

WRITING INTO THE POST-CRITICAL: THE MINDINGS COLLAGE



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ABSTRACT

The Mindings Collage offers a corrective of the discarnate and corrosive “critical thinking” image which dominates our institutionalized language, culture, and education. The Mindings Collage provides rationale and directions for a disciplined practice to help persons recognize and exercise their own distinctive minds.

Orientation

Bringing minds alive: I take that to be Michael Polanyi’s central philosophic mission. But how might we actually *do* it? What practices could encourage persons to recognize, exercise, honor, and assume responsibility for the workings of their own distinctive minds? These are decidedly “post-critical” questions, and the “Mindings Collage” is a response which over years of teaching I, with my students, evolved. I now encourage others to adapt and adopt it.

The Mindings Collage is intended to counteract what William H. Poteat called the “metaphorical intentionalities” pervasive in our language, culture, and education that privilege written literate intelligence over oral-aural intelligence and that prompt us to try to think things out clearly *before* we bring our languages—and ourselves—to bear, which is of course impossible (see Poteat 1985, index references, 324, and *passim*). We are left captivated, abstracted from ourselves in a detached, timeless, Cartesian solitude. Here, we are led to suppose, is where “critical thinking” is to be begun and carried on.

That is, at best, a disastrously incomplete picture. It leaves us all in an impossible epistemological disconnect, suggested by two comments I have heard far too frequently. Professors say, “In their writing, my students will not show their *own* thinking.” Students say, “In my papers, what my professors do *not* want to see is my *own* thinking.”

The Mindings Collage intends to alter this discarnate picture of thinking, prompting us to have our thinking emerge in and through our spontaneous speaking and writing, actions which are confidently rooted within our mindbody concretely placed in our world, our culture, and our time, and emerging through our ongoing dialogical exchange with others. In such speaking/thinking/writing, we never fully know what we are going to say before we say/think/write it. The Mindings Collage presupposes that that is a good, right, and proper thing that needs to be allowed, encouraged, and guided by standards set by the mind itself.

The Mindings Collage culminates my life-long career of wrestling with matters of mind, not in abstracted terms but as a teacher of writing in a state university (UNC Charlotte). That career began with my writing a doctoral dissertation, during which I solicited and received generous responses from Michael Polanyi and William Poteat. I was not one of Poteat’s students, but he became one of my lifelong mentors through direct conversation and letters, through reading his books and articles, and through extended conversation with his former students. I always saw myself primarily and most importantly as a classroom teacher. But in my academic practices and limited scholarship (see References) I always was asking how the teaching of writing in higher education could and should serve actual persons, via the paradigm shift from a critical sensibility to a post-critical sensibility which Polanyi and Poteat have done so much to bring about. As a colleague says, “We are giving ourselves permission to begin before we are finished.”

Beginning a Mindings Collage: Commonplaces

For colleagues and students, commonplaces have proven a good entry to a Mindings Collage of one’s own. A commonplace begins with a quotation, but it should also briefly record whatever response the reader finds her/himself having. Below are some of my own favorite quotes; you are invited to read among them, until you come to one which seems especially to be speaking to you. Then jot whatever response you find yourself having to that quote. Even this brief reading/responding is likely to remind you of something else—maybe a question you find yourself having, or an experience you’ve had in the past, or something you’d like to do in the future, or another quote that has been brought back to your mind, or someone you’d like to write or call, or.... Jot that too.

If it blows up, it's chemistry.
If it has one right answer, it's mathematics.
If it dies, it's biology.
If it's unfinished, it's writing.

—Anonymous

My task as a teacher is not to teach students how to think but to help them recognize when they are doing it.

—Dixie Dellinger

I spend a lot of time in writing classes, and they have a thing about “discourses” and teaching various theories. Not as much on conversation, interaction, dialogue and actual discourse (as opposed to teaching theories of discourse). Students have things to say, but they are told to say what they don't have to say.

—Henry Doss (May '14)

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them.

—William Stafford

Angels can fly, because they take themselves so lightly.

—G. K. Chesterton

Just because you don't see nothing, doesn't mean that nothing is not there.

—The Glorious Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Pocket Rd.,
Florence, SC

Before the beginning of great brilliance, there must be chaos. Before a brilliant person begins something great, they must look foolish to the crowd.

—*I Ching*

All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable, which makes you see something you weren't noticing, which makes you see something that isn't even visible.

—Norman MacLean

Through speech a person dramatically identifies himself with potential acts and deeds; he plays many roles, not in successive stages of life but in a contemporaneously enacted drama. Thus mind emerges.

—John Dewey

We students are always looking for others to do the hard work for us while we relax and read their solutions, rather than attacking the problem ourselves and coming up with our own solutions.

—Anonymous student, ENGL 1101 37, Fall 1994

We write to find out what we know and what we want to say...I thought of how often the act of writing even the simplest document—a letter for instance—has clarified my half-formed ideas. Writing and thinking and learning were the same process.

—William Zinsser

That is why I started to write. To save myself. I realized that no one could save me but myself. The prison authorities were both uninterested and unable to help me. I had to seek out the truth and unravel the snarled web of my motivations. I had to find out who I am and what I want to be, what type of man I should be, and what I could do to become the best of which I was capable.

—Eldridge Cleaver

Education is a matter of placing oneself in a position from which it is impossible to escape without thinking.

—Unknown

Through writing one can continually bring new selves into being, each with new responsibilities and difficulties, but also with new possibilities. Remarkable power, indeed. I write and continually give birth to myself.

—Barbara Mellix

It's hard to do wonderful things in a vacuum.

—Ruth Nathan

Language is the mother, not the handmaiden, of thought; words will tell you things you never thought or felt before.

—W. H. Auden

Education replaces cocksure ignorance with thoughtful uncertainty.

—Unknown

When we discover that we have in this world no earth or rock to stand or walk upon but only shifting sand and sky and wind, the mature response is not to lament the loss of fixity but to learn to sail.

—James Boyd White

It seems like in all my lecture classes people just write exactly what the teacher says instead of listening to what the professor is trying to get across. No one uses their minds in class.

—Anonymous student, ENGL 1101 37, Fall 1994

Socrates, and later Arcesilaus, first had their disciples speak, and then they spoke to them.

—Montaigne

Thinking is quite as incarnate and local as everything else we do.

—William H. Poteat

Mental reflection is so much more interesting than TV it's a shame more people don't switch over to it. They probably think what they hear is unimportant but it never is.

—Robert Pirsig

Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.

—Mikhail Bakhtin

Writing—as is also the case with speaking—however they may differ—is an act of exploration and conquest, launched into the public world from within my mindbody in its convivial ambience *in order that I may discover* what I sense, perceive, remember, understand, and believe.

—William H. Poteat

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. . . . The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Any delay caused by dialogue—in reality a fictitious delay—means time saved in firmness, in self-confidence, and confidence in others, which anti-dialogue cannot offer.

—Paulo Friere

Becoming conscious of the myths we are living means really examining our own lives and asking the deepest questions. I don't pretend to know all the questions that we must ask ourselves in this process, but I do want to make three suggestions. A good place to start is with the question, "What are my gifts?" This is related to a second question, "What is it that gives me joy?" Joy is very different from pleasure or happiness because joy involves struggle and pain as well as triumph. And the third question—one that is particularly important to me—is, "At what point is there an intersection between my gifts and the needs of the world?"

—Sam Keen

The process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic, and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in light of which we approach it; a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis.

—Michael Polanyi

Mindings Collage: Rationale and Directions to Students

First, a word about "minding." It's an old-fashioned word. We used to talk of "minding the store" (or the house, or the horse, or the baby). It meant something like "looking out after," doing whatever was needful to protect and nurture, to cultivate, to be a worthy steward of the entrusted talents. "Minding" was kin to another old-fashioned word, "husbandry" (which could apply to either sex). "Husbandry" was a matter of good stewardship too; it also meant marshalling your resources to whatever worthy end. For instance future farmers used to major in "animal husbandry," something that any horse-whisperer clearly still practices. (These days I suppose that future farmers major in something like "agricultural science"—a loss, I believe.)

Our "mindings" are a matter, really, of each of us cultivating our own mind, of our representing and encouraging some "movements of mind" which also exercise mind and, like any good exercise, strengthen it. We're "minding our minds," if you will or maybe even "making up our minds." What could possibly be more worthy of our attention, our exercise?

Because we're humans, we live largely in language. So, we've begun by asking what it might be to lead a literate life, and we're seeing it's partly a life you live "behind the

scenes” of what a public will read; it’s a matter of “wallowing in complexities,” of spinning, between yourself and what’s beyond yourself, tentative threads that may be as thin as a spider’s—and as strong; over time weaving many of those threads with and against each other until they become the fabric of a text or an idea strong enough for you to stand and act upon. Think of your Mindings Collage as your own “scribal place” (a place of places, actually), an arena within which you allow yourself to make messes, where you uncover thoughts you may not have been aware of having and connections (and disconnects) among your thoughts, where you reach out toward other persons and toward parts of the world which draw your interests. It is your arena, to mind and exercise the workings of your distinctive mind.

Whatever yours may become, a “Mindings Collage” is not a “paper.” A “paper” may be neat, orderly, with all stray thoughts tucked tidily out of sight (or it may not be). Think of your Mindings Collage instead as a web; indeed, you might think of its pages as places within a web; to put the whole thing on computer might be an interesting way to go (see diagram on next page). What’s important, is that you feel perfectly free to play back and forth between these parts as your mind goes (it may be that such “movings between” is what “creativity” is all about, or even “thinking”). You may well find that something you’re writing in one place reminds you (notice that word, “re-minds.” Wow!) of something you’d like to jot in quite another place. Do It! You may be writing a letter to a friend (*Between you and me*) when it reminds you of something in your own background (*Where I’m coming from*) that you’re bringing to this interest. So, jump to that place and add what you’ve just been reminded of. Do it! Or you may be reading something (*My readings*) when you see a reference to something else you might want to read. So, jump to *Moving toward*; record that reference, with a quick note about why it might be interesting. Do it! Now! And so on.

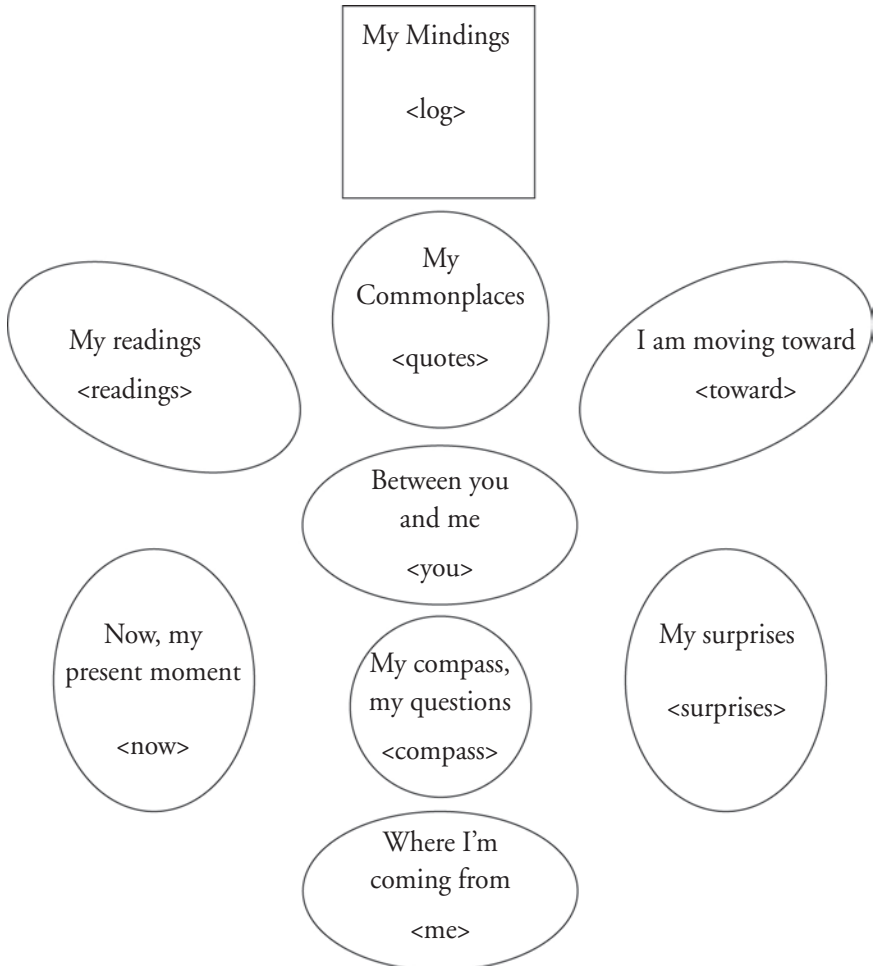
What’s important is to follow and further the movements of your own mind. And to do it, not in the far reaches of some ever-receding future, but now. That’s the watchword: Do it, now! Because “now” has a nasty habit of becoming “then” (or “never”)! I’m asking you to do several things:

- Spend some fifteen minutes of concentrated time, every day, writing in your collage.
- At the beginning of anything you write, put that day’s date.
- Where writing in a collage place leads you to jump to a different one, jot a note (at the end of what you’ve just written in the first place) indicating what place you’re jumping to.
- Follow directions for Log under “Pages of the Collage.” (Actually, they’re more accurately “places.”)
- Bring your Mindings Collage to our class sessions. At times you will be working with yours in class, individually, in pairs, or in small groups. You will never be

asked to share anything you choose not to. Twice during the semester you will leave your Mindings Collage with me, accompanied by a reflective letter which guides me through your work. Please tape shut any entries that for whatever reason you want me NOT to see. I will respond with a letter to you. Your course grade will NOT be based on your Mindings Collage. However, you MUST keep your Mindings Collage complete and up to date, in order to PASS the course.

The “Mindings Collage” requires some daily modicum of mental discipline and scribal exercise, encouraging you to become both more attentive to (and appreciative of) the movements of your own distinctive mind and more fluent as your mind and your words more deeply connect. The one teacher you really must have is yourself.

Pages of the Collage



Think of these “pages” as varied “places.” Following are brief descriptions of what each might be good for, the “movement(s) of mind” that each might represent and encourage. You may find yourself creating additional pages—good! But if you do that, at some point do write a brief description (as I am doing here) of the particular sort(s) of mental movements that page represents and encourages.

The order of the pages below is largely arbitrary. The descriptions of each page are merely well-intended suggestions, not “rules” of any sort. Over time you’ll probably find yourself adapting various pages to fit your own habits of mind or even creating some quite different pages of your own. Fine! Do it!

<Log> **My mindings.** As you *end* each Collage session, *be sure* to jot a one-line Log entry: (1) the date, (2) the page(s) where you have just been working. You may also want to jot a note (3) briefly indicating the subject(s) of your Mindings Collage work for that day, but that is *optional*.

<i>date</i>	<i>page(s)</i>	<i>subjects(s) (optional)</i>
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<now> **Now, my present moment.** Some days, you may need to start by just settling down, settling into the present moment of your life, your mind, your Mindings Collage. On those days, here’s where to start, and maybe to stay. Or maybe you’ll be moving from here to another place in your Mindings Collage.

<compass> **My compass, my quest(ion)(s).** Your compass records the interests, the questions, you find yourself following and developing. A compass is a wondrously useful and reliable instrument; we use it to keep our bearings as we move into unfamiliar territories. But a compass is also a remarkably delicate instrument. Its needle can spin wildly; it can be jiggled away from true north or drawn to some other magnetic fields. In the Collage, your compass consists of your statement(s) of interests you discover. Not that you should spend all that much time gazing at your compass, but that you should rely upon the compass, to guide you into unfamiliar territories beyond (and within) yourself. A compass guides us on a quest, and often statements of our interests take the form of questions, which reshape and refine themselves over time. That is as it should be. *“A good question is half a discovery” (Michael Polanyi.)*

<me> **Where I’m coming from.** What in your background (your experiences, your feelings, your thinking) is informing a particular interest you have? In other words, just who are you, in the context of that interest? As you work, you may well realize other things about yourself that you hadn’t thought of at first. That is as it should be, and this is the place to record and reflect.

<you> **Between you and me.** As you sustain an interest, one of the most valuable things you can do is to write letters to a friend, whether you ever send that letter or meet that person. A friend is someone with whom you share something of an important interest.

<toward> **I am moving toward.** *Move confidently in the direction of your dreams. (H. D. Thoreau).* This is the place for dreams (the sort where you imagine yourself toward a future), little hopes (a book you've heard of, that you might like to read? a person you'd like to talk with?), and for plans (moving toward as major? a career? a paper you're working toward?) Most generally, "moving toward" is a place for *setting directions*, large and small, and for *exploring*.

<quotes> **My commonplaces.** From your reading (or sometimes your listening) you come across quotations you'd like to keep for the future. Here's where to jot them down, along with a brief reflection on what that quote is saying to you or what questions it is leading you to ask.

<i>the quote</i>	<i>my response</i>

<readings> **My readings.** "Reading" can mean many different things, but it usually needs to be more than just "absorbing;" it's more than letting your eyes pass passively over print. Here is where to *interact* with the readings you are doing, from within a particular text or between different ones. At times, your left column might be "something I understand" and your right one "something I don't understand."

<i>from the text</i>	<i>from me</i>

<surprises> **My Surprises.** They come in many shapes and sizes, as you open your eyes and become ever more "observative" of what you're looking at directly and of what comes to you from "the corner of the eye." Sometimes it's a specific something you notice in the world, sometimes it's something about yourself you hadn't quite realized before. Here's where to take brief note of your surprises, the big ones and the little ones too.

NOTE: *what you have just read are the guidelines given to my students. I trust it is clear that the Mindings Collage is not a panacea. Like anything else, it can be a gimmick, a mere school exercise engaged as thoughtlessly—as mindlessly—as*

possible. What mitigates against that, in my experience, is my respect for students' privacy and my engaging with them individually, in person and in our written exchanges, as a person myself rather than as an authority only. A person of mature mind may read the Mindings Collage guidelines for students and say, "But these are movements my mind already makes, habitually." Of course! That is the point! The Mindings Collage is merely a web of prompts, encouraging its users to move toward maturity as responsible, engaged persons. How does it actually work for students? That, I trust students to say. "The last word should be theirs" (Sam Watson).

The Last Word: Reflections from Students

(Quoted with students' permission; the first five, from first-year students; the others from upper-division or graduates)

When I first began the Mindings Collage, I wasn't expecting it to mature me in the way that it did. I really feel like a grown person, and I don't think that I would've without the Mindings Collage. My mind has a different way of thinking now, and I am not the only one who can see this change in me.

The Mindings Collage has meant a lot to everyone I've talked to. Not only was it academic, it was personal. The collage allowed us to explore and research something that we have been wondering about for a long time.

In <My Compass My Questions> I would write about questions that I had. They were just ordinary questions that I would just pick up from day to day that would always, in some way or other, reappear. By jotting down my questions I would keep going over it. Eventually I got some of them answered. Maybe that is why I liked it so much.

I love to write to my friends that I don't get to talk to, or ask one of them a question, and somehow I can imagine their responses in <between you and me>. But I absolutely love my <commonplaces>. I have always been fascinated with quotes, and this is where I can talk about them.

I had to first learn how to write about myself before I could feel confident writing about something else. My work with the Mindings Collage greatly changed my daily musings from the way that I wrote with the original mindings. I can now center my thoughts on one

topic and concentrate in that area, where before my thoughts were random and vague. I centered my collage around my interest in anthropology. I already knew that I would stick to my decision to major in anthropology, but I didn't know why I made the decision in the first place. I knew where I was going; I wanted to understand where I was coming from.

I watched my mind in action. Instead of preconceiving entries for my collage, I watched the working of my mind unfold before my eyes. What seemed chaotic and messy with a first glance is actually capturing my mind's sorting through information, seeking answers, asking new questions, and making connections. I understand more about how my mind works than before. For example, I noticed that the entries in my collage tended to resist structure. I noticed that when I was thinking most deeply, I wrote in fragments and jumped from this point to that point.

One question leads to another. One discovery prompts another. My mind, and thus my writing, is branching out into thoughts and ideas that come from me... This side of my literate life allows me to teach myself... The Mindings Collage showed me that I can be my own teacher and that I have the ability to look at something, analyze and to express that in the medium of writing... The collage has become the haven for my thoughts and the grounding for my ideas.

The collage has become a wonderful place for me to be a little crazy with my writing... Because I was reading two really good books during this time, I put lots of quotes from them in the <readings> and <quotes> sections. I tried to find quotes that really turned me on, and then let my mind fly in various directions. I found my mind going from these quotes to all of the other sections of my collage.

My greatest discovery with the collage is that it made me more aware of everything around me. I found myself constantly looking for scrap paper, because I would have a thought, or see something that I wanted to put in my collage. I began to pull over in my car, or stop what I was doing to write down a thought because I quickly realized that later I wouldn't remember it... I can't say enough about the ability it has given me to write from places I never knew.

By early October, the Mindings Collage began to serve as more than just a sounding board of my ideas and thoughts and philosophies. It had evolved into a notebook of research, of projects I could explore, of actions I could take to develop my interest, and of specific ways to improve my world of teaching and writing and learning and thinking...I feel like the categories we were given made me think, really think, about how I process information, dialogue, texts, conversations, words in my world. It taught me to make connections between things I had normally discarded or kept segregated from each other...like how two books I am engaged in, speak to each other (one required for academics and one fiction for pleasure), or how my correspondence with others (email to friends, classmates, students, parents) reflects who I am and what I believe in, sometimes unintentionally; or how my own personal literacy history directly affects the way I teach others to be literate...The collage houses ideas and keeps them safe and ready to be developed into one day, maybe, a deeper thought, an expanded paper, a developed thesis, a changed methodology, and ultimately, an improved world.

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