



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## Making Connections with Concept Maps

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Students are accustomed to writing about academic subjects, but have you ever asked them to *draw* a "picture" of how they comprehend a topic? Commonly known as "concept maps," this technique calls upon students to create diagrams, drawings, or some other non-narrative representation to display their understanding. This task requires students to think in a holistic fashion, to make connections between seemingly disparate bits of information, and to select key features to highlight. The procedure helps students create conceptual paradigms to store information, and to unearth relationships they had not previously discovered.

Perhaps equally as important, examining students' responses can yield useful insights for instructors. Concept maps can be used to gain a better understanding of how students *think*, certainly an elusive and perplexing topic for many University teachers. Concept maps stress the importance of relationships, a higher-order thinking skill most instructors wish to instill in students grappling with complex material. Moreover, released from the bonds of writing linear narrative, students often respond with a burst of creativity that enhances enthusiasm and interest in the subject.

Generating concept maps can be as simple as asking students to make one on the spot. Several years ago I taught the Western Civilization History survey. After two days of careful lecturing about the intricacies of the French Revolution, a very complex and important period, I asked students to "draw" the events of 1788-1794 without relying on words, text, or linear depictions (such as a cartoon

presented in chronological order). I gave them only ten minutes, urged them to focus on content rather than making them look "pretty," and collected their handiwork. The results were fascinating; I reproduced several examples on overhead transparencies and showed them to the class, prompting further fruitful discussion. (Samples can be viewed in the on-line version of this article at the TRC website under "Publications".)

Last semester I asked my University Seminar students to create a concept map incorporating the salient points of John Burnham's *Bad Habits*, a central text for the semester. I gave them two weeks' notice, and presented a rough example of my own attempt to show how the key elements fit together. (I used an airplane analogy, which I thought rather clever, but the students didn't seem overly impressed.) On the appointed day, students displayed an impressive variety of approaches to mapping the important relationships, several utilizing color in dramatic and effective ways. I paired the students so each could talk at some length about their depiction with a colleague, and then I randomly selected several to present their work to the whole class. The exercise proved valuable for students by presenting them with alternative ways of conceptualizing a difficult text. I found it useful for gaining a deeper understanding of my students' cognitive processes and interpretative skills. It was also, frankly, a lot of fun, with students exuding an enthusiasm reminiscent of show-and-tell from one's youth. (See examples at the TRC website, as noted above.)

If you would like to find out more about incorporating concept maps into your teaching, the TRC has several readings on the subject, and TRC personnel can consult with you about specific strategies for implementation.

