *Pedagogy* 10 (2010): 568–73; and Steve Nebel, Sascha Schneider, and Günter Daniel Rey, “From Duels to Classroom Competition: Social Competition and Learning in Educational Videogames within Different Group Sizes,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 55, part A (February 2016): 384–98. Paige D. Ware, “Confidence and Competition Online: ESL Student Perspectives on Web-Based Discussions in the Classroom,” *Computers and Composition* 21 (2004): 451–68, suggests that mediating assignments through online discussion boards (rather than face-to-face peer review) can give ESL students more confidence, and classroom activities that involve exchanging the commonplace book might serve as another such mediating tool; on the benefits of competition in the classroom, see also Nora Corrigan’s chapter in this volume. For a negative model, see Elizabeth A. Canning, Jennifer LaCosse, Kathryn M. Kroeper, and Mary C. Murphy, “Feeling Like an Imposter: The Effect of Perceived Classroom Competition on the Daily Psychological Experiences of First-Generation College Students,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 14 (2020): 647–57, though the latter is specifically about a broader sense of competition in STEM fields rather than a specific classroom assignment.

dent participation without making the commonplace book as central of an assignment as some chapters have recommended (though our hope is that many of our readers will go on to integrate the commonplace book assignment more thoroughly into their classes).

The first time that I introduced commonplacing into a syllabus, I was reluctant to allow it to displace other central assignments in a trial run, but I wanted to provide an incentive to my students that would replace the typical threat of a bad grade on a large assignment. I told the students on the first day of class that the best commonplace book would win a gift card to Chamblin's, a local used bookstore that is legendarily massive and highly popular among my students. Throughout the course of the semester, I would remind them of this prize, and most students got into the spirit of the competition. To be sure, I still received some less-than-stellar last-minute submissions, but most of my students got excited about the prospect of a reward beyond the promise of a good grade for a relatively small assignment. By the end of the semester, I had a handful of commonplace books that I felt were stellar, and I asked two colleagues to serve as outside judges to help me with the final decision. Awarding the gift certificate on the last day of class was a fun way to end the semester as well.

Unfortunately, the gift certificate idea became problematic when administration gave everyone a firm reminder of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) rules about giving college athletes gifts. To provide context for readers who may not work at schools with large athletics programs, the NCAA sets out guidelines regarding student athletes that have an impact in the classroom regarding everything from attendance policies, to academic misconduct, to rewards systems. At my institution, student athletes make up 16.5 percent of the total student population.<sup>10</sup> College athletics is a multi-million dollar industry in the United States, and the NCAA has strict rules regarding "impermissible benefits" to discourage underhanded bribes in student-athlete recruitment.<sup>11</sup> Though the policy was designed to

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**10** At time of publication, there are 444 student-athletes out of 2,686 undergraduate students.

**11** On NCAA profits, see "NCAA earns \$1.15 billion in 2021 as revenue returns to normal," ESPN, February 2, 2022, [www.espn.com/college-sports/story/\\_/id/33201991/ncaa-earns-115-billion-2021-revenue-returns-normal](http://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/_/id/33201991/ncaa-earns-115-billion-2021-revenue-returns-normal). While the recent introduction of the name, image and likeness policy has allowed some student athletes (usually in major sports like football and basketball) to profit from their success, the NCAA policy against impermissible benefits remains in place. On name, image, and likeness, see Michelle Brutlag Hosik, "NCAA Adopts Interim Name, Image and Likeness Policy," NCAA, June 30, 2021, [www.ncaa.org/news/2021/6/30/ncaa-adopts-interim](http://www.ncaa.org/news/2021/6/30/ncaa-adopts-interim)

prevent corruption in big-money sports, like men's football and basketball, the rules apply equally to all college athletes at NCAA schools. For example, if I have a student-athlete from the women's softball team whose textbook did not arrive in time for the course, it is impermissible for me to give her an extra textbook from my personal collection. Similarly, any prize of value could come under scrutiny under the impermissible benefit policy if the winner were to be a student athlete. Though my first commonplace book winner had not been an NCAA athlete, I wanted to ensure that I did not step into that particular quagmire. One solution was to refashion the award as an extra credit award. I offered the winner of the competition a significant extra credit boost to the final grade, a strategy that has proven effective. On the one hand, the winner is sometimes the kind of student that would have earned a good grade without the extra credit boost, but I have also found that the extra credit motivation works well for students who have different learning abilities and skill sets beyond standard academic writing, as well as for those students who might otherwise have been less motivated to engage thoroughly with the assignment. While this model has worked well for my classes, it does have the drawback of emphasizing grading. The spirit of friendly competition and the fact that extra credit points are a reward without any attendant possibility of penalty helped to mitigate those issues. Overall, the competition has proven beneficial to the goal of encouraging consistent student engagement with the commonplace book assignment.

## Conclusion

No assignment is going to enthrall every student and be a breeze to grade. That said, the chapters in this volume offer concrete strategies for using commonplacing to improve student engagement with old texts, encourage active student learning and critical thinking, and offer creative ways to assess student work. Commonplace assignments have the potential to convince our students that their ideas and experiences are valid, which is especially important in a syllabus that prioritizes white, Christian, male, and dominant language (English) texts, as the early British Literature survey tends to do.<sup>12</sup> Yet by engaging in a notetaking practice that is rooted in early British history, students also learn to see beyond only what they can relate to, which

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name-image-and-likeness-policy.aspx. On impermissible benefits, see the NCAA Bylaws, "16: Awards, Benefits, and Expenses for Enrolled Student-Athletes," <https://web3.ncaa.org/lstdbi/search/bylawView?id=6885>.

**12** See the chapter by Silva in this volume.

can lead to boringly repetitive paper topics.<sup>13</sup> Despite the challenges that any new pedagogical approach is sure to present, we hope that the readers of this volume will be inspired to adopt and adapt these ideas for using commonplace books in the medieval and early modern classroom. The commonplace assignment has consistently appeared on my course evaluations as a favourite among my students. I have benefited in turn from the reward of seeing them create truly stellar work. My students have expressed their creativity in lyrical essay-length responses, cartoons inspired by *Beowulf*, drawings of various authors and poetic settings, and truly insightful commentary about the reading, often from students who might not be bold enough to speak up in class. Commonplacing is both pedagogically useful and creative for the students and more interesting to grade for the professor.

## Appendix

### SAMPLE HOLISTIC GRADING RUBRIC

Criteria	5 (excellent)	4 (very good)	3 (satisfactory)	2 (needs work)	1 (unsatisfactory)
Detailed and clear Index					
Quotations: at least one for each class reading and why it stood out to you.					
Reflections: At least one 300-word response per literary work (e.g. <i>Beowulf</i> , <i>Sir Gawain</i> )					
Class Notes: Notes from each class meeting					
Creativity of Language: Unique voice of author					
Creativity of Design: Layout/drawings communicate thought process					
Overall Visual Appeal (Not necessary for a good grade, but a factor in the competition)					

**13** See the chapter by Pasupathi in this volume.