

## CMAPS IN LITERATURE CLASSES – AN ALTERNATIVE TO SUMMARIES AND NOTES

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**Abstract.** Teaching literature in a foreign language demands a linguistic and cognitive effort from the students which are hampered by the foreseeing task of writing about the text. The organization of ideas and decision-making for writing a literary piece of criticism comes after reading along with critical thinking. Conceptual Maps can be used to help out both the tasks of reading and the consequent writing in a foreign language. As each student performs his or her individual reading, and therefore constructs their meanings from the text, different Cmaps for the same work of literature take place in the classroom. This leads to discussion furthermore to the construction of novel meanings for each student as an individual and as part of a society group in a specific time period of history. The use of Cmaps in literature classes can also help the teacher to assess the students' comprehension of the literary work. interface leads to more accurate search performance than the typically used web page-based browser.

**Keywords:** literature, comprehension, writing, cmapping.

### 1 Introduction

A vast number of young students experience difficulties in understanding literature in English at various and distinct levels such as organization of ideas, thinking, motivation, memory, planning and decision-making. Teaching literature, thus, enabling students to understand authors, plots, and styles requires a lot of cognitive effort as well as linguistic effort. In order to make this work easier for both the teacher and the students, we suggest the use of Conceptual Maps and CMap Tools so that students can represent and visualize what they have read in a meaningful way. Also they may employ the Conceptual Map of their reading as a reference for a follow up writing, such as a summary or an essay. The use of Conceptual Maps in literature classes in Brazil has not been used on a regular basis, since its tools have not been known by most professional that work in the field of Literature. In this paper we propose the use of CMap and CMap Tools to help students organize their readings in foreign literature in order to write essays.

Literature is, of its very nature, polyvalent – it can mean different things at different times. Historically can also mean different things at different times and biographically too: a work of literature can mean different things to different times at one's life. This multi-meaningfulness operates from the level of whole text to the single word. Literature explores the linguistic ambiguities that we live with in our everyday lives. Thus, each reading is an individual experience at a very specific time. By representing their own reading through a Conceptual Map, students are able to comprehend the inherent slipperiness of literature by organizing their thoughts (previous knowledge) and the concepts related to the given fiction piece.

One can discover polyvalence at the micro-level of the simplest of words. Responding to literature refers to the way in which one reacts to something that has been read or listened to (Cooper, 1993). This process begins before reading as one thinks about what is to be read and continues during and after reading (Martinez & Roser, 1991). Rosenblatt (1976; 1978) has contended for many years that individuals construct their own meanings by transacting with the text. We consider, in our proposal of CMap Tools for literary studies, the Learning Theory of Assimilation (Ausubel, 1968 and Novak, 2010), which is based on a classical cognitive view of Educational Psychology in which learning is seen as a process that relates new information with previous knowledge on a given subject. In this way, learners can relate their personal experiences (previous knowledge) to the fictional text (new subject), and express their ideas, or summarize the text in conceptual maps.

It is therefore important that students are provided with tools that will help them develop understanding and help them relate what they have read to their personal experiences. It is through this process that students learn to construct meaning and comprehend information. Researchers have found that readers respond to literature in a variety of ways – by retelling, summarizing, analyzing and generalizing (Applebee, 1978). Working towards doing so, we propose that students create their own conceptual maps based on their reading, so that they feel prepared to discuss it, and later write about the chosen piece of literature. This proposal aims at providing undergraduates with a tool (CMap) that enables them to systematize their own reading in a graphic summary, without having to make the cognitive effort required to write an essay about the text they have read. The writing task would be developed later based on their Conceptual Maps, which will guide them throughout the process,

and can be remodeled, if necessary, to attend new constructed meaning(s) from subsequent readings of the given literary work.

## 2 Cmap Concepts And Literature Classes

The Conceptual Map is a tool created to give support to comprehension and autonomy (Novak, 1997). They are an extension of a project, a text, in which we plan; organize our ideas to a specific aim, establishing inter-relations between previous knowledge and what was read. The creation of a CMap allows us the appropriation of understanding. These tools are graphic representations such as diagrams, relating concepts by words, showing these concepts more comprehensively. The diagram indicates the process of organization of knowledge as well as connects the visual and the linguistic. To learn with CMaps, the students need to have previous knowledge about a specific theme. Our study is influenced by Learning Theory of Assimilation (Ausubel, 1968 and Novak, 2010), that states learning as a process in which the learner relates new information received with his/her prior knowledge on a given subject. This will be idiosyncratically defined by the conditions that the learner finds throughout his life experiences, her lifestyle and the offered opportunities for practicing their knowledge (Tavares, 2007).

Teaching Literature using CMap helps the student towards a better understanding of the target text, also allows the reader to cope with the polyvalence of the text in its linguistic and narrative dimensions. Previous knowledge in literature class is the literary fabrication itself to which we are exposed since childhood when we are told stories – fiction stories. The narrative process in fiction is so well integrated in our lives that we consider this integration as prior knowledge to the reading of literary pieces in a foreign language in addition to the acquisition of the foreign language itself.

### 2.1 *Reading for meaning and CMap*

As students become more experienced readers and writers, they develop more sophisticated abilities to construct meaning by analyzing and evaluating literature (Kelly & Farnan, 1991). The hermeneutics in literary studies concerns the extraction of meaning(s) from words on the page. Hermeneutics adds to the process of extraction a focus on exactly how the meaning is being communicated, and how, once communicated, we “make sense” of it. (Sutherland, 2011). The primary question about meaning is where it is located, in the text, in the mind, in the medium? Or is it a consensual creation? We believe meaning is constructed by the individual from all the literary aspects mentioned above as well as one’s own experiences. What the literary work means and how it means, i.e., the hermeneutics aspect can be explored and displayed in a Conceptual Map. Reading a literary work is a multiple activity; it involves reading the text more than once, elaborating relations between the words, the contents, and characters that lead to understanding it, sometimes, at more than one level. Layers of meaning can be shown through Conceptual mapping of the target text.

### 2.2 *CMap as a writing task*

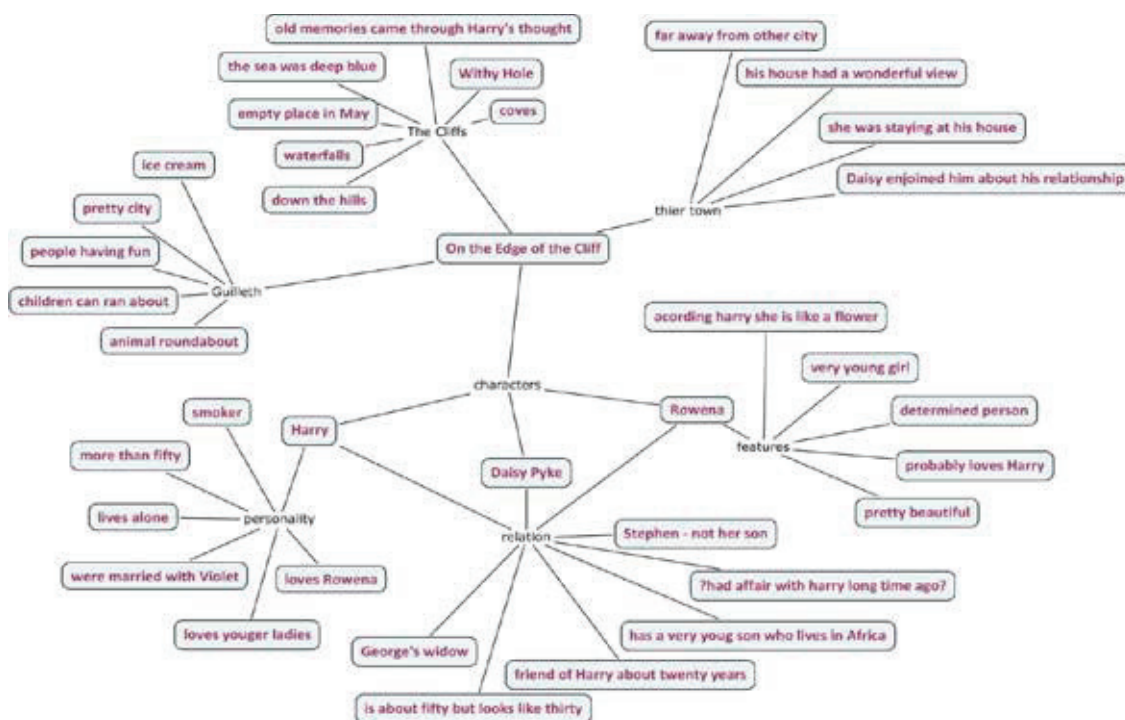
In literature classes, reading and discussing the literary work compose its first stage, followed by a writing in which students respond in a critic approach to the literary text and its aspects. One can say that writing is one form of responding to literature and, by giving written responses to literature, students learn to construct meaning through writing. They further develop their ability to think critically (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). However, writing in a foreign language (English, in our case) can be an overwhelming task for freshmen in college since it is probably the first time they are asked to write an essay in English. This can interfere with the students’ ability to think critically due to their lack of experience in this form of assignment. By providing students with the proper tools, we promote their comprehension and thinking capacities in the target language.

Conceptual Maps make it possible for students to organize critically their thoughts, furthermore, guides them towards the writing of a piece of literary criticism. They are able to connect facts to situations and are able to carry out in-depth elaboration by relating to incidents from the text. The Cmap allows the students to voice their opinions on different issues in the text, leading them to think critically and to substantiate their opinions with facts. In Literature Classes, the usage of a CMap can transform the readable comprehension into another point of view from the students. The reader, after creating their own CMap, is able to understand multiple aspects of the narrative, examining into detail the characters, the scene, and even the author.

It is important for teachers to model different types of responding behaviors for students (Martinez & Roser, 1991). In this sense, a Conceptual Map of a literary work can also substitute for a traditional piece of writing.

The Cmap provides the students with the opportunity to be creative and to express the meaning of the text as constructed by them. Comparing different Cmaps for the same literary piece in class brings the opportunity for discussion and later on the re-making of the Cmap based on the classroom discussion. The various layers of meaning in a literary work, as perceived by the students, work together to question these meanings, and to construct other ones.

Other aspects of literature can be approached by Cmapping, such as style, irony, culture, narrative, intention, along with linguistic features, making it possible for the students to respond to their readings in writing. Moreover, the Conceptual Map can substitute for the traditional essay writing assignment for classroom assessment. Instead of taking notes and/or writing summaries (which swarm on the web), students are confronted with the task of organizing their ideas from their own perspective. Consequently they achieve the goal of a literature class: to discuss the work of a specific author from their point of view, and deal with different approaches. Below we present an example of a Conceptual Maps carried out in English Literature class.



**Figure 1.** Concept Map about the short story named “On the edge of the Cliff”, created by a college student, during the 6<sup>th</sup> semester of Languages, in a class of English Literature II

The CMap of figure one was made by a student to describe some aspects of the characters from the short story “On the Edge of the Cliff” (Chartier, 1997). The narrative tells about three people, a couple, and a girl who seems to be in a relationship with the man, but at the same time seems to be just a friend of his. There is a certain mystery about this relationship. It is not implicit if the two, Harry and Daisy, are just friend or if they really have something more. But it is clear when the author refers to Harry and Rowena as a couple. As we can see, the details inserted on the Map can facilitate the comprehension of the characters by others who haven’t read the text, and making it easier to grasp the story.

After elaborating the Conceptual Map of the reading of the fictional piece, students are encouraged to reread their maps, and, if necessary, remodel them, or produce a new conceptual map aiming the task of writing a piece of criticism about the literary piece. The usage of CMaps allows the students to build graphically their comprehension of the texts; moreover, it provides them with a resourceful tool to rephrase the meaning(s) they have constructed during, as well as after the reading. The task of writing a summary of the story can be replaced by the CMaps, further; they can be employed in any other writing activity which follows the reading.

Teaching literature in a foreign language demands linguistic and cognitive effort from the students which can be hampered by the foreseeing task of writing about the read text. The organization of ideas and decision-making for writing a literary piece of criticism comes after reading by way of critical thinking. Conceptual Maps can be used to help out both the tasks of reading and the consequent writing in a foreign language. As each student performs his or her individual reading, and therefore construct their meanings from the text, different Cmaps for the same work of literature take place in the classroom. This leads to discussion and to the

construction of novel meanings for each student or simply questions their previous concepts. The building of knowledge and of meaning out of a literary work is in agreement with the purpose of Conceptual Map as a cognitive tool. The use of Cmaps in literature classes can also help the teacher to assess the students' comprehension of the literary work.

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