K-Plan Commonplace as a Pensieve  (PRS mental meanderings on 15 March 2012)

When mulling over the new K-Plan Commonplace and how using it could help students shift from being externally defined to being shaped more by self-authorship, images of Kegan’s notion of shifting from “subject” to “object” kept bumping into images of Dumbledore’s pensieve. (yeah...thinking about Dumbledore is probably not very erudite of me...who cares...it works!)

[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. (See next page for more information.) 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.

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 a pensive...at least to my mind it does.

Having a device like that at one’s disposal allows events and reflections on them to be “viewed from a third-person point of view.” Doing this helps us think about events and trajectories “objectively,” and this can foster internal (and external) dialogues about choices to be made.

For what it’s worth...here’s what led to musings about developing a K-Plan Commonplace in the first place. I encountered “commonplace books” on page 179 of Nicholas Carr’s The Shallows. These things (and practices) are VERY COOL (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonplace_book), as some of you no doubt already know. While the name “K-Plan Commonplace” might be too “cute” for some tastes, I really like the idea of improving on the age-old practice of keeping a commonplace book, a practice called commonplacing, and using it as a means of fostering structured reflection about a college education. Providing each student with her/his own K-Plan Commonplace would help the student strike a healthy balance between what Carr refers to as “efficient data collection” and “inefficient contemplation.” And in so doing, we will help students (and us?) 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.
Possibly the most ingenious magical device in the world of Harry Potter, a pensieve is a magical repository for memories. Harry first learns about it in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, and the pensieve itself is featured on the cover of Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince.

The pensieve is a stone bowl with runes on it, filled with a silvery white gaseous liquid (or viscous gas). The user extracts a memory from himself or someone else with a wand, then drops it in the pensieve for later retrieval. Dumbledore explains that it helps keep his mind from becoming too crowded with old memories, and to experience a particular memory again when needed.

We find an additional way of using a pensieve in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, when Severus Snape gives Harry a selected set of memories as he lays dying. These memories are a montage of events from Snape's life that explain his decision and cast his actions in a sufficiently positive light that Harry gives his eventual son the middle name Severus, for "probably the bravest man I ever knew".

For as effective as the descriptions in the books are, the way the pensive is depicted in the films is all the more impressive. It presents the user with a walk-through of someone else’s memories, similar to what Harry experiences when he enters Tom Riddle’s diary in Chamber of Secrets, but much more detailed and, importantly, accurate. The memory is simply there for Harry or whoever to experience.

The name is ingenious too. Clearly a wordplay on pensive, and in the spirit with which J.K. Rowling creates a lot of her names, the pensieve also includes the word sieve, a device often resembling a screen that can be used to sift through something. Sieves are often used to eliminate undesired objects or items, such as when an archaeologist uses one to sift through sand or dirt in search of fossils or other relics. The pensieve seems to be a way to prevent people’s often sieve-like memories from losing important information.

The translation of pensive posed interesting challenges and a variety of results.

French        pensine
Spanish       pensadero
German        Denkarium
Japanese      ペンシーブ (pronounced "pensheebu"

The French sounds similar to piscine, which means pool or swimming pool, as well as pensif, meaning thoughtful or pensive, and penser, meaning to think, ponder, or remember.

The Spanish is close to pensado, meaning thought or thought out, or pensadero, meaning thinker.

The German is a nice combination of Denk from denken, meaning to think, and ium, as in gynasium, creating a work that approximates the original.

The Japanese is simply a phonetic rendering of the English, and so conveys none of the idea of the word pensieve.

Interestingly, the pensieve not only lets its user see a memory from a third-person perspective, but it also seems to add information the user could not have known. But Rowling has explained, in an interview, that the memories in a pensieve include what the person did not notice or remark upon originally. In this sense, the memories from a pensieve are similar to what can be obtained in some cases under hypnosis.