VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 1

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN · WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

Message Mapping: An Instructional Tool for Speaking and Writing

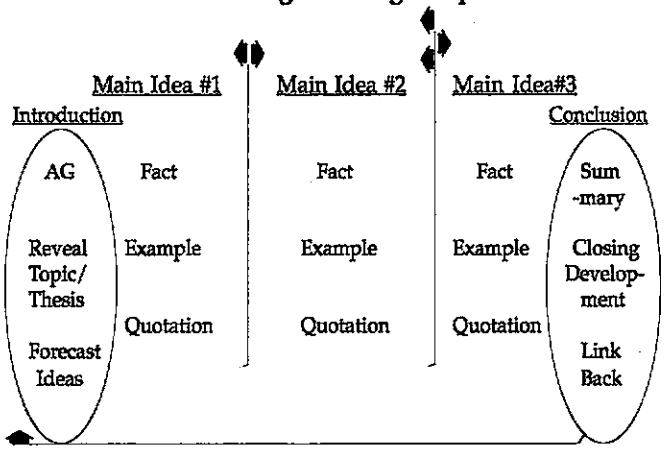
"Ahhh...I see what you're saying."

The message map is an instructional tool that helps students adopt a receiver-centered perspective by producing a visual "map" of the message they are trying to deliver—whether oral or written. Maps help students establish a holistic image of the message with a better understanding of its logical structure, encompassing and surpassing many of the functions traditionally attributed to speech or essay outlining. Students have used the maps to facilitate the writing of research papers, news articles, and essay exams; and to structure informative and persuasive speeches in classrooms and business settings. Message mapping is an essential tool for the communication teacher's "tool kit."

Basics

The message map is intended to represent a visual image of the message a person intends to communicate, whether through speaking or writing. If a speaker or writer constructs a message map with the following basic elements and the receivers can reproduce a similar map while listening or reading, communication has been successful. Though the message map can be made increasingly complex as the sophistication of the message grows, at its most basic level, message maps grow from the following model:

On-Target Message Map



There are three major elements of any message map: the introduction, main ideas, and conclusion. For the introduction, the communicator is prompted to include three key elements: (1) attention "getters," usually a visual image relevant to the topic, (2) revelation and development of the topic/argument with definitions or background statements as needed, and (3) a main idea forecast. The conclusion section contains very similar elements: (1) summary of main ideas, (2) closing development of topic/argument, and (3) a visually oriented link back to the introduction attention "getter." The main idea blocks (as many as necessary) are worded in grammatically parallel terms to make the structure clear and tightly focused; elements of a credible message—facts, quotes, and examples—are to be included under each main idea. With this structure, students completing long research efforts weave numerous facts, quotes, and examples into the fabric of each main idea. Arrows drawn between the blocks remind the student of the need for summary/forecast transitions as the message progresses.

A completed map includes the basic elements pictured here with a bulleted statement to cue the student as to the information to be included in a given segment. For example, if a student was writing an essay on Martin Luther King, she might have a bullet under a main idea focusing on his writings which reads: "Q-Letters from Birmingham Jail." This bullet would show the student where in the message they are including a quotation.

In practice, the student would begin the construction of a message by focusing on the main ideas and supporting material. The introduction and conclusion are generated last. This development sequence helps to bypass the writers block or speech anxiety that often plagues inexperienced communicators. As the student develops the main ideas with supporting elements such as dramatic examples, startling facts, or compelling quotations, he or she begins to think of these elements as logically interrelated building blocks that can be shaped to meet the needs of the audience. Significantly, some of the research that generates these

building blocks is conducted before the map is constructed, but glaring gaps on logic or support, as visually displayed on the map, prompt the student to do further research. Additionally, the map stimulates critical evaluation processes as students are encouraged to consider each element of the map as independent thought capsules that can be moved or modified as the message takes form. Put simply, whether writing or speaking, students are less "tied to the text." This occurs because the space available for ideas on any map is extremely limited, and this helps students avoid focusing on the complexities of grammar or paragraph construction during the planning stages of their message. Rather than getting committed to a paragraph, students learn to brainstorm with bullet phrases that serve as visual referents on the map.

As a second major step, the student constructs the introduction and conclusion blocks. Typically, students have already found useful attention- grabbing pieces of information during their research that work well in both the introduction and conclusion. Revealing the topic and presenting a thesis/purpose for the message becomes much easier with the main idea structure clearly displayed. Further, the forecast of the message structure or argument is simplified by mapping, particularly if one insists on grammatically parallel main idea titles. The conclusion is equally as straightforward, with its summary of main ideas, closing development of topic or argument, and link back to the introduction attention getter.

To complete this basic message map, all that remains are the arrows, drawn to remind the speaker or writer to develop transition statements. These arrows are drawn from the bottom of each main idea column to the top of the map and are capped with branching arrows to indicate main ideas to be summarized and forecasted by that transition. For example, in a message about the availability, scheduling, and interviewing problems of a job placement service, if a student saw a transition arrow after the second main idea that had two heads pointing to the prior main ideas and one to the next, the transition constructed might sound like this:

> Clearly, we can see students having problems with the placement service's availability and scheduling, but an even more critical problem arises as students begin to interview.

Once the map is constructed, the speaker or writer is ready for the communication event. From the message map, the extemporaneous speaker can deliver memorable speeches, the essay exam writer can compose effective answers, and the student author can construct cogent papers.

Benefits

The message map, when viewed as a holistic message model, facilitates the development of particularly well-organized messages, freeing the instructor to focus on other important communication issues such as prose or delivery. Moreover, since the map draws the student's thoughts toward the receiver (remembering that the map is actually a graphic representation of what is happening in a receiver's mind as he processes the message), the depth and appropriateness of the supporting material tends to improve. Students recognize their own logic flaws as the core logic of their message is taking shape on a single sheet of paper with nothing but the essence of each idea or each bit of supporting data serving as the building blocks.

A particularly salient instructional benefit is that message mapping helps students overcome the communication anxiety that leads to stage fright for speakers and writers block for writers. When students have a sense of confidence in the substance and organization of their message, the anxiety that draws their attention to superficial things, such as gestures or specific word choices, tends to diminish.

Conclusion

The message map is a flexible tool; however, limits do exist. For subjects such as creative writing or oral interpretation, mapping may not be appropriate—it may be too structured. Nonetheless, in our experience, we have seen creative writers and dynamic speakers effectively organize superior messages using this technique. Overall, maps have been useful tools, facilitating instruction, targeting significant skill issues, and increasing learning.

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January 20, 1995, Vol. XVII, No. 1

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms. ISSN 0199-106X.