

Making Connections — Content on Mindmapping

Intro: Once we've freewritten, once we've made some lists — then how do we go about seeing connections between all the stuff we've discovered? —

Mindmapping is an excellent strategy for “making connections” — Some call it “clustering” or “concept mapping” — “webs” or “spider diagrams”. In another context, I've called it “Fireworks.” For our purposes I'll just call it mindmapping, because that's what the computer and tablet applications are usually called. You can search online and find lots of information about “mindmaps” and a number of applications that allow you to create mindmaps electronically. (Though, doing it by hand will be your best introduction to mindmapping ... so I recommend you start there.)

Mindmapping can help in various ways —

- 1) It can be a **form of brainstorming** —
 - a) a visual form of listing that allows you to “brain dump” ideas out on a sheet of paper, preferably in a messy form, and to do so quickly, without judgment. (Listing can sometimes feel too much like an outline or a to-do list.
 - b) A list is inherently “organized”—but a mmap, especially one written by hand, is messy — and messy can sometimes give us permission to be messy. Our brains often feel “messy” to us — and mmaping can be a way to “visualize” that very messiness.
 - c) When we mindmap we do less editing of our suggestions, we just let the mess come out onto the page. And then it's out of our minds and onto a sheet of paper, and we can stand back from it and see what we've got. (It's hard to “stand back from” our brain! ... but this kind of brain-dump mmaping can let us do that.

- 2) It can be **“visualized creativity”**
 - a) We have, evidently, an epidemic of “ADD” — Attention Deficit Disorder. We give kids (and adults) drugs for this “disorder.” Now I'm not saying that this diagnosis is never appropriate. But are we over-diagnosing? Absolutely. For, many people who have been diagnosed with ADD are

suffering from a different disorder — from a disorder infecting our schools and the academy and the work-a-day world, and that is a disorder of “no creativity allowed”—especially if that creativity isn’t neat and normal and within the prescribed structures. Which, of course, isn’t creativity at all. [A side-note, we’re talking here, perhaps, about the difference between what some researchers call “convergent thinking” and “divergent thinking” — with connections, too, to “vertical vs. lateral thinking.” See the links to those topics under Resources in this unit.]

- b) Look at one of the mindmaps at the Mind Map Inspiration website. These are wonderfully wild. They look very much like products of the “brain of the creators”, of the people who made the mindmaps. I doubt they communicate anything to anyone other than the people who made them. They look a little ADD, perhaps! But they’re really a step-on-the-way to organizing the multiplicity of a creative mind.
 - c) Creative folks don’t have an deficit of attention. Creatives have a surplus of attention. Mindmapping gives permission for that surplus to find expression — and if you’ve fallen under the spell of the “orderly academic syndrome” [OAS, for short]— mmapping can increase your awareness of all the other stuff that’s going on in your head and also increase the breadth and depth of your thinking.
- 3) And finally, then, mmapping can (perhaps ironically?) also be a form of organizing a project or an explosion of ideas — in a form that will allow you to see the whole project at once, to see the key ideas and to see how those key ideas (or sub-ideas) interact with each other. In this way, mmapping can give a large project an inter-connectedness that it would otherwise not have. The project will feel woven rather than just one long string of thoughts.
- 4) In short — Mindmapping is an extraordinarily facile form of discovering content, organizing content, and playing with structure.
- a) It can help you study for an exam — by laying out the content—of your notes or reading material—in an organized fashion, and then drawing lines between items to show connections.
 - b) It can help you collect diverse research material for a paper or project.
 - c) It can help you both to plan the stages of a project and to visualize the whole project as a set of interconnections. (This can be a really good group activity for when you’re leading people to work on a project

together.)

- d) It can help you think through complex problems, to compare, for instance, different interpretations of a text, itemizing each the case for each interpretation and then drawing lines to indicate similarities (or conflicts) between competing interpretations.
 - e) It can help you present a complex topic to an audience (through, for example, a powerpoint or Prezi, or Keynote presentation) ... if the mmap is simple enough!
- 5) **How to Create a Mindmap** — I’m going to give audio instructions for how to do this. I’ll say “Pause” after each step, so that you can pause the recording and actually follow along, making your own version of this mindmap. When you’ve finished doing the step I’ve just outline, un-pause the audio and listen to the next step. Of course, if you don’t want to make your own version, that’s fine. Just let the audio keep running!
1. Choose a topic for the Mindmap. This can be anything you want to explore or a project or topic you’re wanting to visualize structurally. So, let’s say you want to think about the word “Friend.” (You can choose this topic or another one for this audio exercise.) **PAUSE.**
 2. Take a blank sheet of paper — plain, unlined copy paper is best for this. Turn the paper in landscape position, so that the long edges of the paper are at the top and bottom. **PAUSE.**
 3. Write the topic — in this case, the word “Friend” in the middle of the paper. Now, Circle that word (so that it’s quite easy to see ... the rest of the mindmap is going to get a little messy, and this will make sure we can always “find our way back” to the primary topic. **PAUSE.**
 4. Draw 5 or 6 “rays” out from that circle (which, of course, is actually an oval). **PAUSE.**
 5. At the end of each of those “rays” write a word that pops into your mind when you think about the word “Friend.” So, maybe I’d write “companion” or “Dena” or “enemy.” That is, maybe you’ll think of a synonym or an example or an antonym of the topic ... or any one of another hundred types of connections. It doesn’t matter at this point. What matters is that you do it quickly. Just “pop” the word or short phrase out. Try it yourself. **PAUSE.** So, how does yours look? Let’s call

this the first level of our mindmap.

6. Now for the second level, draw 3-4 “rays” out from each of the words or phrases you wrote down on that first level. Again, you’re going to want to “pop” out words that come to mind when you think about each of those first-level words. But first, let’s do two things:
 - a. Get yourself a coffee cup and place it in the middle of your mmap, so that it covers up your “Topic” word — in the case of my illustration, I’d cover up the word “Friend.” Of course it doesn’t really have to be a coffee cup. Actually, something like a coaster works really well—it’s hard to maneuver around a coffee cup!—so something flat is actually better. The purpose of this is that, as you move to the outer levels, you want to “forget” what the overall topic is. That momentary “forgetfulness” will spark interesting connections that you might miss otherwise.
 - b. And, let’s try something different for the second-level. For illustrative purposes. In the first level we just let any random word or thought pop into our minds. Now, for the second level, we could try several different “controls”—or a common “control”—for our “popping.” By “control” I mean, using different tricks for restricting the “popping” I do. For example:
 - If I’ve written the word “Dena” (a friend of mine), I might restrict all my second-level popping to memories I have of our friendship. So I’d pop things like “brie and wine coolers”; “Univ. of Chicago”: Bethany; stealing the pacifier, and etc.
 - If I’ve written the word “enemy” I might restrict all my second-level popping to qualities of an enemy — “hateful,” “refuses to listen,” “oppositional” — or something like that.
 - I might decide that all the second-level popping has to be related to a song or music. Or every word/phrase has to begin with the same letter. Or, I will only list colors that the word reminds me of.
 - c. So, let’s do some second-level words and phrases now.
 - Select one first-level word — for that word, identify a color, a place, and a sound that you connect with that word. So, if

I chose “enemy” for my first-level word, I might write “brown”; “prison”; “yelling”. Remember: your words & phrases do not have to be “rational.” If it occurs to you, just write it down. Go ahead and “be wrong.” ha! **PAUSE.**

- Now, Select another first-level word — for that word, identify at least 3 memories you have that relate somehow to that word. Remember that you’ve forgotten the original topic completely. Just focus on that first-level word. Forget the pink elephant that is being squashed by the coffee cup. :-) **PAUSE.**
 - Now, if you wish, go ahead and complete all the second-level words — restricted or unrestricted, your choice. When you finish the second-level of your mind-map, you should have anywhere from 15-25 words somewhere on your sheet of paper. **PAUSE.**
7. On to the Third Level. Ideally, you’d take your mindmap at least to the third level. Four levels would even be better in many cases. We won’t do that here ... but feel free to complete the mindmap you’ve started here if you’ve been using the audio prompts.
 8. When you’ve taken the mmap as far as you want to go, take the “coffee cup” off of the TOPIC word. Now the real fun begins. There are two “next steps” — which can take quite a while — but here’s where the “making connections” part really digs in deep. First, spend a minute or two just letting your eyes scan over the mindmap you’ve made. Hopefully you’ve been “lost” inside the making of it and haven’t been thinking of the “whole.” You’ve spent some focused time being, if you will, “all over the map”—encouraging a kind of focused randomness. Now, step back and see what you’ve done. Then,
 - a. Select one word of phrase from the outer level of your mindmap. Write that word at the top of a blank page in your notebook. Next to that word, write the TOPIC word. Now, do one (or both) of two things —
 - a 3-5 minute freewrite connecting those two words in some way ... as though you were writing a short essay about how those two words are “obviously” connected.

- Make a list of how those two words are related. See if you can list ten ways those two words relate to one another.
- b. A second “connection-making” activity consists in drawing lines between outer-level words, indicating connections. So, for instance, I may have written “green” somewhere on my fourth-level. Over on the other side of the page maybe I wrote “grassy knoll” on my third-level. Well, when I stand back and look at the mindmap I’ve made, I notice that “grassy knoll” and “green” are connected. So I draw a line between “green” and “grassy knoll”. But then I also see that, at the second level, I’ve written the word “inexperienced” — and realize that “green” is one way we describe someone who is inexperienced,... so I draw a line between “green” and “inexperienced.” When you finish all this line-drawing you may have an indecipherable mess. That’s okay ... because the purpose of the mindmap lays in the **process** of making the map. You’ve seen some connections you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. Hooray for you!

There are scores of different ways to use Mindmapping. Use the tool and make it serve your own needs. Go, “be all over the map”!
