Appendix

15 A glimpse into Luhmann’s Zettelkasten and a few words on software

Let’s have a look at the section within Luhmann’s Zettelkasten where he prepared a short article (8 pages) with some observations about his Zettelkasten. This section contains 17 notes starting with the number 9/8, which is directly followed by two branched-out note sequences. One contains ten consecutive notes (9/8a to 9/8j), and one containing three consecutive notes (9/8,1, 9/8,2 and 9/8,3). Another short branch starts at note 9/8a, which is followed by 9/8a1 and 9/8a2, and one equally short branch starts at 9/8b, which is followed by 9/8b1 and 9/8b2. The notes before and thereafter (the sequences starting at 9/7 or 9/9) are thematically unrelated. It is a section with few references to external literature and few cross-references compared to other sections on more complex topics.

In the slip-box, this section looks like this.

*Fig. 1*

Visualising the branches, it looks like this.
Even though some parts of Luhmann’s Zettelkasten are already very close to the final manuscript, the notes and note sequences are not always fully comprehensible for an outsider. Reading them is a bit like eavesdropping on a conversation between two old friends, who, over time, have developed their own language and don’t have to explain everything to each other anymore. This makes it sometimes a bit difficult for an outsider to fully grasp what is going on between the notes and the user. On note 9/8,3 he addresses this in regard to visitors who want to have a look at the Zettelkasten. It says:

**Geist im Kasten?**
Zuschauer kommen.
Sie bekommen alles zu sehen, und nichts als das – wie beim Pornofilm.
Und entsprechend ist die Enttäuschung.

**Spirit in the box?**
Spectators visit.
They get to see everything, and nothing but that – like in a porn movie.
And accordingly the disappointment.

The first note in this sequence, 9/8, is more on the abstract side:

**Zettelkasten als kybernetisches System**
Kombination von Unordnung und Ordnung, von Klumpenbildung und unvorhersehbarer, im ad hoc Zugriff realisierter Kombination.
Vorbedingung: Verzicht auf festgelegte Ordnung.

Die vorgeschaltete Differenzierung: Suchhilfen vs. Inhalt; Register, Fragestellungen, Einfälle vs. Vorhandenes überformt und macht z.T. entbehrlich, das, was an innerer Ordnung vorausgesetzt werden muss.

**Zettelkasten as a cybernetic system**
Combination of disorder and order, of clumping and unpredictable combinations realised in ad hoc access.

Precondition: doing without a fixed order.

Preceding differentiation: search aids vs. content; registers, questions, ideas vs. existing ones reshaped and sometimes makes superfluous that which has to be assumed in terms of internal order.

The note behind with the number 9/8,1 is more of a question.

**Thema: Kommunikation mit dem Zettelkasten:**
Wie kommt man zu einem adäquaten Partner, Junior-Partner?
– wichtig, nachdem das Arbeiten mit Personal immer schwieriger und immer teurer wird.

**Slip of paper’s reality**

There are two more notes in this note-sequence, which I leave out here.
(9/8,2 and 9/8,3)

The next note in the box is branched out from the first one and has the number 9/8a

*Das Produktivitätsproblem muss in bezug auf eine Relation gestellt werden, nämlich in bezug auf die Relation von Zettelkasten und Benutzer.*

This is followed by 9/8a1 and 9/8a2 before the original sequence continues with 9/8b

*Der Zettelkasten ist unaufhörlich gewachsen, und ich habe versucht, so gut ich konnte und soweit meine Fähigkeiten reichen, davon zu profitieren.*


9/8b contains a reference which also can be found in a footnote in the final article.


Es ist danach wichtig, dass man nicht auf eine Unmenge von Punkt-für-Punkt Zugriffe angewiesen ist, sondern auf Relationen zwischen Notizen, also auf Verweisen zurückgreifen kann, die mehr auf einmal verfügbar machen, als man bei einem Suchimpuls oder auch bei einer Gedankenfixierung im Sinn hat.

On the general structure of memories see Ashby 1967, p. 103.

It is then important that you do not have to rely on a vast number of point-by-point accesses, but can fall back on relationships between notes, i.e. on references that make more available at once than you would with a search impulse or even with a fixation on a thought in mind.

And this is a passage from the published article where we can find the
While most of you will implement the idea of the Zettelkasten with the help of software and without the need for Luhmann's quaint numbering system, it is important to realise what crucial thing prompts us to look for existing threads within the system to expand on. It encourages us to continue a dialogue by adding to existing note sequences instead of collecting isolated snippets. Note sequences occupy the sweet spot between isolated facts/ideas and continuous text. You can feel free to write whole note sequences on a single page, or even inside a single block (or paragraph), as a stand-alone note, addressable from anywhere else, you keep the granularity of your notes while benefiting from a better overview.

If you really like the software you have chosen, you might want to use it for writing both literature notes and permanent notes, maybe even project notes. That is okay and helps to remove the friction of switching over an existing thread. If your program allows for linking to individual blocks within a page in direct response to an existing note, continuing the dialogue, feel free to write whole note sequences on a single page. As long as you treat each block (or paragraph) as a stand-alone note, addressable from anywhere else, you keep the granularity of your notes while benefiting from a better overview.

If your program allows linking to individual blocks within a page, you can use it for writing both literature notes and permanent notes, maybe even project notes. That is okay and helps to remove the friction of switching over an existing thread. If you really like the software you have chosen, you might want to use it for writing both literature notes and permanent notes, maybe even project notes. That is okay and helps to remove the friction of switching.
between apps. But make sure you keep the distinction between the different note types clearly visible within the program; write note sequences and build up your critical mass of ideas only within the network of permanent notes.

While all tools and software we use influence the way we work, the best note-taking apps available are characterised by their openness and flexibility. But with this freedom also comes the need to implement structure. Having a page with a top-level overview of the major themes and topics you are working on can be very helpful, especially in the beginning. But in contrast to a folder setup, this is in itself an idea among others. It is an idea about the structure on a note and therefore open to change. The same is true for midlevel “entry notes” into particular topics or “Maps of Content.” Whenever complexity has built up, it makes sense to give yourself an overview of the different aspects of a topic on such a note. This, too, is not about imposing structure onto the system, but making an implicit idea about structure explicit and therefore open to change. It is worth repeating here: How we structure a topic is how we think about a topic and therefore a thought in itself. It belongs in the slip-box as a note, becoming therefore something to be tested, questioned and discussed.

But most importantly and whatever tool you use: Keep it light, do what feels right, adjust the workflow along the way. Try out different paths, experiment, be playful. There is no right and wrong as long as you stick to the principles. And don’t take it too seriously. Good ideas flourish in a relaxed environment. The Zettelkasten is a dialogue partner you should have fun collaborating with. And on that note, let’s have a last look into Luhmann’s slip-box. The final note he has written in this sequence about the Zettelkasten is note number 9/8j:

"Im Zettelkasten ist ein Zettel, der das Argument enthält, das die Behauptungen auf allen anderen Zetteln widerlegt.
Aber dieser Zettel verschwindet, sobald man den Zettelkasten aufzieht.
D.h. er nimmt eine andere Nummer an, versteht sich und ist dann nicht zu finden.
Ein Joker."