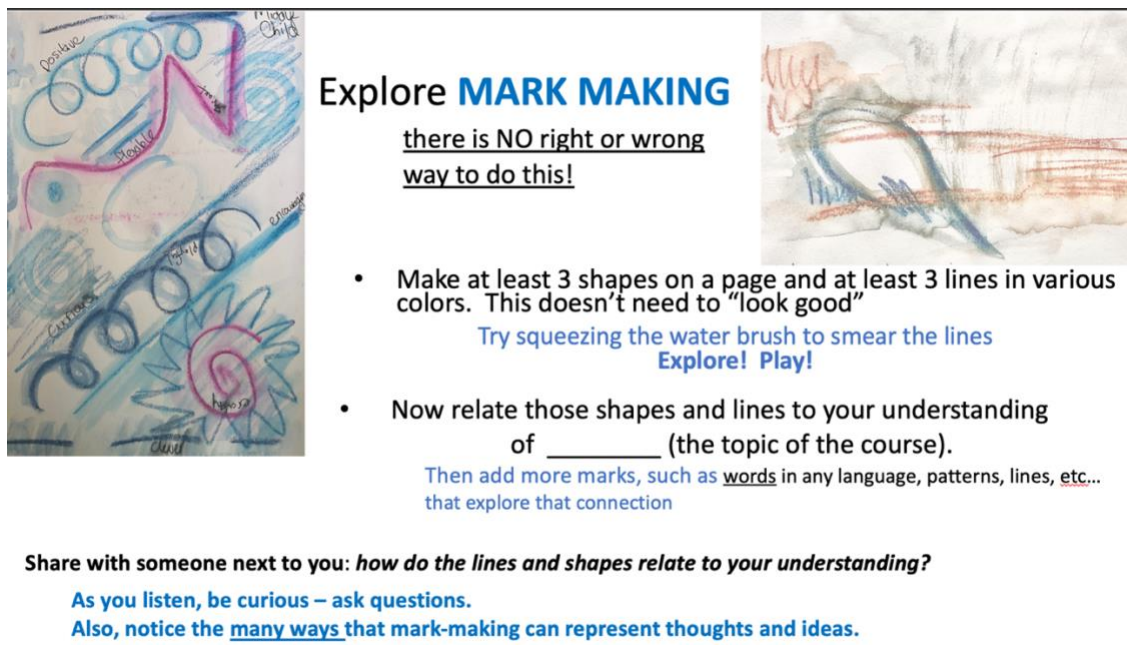


## Possibility Books for faculty at Colorado College

A critical element of C&I's curricular work is equipping faculty members with specific creativity practices and tools they can quickly adapt to their courses. Possibility Books (PB) exemplify a highly successful initiative that embeds creativity sustainably into courses.<sup>1</sup> PB represents a pedagogical approach that privileges creative, non-traditional education methods. Students (and instructors) are provided with a notebook and materials to respond to carefully crafted and sequenced prompts. This daily practice emphasizes visual note-taking and expressive mark-making instead of reflecting with words or drawings.

Possibility Books start with a series of PowerPoint slides containing simple strategies for students to access creative and visual thinking through prompts that explicitly ask students to practice C&I's six creativity mindsets: possibility thinking, openness, unexpected connections, tolerance of ambiguity, willingness to take risks, and curiosity. Starting on the first day of class, a faculty member presents one slide for ten minutes at the beginning of each class; half of that time is for reflection and the other half allows students to share thoughts with one other student. While the first few slides (see Figure 1) have a specific scope and sequence, the faculty member can then adapt PB for each course. It is essential to note that PB are not graded or evaluated but offer students a non-judgmental space to think in non-traditional ways. As a practice-oriented routine, PB helps students prepare for class by providing space to explore possible ways of knowing and to learn from one another.

Figure 1  
Possibility Books slide for the first day of class



**Explore MARK MAKING**

there is NO right or wrong way to do this!

- Make at least 3 shapes on a page and at least 3 lines in various colors. This doesn't need to "look good"  
Try squeezing the water brush to smear the lines  
Explore! Play!
- Now relate those shapes and lines to your understanding of \_\_\_\_\_ (the topic of the course).  
Then add more marks, such as words in any language, patterns, lines, etc... that explore that connection

**Share with someone next to you: *how do the lines and shapes relate to your understanding?***

**As you listen, be curious – ask questions.**

**Also, notice the many ways that mark-making can represent thoughts and ideas.**

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<sup>1</sup> The inspiration for PB came from Dr. Jane Hilberry's question, "What if we gave every entering student a sketchbook?"

The PB pedagogy proceeds from the premise that mark making provides a powerful method for students to record and respond to what is happening in class. Research shows that “using a combination of modalities (i.e., visual and verbal; text and pictures) increases student learning and retention of material” (Gansemer-Topf, 2021, p.306) and “cultivates agentive knowledge building and active negotiation of learning” (Redmond, 2022, p. 138). A study on reflective sketchbooks (Moate et al., 2019) found that the “decorative or aesthetic features of the sketchbook became part of the reflective process, in effect creating material space for critical thinking” (p. 177). Another study emphasized that using sketchbooks as reflective journals “provided an alternative way for students to respond to and express understanding than conventional forms of written language that dominate academia” (Lillis & Scott, 2007). To build on this research, PB coined *mark making* as a method to record and expand on students’ ways of knowing.

It is important to note that how visual practices are introduced to students matters. Typical approaches for integrating visual thinking into course content often focus on communicating ideas to others through sketches or schematic drawings. While many of these methods emphasize that the goal of visual communication is “not to create art or even an artful page” (Redmond, 2022, p.139), “many students carry ‘art wounds’ that may inhibit engagement” (p. 143). To ensure that the PB pedagogy is accessible to all students regardless of their perceived drawing ability – or lack thereof – C&I emphasizes visual *mark making* rather than sketching or drawing. Mark making describes the different lines, dots, marks, patterns, and textures students make when responding to something seen or felt. A common term in visual art classrooms, mark making “... is a sensory and physical experience.... It is also a metaphorical process, carrying something across from thinking to paper” (Abegglen et al., 2022).

Possibility Books support a variety of outcomes, are adaptable to courses in any discipline, and lead to a nuanced understanding of concepts by encouraging students to connect course content to their prior knowledge. For example, in first-year classes, PB include prompts for reflection on the learning outcomes of our First Year Experience program, including thinking about the nature of academic disciplines based on what they already know. PB create a communal space where students feel accepted and able to bring their whole selves into the classroom, which contributes to students commenting that using PB decreases their anxiety and puts them in a “headspace” to learn. PB ask students to have ‘conversations’ with themselves and others. Revisiting selected prompts allows students to track how their understandings shift over time. One student provided the following feedback:

[Possibility Books] “spark creativity and personal growth. While writing about my experiences, I addressed challenges and setbacks. This book provided me with the space to openly share and reflect on failures; it contributed to my mindset of seeing failure as a part of the learning process, which fostered a greater willingness to take creative risks.”<sup>2</sup>

To maximize the use of PB, faculty members can create additional prompts for course reflection and assignments. If a faculty member would like to assess students’ reflections on a given prompt, students must understand ahead of time that the professor will view the page they create. The process of reflection through mark making, sharing, and creatively connecting content to self, opens the possibilities for knowledge creation.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, 2023.

In many higher education classrooms, specific ways of learning are privileged, including the use of the English language, text-based reading and writing, logic (as opposed to intuition), and understanding with the mind more than the body. PB create an inclusive space where students feel comfortable using their own languages (linguistic, metaphorical, and symbolic), backgrounds, and modes of learning, including embodied understandings. By introducing modes of learning that have been excluded from traditional, colonial-based academic inquiry and providing space that centers diverse identity perspectives, neurodiversity, and cultural knowledge as assets, PB meet CC's institutional Antiracism Commitment. Further, visual note-taking recruits and amplifies the benefits of embodied cognition by engaging students' hands and senses. Thus, this method "honors participants as authorities on their perceptions, experiences, and meaning-making abilities" (Kortegast et al., 2019, p. 503). After using PB for the first time in a foreign language course, a faculty member reflected, "It's so easy for an old dog like me to stick to the methods and approaches that are familiar and have been pretty successful. But pushing myself to think and teach in different ways is, I know, making me better at my job."<sup>3</sup> Possibility Books encourage faculty and students to try new approaches, linger with ambiguity, stay open to many perspectives, and explore a range of methods for knowing. In this way, PB's pedagogy contributes to equitable educational experiences.

The use of Possibility Books has grown significantly since its inception. In academic year 2022-23, nine courses comprising 144 students included PB; in academic year 2023-24, 54 courses comprising over 700 students employed the pedagogy. Assessments of the program are promising; results indicate that when Possibility Books are integrated into the course, the interactions foster a safe and collaborative learning environment. In addition, implementation of Possibility Books encourages students to establish connections with the content, thereby enhancing their learning.<sup>4</sup> Over 82% of students surveyed recommended that PB be used in other courses.

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<sup>3</sup> Associate Professor in Foreign Language, personal communication, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Taber, Professor of Education uses PB in his courses, has conducted extensive data analysis of the pedagogy, and has been a substantial partner in the development of the project.

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\*\* Possibility Books are researched and developed by Kris Stanec, Director of Creativity and Innovation at Colorado College.