Indexing commonplace books: John Locke’s method

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An outline of John Locke’s method of indexing commonplace books, which can be seen as a significant contribution to the emergence of modern indexing principles.

[Thomas] Gray initially attempted to keep his notebooks in the manner first recommended by the philosopher John Locke in his writings on education. According to Locke’s method, subjects were filed in an index prefixed to each volume by respectively, first letter and first vowel.1

This quotation, cited in the October 2000 issue of The Indexer, raises some intriguing questions. How were commonplace books organized? And what precisely was John Locke’s method of indexing them? In this article, I attempt to answer those questions and also to show that John Locke’s method of indexing commonplace books, despite having a number of features that appear peculiar to a modern indexer’s eyes, was significant in contributing to the emergence of modern indexing principles during the 18th century, before their codification in the late 19th and the 20th centuries.

The tradition of commonplace books

Of the various meanings of ‘commonplace’, the applicable one is ‘a notable passage or quotation entered in a book for future use’.2 This usage is recorded as early as the mid-16th century. John Locke lived from 1632 to 1704, and Thomas Gray from 1716 to 1761; so it seems clear that the habit of keeping commonplace books was a standard scholarly technique over several centuries, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. It persists in literary circles even today.

Classical and Renaissance authors offered advice on how to collect words and passages under various topoi or loci (places) as a means of storing extracts from books that could later be brought together and embellished in either writing or conversation. The sets of ideas or themes grouped under one ‘Head’ were known as ‘commonplaces’, and the notebooks kept for this purpose were commonplace books. (Yeo, 2001: 104)

Joan Marie Lechner has shown that commonplace books were kept as aids to recall reading and as storehouses (thesauri) of topics and phrases suitable for speeches and conversation, as recommended by Erasmus and others. However, Lechner noted a new need partly satisfied by the commonplace collections – they accommodated Renaissance passions for ‘accumulating universal knowledge’: ‘the commonplace book with its encyclopaedic array of topics or places was thought of as a compend of knowledge displayed in a systematic pattern of some kind and producing a “circle” of learning or a unity of the arts and sciences’. (Yeo, 2001: 105)

In this way, the commonplace books kept by individuals provided a pattern for the published, alphabetically arranged dictionaries of the arts and sciences, and the encyclopaedias that were to become such important products and strong symbols of the 18th-century Enlightenment.

That great reference work, Ephraim Chambers’s Cyclopaedia, first published in 1728, and the precursor of all western vernacular encyclopaedias, gives this description of the commonplace tradition:

COMMON-PLACE Book, Adversaria, among the learned, denotes a register, or orderly collection of what things occur worthy to be noted, and retained in the course of a man’s reading or study; so disposed, as that among a multiplicity of heads, and things of all kinds, any one may be easily found and turned to at pleasure.

Common-place-books are things of great service: they are a kind of promptuaries or storehouses, wherein to reposit the choicest and most valuable parts of authors, to be ready at hand when wanted. (Chambers, 1751)4

Clearly, commonplace books were more than collections of curious quotations. They were personal summaries of scientific, literary, religious and other knowledge, in a time when communication, publication and libraries were conducted much more by individuals than by institutions.

Locke’s commonplace method

Chambers recommended – and Gray followed – Locke’s method for keeping a commonplace book, as set out in his A New Method of a Common-Place Book, first published in French in 1687 and then, posthumously, in an English translation in 1706. This pamphlet offered a way of making a commonplace book for which ‘an index of two pages is sufficient’. Locke explained that:

If I would put any thing in my Common-Place-Book, I find out a Head to which I may refer it. Each Head ought to be some important and essential Word to the matter in hand, and in that Word regard is to be had to the first Letter, and the Vowel that follows it; for upon these two Letters depend all the use of the Index. (Yeo, 2001: 111)5

As Yeo (2001: 112) points out, this was, in fact, a method for making an index to a commonplace book.

Locke’s method was described in some detail in Chambers’s Cyclopaedia:

Several persons have their several methods of ordering them: but that which comes best recommended, and which many
learned men have now given into, is the method of the great master of order Mr. Locke. He has thought fit to publish it in a letter to M. Toisnard; determined thereto, by the great convenience and advantage he had found from it in 20 years experience; as well as by the recommendations and intreaties of many of his friends, who has likewise proved it.

The substance of this method we shall here give the reader; whereby he will be easily enabled to execute it himself.

The first page of the book you intend to take down their common-places in, is to serve as a kind of index to the whole; and to contain references to every place or matter, therein: in the commodious contrivance of which index, so as it may admit of a sufficient copia, or variety of materials, without any confusion; all the secret of the method consists.

In order to this, the first page, as already mentioned, or, for more room, the two first pages that front each other, are to be divided, by parallel lines, into 25 equal parts; whereof, every fifth line is to be distinguished, by its colour, or some other circumstance. These lines are to be cut perpendicularly by others, drawn from top to bottom; and in the several spaces thereof, the several letters of the alphabet, both capital and minuscule, are to be duly written.

The form of the lines and divisions, both horizontal and perpendicular, with the manner of writing the letters therein, will be conceived from the following specimen; wherein what is to be done in the book for all the letters of the alphabet, is here shewn in the first four, A, B, C, and D.

The index of the common-place book thus formed, matters are ready for the taking down of any thing therein.

In order to this, consider to what head, the thing you would enter is most naturally referred; and under which, one would be led to look for such a thing; in this head, or word, regard is had to the initial letter, and the first vowel that follows it; which are the characteristic letters whereon all the use of the index depends.

Suppose, e.g. I would enter down a passage that refers to the head beauty; B, I consider, is the initial letter, and e the first vowel: then, looking upon the index for the partition B, and therein the line e (which is the place for all words whose first letter is B, and first vowel e; as Beauty, Beneficence, Bread, Bleeding, Blemishes, &c.), and finding no numbers already down to direct me to any page of the book where words of this character have been entered, I turn forward to the first blank page I find, which in a fresh book, as this is supposed to be, will be page 2. and here I now write what I have occasion for on the head beauty; beginning the head in the margin, and indenting all the other subservient lines, that the head may stand out, and shew itself: this done, I enter the page where it is written, viz. 2. in the index, in the space B e; from which time, the class B e becomes wholly in possession of the 2d and 3d pages, which are consigned to letters of this characteristic.

Had I found any page or number already entered in the space B e, I must have turned to the page, and have written my matter in what room was left therein: so, if after entering the passage on beauty, I should have occasion for benevolence, or the like, finding the number 2 already possessed of the space of this characteristic, I begin the passage on benevolence in the remainder of the page; which not containing the whole, I carry it on to page 3. which is also for B e, and add the number 3 in the index. (Chambers, 1751)

Chambers goes on to give an example of entries for ‘Beauty’ and ‘Benevolence’. Each extract is given in quotation marks, followed by references to sources, such as:

Inquiry into Original of our Ideas of Beauty, &c. 8vo. Lond. 1725.
p.10, 11, 12
Idem ib. p.130, 131, 143, 199

Chambers’s description of Locke’s method continues in the following way:

When the two pages destined for one class are full, look forwards for the next backside that is blank; if it be that which immediately follows, write at the bottom of the margin of the page filled, the letter v. for vertce, turn over; and the same at the top of the next page; and continue from this new page as before. If the pages immediately following be already filled with other classes, then write at the bottom of the page last filled the letter v. with the number of the next blank page; and at the top of that page, the number of the page last filled: then entering that head in this new page, proceed as before. By these two numbers of reference, the one at the top, and the other at the bottom of the page, the discontinued matters are again connected. It may not be amiss, too, every time you put a number at the bottom of a page, to put it likewise in the index. (Chambers, 1751)

Some peculiar features of the alphabetical system are also described:

Note, if the head be a monosyllable beginning with a vowel, the vowel is at the same time both the initial letter and the characteristic vowel: thus, the word art is to be wrote in A a. Mr Locke omits three letters of the alphabet in his index, viz. K, Y and W; which are supplied by C, I, U, equivalent to them: and as for Q, since it is always followed by an u, he puts it in the fifth place of Z; and so has no Z u, which is a characteristic very rarely occurs. By thus making Q the last in the index, its regularity is preserved, without diminishing its extent. Others choose to retain the class Z u, and assign a place for Q u below the index. (Chambers, 1751)

Following contemporary practice, Locke and Chambers assume that I and J will be interfiled, and also treat U and V as the same letter. This can lead to some sequences that are bizarre to modern eyes. Consider this run, from Harris’s Lexicon Technicum (1704):

![Figure 1. John Locke's index for a commonplace book in the entry for 'Common-Place-Book', in Ephraim Chambers, Cyclopaedia, 2nd edn, London: D. Midwinter, 1738, volume I.](image-url)
Vortex
Voucher
Voydance
Upright South Dyals
Urachus
Uvigena
Vulgar Fractions
Vultur Volans
Uvula

And this, from the first edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1777):

Involution
Joachimites
Joanna
Job
Jobber
Logus
John
Lonia
Jonk
Jpecacuanha

Yet this practice, unhelpful as it may seem to us, persisted long enough for Wheatley, as late as 1878, to make the rule:

Indexes should be arranged in alphabetical order, proper names and subjects being united in one alphabet. An introduction should be prefixed. I.J.U/V to be distinguished. (Lee, 1999: 31)\(^8\)

But does Locke’s method provide enough alphabetical differentiation for heads in a large commonplace book? Chambers, following Locke, assures us that it does:

If any imagine, that those hundred classes are not sufficient to comprehend all kinds of subjects without confusion, he may follow the same method, and yet augment the number to 500, by taking in one more characteristic to them. But the inventor assures us, that in his collections, for a long series of years, he never found any deficiency in the index, as above laid down. (Chambers, 1751)

In fact, what the inventor did was to keep a number of separate commonplace books, each devoted to what we would think of as a different discipline (see below).

Yeo provides another example of Locke’s method:

Material was . . . recorded in the book on pages occupied by other Heads having the same initial letter and first vowel. For example, Locke listed ‘Ebionitae, Episcopus, Echinus, Efficacia’ as Heads that might be found in the same part of his commonplace book. (Yeo, 2001: 112)\(^7\)

Note that these Heads are in Latin, while Chambers’s examples of the application of Locke’s method uses English-language heads.

Locke’s practice

Serious scholars, like Locke, kept more than one commonplace book, so a system of as many as 500 classes to accommodate the heads would be unnecessary.

Locke’s suggestion of using ‘a Book for each Science upon which one makes Collections’ is relevant here. He specified three such separate notebooks designated for natural philosophy, moral knowledge and a third domain which he called ‘the Knowledge of Signs’. This reflected his preferred classification of knowledge, given in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), but at the same time it released each commonplace book (and its maker) from the responsibility of using only large conceptual Heads. (Yeo, 2001: 113)\(^8\)

Locke specified three books, but he himself kept a greater number of commonplace books and gave titles to at least six of them, such as one devoted to medicine (Yeo, 2001: 113, n. 49).\(^9\)

The emergence of indexing principles

What light does Locke’s method throw on the emergence of modern indexing principles, long before their first systematic expression by Cutter and Wheatley?\(^10\) Here, I comment briefly on how his method compares with some modern principles and techniques.

Alphabetical order

The particular alphabetical system that Locke recommends appears extraordinary, and its artificiality detracts from the major advantage of alphabetical arrangement, namely, the ease with which the order of a comparatively small number of letters may be learned, remembered, and become almost intuitive. But if the advantages of the strict application of alphabetical order had not yet been perceived, Locke’s method is significant in that it gave scholarly respectability to any sort of alphabetical system.

Encyclopaedic reference works of the middle ages and the Renaissance were thematically, if not systematically, arranged, and rarely used alphabetical presentation, though they did sometimes append alphabetical finding aids. By 1700, systematically arranged reference books were beginning to give way to a new range of works in alphabetical format, first in French and later in English: historical and biographical dictionaries; the predecessors of the modern language dictionary; and dictionaries of the arts and sciences, which developed into the modern alphabetical encyclopaedia.

But these works were alphabetically arranged, not alphabetically indexed. The need for an alphabetical index to a work already alphabetically arranged was recognized only gradually. One of the earliest to think this way was John Harris, who knew that his alphabetically arranged Lexicon could be improved. In the volume of 1704 he apologized for not being able to supply ‘at the End of the Book, a particular Alphabet for each Art and Science by it self’ (Harris, 1704: preface). He remedied this defect in the 1710 volume and, while it is not quite a modern index, it is moving towards it.

Locke, by suggesting an alphabetical index to a collection in random order, laid the groundwork for the development of later alphabetical indexes.

Choice of headings: specific entry

There is a clear movement, both in Locke’s practice in choosing headings and in his recommended method, away from the broad categories (‘Heads’) of his predecessors towards the specific headings that are now standard.

. . . while Locke followed the commonplace tradition of grouping passages under Heads, there are indications of potential departures from it in his pamphlet. The suggestion that 500 Heads could be accommodated by the index – even though Locke reported that his own reading never demanded this expansion – does anticipate an open-ended practice in which the Heads

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chosen could be of a more personal or arbitrary character than the categories used in Renaissance commonplace books. While Locke did endorse the importance of finding ‘a proper Head’, the examples he cited do not suggest large categories from a philosophical classification of knowledge. For example, Ann Moss suggests that particular examples – Ebionites, Acheron, Haeretici – may have been part of a defence of religious toleration: that is, they were notes on a topic of interest to Locke, but were not explicitly ‘mapped on to any pre-existing conceptual grid’. (Yeo, 2001: 112–13)\textsuperscript{11}

In the early-18th-century dictionaries of arts and sciences, the immediate public demonstrations of Locke’s method, specific headings became fully established.

This possibility of a separation of the commonplace method from its earlier nexus with systematic ordering of knowledge is apparent in Chambers’ own favourable gloss on Locke’s method. Thus, of the examples of Heads he gave — ‘Beauty, Benevolence, Bread, Bleeding, Blemishes etc’ — the last three do not belong to the standard repertoire of moral, theological and philosophical topics, but rather to medicine or natural history — subjects that Locke no doubt anticipated when he advised using ‘a Book for each Science’. (Yeo, 2001: 113)

Natural language

As already quoted above, Locke stated:

\begin{quote}
If I would put any thing in my Common-Place-Book, I find out a Head to which I may refer it. Each Head ought to be some important and essential Word to the matter in hand. (Yeo, 2001: 111)\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Here, and in many other statements by Locke on language, there is some recognition of the importance of usage and natural language in the choice of Heads. Chambers considered but (unlike others of his time, such as Leibniz) rejected the idea of an artificial language, and made Locke’s theory of language the philosophical framework of the Cyclopaedia (see Yeo, 2001: 158). The choice of headings in Chambers’ work provides excellent illustrations of contemporary English usage.

Syndetic structure

While there are no cross-references in Locke’s method, there is an extensive system of links, between the index and the full text, and between separated and scattered sections of related text. The thoroughgoing exploitation of what we would now recognize as see and see also references did not come until Chambers’s remarkable and really extensive use of cross-references in his 1728 Cyclopaedia. This unique feature was one of the most important factors in the success of this publication.

Locators

One curious feature, most significant for the history of indexing, is that Locke’s method includes (as it must) a page numbering system. Harris’s Lexicon (1704) and Chambers’s Cyclopaedia (1728) do not; they are arranged in alphabetical order, and their cross-referencing and indexing systems work well enough, referring to Heads as locators. But by the end of the 18th century, page numbering had become the norm (e.g. it appears in the first edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1777) and locators were available for more accurate and economical systems of scholarly citation, cross-referencing and indexing.

Locke’s influence

Locke’s method can be credited with laying the groundwork for later advances. In providing scholarly respectability for an alphabetical method, and in moving towards the use of specific entry and natural language, he provided some guidelines for the successful Enlightenment dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

It is difficult to imagine how Harris and Chambers, those great single-handed compilers, editors and writers of large encyclopaedias, could have managed the task if they had not themselves maintained extensive collections of commonplace books of the type Locke recommends.

The same indexing principles that emerged in the structure and arrangement of 18th-century reference books and encyclopaedias\textsuperscript{13} re-emerged nearly two centuries after Locke’s Method first appeared, when the first systematic rules for indexing were written.

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My thanks to Richard Yeo, Associate Professor (Reader) in the School of Humanities, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, whose Encyclopaedic visions: scientific dictionaries and Enlightenment culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) I had the pleasure of indexing. This work and its author stimulated my interest in the development of indexing principles, particularly as seen in the organization of the reference books of the 18th century, with their roots in the tradition of commonplace books. My debt to him is obvious from my frequent reference to his work in this article. Thanks to him and to Cambridge University Press for permission to quote from his book.

Notes

10. Charles Ami Cutter’s Rules for a dictionary catalog, first published in 1876, was (in my opinion) the first codification of modern indexing principles, and remains important for all types of indexing. The first systematic text on book indexing, Henry Benjamin Wheatley’s What is an Index? was published in 1878 and his How to make an index in 1902.
13. The themes of the emergence of indexing principles in 18th-century reference books and encyclopaedias will be discussed in a subsequent article.

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Index makers

No. 8 Gertrude Boyle

Gertrude Boyle was chief catalogueer of the Toronto Public Reference Library, where for 30 years or more she trained most of the catalogueers in Canada. After retirement, in 1953 she undertook the indexing of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s notebooks: a million words or more being divided into five volumes and edited with copious notes by Professor Kathleen Coburn. In her wholly delightful account of her work on the Coleridge manuscripts, *In pursuit of Coleridge* (Bodley Head, 1977), Coburn writes of her indexer:

A fierce little lady with minute hands and feet that somehow raced over files or floor with startling rapidity, she had a splendid intolerance of inaccuracy – Coleridge’s, mine, and everyone else’s. We had great fun, some hot and bothered times, exasperated, weary times, but her goodwill and determination never flagged. At first her stern Puritan upbringings, or perhaps just a personal reserve, made her critical of one she regularly referred to as ‘Mr Coleridge’. Why did ‘Mr Coleridge’ want to write down on paper, even for himself, all the things he did write? However, after a few months I heard that she was offering to others my arguments for the defence, and that her friends were setting conversational traps simply to provoke her into doing so. One day when I was driving her home in a thick blizzard through slow traffic that gave opportunity for ample talk, she made a characteristically honest confession of the softening influence of STC on her. In reporting someone’s misfortunes or mistakes or unhappiness of some kind, she said, ‘Well, it’s really all her own fault . . .’ and then stopped herself short. ‘Oh, no,’ she said, ‘that’s not true’. With a sheepish smile she turned to look me in the eye. ‘Thanks to Mr Coleridge I don’t think in that way any more.’

Perhaps a professional indexer (not the same breed as a cataloguer), given a free hand, would have prepared a better index. Some decisions taken then I should not take now. But the process Gertrude Boyle put me through in coming to the principles and practices we arrived at was more than worth the agony. She saved me, as good indexers do, from many slips, oversights, and downright errors. Illness overtook her towards the end of her work on Volume Two, since when the indexing has been less provocative.

Later she wrote:

The years of the proofs [1955–6] were also prime for the index. As it was the first indexing of [STC’s] notebooks, and therefore would set a pattern for the five volumes, decisions were legion, and crucial, and because of my inexperience, they had to be made and remade. The patience of my doughty little indexer was often stretched but never exhausted, and she gave that kind of stern support that only a conscientious indexer can give, correcting my errors or laziness, insisting on decisions when I thought I was too busy to make them, and generally sparing neither herself nor me in the interest of her ‘Mr Coleridge’. I remember the June night when over the telephone in the late hours we realized that the printer’s copy of the index must be marked by us to indicate that certain classes of numerals had to be printed in a special font of type. We decided to put a tick against these figures – a considerable task in an index that eventually in print ran to a hundred and thirty pages. Next morning Gertrude was up at 5 a.m. ‘ticking’. When I left at 10.30 a.m. to catch a plane for London she was, she said, ‘still ticking’. A pint-size stalwart, at the time of writing this chapter she was a sprightly eighty-year-old, still ticking cheerfully, an encouragement to all her friends. The ticking is now silenced; the encouragement remains.

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Hazel K. Bell, Hatfield