Jane Karwoski

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University of Las Vegas / Distance Education

Let's Learn to Think Creatively

Industry:

Education

Location:

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Challenge:

Improve students' ability to capture and organize information and ideas in a way that will lead to more creative thinking.

Toolkit:

ConceptDraw
MINDMAP

Solution:

Teach students to take notes in mind map form so that they can see the relationship between ideas.

Benefits:

Class notes taken in mind map form enable students to gain a broader picture of the subject at hand. Rather than missing key connections between ideas captured on separate pages, students using ConceptDraw MINDMAP can see more information on one page, and thus are better able to make connections that lead to insight.

The purpose of Dr. Jane Karwoski's online class at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV) is to review the history of psychology. But she has a broader goal: To help students learn to think creatively. Thinking, she says, is all about making connections between pieces of information. By enabling her students to capture and organize information in new ways, ConceptDraw MINDMAP fosters learning and creativity.

Dr. Karwoski first became familiar with mind mapping in the mid-1980s, and used it for analyzing and prioritizing personal projects. It became even more important to her when she entered graduate school and began using it to map textbook chapters, lectures, and articles for journal club discussions.

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Others began to see the value of mind mapping too. When she gave a guest presentation on mind mapping in a college-level software design class, one senior raised his hand and asked 'Why didn't we hear about mind mapping when we were freshmen?'

But it wasn't until years later, when one of her students used it in an assignment, that she came across ConceptDraw MINDMAP. "I was so impressed with the look of ConceptDraw, and how the student was able to use it," she says, "that I started using it myself."

Connecting the Dots

"Thinking creatively is the ability to take existing ideas and combine them in new ways," Dr. Karwoski says. "This is much easier to do when you can see all the ideas in front of you. And that's where ConceptDraw comes in. " Mind maps support creative thinking because students can capture information by visually connecting short key words and phrases, instead of having to write complete sentences.
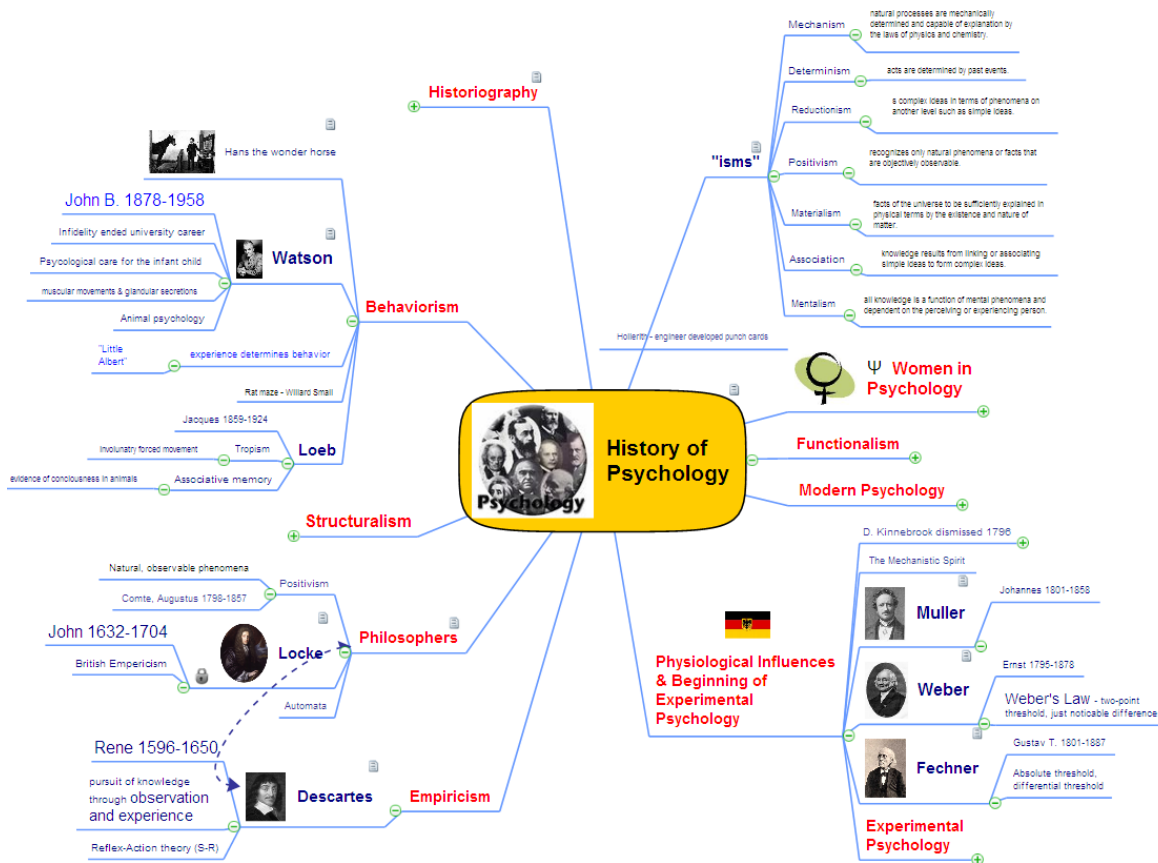
"A mind map is like a CD," she says. "You can jump right to the information you're interested in. Linear notes are like audio tapes. You waste time wading line by line through the content in hopes of getting to what you want. " Such efficient use of space means that more information can fit onto a single page or screen — and that gives students the opportunity to see how normally unconnected ideas might fit together.

Students Take Note

Because it accelerates her students' ability to capture and make sense of information, mind mapping is a regular part of Dr. Karwoski's class. In fact, the map her students create to summarize textbook material constitutes a full third of their final grade. As her students build these maps, she encourages them to add notes or images from video lectures, their thoughts on additional readings, even pictures and icons that help them remember information — and the ideas that the information generates.

She says part of the challenge she faces is that lots of students don't know how to take good notes in the first place. "They just copy down sections straight from the text and think that will help them learn." So when she reviews their maps, she uses the map structure to teach them how to take better notes.

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Map constructed by Ms. Annette Linders Schultz, Duane P., and Sydney Ellen. Schultz.
A History of Modern Psychology. 9th ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2007. Print.

Mind maps work best when you use just a few well chosen words to convey meaning. By helping her students capture the meaning of a key paragraph in three or four words—instead of three or four sentences, Dr. Karwoski helps her students create very concise, but very content-rich, class notes.

The Perfect Study Aid

To drive home the value of the maps, Dr. Karwoski presents her students with a scenario: "You didn't think you'd have to take the Psychology Graduate Record Exam. But now you find out that to get into your dream school, you do. So suddenly you have to do a crash review of psychology. Imagine how much easier it will be for you to prepare for the exam if you've created a clear, concise map for each of your undergraduate psychology courses." That's the kind of map she teaches them to create.

When, during the course of the semester, students turn in particularly good maps, Dr. Karwoski asks them if she can publish the maps in Web Campus, UNLV's Blackboard® system. "I was so thrilled to find that I had no trouble receiving and sending maps through Web Campus. I just click on the attachment, ConceptDraw MINDMAP opens up—and there's the map."

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Manipulating Text… but in a Nice Way

One of the main reasons Dr. Karwoski was attracted to mind mapping is that it allows you to manipulate text—move it around, see what goes together, see if things might go together in new and different ways… without having to get out the scissors and glue stick. This approach was reinforced for her recently at a Text and Academic Authors Association conference when one of the speakers recommended that students cut their dissertation draft into pieces. That way, the speaker said, students can move the pieces around until they find the best structure.

Dr. Karwoski says that breaking down information into small words and phrases can help when you want to put it back together in new ways to gain new insights. To do that, she says, you need to be able to move each piece of information around independently. "I guess that's why I've always been a great one for index cards and sticky notes. In previous semesters, before we started working as a class with ConceptDraw, I would tell students that low tech was fine. One student even put sticky notes on the back of a door, and then sent me a photograph of the door. That works, she says. It's just a lot easier to do it digitally."

Distinguish Yourself as a Speaker

Just as it helps her students, ConceptDraw helps Dr. Karwoski professionally. In her capacity as a speaker at psychology and learning events, mind maps help her to be organized— but not too organized.

"What I like about mind mapping is that it allows me a great deal of flexibility and spontaneity when I'm presenting. I can extemporize, because it's easy to keep track of the main points I want to cover. That keeps my presentations fresh. Whether I'm teaching my students, making presentations, planning research, or drafting an article, the main thing I'm working on is being able to make connections between different facts and concepts. Good learning, thinking, writing, and presenting is a matter of connecting ideas. And connecting ideas is what ConceptDraw MINDMAP is all about"■