Pinvention: Updating Commonplace Books for the Digital Age
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Pinvention: Updating Commonplace Books for the Digital Age
Cory Geraths & Michele Kennerly

Courses: This semester-length project suits the following courses, although instructors may find it applicable to others as well: Public Speaking, Speechwriting, Introduction to Communication, Rhetorical Criticism, and Communication and Technology.

Objectives: This digital project helps students achieve the following objectives: (1) to organize digitally abundant sources during the research process (for multiple assignments over the course of a semester or for one only); (2) to visualize and spatialize their findings; and (3) to incorporate images and other non-traditional scholarly sources into their presentations or projects, or at least into their preliminary planning stages.

Introduction and Rationale

We propose to revive the commonplace book and revise it for the digital age. Though by the early modern period (c. 1500–1800) assembling quotations and other material had long been a trusted means of moral and rhetorical development, it was during that time that so-called “commonplace books” came into being as recognizable “tools that lay at the intersection between practices of collecting, reading, classifying, learning, and the arts of rhetoric” (Dacome, 2004). A keeper of a commonplace book would stock it—“it” typically being a notebook—with the sayings of others, musings of one’s own, newspaper clippings, drawings, musical notations, and more. Such items would be ordered and organized according to themes or headings of the bookkeeper’s devising that would help her more easily locate a given item when it became relevant. Like other processes and products of rhetorical invention (i.e., coming upon and generating speaking or writing material), commonplace books...
ensured that no communicative encounter would render one dumbstruck, that one’s inventories of invention would never go empty. Commonplace books cultivate copia (copiousness, plentitude) by affording a speaker or writer many available means of persuasion and invitation.

Due to various pressures, the use of commonplace books declined sharply in the seventeenth century, though they remained a curricular fixture of schools thereafter (Moss, 1996). The time is right for reanimating the commonplace book. We live in a time of overwhelming information abundance. In books, blogs, tweets, status updates, wiki pages, Google searches, JSTOR, and more, “the information”—as Gleick (2012) ominously called it—gushes all around us. Scholars have, however, historicized what we commonly presume to be an exclusively contemporary condition. For instance, Blair (2011) writes of canon formations, bibliographies, compendia, encyclopedias, anthologies, and commonplace books that helped thinkers manage plentitude. Our digital update of the commonplace book leverages both a time-tested form of information organization and the ease and accessibility of a digital platform. Moreover, the activities required to start and maintain commonplace books reinforce—or, for students with little training in research, introduce—invention as a process that requires collection, organization, and reflection in the service of incorporating material into a larger communicative effort. Being able to see, easily move around, and categorize material facilitates harmonizing possible pieces of one’s argument and highlighting the most compelling elements. The public, networked aspect of a digitized commonplace book also underscores rhetorical invention as a social activity, helping students to recognize that arguments (claims, evidence, and especially warrants) are communal in their origin and orientation.

Though we have framed digital commonplace books primarily in terms of invention, the additional canons of rhetoric (i.e., steps of/for crafting communication) are not uninvolved. The commonplace book—whether analogue or digital—demands its maker find (invention), organize (arrangement), and store and retrieve (memory) material. The set-up we propose below could be expanded to include style and delivery, encouraging students to find material worthy of stylistic and performative emulation. The commonplace book is a communication aid whose time has come … again.

The Activity

Selecting a Platform

We illustrate the pedagogical potential of Pinterest, which has not enjoyed the same academic take-up as other digital tools or social networking sites. Pinterest, a social networking platform geared toward the visual and spatial, offers unique capacities for revitalizing the commonplace book. Pinterest frames its invention possibilities to users as a site for “discover[ing] ideas for any project or interest, hand-picked by people like you” (“About Pinterest,” 2014), and it serves as a place to assemble ideas
in image form for immediate or later use. Since its debut in 2010, Pinterest’s popularity has surged dramatically (Carlson, 2012).

With this project, we scholasticize the platform’s possibilities, rendering it a site for student invention, inspiration, and organization. With its visual-spatial focus and wide user base, Pinterest provides a solid platform for enriching student research practices. We incorporated this project into several 29-student sections of an undergraduate Public Speaking course in which at least two of the three main speeches focused on a significant common or civic issue of each speaker’s choosing, but the project could be applied easily to other Communication courses.

Overview of Activity

The Pinterest platform consists of two primary components: “pins” and “boards.” Pins are the discoveries one displays, and each pin functions like a discrete entry in a traditional commonplace book. Digital finds are pinned onto “boards,” that is, easily viewed sections of one’s Pinterest profile designated for various themes. Historical commonplace books were also organized thematically or topically. Students build their commonplace books by three means: the creation of boards; the consistent pinning of research to them; and the captioning of each pinned item. Those combined components provide a kinesthetic, malleable space to which students can turn and return, repeatedly, as they prepare their class projects.

Early on in the course, instructors should guide students in the creation of their respective Pinterest accounts and pages. Students’ usernames should be easily recognizable as theirs. Moreover, students should send links to their Pinterest pages to the instructor, who should compile a list of hyperlinks to distribute to the class (enabling students to visit and pin from one another’s boards, if they wish) and to use as an easy method for accessing students’ pages for assessment purposes. In addition to providing instructions for setting up their Pinterest accounts, instructors should orient students as to the basic ins and outs of the platform; namely, how to create a board, how to pin, and how to write proper captions. If available resources and time exist, instructors could take students to a campus computer lab to talk and walk through those steps.

Creating Boards

We recommend students create five boards or fewer. A given board consists of images (one per pinned artifact) equipped with captions. While the scope of each board may differ depending upon the specific content and research aims of a course, the following categories have proved fruitful: (1) Brainstorming, (2) Visualizing, (3) Articles, (4) Opinions, and (5) Miscellaneous. The first board, “Brainstorming,” allows students to (com)pile research that can be sorted later onto other boards. This board invites an opportunity to discuss the necessity of brainstorming to the research process, and also demonstrates the importance of revision in research by encouraging students to sort and resort their research findings onto different boards.
Students tend to make extensive use of this board, especially early in the semester, when the research process is at its most acquisitive stage.

The second board, “Visualizing,” takes advantage of Pinterest’s inherent visuality; Pinterest’s internal search tools lead mostly to images and videos, a useful point to make to students. This board fosters lively discussion about the benefits and liabilities of using visuals during speeches and presentations. It also invites an expansion of the scope of traditional academic inquiry and argument. We asked our students to consider taking photos or making videos to use in their speeches, which sparked a discussion about how the commonplaces of their own lives—their experiences walking around campus, their families and friends, and everything in between—were also deeply relevant to their speeches and their study of Communication.

The third board, “Articles,” provides a space for students to pin items from news organizations and library databases. This board provides a space for students to engage with formal scholarship and allows instructors to encourage continued intentional inclusiveness by nudging students toward (re)sources they might not have previously encountered (e.g., academic journals). On the fourth board, “Opinions,” students pin opinion pieces that may form, inform, and reform their developing arguments and narratives. By encouraging students to read op-eds and blog posts, instructors invite a discussion of the positives and negatives of those genres and outlets for argument(s).

The final board we required of our students, “Miscellaneous,” is the potpourri of the project. Students will find artifacts that are unclassifiable within the confines of the boards outlined above. Providing a space for such outliers can be incredibly useful to students’ development as inventive, creative speakers and writers. Our students typically pinned charts, graphs, maps, and interview transcripts onto this board.

Pinning

Pinning is akin to brainstorming; that is, students should pin with the aim of generating more than they will ultimately incorporate into their presentations. They are not required to and ought not to include everything they pin. Instead, students should view their digital commonplace books as spaces of creative chaos where they can form and reform opinions and tinker with the organization of their arguments. While not every artifact pinned will make it into a student’s speech as quoted material, all should inform the student’s preparation process. It is therefore crucial that instructors frame invention as a holistic process—one that does not begin or end with an assignment’s required number of sources but, rather, encompasses the entire research effort, from the first Pinterest search to the delivery of the presentation or paper.

Student success with this project derives from the quality and range of their assorted pins, and instructors should make it a point to explain not only how to pin but also different mechanisms for finding artifacts worth pinning. Three pinning sources are: the Pinterest platform itself; student uploads; and Pinstamatic, a third-party Web site whose tools enable users to pin items Pinterest is unable to handle.
As mentioned previously, Pinterest contains a built-in search function for users. Students can do searches for different keywords, which bring up the top pins from other Pinterest users. This was a good first step for students when entering into the research process and is not unlike a quick search on a general search engine. Students tend to find only images and videos using this method, and not much more. We recommend, then, that instructors assist students by pointing them toward other avenues for finding relevant research that can be pinned.

Pinterest provides an easy system for users to upload their own material via three methods. The first method, hyperlinking, was the most commonly used. All students need to do is copy and paste the web address of the Web site, article, or image they would like to pin into the provided box (which can be accessed via a “plus” button in the bottom right-hand corner of their Pinterest page). Most of the time this was fairly intuitive. However, some articles—primarily those without images (all pins require some sort of image to be processed)—were rejected by the platform. The other two methods for uploading were used less frequently by our students. One, uploads from a user’s hard-drive, was usually used by students only for uploading personal images or videos. The other, embedded linking via a “Pinterest button” on different Web sites, was spotty and dependent on the site in question.

The final method for pinning is the Web site Pinstamatic (http://www.pinstamatic.com). Pinstamatic proved helpful in resolving most issues with Web sites and articles that could not be pinned, since it allows students to create pins directly from Web sites via screenshots. Pinstamatic circumvents issues that arise when Pinterest’s system does not detect an embedded image within an attempted pin. Pinstamatic does so by taking a screenshot of the first page of the artifact, which is then used as the given image for the pin. These can then be uploaded directly to Pinterest boards. The Web site also provides platforms for students to create pins out of maps, photographs, and quotations. Additionally, it allows students to connect their work on Pinterest to other social networking sites, such as Twitter, which may be of interest to instructors looking to link additional digital resources into their classrooms. While not always glitch-free, Pinstamatic has been serviceable.

Captioning

A key feature of the historical commonplace book was the specification of the provenance of elements not invented oneself; for instance, the keeper of the book might record a quotation she fancied and then detail its source. Likewise, we required students to write short captions of three or four sentences for each pin. These sentences covered the following: a brief, one-sentence summary of the thesis/overall argument of the pin; the relevant bibliographic information (author, source, date, etc.); and how the pin might be useful to the project or in course discussion. Each of those components teaches students how to summarize research concisely and provides a space for linking the project with course discussions on argumentation and thesis statements. They also function like truncated annotated bibliographies. Finally, captions proved to be useful for our students as time elapsed between finding
an item and using it, since they provided a refresher of an artifact’s argument and importance.

**Debriefing**

Digital commonplace books met our core aim: to enlarge and enliven the inventionary inventories of our students. Despite some initial concerns (among both students and instructors), the experience resulted in new ways of thinking, new patterns of research, and an altogether revitalized process of rhetorical invention in our classrooms. The digitized version of the historical commonplace book, which was central to pedagogy for centuries, helps students adjust to changing research opportunities and helps to impose a much-needed structure on an increasingly complex inventionary nexus. Pinning marks invention as an active process of discovery that ranges from shuffling through library stacks and perusing PDFs to tracking Twitter hashtags and browsing blog posts. Pinterest also offers a visual space where students can better conceptualize and see their available means of communication. In this sense, then, digital commonplace books extend Aristotle’s (trans. 2007) original definition of rhetoric and equip students to manage what can be an overwhelming amount of research options and materials.

**Appraisal**

The most prominent limitations we encountered while constructing and implementing this project were our students’ misconceptions about the pedagogical utility of digital technologies, Pinterest specifically. Some students were confused or unconvinced when the project was explained at the semester’s start. In an end-of-semester evaluation of the project, one student recounted: “On the first day of class when I found out that we were going to be using Pinterest, I thought to myself ‘well that’s weird, what does that have to do with public speaking?’” She was not alone. To redress that reaction, instructors need to insist on and persist in explaining—from the get-go and throughout the term—the relevance of the project to course objectives. In particular, student skepticism hinged on preconceived notions of Pinterest as a social networking platform for the categorization of “traditionally feminine” concerns: everything from food and furniture to weddings and wardrobes. By framing the digital commonplace book as an expansion of Pinterest’s possibilities, one can adjust students’ presumptions.

Another limitation concerns evaluation. We recommend curbing what could be a considerable grading burden by limiting project checks to fewer than three per term. It may be helpful to take screenshots of students’ Pinterest pages on due dates, allowing for grading at a later date. It is also helpful to cap the number of pins students are responsible for per assignment review—such as 10 per check, to be completed prior to the due date of each major speech (for instance) in class. Because of the grading burden, and though we believe digital commonplace books could be
adapted for larger lecture classes, we suspect that digital commonplace books are most applicable and practical in Communication courses of fewer than 30 students.

Despite those limitations, digitizing the commonplace book allows instructors to initiate their students into a new way of organizing the processes and products of rhetorical invention. Like the original commonplace books, this new form allows students to assimilate social and scholarly knowledge, assemble arguments, and achieve copiousness in the service of their own communicative situations. As one of our students cheered, "Pinterest has helped me in more ways than one and I will be continuing to use it throughout my college years as it provides a visual collection of my thoughts and is not just an outline of words."

Notes

[1] Recently, writing instructors have revived the analogue commonplace book; see, e.g., Carbone (2010) on how it can be used to help students develop multiple perspectives on current events.

[2] We recognize, though, that not every student possesses her/his own computer or smart device or has free and reliable Internet access.

[3] A few rhetoricians, however, have recently turned to Pinterest for pedagogical purposes. For instance, Cindy Koenig Richards regularly assembles pertinent images and quotations for her courses at Willamette University, and Cara Finnegan built a Pinterest-based project into her fall 2014 course, "Photography and Public Life," at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

[4] We have not conducted formal assessments. Our evaluations thus far have been end-of-semester discussions of the project. Student feedback used with permission.

References and Suggested Readings


