

Reviving the Forgotten Scholarly Discipline of Commonplacing to Enhance Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explains how the forgotten scholarly discipline of commonplacing can be revived and deployed as a technique for enhancing learning and teaching. It presents a case study of a recent third year undergraduate Business School module to demonstrate how reviving the practice of commonplacing can lead to remarkable learner achievements. The paper also provides some advice for teachers and points to opportunities for further development.

Keywords: commonplacing; mind mapping; processual learning; radiant thinking; stakeholder shaking.

Introduction and Background

Durham University students, who enrolled on a third year undergraduate Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability module in 2022-23, were challenged, for their summative assignment, to critically evaluate the contention that corporations can fix the greatest cause of environmental destruction, the global food and agriculture system. Repeated warnings about this escalating systemic crisis (e.g., by Beddington, 2011) “have scarcely ruffled the surface of public consciousness”

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(Monbiot, 2022, p.34) until recent supply-chain disruptions again exposed its precarity. Attempts to address the complex nexus of systemic market, policy and institutional failures, collectively constituting a “justice-failure” (Singer, 2018), through market-based approaches, have led to unchecked industrialised agriculture pushing species to extinction. This is causing ecosystem collapse and is contributing to irreversible climate disaster resulting in vicious spirals rendering food security precarious, threatening the survival of food production systems, and diminishing prospects of achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Shiva, 2022). Industrial-scale mechanisation, economies of scale and monoculture, intensification of production, resource extraction and biofuel displacement, have only exacerbated the crisis, resulting in destruction of habitats, soil infertility, water scarcity, and concentration of power and control over global supply chains, accelerating inequality and unsustainable consumption, malnutrition, hunger, obesity, antibiotic resistance, diseases, and livelihood stresses. According to Taylor (2022), “No one in leadership in government appears to have really grasped the scale and urgency of the challenges posed to our health and our planet by the food system.”

Few of the 170 students enrolled on the module evidenced any significant awareness of the scale and urgency of this existential threat to people and planet, so the assignment necessitated a significant amount of research into the complexity of the topic, requiring integrated systems thinking. This was complemented by relevant reading, seminar case studies, a guest lecture by a director of a radically alternative, regenerative and redistributive, food community interest company (CIC), supplemented by a video documentary by Jeremy Rifkin (2022), and a range of other online resources.

This paper provides an overview of the history of commonplacings and makes the case for reviving it to enhance learning and teaching in higher education. It presents a novel case study, focusing on practical implications for learning and teaching and evidencing impact on learning. It concludes with several preliminary experience-based reflections and recommendations for teachers.

The Scholarly Discipline of Commonplacing

To facilitate compilation of the complex material required for this assignment, we alighted on the idea of reviving the largely forgotten practice of “commonplacing”. Commonplacing is a technique that involves seeking out and storing knowledge for a combinatorial plastic process – an ongoing harvesting and amalgamating of disparate concepts and experiences to form new wholes. Moss (1996) traces its conceptual origins back to Seneca’s (4BC-65AD) knowledge-creation analogy with how bees make honey by collecting nectar, i.e. that “we should mingle all the various nectars we have tasted, and turn them into a single sweet substance, in such a way that, even if it is apparent where it originated, it appears quite different from what it was in its original state” (p.12).

We revived this practice by substituting mind maps in place of the original medium of commonplace books. According to Moss (1996, p.134), commonplace books were the information-organisers of Early Modern Europe, forming one of the most important elements of Renaissance education and its intellectual paradigm. She explains how, from 1531 onwards, the commonplace book was fully integrated into learning and teaching pedagogy throughout Northern Europe.

According to Moss (1996), the order suggested for organizing a commonplace book “presupposes a universe of knowledge and moral activity in which everything is loosely connected by association of ideas, by similarity and difference” (p.122). Erasmus (1466-1536), known as “the father of commonplacing”, emphasised that the order of headings in the commonplace book was to be left to the student’s discretion, around certain themes. According to Moss (1996, p.111), he instructed his pupils in the technique thus:

So, after you have prepared yourself a sufficient number of headings and have arranged them in whatever order of themes you prefer, and have next subdivided them one by one into their appropriate sections and have labelled these sections with short phrases [codes], then, whatever you come across in

any author, particularly if it is especially striking, you will be able to note it down immediately in its appropriate place (*suo loco annotabis*): be it a story or a fable or an example or a strange occurrence or a pithy remark or a witty saying or any other clever form of words or a proverb or a metaphor or a similitude. This will ensure both that what you read will stay fixed more firmly in your mind and that you will learn to make use of the riches you have acquired by reading... Finally, whenever occasion demands, you will have ready to hand a supply of material for spoken or written composition, because you will have a well organised set of pigeonholes, from which you may extract what you want.

John Donne (1572-1631), an inveterate “commonplacer”, utilised commonplacing to pluck ideas out of their context and rearrange them in surprising new ways. Rundell (2022) described his resultant writing as “a kind of alchemy: a mix of unlikely ingredients which spark into gold” (p.39). He delighted in shaking his readers out of their complacency, akin to the current notion of “stakeholder shaking” (Sulkowski et al., 2018). By the 17th century, most European universities were schooling students in commonplacing as an academic practice. At Oxford, John Locke (1632-1704) developed a more rigorous method of commonplacing, with systematic coding and indexing, published posthumously in England as “A New Method of Making Commonplacing Books” in 1706. Locke's commonplace books now comprise one of the largest collections of manuscript in Oxford University's Bodleian Library.

But, according to Moss (1996):

The joyous and extravagant universe of inconstancy which Erasmus had conjured up was displaced by projects of much more solid constructions, in which themes were developed on the basis of progressively and systematically accumulated knowledge... Their practical utility, however, made them still very personal instruments of research and reference (p.129)... Well into the second half of the seventeenth century, commonplace books were deeply entrenched in pedagogical methodology, remaining the paradigm learning tool by which information was assembled and retained (p.219).

Commonplacing was a sense-making tool that dovetails philosophically with an interpretivist epistemology, a precursor of the present-day research method known as “thematic analysis” which involves similar processes of coding and thematising. However, Enlightenment scientific rationality led to specialisation in academic

disciplines orientated towards what is now defined as a positivist epistemology. Consequentially, according to Moss (1996), “the promotion of mathematical reasoning as the only truly valid procedure of proof, together with the belief that the language of nature is the language of mathematics, left little space for commonplace books” (p.274). The practice of commonplacing was increasingly instrumentally reified into a mechanical procedure, dismissed as a complete waste of time and talent by scholars such as René Descartes (1596-1650) who poured scorn on combinatorial logic, eventually leading to its total demise and obscurity. The Enlightenment project unravelled with the realisation that mathematical models cannot explain let alone predict how complex systems evolve in uncertain environments, especially when the effect of actions depends on the ways in which others interpret and respond to them. Kay (2011) contends that “to fit the world into a single model or narrative fails to acknowledge the universality of uncertainty and complexity” (p.176). Kay posits the need for an alternative to the “rational” process of defining objectives, evaluating options, and modelling consequences, and calls for an “oblique approach” (p.177) that is “iterative and experimental, constantly adapting as new information, of many kinds, becomes available” (p.178) to fill the gap. We believe that reviving the scholarly discipline of commonplacing has the potential to fill this gap.

Practical Implementation

We provided our students with a mind mappers’ toolkit, and, for their formative assignments, asked them to create mind maps by commonplacing, emulating Erasmus’ original method, over a period of seven weeks. They then presented and discussed their mind maps in seminars, receiving both peer and seminar leader feedback. Finally, they used their mind maps to constructively align with and inform their summative written assignments. This concurs with the original first principle of commonplacing which, according to Moss (1996), was that “knowledge does not lie in the commonplace collection itself, but in the thorough understanding of topics

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which it ensures, and in the penetration acquired from practice in elaborating on them in written composition which draws on what the student has collected” (p.166).

Development of the mind mapping technique is considered to be a valuable learning outcome for our students. Kotob et al. (2016) emphasise that mind maps are applicable to both business and management (e.g., for planning and delivering projects and facilitating communication between various stakeholders), and education (e.g., for making tasks interesting, improving the ability to concentrate, and enhancing the ability to remember and think creatively).

Theoretical Framework

Our revival of commonplacing is embedded in an overarching, theoretically informed framework, developed by Beech and MacIntosh (2012). Their “processual” learning framework (Fig.1) combines three interrelated and intersecting domains or “zones” of learning: the dialogical (pedagogic) zone, the social (interpersonal) zone, and the personal (reflective) zone.

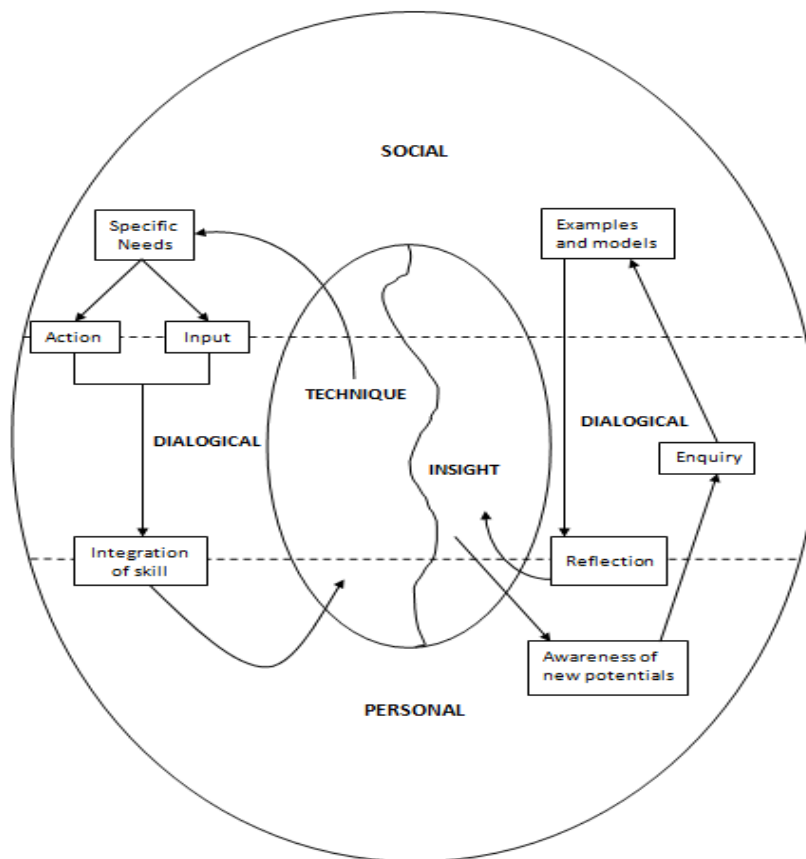


Figure 1: Processual Learning Framework (adapted from Beech & MacIntosh, 2012, p.50)

Our evaluation of how students engaged with the commonplacing approach, based on verbal feedback during the seminar in which they presented and discussed their findings, revealed that it spans all three zones. One student who enthusiastically compiled nine mind maps, plucking ideas from lectures, seminars and private study over seven weeks of research into the subject, reported that she discussed her mind maps with friends and relatives, shared them with peers in class, revised and reflected on them, and delighted in their visual impact and intricate interconnections which she enjoyed sharing and discussing, both in and out of the classroom. She also commented that they “worked a bit like magic eye pictures” in that she felt her brain subconsciously grasped the complex interconnected patterns, enabling her to navigate them surprisingly intuitively and effortlessly. This is a common

phenomenon, due to the way in which mind maps replicate and stimulate “radiant thinking” (Buzan, 2006), the natural function of the human brain.

Our theoretically informed rationale for using mind maps is supported by Tavares et al. (2021) who explain that mind maps disrupt the learning environment’s conventional linear paradigm and make relationships between concepts more understandable and didactic. In the same way as commonplace books, they facilitate integration of empirical and theoretical knowledge, stimulate creative and active learning, enhance recall and connection to previous knowledge, systematically organise information, and encourage critical thinking and the construction of collective knowledge and learning. According to Raworth (2018, p.13) “neuroscience has confirmed the dominant role of visualisation in human cognition”, and she cites visual literacy expert Lynell Burmark’s explanation that “words are processed by our short-term memory....Images, on the other hand, go directly into long-term memory where they are indelibly etched.” Many other scholars have demonstrated how visualising mind maps enhances learning by helping students to organise thoughts, create ideas, focus discussions, solve problems, make decisions, and critically reflect in ways that inculcate depth of understanding and insight.

Evidence of Impact

Several of our students submitted their final assignments to the UN Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) UK and Ireland Chapter 2023 Student Writing Competition. They were awarded first and third prizes and gained five of the seven other finalist places, a clearly remarkable “learner achievement”. The competition organiser commended them on “their exceptionally talented, creative and committed contributions to researching and reflecting on sustainability, responsibility and ethical challenges” and remarked on how our students “dominated to an unusual extent the winners and finalists lists.” The judging panel praised them for their “insightful, independent, mature and critical evaluation of the global food system and its dysfunctions, along with potential implications for future

governance.” So, this not only created positive impacts for the students themselves, in terms of their marks, prizes and wider recognition, it also impacted positively on Durham University’s reputation, especially its commitment to education for sustainable development, which is now factored into university rankings by the Times Higher Education Supplement and other accrediting bodies. Furthermore, publication of the winning entries can be expected to raise awareness of the scale and urgency of the crisis threatening the health of people and planet attributable to the current food and agriculture system, and of alternative ways to “feed the world without devouring the planet” (Monbiot, 2022, p.231).

The successful impacts and outcomes, evidenced above, are clear enough, and the initiative was widely appreciated by the students. One student commented “I have truly gained a whole new perspective about corporate responsibility and sustainability and enjoyed it.”

Further Development of Commonplacing

Reflecting on how our approach might be extended and enhanced, technology could be deployed to develop interactive mind maps, whereby students could share and even contribute directly to co-creating their mind maps. However, we recommend conceptualising and embedding commonplacing within a processual learning framework, as suggested above. This balances attention on both the social and dialogical zones, in which knowledge and experience is shared and co-created, and the personal zone of private individual study and reflection which also needs to be valued and protected.

Moss (1996, p.166) emphasises that commonplacing was a personal activity, intrinsically motivated by students’ enthusiasm and fully incorporated into their systems of thought, which invariably revealed their individual idiosyncrasies. Similarly, mind mapping is a very personal learning process that embodies and reflects a diversity of styles and learning approaches through which students can

express their individuality and creativity, especially by artistic or graphical design and presentation of their individual mind maps. So, although visual and interactive technologies lend themselves to the development of new educational and pedagogic tools, including interactive mind maps, their application could compromise valuable aspects of the learning process. However, the sharing and editing of mind maps, once created, is an essential part of the learning process, so deploying new platform-based technologies to facilitate that would certainly be beneficial.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Commonplacing is a scholarly discipline with a distinguished history that has largely been forgotten or overlooked within Higher Education teaching and learning scholarship. As we have demonstrated, mind mapping provides a practical way of reviving it, and, as our case study demonstrates, it can contribute to enhancing teaching and learning when embedded in a theoretically informed and practically meaningful framework. Anyone wishing to adopt the approach is advised to ensure that their students have access to a suitable mind mapping toolkit, and that the technique of commonplacing is demonstrated to them, as they are unlikely to have encountered it previously. In our case, most students quickly grasped it and became enthusiastic commonplacers and mind mappers. Suitable mind mapping software is widely available and should be selected and adopted, but without constraining students from manual production of their mind maps, for the reasons stated in the previous section. Finally, a word of warning that some students may find mind mapping more difficult, especially if they have habitually practiced linear analytical thinking (which scholars such as Buzan (2006) and McGilchrist (2010) attribute to left-brain cognitive predominance). McGilchrist identifies that as a largely Western trait, and Martin (2009, p.129) complains that the preponderance of training in analytical thinking in business schools inculcates “an active hostility” to intuitive thinking, thereby inhibiting creativity and impeding the development of integrated thinking and critical dynamic capabilities. So, this initiative may also go some way to redressing those shortcomings, but academics may need to provide greater

support for students who experience difficulties with it. Finally, the opportunity for interactive mind mapping (Tavares et al., 2021), facilitated by new technologies, is an area that warrants further exploration and experimentation.

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