Mapping an Idea

Video Transcript

Say you unfold a road map and look at it more closely. Or review the route proposed to you by your GPS or smart phone's map application. You can see that each city acts as a hub for multiple roads that lead away from it in different directions. Each road heading out of a city leads eventually to a new destination that itself is the converging point of more roads. But what do the images on a road map actually mean? How do they help us navigate in our world? They help us find our way, of course, but they also show the relationships between each of these destinations in terms of distance and direction.

In writing, when we are trying to build relationships between concepts in an essay, it can be hard to visualize where each topic connects to another. We may not even have a firm grasp on which topic is our central topic, much less how other topics relate to it and each other. This is where clustering can be useful.

Clustering is a free-associative exercise that uses words and basic concepts to build "idea maps" that will help you start thinking about the relationships between different concepts so that you can build a well-developed and focused product.

A key strategy in this exercise is to use word association to develop a broader context for the topic you want to write about. No word or concept exists in a vacuum. Each idea has something that came before it that helped it develop into a complete form, and many ideas themselves spawn new concepts that can be further developed over time. When building an idea map, you use word association to identify the key aspects of the topic you want to explore - what images, or words, comes to mind when thinking about the topic and what concepts are meaningfully related to your chosen topic. As you develop your essay, you may explore the relationships between the different topics in your idea map. This is the central idea behind clustering; identify words or basic ideas related to broad subjects and then build and elaborate on those connections.

Remember that clustering is simply a first step towards writing a paper, so when you finish this exercise, it may seem that all you've really accomplished from this is a bunch of seemingly random words crazily scribbled over a sheet of paper. You may begin to question your sanity. Don't let your own thoughts overwhelm you. The real goal of clustering is to help you recognize and understand the relationships between words and concepts so that you can begin to develop well-constructed arguments or analysis from a basic concept.

Have you ever tried to connect different concepts? Did you find it difficult to see the connections without writing them out? How do you think an idea might improve with a visualization of the connections between its components?

About this transcript:

- Transcript Title: Mapping an Idea

- Corresponding Lesson: Clustering

- Author and Curator: Matt Huigens for The TEL Library

- Creative Commons License: CC BY NC SA