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The Journey Out: Conceptual Mapping of the Writing Process

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The journey out: conceptual mapping and writing process.

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Beth Brunk-Chavez

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Abstract

A simple exercise in conceptual mapping of students' writing process can yield surprisingly rich results. In this active learning exercise which students find quite pleasurable, students draw steps in their writing process by employing personally expressive symbols, metaphors, and linking devices. These maps help to conceptually integrate the writing process, which is generally experienced as a fragmented activity. Sharing of conceptual maps helps forge community in the classroom as students read and learn from each other's maps. Moreover, maps can serve as a unique form of prewriting to help students make discoveries about themselves as writers and organize that information in preparation for assignments that call for reflection on writing.

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In The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders, Janet Emig asks, "If there are specifiable elements, moments, and stages in the composing process of students, what are these?" She also wants to know if these elements, moments, and stages can be differentiated and designated. Are they linear, or recursive, or something else? How do they relate to each other? (1-2) Asking a first-year college student these questions would bear some interesting results. Perhaps this is why so many class discussions of the writing process involve a standard list and short description of the four primary stages--invention, drafting, revision, editing--along with the caveat that these are not to follow from "Step 1" to "Step 2," but that it is a recursive process where steps are revisited and repeated. This is certainly a productive place to start as a means of encouraging students to think about their writing processes and for creating a common language in the classroom; however, it can also become quite limiting.

When asked, students are hard pressed to reconstruct their own writing processes verbally or in writing, even when they have been advised to pay attention to what they do when they write. Often, they will fall into using the language introduced to them--invention, drafting, revision, and editing--to the point that each student's account of his or her process is a cookie-cutter copy of the next student's; these accounts too often say little about their identities and personalities.

Perhaps the problem of providing useful ways for students to articulate their writing process lies in the concept of the process itself. While process-terminology enables

students to think about their own processes, it simultaneously reduces every stage of their writing into four categories. Erika Lindemann suggests, "writing involves not just one process but several. Most of them seem to be mental and consequently difficult for researchers to reconstruct" (22). In line with these observations, proponents of post-process theory suggest that no one big theory can possibly define the writing process. In fact, few people follow the same process, nor is one person's process the same twice. Although many post-process theorists laud process-theory for turning its eye to the student rather than the product, they also contend that the result is a formula that has become too rigid and too generic. Barbara Couture argues that "a single model for generating ideas, conducting research, and writing and revising a draft does not capture all the effective ways that human beings solve the problem of acquiring knowledge and communicating it to one another" (41). To remedy this problem, David Russell suggests that we think "beyond process" to "realize that there are many writing processes" and to seek "a progressively wider understanding" of them (88).

Student writing experience at James Madison University (JMU) seems to bear out this problem. The Writing Program at JMU is responsible for providing classes in a Writing and Rhetoric minor as well as freshman reading and composition. All first year composition goals and objectives uniformly stress "the understanding of writing as a process, including the practice of invention, arrangement, and revision." However, a portfolio assessment session led by Ed White, noted scholar and teacher of composition studies, illustrates the potentially restrictive result process terminology can have on student writing. In a common assignment for first-year writing portfolios, students reflect on their growth and development as writers. While the assignment encourages originality and personal reflection, the vast majority of authors described their writing process as a list of steps. There were occasional breakthroughs, such as one White characterized as an essay "English teachers love to get, but don't very often." In this essay, the student described his process through the extended figure of one who fidgets--physically and intellectually--to get himself on paper. It was strikingly personal and original and conveyed a vivid picture of a writer struggling to connect with an audience.

As process theory contends, student awareness of process can make a better writer, but as post-process theory adds, process cannot simply be reduced to a uniform shopping list of steps but needs to be articulated for each student's context. Students experience the writing process in more particular, individual, and interesting ways than they tend to describe in their self-reflective papers. However, the anecdote above illustrates the problem of encouraging students to use process as a vehicle to transport them to deeper levels of self-discovery and originality rather than employing it as a prescribed formula. If students can tap into that unique process, they might use it effectively to produce authentic writing.

One of the tools useful to this end is conceptual mapping, or concept mapping (CM), which dovetails theories of writing process and post-process with active learning. CM is a student-centered learning activity applied across disciplines such as science, math, literature, and history. Its aim is to facilitate student understanding of core concepts in

such a way as to encourage original thinking and long-term retention. As Joseph Novak and Bob Gowan explain in their 1984 pioneering study, Learning How to Learn, CMs "are somewhat analogous to road maps in that they show relationships, not between places, but between ideas" (41). CM, in the classic sense, is represented in a form similar to a flow chart or organizational chart. On a single plane, key words and phrases represent both major and subordinate concepts in a knowledge domain. These concepts are connected via links, called "propositions," that express the relationships among the concepts. Typically hierarchically driven, moving from general to specific, the CM might be a simple to a highly complex form. CMs are commonly used to schematize processes, such as photosynthesis in a biology class, and systems for knowledge domains, such as feudalism in a history class.

Unlike these examples, teaching of process is not geared toward delivering content, but toward providing guidance as students traverse the thorny "road" of what Linda Flowers calls the "problem of writing." Students, whose final objective is to see themselves as writers and as such enter the discourse community of the academy, can benefit from using CMs. They can help articulate the core concept of the writing processes given each student's unique context and can act as steps in the processes of writing a paper. JMU's writing instructors interpret CM as a simple, rather playful exercise which has proven useful both as a one time in-class or take home assignment and as a beginning and end of semester activity. The assignment begins with an explanation of the goals of the activity along with a model of a CM and a set of prompts to help students get started. Instructions may be given as follows:

1) On a large piece of paper, intuitively draw major moments in the writing process. Place them anywhere and in any order and include any symbols that come to mind as you draw. Include yourself in these moments.

2) Draw lines of relation between these moments suggesting your movement through them and, if appropriate, back. Consider using symbols instead of lines to express the relationships among these moments (i.e. footsteps, arrows, paw prints, tears!).

3) Fill in the "ground" for the map by characterizing the "terrain" of your process.

As students draw or "map" steps in their writing processes by employing personally expressive symbols, metaphors, and linking devices, they tend to represent a range of activities concerning authorship, personal investment and attitude, critical thinking, and generating ideas. Students delight in the original ways they interpret this exercise, especially when their maps take on characteristics intimate to their own identities. This use of CMs in a writing classroom shares several key features with the classic model: the core concept of "writing process" is central to the exercise; subordinate concepts, such as invention, arrangement, drafting, and peer review might be included in the maps although only in ways that reflect the student's particular experience; these subordinate concepts are linked to the core concept in non-linear, interrelated ways to suggest relationships among them; and the "whole unit" of the writer in process as depicted in the map appears in one graphic representation. However, because a writer's

needs are not content but process-driven, and process is generated by the writer, writing students break away from the classic model.

One major difference is that each map will not be the same as is the case when each student is mapping the process of photosynthesis, but will be highly individualized. If the map includes steps in the writer's process, the steps are not listed in terms of invention, drafting, revision, and editing, but are characterized as lived moments. As characterizations, they take on metaphoric, connotative shape. While one student's concept of revision might be analogous to Sisyphus pushing a rock up a hill, another's might be expressed as rehearsing a movie script. Novak and Gowan "anticipate that the schematic nature of CMs should provide the flexibility needed for fabricating interesting tales" (53). JMU's writing students certainly spin "interesting tales" in their highly illustrative, original writing process CMs.

The transformation in the writing classroom of the rigid, highly schematized classic CM to an individually interpreted CM follows a need that writers have to move back and forth between the linearity required for putting together ideas in a paper and the non-linear constellation of ideas that exist in the mind. For the writing classroom that seeks to help students find ways to move from the holographic to the linear and back, an emphasis on the iconographic over the alphabetic is natural in the creation of CMs. Indeed, Novak and Gowan themselves encourage the inclusion of the iconographic. They argue that images can be used to illustrate "events encountered, or to be encountered, during the conceptual journey and to `pump' meaning into the framework of more abstract regularities the concept labels represent" (42). Here, an "abstract regularity" such as revision might be a step in the process that each student experiences differently and in personally meaningful ways. In other words the icons add layers of meaning only the student can provide. Maps not only present a picture of process on a single plane, thereby translating dry words into a personal story of writing, they can also function as steps in the process itself. For example, mapping can serve as a unique form of invention to help students make discoveries about themselves as writers and organize that information in preparation for reflective writing assignments. For the portfolio assessment at JMU mentioned earlier, students include a reflective essay titled "Myself as a Writer," as an introductory piece. Those students who participated in CM prior to drafting these essays wrote creative, engaging essays that said something significant about themselves as writers. In other words, they literally saw themselves as writers and were able to translate that vision into text.

One student who early in the semester admitted to "hating" writing because of her difficulties with self-expression and clarity, conceptualized her writing process as a maze, which was a perfect metaphor for her struggle to get her ideas on paper for an audience. The maze's sub-concepts were the steps in the process, but these were overshadowed by the "propositions" which she represented as alleys connecting the steps--many of which were blind alleys--suggesting the severity of the challenge writing presented to her. Retracing alleys to arrive at different stages of completion rehearsed the need for revision--rethinking and revisiting of previously lived moments of the writing. The map facilitated self-discovery about the student's nature of writing while

providing original material for what she would then say in her essay. Seeing the maze was a comforting revelation. Instead of a jumble of thoughts and impossible problems, writing was now conceptualized in a familiar if challenging (but possibly fun?) form. As she confessed in her reflective portfolio essay, she had learned that her writing must include many false starts and revisions, miscalculations and complexities, and these add up to a thrilling sense of achievement, as her maze promised an exit.

Another student found the CM to be a good way to express arrangement. An ambitious student and member of the track and field team, Jerry created a map that illustrated how the TV show Macgyver helped provide an unusual inspiration for the portfolio essay. In the map (figure 1), the student watches the show while thinking of his paper assignment. The CM also shows the student interrupting his writing process to go running. His reflective essay skillfully combined two things he loved, Macgyver and running, and he discovered that both of these activities had parallels with his own writing. According to the student, Macgyver has a foil who in every episode ruins the hero's final triumph. Like Macgyver, the student felt the presence of an unseen force that would "foil" his attempts to bring his writing to a final, perfect stage. The student writer described feeling the need to press on, to continue to find that perfect ending and overcome the foil. Further, he described running as analogous to revision and the recursive nature of writing. "You are never finished running, and you are never finished writing," he argued. A revelation was that both running and writing require focus, discipline, and constant practice. Arrangement in this case arose from the juxtaposition of two very different aspects of the student's life into one seamless story about his writing process.

Perhaps the most useful benefit of CM is that it helps students see themselves as writers, an identity most students initially resist. Figure 2 provides a striking example of how CM can encourage students to identify themselves as writers. It shows similarities between the process of writing a paper and that of surfing. In his map, Luke pictures the whole experience of writing as surfing, from the solid ground of the beach to the vast fluidity of the "wave." The student stands ready to throw himself into the "rough waters" of a new paper assignment. Getting out to the final paper is analogous to "paddling" through drafts, a struggle against the tide. But, like the achievement of reaching the exit of the maze, the achievement here is "riding the wave" of the paper--exhilarating and what the journey is all about. Here, the student's deeply centered identity as a surfer is conflated with his newly conceptualized identity as a writer. Writing calls into play our creative energy as we cast about among those holographic concepts in mind and bring them into linear, symbolic form in writing. In CMs, students seem more willing to express creativity, originality, and humor, which are too often withheld from their writing. Because the CM medium as we use it is more iconographic than alphabetic, students seem transported to a more playful frame of mind. Students have visually displayed their writing process as a baseball game, the evolution of humans, mountain climbing, and riding roller coasters. These images provide a springboard, and often a central metaphor, for the students' unique and personal essays about themselves as writers. When students realize the effectiveness of these images in their writing, they may be

encouraged to continue developing a style in which their individualized voice is ever-present and not hidden.

As these examples show, CM helps promote writing as a process while disrupting linear, prescriptive approaches to it. Figure 3, Tim's map, shows a train and track as a metaphor for writing. The cars are disconnected and the track shows recursivity at steps five and ten, major moments of revision. Like the train and track, the final paper will connect all the parts and "flow" smoothly. As in this example, these maps can help to conceptually integrate the writing process, which students generally experience as a fragmented activity performed in distinctly separate steps (perhaps because of the structure of a syllabus or interruptions in their writing). Additionally, writing courses offer opportunities for community building and collaborative learning. In workshops, small groups often work together to help solve writing problems and provide feedback. The CM exercise extends the classroom beyond the paper and space at hand so that each student provides a picture, literally, of his or her writing activity. Students read and learn from each other's maps, as authors/artists and as audience. Those individually isolated moments of writer's block or epiphany made public through the maps produce recognition, empathy, and support from peers. Students realize that there is no one plan for writing, but many. They realize that there is no one process that must be followed, but they can create, refine, and experiment with processes that reflect their personalities and meet their needs.

In a typical first-year composition class, creating these writing process concept maps is especially useful for students who are frustrated with writing and overwhelmed with the task of organizing a paper. For those who have trouble inventing ideas, the CM can offer a plan for beginning, structuring, and revising a self-reflective paper. Weaker writers, in particular, can benefit from the way the exercise enables them to see new possibilities for their writing and for themselves as writers. Writers who are more confident in their abilities, such as Jerry who compared his process to MacGyver, are inspired by the CM to draw upon ideas that may not have revealed themselves in a purely verbal experience. The CM is a form of visual rhetoric, which persuasively shows the ways in which writing is an integral not separate part of their lives.

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Beth Brunk-Chavez, The University of Texas at El Paso Janette Martin, James Madison University, VA

Brunk-Chavez, Ph.D., teaches rhetoric and writing. Martin, Ph.D., teaches composition, rhetoric, literature, and American Studies.

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