Assessing the Impact on Critical Reading and Critical Thinking:
Using Commonplace Books and Social Reading Practices in a First-Year Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Although much has been written about the history of commonplacing, there has been a lack of evidence-based research to show the extent to which this historical practice may still be valuable today as a pedagogy that educates citizens in critical reading for democracy. This article describes an IRB-approved, experimental study to answer this question. Three sections of the same first-year reading and writing course were compared: one section did not use commonplace books, a second section used commonplace books that included quotations only, and a third section used commonplace books with reflective writing. We expected to find that students who used commonplace books would perform better in end-of-study assessments than those who did not. Instead, we were surprised to find that many of the students who were not required to use commonplace books created their own note-taking methods which performed a similar function. In essence, they developed their own commonplace book culture and methodology using Google Docs and other social reading practices. Their performance was as strong as the students who used commonplace books.

Keywords: commonplace books, first-year writing, critical reading, critical thinking

As John Dewey, in his essay “Education and Democracy,” recognized, “We have a great and precious heritage from the past, but to be realized, to be translated from an idea and an emotion, this tradition has to be embodied by active effort in the social relations which we as
human beings bear to each other under present conditions” (Dewey [1938] 1988: 96). Dewey was speaking about the problem of maintaining a democracy and how the nation’s educational system is tasked with the job of teaching each generation anew what “a democratic society means under existing conditions” (Dewey [1938] 1988: 96). Similarly, in his speech “Creative Democracy” (1939) he states that democracy is not “a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics,” but rather a “belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness.” In other words, democracy must continue to be made in an ongoing fashion by every generation. Today the need persists, as evidenced by the fact that, in 2016, the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded the United States from the status of “full democracy” to “flawed democracy,” and the nation’s rank has continued to drop to its present rank of 25th place worldwide (Economist Intelligence Unit 2019:10).

Related to the decline in American democracy is the problem of fake news and media manipulation. Alice Markwick and Rebecca Lewis (2017) reported for the Data and Society Research Institute the numerous ways in which “internet subcultures take advantage of the current media ecosystem to manipulate news frames, set agendas, and propagate ideas” (1). This has resulted in the spreading of conspiracy theories, hoaxes, misinformation, hate speech, and hyper-partisan news stories, as well as a declining trust in the media generally.

The problem of maintaining a healthy democracy is not new and must be solved again with each generation. This article posits that, as Dewey suggested, it is worth returning to older ideas as we revisit what it means to “create democracy anew” while, at the same time, embodying those practices—whether democratic or pedagogical—in new ways appropriate to the “existing conditions.” Ellen Carillo’s book *Teaching Readers in a Post-Truth America* (2018)
details those existing conditions and makes a strong case for the relevance of paying attention to reading instruction, critical thinking, and information literacy within the context of first-year composition courses.

To prepare students to combat fake news, one strategy is to teach students how to become critical readers so they can better discern between credible and dubious sources of information. Just as a person trains to recognize counterfeit money by carefully studying the attributes of genuine currency, a reader can learn to recognize the characteristics of credible information and thus be better prepared to recognize fake news when it appears. Similarly, in response to the conditions of flawed democracy and fake news, this article posits that educators in a first-year reading and writing course may benefit from looking backward to how reading was taught in the past while adapting those pedagogical methods for the 21st century.

Naomi Baron, in her study of various historical and contemporary approaches to reading, recaps Samuel Johnson’s eighteenth-century categories: “hard study (done with pen in hand), perusal (searching for particular information), curious reading (when engrossed in a novel), and “mere reading” (browsing and skimming).” Baron distinguishes between “reading on the prowl” (reading for information, related to skimming, scanning, and in the digital world, searching with the FIND function) and “continuous reading” (reading from beginning to end in order). Baron points out that, well before the rise of the novel, many varied approaches to reading existed, and “reading on the prowl” (rather than continuous reading) had actually been the norm for approaching most texts since the invention of the codex (Baron 2015: 22-23).

Two centuries earlier, in his essay “Of Books,” Michele de Montaigne describes his own fragmented reading practices: “[Seneca and Plutarch] have this notable advantage for my humor, that the knowledge I seek is there treated in detached pieces that do not demand the obligation of
long labor, of which I am incapable . . . I need no great enterprise to get at them, and I leave them whenever I like. For they have no continuity from one to another” (Montaigne [1580] 1995: 50).

In today’s world of online sources, many of us are reading more often in a fragmented way rather than the linear way of approaching a printed novel or non-fiction book (Carr 2010; Baron 2015). While this fragmented approach has raised alarm for some (such as Nicholas Carr), we suggest that teachers might reframe fragmented reading as not entirely brand-new but a return to earlier times, as Baron suggests. Because today’s readers’ habits are fragmented, the Commonplace Book assignment provides a way of managing that way of reading, an approach that is similar to that of early modern readers.

**Commonplace Books, Commonplace Book Practices, and Commonplace Book Culture**

Robert Darnton described in “Extraordinary Commonplaces” how early modern English readers made sense of their times by reading their way through it, nonlinearly, with a pen in hand:

. . . early modern Englishmen [seventeenth century] read in fits and starts and jumped from book to book. They broke texts into fragments and assembled them into new patterns by transcribing them in different sections of their notebooks. Then they reread the copies and rearranged the patterns while adding more excerpts. Reading and writing were therefore inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things, for the world was full of signs: you could read your way through it; and by keeping an account of your readings, you made a book of your own, one stamped with your personality (Darnton 2000: 1).
Darnton is describing the historical practice of commonplacing, which was a common pedagogical practice for several centuries, from about the twelfth century to the mid-nineteenth century (Darnton 2000). Other historians trace a longer history going as far back as Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in 350 BC and Cicero’s *Topica* in 44 BC, which was lost and later rediscovered during the high Renaissance and early modern period (Allan 2010: 35-45; Havens 2001). In short, commonplacing was a practice of recording passages from one’s reading in a notebook, either with or without categorizing the passages under headings. Erasmus and John Locke recommended the practice in their respective works *De Copia* and *A New Method of Commonplacing*.

The practice of commonplacing nearly died out in the mid-nineteenth century due in part to the rise of scrapbooking and in part to the rise of the New Critics, who emphasized originality over tradition (Stokes 2018: 201). Stokes asserts, “Once critics widely accepted the New Critical regard for innovation as the distinguishing hallmark of literary achievement, commonplace books came to seem retrograde and even antithetical to literary change” (2018: 202). Yet important examples of commonplacing carried into the twentieth-century, notably Virginia Woolf. According to Caroline Pollentier, Woolf’s approach to commonplacing was broad and loose, consisting not only of recording quotations in a notebook, but writing marginalia nearly whenever she read. She resisted a mimetic approach to commonplacing and instead used commonplacing as a means of composing or pre-writing. Woolf’s method of commonplacing was more “essayistic” (Pollentier 2007: 52-59) than that recommended by Locke, which included only direct quotations under headings.

As contemporary readers leave behind the linear (or “continuous”) reading approach of recent centuries and return to fragmented practices akin to those early modern (17th century)
approaches discussed above, readers and scholars can benefit from borrowing earlier pedagogical practices as well. Furthermore, when such reading is integrated with particular writing practices to aid in proper “digestion,” students can find new ways to construct meaning.

Linda Laidlaw recognizes the value of commonplace books not only as a historical practice but as a living pedagogy. She describes the contemporary commonplace book as a “complex, intertextual, and nonlinear site for teaching and learning” and describes the commonplace book as not static but as a flexible, nonlinear structure which gains complexity each time it is revisited. More than writing down quotations from their reading (commonplacing in the strictest sense), Laidlaw’s students use their books to “gather their responses to texts, record experiences, and engage in autobiographical writings” (2001: 50) as well as to read aloud to each other. In this respect, Laidlaw’s approach follows Woolf’s essayistic model more than Locke’s traditional prescription.

Adam Smyth offers a new term “commonplace book culture” that serves as an umbrella to describe “this very wide range of texts and practices [related to commonplace books]” (2010: 91). He has identified sixteen traits characteristic of commonplace book culture from the past, many of which are relevant to teaching reading today. This article will focus on just two of them. First, reading within commonplace book culture is “an active, interventionist practice with connotations . . . of collecting, gathering, picking out.” This active reading practice fits well with the emphasis on “engagement” and “engaged learning” which has been emphasized in higher education in recent years (a Google search for “engaged learning in higher education” in August 2019 returned 146 million results). The National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) was launched in 2000 and asserts that “measures of student engagement can serve as proxies for educational quality” (NSSE).
Second, Smyth says commonplace book culture includes “an intimate connection between reading and writing; a sense that ‘neither writing nor reading can be identified as the ‘primary’ activity involved in the composition of a commonplace book’; a sense that reading generates writing. Early modern readers read with a pen in hand, and we see the inseparability of reading and transcription in the ink-spattered pages of early modern books” (2010: 94). In our teaching approach, we employed Carillo’s emphasis on integrating reading and writing practices within first-year composition classes and with John Bean’s (2001) exhortation to teach writing as a way of promoting critical thinking about one’s reading. Like Carillo’s passage-based paper assignment, the commonplace book assignment allows students to “experience the connections between the interpretive practices of reading and writing” (2015:133). We used the commonplace book in conjunction with Bean’s (2001:143-144) guidance on “Helping Students Read Difficult Texts” (chapter 8 of Engaging Ideas).

Assessing a Historical Pedagogy with Contemporary Research Methods

Commonplace books, after falling out of use since the mid-nineteenth century, have been making a comeback. Recent years have seen a resurgence of commonplacing assignments in classrooms, often in the context of history or literature classes, as illustrated by many recent articles and blog posts detailing such assignments (Laidlaw 2001; Pasupathi, 2014; Geraths and Kennerly 2014; and others). For example, in 2016, the University of Mississippi replaced their ePortfolios (used since 2010) with Commonplace Books (Writing and Rhetoric Teaching Hub 2016). While much of the scholarship on commonplace books consists of studying historical commonplace books with the goal of understanding how and what people read, or with an eye for interpreting political and cultural understandings from the past (Susan Miller 1998; Stokes
2018), few sources demonstrate concrete evidence of the value of using this classical pedagogical practice in today’s writing classrooms. Those that do are typically limited to describing assignments rather than empirically measuring their impact on learning (Geraths and Kennerly 2014; Laidlaw 2001; Pasupathi 2014).

Yet the field of writing studies has asked for more research that is replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (Driscoll and Powell 2015; Haswell 2005). Therefore, this article describes an attempt to address the gap between theory and practice, between the resurging interest in this classical pedagogy and empirical evidence for its impact/usefulness. This study responds to the broad call for more empirical research to be done in the humanities in general (Van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier 2002) and in writing studies in particular (Haswell 2005; Vanderbilt 2013; Driscoll and Powell 2015). This IRB-approved study involved collecting data (written artifacts) and using rubrics to assess students’ critical thinking and reading. In particular, the goal was to demonstrate whether adopting commonplace book practices might assist students in developing the kind of critical reading and thinking skills necessary for a healthy civic society. To further home in on the goal of teaching reading for democracy, readings related to the freedom of speech and its limitations were selected (see Appendix for list of readings).

**Methods**

The primary investigator (PI) teaches three sections of a one-semester, first-year writing in an undergraduate program as part of the general education curriculum at a large state university. It includes five department-created objectives which are adapted from the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (3.0), Approved July 17, 2014 (WPA 38.1 (Fall 2014): 129-143). Students will:
1. Demonstrate an awareness of rhetorical knowledge, which may include the ability to analyze and act on understandings of audiences, purposes and contexts in creating and comprehending texts;

2. Employ critical thinking, which includes the ability, through reading, research and writing, to analyze a situation or text and make thoughtful decisions based on that analysis;

3. Employ writing processes;

4. Demonstrate an awareness of conventions, the formal and informal guidelines that define what is considered to be correct and appropriate in a variety of texts; and

5. Compose in multiple environments using traditional and digital communication tools.

(JMU WRTC website and syllabus template)

For this study, each class section was assigned to a different treatment group. One section was not assigned to use commonplace books (no_CP), a second was assigned to use commonplace books that included quotations only (CP), and the third made commonplace books that included both quotations and additional written reflections (CP+).

We hypothesized that using commonplace books as a tool for organizing fragmented reading and for comparing sentences from different sources would be helpful in preparing students to engage in critical thinking in an information-saturated, post-truth era. All three sections read the same sources for each class day and all students met in small groups daily during class time to exchange their understandings and/or their commonplace book entries. The No_CP section was not instructed to use commonplace books but to read closely and annotate however they wished.
In light of concerns about how contemporary students (mis-) use quotations (see The Citation Project; Howard, Serviss and Rodriguez), we hypothesized that the best practice for a contemporary commonplace book assignment would be the more open, personal, and interpretative form of the practice that Woolf modeled (CP+) rather than adhering to the traditional, quotations-only approach (CP). Collecting quotations alone could inadvertently encourage students to fall into “quote-mining,” which Howard, Serviss, and Rodriguez (2010:177-192) explain is problematic since students may not understand the sources themselves—instead, they may be appropriating sentences from sources without understanding the context. We also hypothesized that any type of commonplace book (CP or CP+) would be better than nothing (no_CP).

**Participants**

In spring 2019, the PI taught three sections of the same first-year writing course. Students were of comparable academic ability as evidenced by course placement (about one-third of incoming first-year students test out of the course while all others are placed in WRTC 103). Class sections were similar in terms of gender and ethnicity.

**Sample size.** The first and second sections included 20 students while the third section had 22 students. The composition of each class was similar in terms of demographics with a few exceptions. Nearly all students were first-year students in their second semester of college. The second section included two students who were sophomores. The second section also included a service dog who did not participate in the study. The third section included two non-traditional students, about age 25, who were both in their first year of university after having spent time in
the army and workforce, respectively. The actual sample size of data was slightly smaller due to absences.

**Research Design**

Students were assigned to read a variety of different genres of articles that related to the First Amendment of the Constitution, in particular the freedom of speech (Appendix A). These included primary sources, popular websites, government sources, and scholarly articles from legal journals. Each class period, the students were expected to come to class having read that day’s assigned article. The No CP section was not required to take notes, although some students chose to do so on their own. The CP section was asked to write one or more specific quotations in their commonplace books. The section CP+ was asked to write one or more specific quotations along with a brief written reflection in response to the quotation or article (“low stakes writing”). Class time was spent primarily in small group discussions to unpack the readings and to gain a more complex understanding of the articles (Bean 2001:149-168).

Small groups were assigned at the beginning of the study period using the survey and strategies recommended in “Successful Strategies for Teams: Team Member Handbook” (Kennedy and Nilson 2008). The small group discussions then became a related ritual or practice connected to the individually kept commonplace books as students asked each other what they put in and what they left out, and why. In addition, students wrote a group paper that analyzed one of the sources while discussing one or more of the other documents. After composing group papers, students wrote individual brief reflections on the experience of reading and interpreting texts in groups.

At the beginning of the unit, each student wrote a brief “three-minute paper” (adapted from Angelo and Cross 1993:148-153) about their previous knowledge of the first amendment.
Before the writing task, students were asked to read the first amendment of the Constitution along with an online article that elaborated on the freedom of speech clause. Both were found on the free website ConstitutionCenter.org. The article “Freedom of Speech and the Press” by Geoffrey R. Stone and Eugene Volokh presented the “common interpretation” of this particular clause of the first amendment. The prompt was to write down one’s understanding of the freedom of speech based on the reading. Three minutes of writing time yielded about a half-page of writing per student. The students’ critical thinking skills and reading skills were assessed using the VALUES Reading Rubrics (AAC&U 2009). The VALUES rubric was chosen because of its wide availability, generally-recognized credibility, and the fact that these rubrics are used broadly among colleges and universities of different sizes (Pike and Drezel McConnell 2018), making this study easily replicable. The VALUES Reading Rubric includes six criteria for evaluating student reading: comprehension, genres, reader’s relationship to text, analysis, interpretation, and reader’s voice. Each writing sample was rated on a scale of 1 to 4 for each of the six criteria, for a total score out of 24 possible points. Since the rubric is somewhat subjective, this is considered a qualitative measure, much like a Likert scale. The total scores were compared using statistical analysis to improve the robustness of the study.

Upon completion of the unit, students again wrote a three-minute paper (Angelo and Cross, 1993:148). The prompt was to write down one’s understanding of freedom of speech based on all of the texts read during this unit. Skills were assessed using the same reading rubric (AAC&U 2009).

In addition to the three-minute papers, the group papers provided an additional source of data. After reading the assigned articles, students worked collaboratively within their groups to craft a 1,000-word rhetorical analysis paper that focused on one or more of the sources they had
studied. Out of the three sections, there were a total of 13 group papers (4 from the no_CP section, 4 from the CP section, and 5 from the CP+ section). After data collection, all the group papers were blindly rated using three different VALUES rubrics: reading, critical thinking, and written communication (AAC&U 2009). Each paper was labeled with a random letter so that the rater would not know which class section the paper had come from. Names and identifying information had been covered with removeable tape to ensure a blind rating process. Each paper was scored out of 24 points for the reading rubric, and out of 20 points each for the critical thinking and written communication rubrics (since the latter rubrics included just 5 different criteria, each measured on a scale of 1-4 for a possible total of 20 points).

**Ethics**

All assignments collected as data for this study were given completion credit rather than assigned a grade so as to minimize the possibility or appearance of coercion. To preserve student privacy and to reduce the chance of unconscious bias while rating papers, student names were concealed using removeable tape. Then all the pre-study papers from all three sections were mixed together so that the sole rater (PI) would not know which class the papers came from. The same process was used for the post-study papers to reduce the chance of unconscious bias.

**Results**

At the beginning of this study, first year students from three sections of reading and writing class were compared prior to the introduction of commonplace book intervention. All data analysis for this study was performed using the statistical package SAS. Figure 1 presents students’ initial writing scores using the VALUES Reading Rubric (AAC&U 2009).
We can see that most of the initial scores are low, either ‘Benchmark 1’ or ‘Milestone 2’ for all three sections. Approximately 29% (15/51) of all the writing samples achieved ‘Benchmark 1’ and 65% achieved ‘Milestone 2’ ratings. Only 6% earned the ‘Milestone 3’ rating and none of the papers earned the highest rating of ‘Capstone 4’. Only one paper from each section received a ‘Milestone 3’ score and none of the papers earned a score of ‘Capstone 4’.
If we look carefully at the distribution of ratings across the three sections, we see that the CP section has more papers (9 papers) with benchmark ratings compared to the other two sections. In terms of milestone 2 rating, both CP+ and No_CP sections performed better than the CP section. It appears that the CP section was slightly weaker compared to the other two sections, but after using the Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric statistical test (Kruskal and Wallis, 1952: 583-621) we concluded that the students in these three sections were comparable in terms of their writing samples (p-value = 0.1256).
After determining that the three sections were not statistically different in terms of writing samples, we proceeded with the ‘commonplace’ intervention. Students in the ‘No_CP’ section received the regular lecture and instruction and served as a control to the other two sections. The students in the ‘CP’ section were instructed to use the commonplace books only for quotations and also received the regular lecture and instruction. Students in the ‘CP+’ section were advised to use the notetaking and reflections in addition to the quotations in the commonplace books, as well as received the same regular lecture and instruction as the other sections.

Figure 2 compares the writing samples from the three sections after the implementation of the commonplace books intervention.
Figure 2 reveals that out of all the students, the benchmark rating was about 2 to 3 percent in all 3 sections, and the milestone 2 rating was approximately 10% in all three sections. For milestone 3, the CP+ section had the highest percentage, then the section CP, and finally the No_CP section had the lowest percentage. The overall scores trended higher than in the initial papers. But interestingly, not a single paper got the capstone rating from the CP+ section, which appears to contradict the hypothesis. Of the total papers, 5% from the CP section received capstone rating and 7% from the No_CP section received capstone.

These findings complicate matters because we would have expected that the highest scores (capstone) would have been found in the CP+ section rather than the no_CP section. One
possible explanation is that the “no_CP” section included a few very highly motivated students who created their own methods of detailed notetaking using shared electronic documents. As one student in this section wrote in a qualitative comment, “We created a [shared] word document to store summaries of each article.” Another student from the no_CP section wrote, “My group ping-ponged ideas off of one another and I was able to sort out what was important and write down the main points of our discussion.” A third student said, “We all wrote comments on Google Docs to peer evaluate each other and color-coded our parts to make it easy to work on.” Although these students in no_CP were not following a prescribed method of commonplacing, the activities they designed on their own initiative align with the traits that Adam Smyth (2010) described as characteristic of “commonplace book culture.”

Table 2 provides a more detailed look at the within-section distribution of ratings. For the milestone 3 ratings, 62% of the students from CP+ section achieved this, followed by the 47%
from the CP section and 39% from the No_CP section. As for milestone 2 rating, all three sections have comparable results. For the benchmark rating, CP+ has the highest, followed by the No_CP, and finally the CP. For the capstone rating, No_CP has the highest, then CP, and zero for CP+. Overall, 95% of the papers in the CP section earned either milestone 2 or higher ratings, 94% earned 2 or higher for the No_CP section, and 90% earned 2 or higher for the CP+ section. We again applied the Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric statistical test and found no significant difference (p-value = 0.6468) among the three sections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The SAS System</th>
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<td>Kruskal-Wallis Test using scores from the 2nd set</td>
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The NPAR1WAY Procedure

| Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums) for Variable score Classified by Variable Section |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Section | N | Sum of Scores | Expected Under H0 | Std Dev Under H0 | Mean Score |
| No_CP   | 18 | 562.50 | 531.00 | 54.636897 | 31.250000 |
| CP      | 19 | 581.50 | 560.50 | 55.427959 | 30.605263 |
| CP+     | 21 | 567.00 | 619.50 | 56.758419 | 27.000000 |

Average scores were used for ties.

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<td>Chi-Square</td>
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<td>DF</td>
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<td>Pr &gt; Chi-Square</td>
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The general trend in all classes was improvement from the beginning of the unit of study to the end. Students appeared to improve in their ability to read and understand texts on the topic
of freedom of speech. As well, some writing samples from all sections included qualitative language like “Before we studied this topic, I thought . . . but now my understanding is more complex . . .” This demonstrated a deepening understanding compared to earlier samples that included simple language like “freedom of speech means we can say whatever we want.”

The SAS System

Table 3. Group paper grading (0 to 1 scale) across Sections

The MEANS Procedure

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section=No_CP</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
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<th>Maximum</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.8541667</td>
<td>0.041667</td>
<td>0.791667</td>
<td>0.875000</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>0.2483277</td>
<td>0.450000</td>
<td>1.000000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.6875000</td>
<td>0.2561738</td>
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<td>0.950000</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
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<td>0.1554563</td>
<td>0.400000</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Mean</th>
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<td>0.791667</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>0.1753568</td>
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<td>0.850000</td>
<td></td>
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From Table 3 it can be observed that both CP+ and No_CP sections had similar average reading scores, relatively higher than the CP group. In terms of average critical thinking and writing scores, the No_CP group had the higher average compared to both the CP and CP+ group. Still, differences between sections were not statistically significant.
 Limitations

The three sections of this study were very similar in terms of students, but there were environmental differences between sections.

The three sections met at different times of day (9:05am, 10:10am, and 12:20pm) and in two different locations on campus. The first two sections met in the same room, sequentially, while the third section met in a different room with a different layout. Section 2 included a service dog which may have had an unknown impact on the classroom environment. Different individual classroom cultures and individual student motivation may have had an affect on the quality of work submitted. For example, one section (CP+) had more absences during the study period than other sections. Based on the group reflection comments, it would seem that most groups in the no_CP section stayed on task during their group work while some groups in both the CP and CP+ sections mentioned that they enjoyed socializing together but didn’t always focus on the assigned tasks.

An additional limitation was that this study included only one rater. A future study could be improved by having multiple raters. Using the VALUES rubric could be seen as a limitation because it is a subjective way to assess writing, reading, and critical thinking. Rubrics create an illusion of objectivity, but applying them involves interpretation on the part of the rater. Having multiple raters for a future study would help to mitigate the subjectivity inherent in using a rubric.

One further limitation is the reliance on self-reports by students to provide additional support for the study results. Self-reports are not objective measures but reflect only what students believe they have learned.
Discussion

This study suggests that having students create commonplace books with only quotations is not necessarily more helpful for critical thinking than the other pedagogical practices—small group discussions, lectures, and low-stakes writing—used in this study. On the other hand, encouraging students to engage in “commonplace book culture”—that is, active and engaged reading that integrates reading, writing, and thinking activities—does appear to be a good teaching strategy for improving critical thinking. “Commonplace book culture” includes assignments that integrate reading and writing and which incorporate essayistic responses to readings rather than simply recording quotations. Students wrote in their qualitative comments that they benefited from sharing their reading activities with others in their small groups and from collaboratively writing their analysis papers. They also commented on the value of discussing the articles with classmates who had different interpretations and viewpoints than their own. More work could be done to compare the value of handwritten commonplace books (as the CP+ section used) and the shared online note-taking practices (via Google docs and shared Word docs) that some participants in the no_CP section engaged in.

Some might wonder, how is “commonplace book culture” different from simply requiring students to take notes and work collaboratively? The difference may lie primarily in how the practice is contextualized. By nesting these contemporary classroom activities within the broader, longer historical context of how people have read in the past, made sense of abundant information, and created meaning through engaging with texts, students in a digital age find comfort in learning that readers in the past have struggled in much the same way to keep pace with a deluge of texts. Fragments can be collected, organized, cohered to the container: the codex
which holds their commonplace materials. A commonplace book, more than a digital folder, invites rereading and revisiting.

In the future, we plan to design a more elaborate study encompassing more sections and multiple raters to study the efficacy of “commonplace book culture”. A larger sample size would enable us to determine the statistical significance of the study findings. We also want to explore whether there is a meaningful difference between creating a handwritten commonplace book or a digital variation of a commonplace book. This question arose when examining the differences between the no_CP course section in which some students created, on their own initiative, something akin to a digital equivalent of a commonplace book using Google Docs, while the other two sections had been required to handwrite their commonplace book content. Since the students who used digital “commonplacing” (via shared GoogleDocs) received more capstone ratings than did students who were required to use handwritten commonplace books, we wonder whether the digital tool had any advantages over the traditional method. On the other hand, this correlation could instead be attributed instead to higher motivation in these particular students (demonstrated by their taking initiative to create their own note-taking method) rather than the particular tools they used. Further research and a careful new design would be needed in order to test the specific benefits of using one type of commonplacing over another.

Works Cited


4. www.aacu.org/peerreview/2018/Fall/Research


Writing and Rhetoric Teaching Hub. 2016. “Commonplace Books in First-Year Writing.” University of Mississippi. [https://library.cwr.olemiss.edu/guides/cpb/](https://library.cwr.olemiss.edu/guides/cpb/)

Appendix A: Required Readings for the Study of Freedom of Speech and its Limitations

*note: This particular set of readings demonstrates to students some of the differences between genres (line 2 of the VALUES Reading Rubric, AAC&U 2009)*

**Primary source documents:**
First Amendment (passed 1789, ratified 1791). constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-i

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison making suggestions about the proposed Constitution (20 December 1787). founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0210


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Educational Websites [.edu]:


Scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles:

