Kalamazoo College

K-Plan Commonplace

Commonplacings and a Pensieve

One could imagine the K-Plan Commonplace as a melding of an expanded academic transcript with a “commonplace book,” which provides space for the student’s reflections on decisions made and trajectories followed through four years at K. Keeping a commonplace book, a practice referred to as “commonplacing,” was a tradition of many intellectuals from the 17th through early 20th centuries (http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/reading/commonplace.html) and served as a means of keeping track of ideas, quotes, book passages, etc. In a similar way, dialogue space will be provided in each K-Plan Commonplace for students to record periodic reflections on their own K-Plan and thereby help them heed Kierkegaard’s assertion, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

Having a K-Plan Commonplace – a repository for a record of one’s accomplishments and reflections on those accomplishments and where they might lead – is like having access to something like Dumbledore’s pensieve. The following is from http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Pensieve:

Dumbledore: "I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form."

Harry: "You mean... that stuff's your thoughts?"

Dumbledore: "Certainly."

— Albus Dumbledore to Harry Potter[^src]

The Pensieve is an object used to review memories. It has the appearance of a shallow stone basin, into which are carved runes and strange symbols. It is filled with a silvery substance that appears to be a cloud-like liquid/gas; the collected memories of people who have siphoned their recollections into it. Memories can then be viewed from a third-person point of view.

Etymology Pensieve seems to be a portmanteau, combining the words ‘pensive’ and ‘sieve.’ The latter is an object in which something may be sorted, and ‘Pensive’ is derived from French, and originally from the Latin ‘pensare,’ meaning ‘to ponder,’ and in common English usage means ‘thoughtful’ or ‘reflective;’ thus a ‘pensieve’ allows for the sorting of thoughts, or memories.

Thus, using her/his own K-Plan Commonplace helps the student strike a healthy balance between what Nicholas Carr refers to in The Shallows as “efficient data collection” and “inefficient contemplation.” By “socializing” with her/his ideas and perceptions of experiences, as Joseph Priestly did so well (Invention of Air by Steven Johnson), the student can step outside the seemingly disparate fragments of a “broken world” (Terry Tempest Williams), view them objectively, and (perhaps) better see the whole that emerges from the assembled mosaic.