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## Hanging out the Writing: when mind maps don't help

**Linda Kirkham** from Loughborough University Student Support Services describes an alternative way of helping students with dyslexia to map their ideas.

any art and design students have dyslexia and many are reluctant writers but confident visual and tactile artists. The strategy presented here came about through trying to help art and design students tackle their final-year dissertations. Such students have often laboured through their previous years of theoretical and historical studies, sometimes resenting the amount of time they have had to devote to written language tasks, keeping them away from the studios. Some have not previously used study support services. Then in their final year they are required to produce a theoretical study of around 10,000 words; which is often far more daunting than their academic supervisors realise. The following ideas were attempts to get art and design students started on their dissertation in ways that would reduce their fears. Many of these students have absorbed the widespread view that dyslexia equals visual thinking and is therefore best supported by mind mapping. Many are also likely to have received mind map software as a benefit of the Disabled Students' Allowance. However, some students report that they find mind maps messy and confusing.

Tilly Mortimore, in examining dyslexia and differences in learning, acknowledges that for some students, a mind map, '...is simply a bewildering spidery maze that gets between the student and the information, increasing tension and reducing their ability to retrieve the facts they need.' (2003: 24) In helping to explain this difference, Mortimore draws upon Riding and Rayner's Cognitive Styles Analysis (CSA) model that identifies a continuum between verbaliser and imager learners, as well as between analytic and holistic learners. She also cautions against making the assumption '...that anyone who scores highly on the imaging side of the CSA continuum is bound [her emphasis] to like mind maps' (op cit: 42).

One of our students came to a study support session with her 'Inspiration' mind map on her laptop but was overwhelmed by the starburst of simultaneous and linked ideas and could see no way of moving on towards the steady, serial format needed for writing. We tackled this by colour-coding, slowly identifying the key themes under which ideas could be arranged and then printed it and increased it in size to A3.

Another student had developed his own strategy to 'manage' mind mapping, whereby he created his mind map on his computer, then printed it out and physically cut out the ideas in order to work on putting them in order for his essay. Both of these students illustrate one of the difficulties with mind mapping – the need to quickly generate key words and to easily distinguish the big ideas from the fine detail. It's possible this could be overcome by training and practice in mind mapping, but many final-year students find themselves without either, having not seen the point previously. In the case of Arts dissertation students, and particularly when their study is contextualised by several bodies of theory, they have a sense that all of the ideas seem interlinked and therefore find it impossible to know how to write about them and where to start. In a sense, an unstructured mind-map exacerbates the problem.

As always, a core task for specialist study support tutors is to help students break down the whole into smaller, manageable chunks – to conceptualise it as a series of modules or chapters. One of the study support tutors addressed this by increasing the multisensory aspects of the work for the student which appealed more to the student's natural confidence and strengths in manipulating visual and tactile materials. Together they began to develop the idea of a dissertation as being a piece of several parts with ideas hanging from each part but attached together. This was physically made using tags and pipe cleaners, the skill being to consider where each idea could belong.



Coloured pipe cleaners represent each main theme of a dissertation.

Francis, in her work with art and design students' writing, recognised the conflicts for many of these students, again citing Riding and Rayner's model and identifying that: ' Many visual artists may gravitate to the holistic/ imager sector and many writers might locate themselves firmly in the analytic/verbal quadrant' (2003:19). Francis explains the blocks that students often experience with writing; how starting is the hardest part and of their sense of urgency to 'do', but frustration at not knowing what to do. She suggests that, 'If someone is reluctant to write . . . then the act of doing can create the climate for something to happen' (2009: 23), and she explores ways in through visual and tactile processes. Her work promotes the importance of using tools that appeal aesthetically and as tactile objects.

Two recent fine art students, both with significant dyslexia and dyspraxia were starting their final year dissertations. Each had difficulty in handling large amounts of information and both had tried mind mapping but became very confused by anything more than a basic mind map of three or four thoughts on one subject. We needed a way of making the sub-sections of the piece very explicit and chunky, yet 'plastic' so that ideas could be moved, sorted and categorised. We tapped into one of the student's interest in comics and Manga books to show how the process was much like creating a storyboard, where the narrative is laid out from left-to-right in a visible way, rather than top-to- bottom and part-hidden, in the way that writing appears on a computer screen. The result was a simple hanging storyboard format.

From an assortment of cards, fabrics, wool, string, tags and markers, Student A chose to make her storyboard using tactile, corrugated cardboard with coloured wools. The heart-shaped sticky note pinpoints the 'heart' of her argument. Student B chose a more graphic feel, with crisp card and string; some of the sticky notes refer him to his original mind maps on specific points.

Student A gradually abandoned her storyboard as her draft took shape. Student B carried his around throughout the dissertation process, folded like a book, but then laying it out on the desk for each study support session, keeping it in front of him as he wrote, as if he was almost literally 'handling' his ideas. He also recommended it to a friend who was also struggling with the dissertation and so the concept was passed on.

When another student adopted the strategy the storyboard was soon bristling with sticky notes, attachments and extensions and it was then the format became nicknamed 'the washing line'. This student had particular difficulty with reading and working memory and said that this method helped her "keep control" of what was going on. The 'washing line' went everywhere with her. The strategy seemed to have potential, so an example was included as part of a dissertation-planning poster to show new students as they started on the journey of producing extended pieces. We found that it was not only arts students who liked it: a mature MBA student (with dyslexia) adopted it and commented that, 'With the card in my hand, I can really think'.

A colleague shared this study support experience: 'I usually see Student C in my own office and a couple of weeks ago, talked with her about the 'dissertation planning' poster. She seemed indifferent to all the ideas I had, including various coloured luggage labels hanging up on the wall with post-it notes on them; but they didn't seem to do anything for her. However when she saw the cardboard 'washing line' plans and touched them then they really activated her planning brain. She could visualise them hanging in her study room.'

Because students are often not allowed to pin things to walls in their rooms, one of the students has tied her 'washing line' to the curtain pelmet. Another possibility is to use 'Magic Whiteboard' sheets that stick to the wall through static: however, this may not hold the same aesthetic appeal. An assistive software trainer also recommends the 'top-down' or 'family tree' option for organising a mind-map as very popular amongst students when demonstrated. This is a good format to facilitate the transfer from the washing line to word-processing. Once transferred, the notes can be converted to linear format using the 'Outline View' feature in most mind map programmes.



Student A: Tactile storyboard.



Student B: Storyboard refers back to the original mind map.



Hanging out the washing line.

It is difficult to say why the 'washing line' helps. It is not much more than an essay chain or framework, but it has a tactile dimension. Francis (2009) notes that, the author Will Self has a similar working method of using sticky notes of jottings that he sticks on the wall to arrange and re-arrange into sections. However, as an experienced writer he is likely to have in mind a conceptual framework of sections, and even word count, to work to – these conceptual anchors can be a problem for our less experienced students that is not solved by mind-mapping, but is presented visually and in the memory by their cardboard chunks.

Most of us need to understand the 'big picture' when learning (Cooper 2009), and the 'washing line' helps to give a stable representation of the whole dissertation structure and how information and ideas might fit into it. It also seems to support ideas about writing as creative design, the visual composition of text and the page as a pictorial frame, (Sharples1999) which can act as a bridge for art and design students.

It has been suggested that those with dyspraxic difficulties might have greater difficulties with the right-hemisphere skills of visual and holistic thinking and are stronger in the left hemisphere skills of verbal and step-by step thinking (Grant, 2005, Portwood, 2011). Anecdotally, it is often those students who say that mind mapping confuses them and also feeds into their self-reported tendencies to 'go off at tangents' and lose sight of relevancy. As noted, the initial enthusiasts for the strategy were students with dyspraxic characteristics.

Finally, in terms of the great difficulties experienced by students with attentional difficulties in getting started on a task, organising and prioritizing, and in maintaining focus, described as aspects of executive functioning (Brown, 2005, Johnson, Ridsdale and Jones, 2013), the acts of choosing and using physical materials alongside related discussions around structure, size and so forth seem to capture the attention and allow it to dwell. Physical symbols can have a lasting effect notes Pollack (2009) and Symonds (2009) describes the importance of engaging the senses which 'improves learning, accessing long-term memory'. In its basic physicality, hanging out the writing seems to offer these opportunities.

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