FROM CONTENT TO CONCEPTS:
USING CONCEPT MAPPING TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN TO THINK LIKE HISTORIANS

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Abstract. Very often students arrive in collegiate history courses with a simplistic idea of what history is and what historians do. In particular, students have little understanding of the complexity of historical analysis and fail to understand the variety of issues that historians need to consider when writing about the past. These issues – such as context, chronology and causation, and continuity and change over time – can be treated as core concepts that students need to understand and develop a facility with in order to start to think like an historian. This project addresses this by using concept mapping as a way to help students learn these key ideas and concepts. This presentation focuses on an introductory United States history course. The author describes how concept mapping was utilized as a way to develop these skills in undergraduate history students.

1   Introduction

The "coverage" model of pedagogy has come under increased scrutiny in recent years (Weimer, 2013; Ambrose et al., 2010). This is particularly the case in many introductory history courses where the sheer volume of "material" to "cover" is daunting (Sipress & Voelker, 2008). For example, in the course under consideration in this presentation –History of the United States from 1865 to the Present - potentially anything that happened between 1865 and the present involving the United States could be included in the material to be "covered". In addition, courses such as this one which end "in the present" have an ever-shifting end point with new "material" to be "covered" every few years. Many historians teaching introductory-level courses such as this one have come to the conclusion that this has reached an untenable situation, necessitating a thorough rethinking of the pedagogy employed in such courses.

In addition, many collegiate history courses are bounded by time and place, where the focus has traditionally been on having students learn "what happened" in that given place during a given time period. Courses where students learn to "think like historians" tend to be upper division courses reserved for history majors. Unlike in many of the other social sciences, introductory history courses do not often focus primarily on helping students learn the fundamental concepts that historians use to understand the past. Key historical concepts - such as context, chronology and causation, continuity and change over time – are seldom addressed in a systematic way and instead are often lightly addressed if at all. This course was designed to place the focus on helping students learn these fundamental concepts first, then used the remainder of the semester to have the students "think like an historian" and apply these concepts to a series of student-selected research projects involving construction of concept maps. While concept mapping has been used in many higher education settings to help students understand a wide variety of subjects, concept maps have seldom if ever been used in collegiate history courses. Indeed, after conducting a thorough search of the literature I failed to find a single reference in which concept mapping had been used in collegiate history courses in any fashion at all.

2   Concept Maps in the Course

I used concept mapping in two different ways in this course. First, concept maps were constructed by the students on historical events of their choosing. Constructing these maps helped students understand that history is not a simple liner, chronological unfolding of events in time, but rather better understood as a complex web of interrelated events and causes occurring through time. Concept mapping is particularly well suited to illustrating this. As soon as students move away from a written narrative of an event and begin to construct concept maps they more easily see the interconnectedness and complexity of any single event. The idea of "context", for example, becomes clearly apparent as students place an event in the web of other events and patterns connected to it. The second way I used concept mapping in this course was to have students construct maps on specific historical concepts after they had worked with historical events. This was a much more challenging assignment as the students needed to consider how historians use specific historical concepts to inquire about the past. Students constructed concept maps around focus questions such as "How does context inform an historians understanding of an historical event" or "How do historians use chronology and causation to explain an historical event." This was often challenging but very helpful for students because of the metacognitive nature of this concept map, i.e. thinking about how historians know something or how historians come to an understand about an event or historical issue. When confronted with thinking about how historians think students need to draw upon

their own understandings, developed through the earlier use of concept maps, and can achieve a richer understanding of what it is historians do and how they do it.

I introduced concept mapping in the course in a three-step process. First, I informally introduced the idea by having the students help me identify a list of concepts associated with the second stage of the industrial revolution (circa 1880-1910). This is a major topic addressed early in the course. It is also a very complex, multifaceted topic as it incorporates such a wide array of concepts such as urbanization, immigration, technological change, labor issues, changes in the finance system, development of mass marketing, child labor concerns and on and on. I then modeled the construction of a concept map at the front of the room at the board, engaging with the students to consider where each concept should go in relation to the others, and what sorts of connecting words best describe the relationship between them. The students quickly began to make many connections between the concepts, and we kept needing to add more concepts as we proceeded. In the second step I divided the students into small groups, had them choose a topic from the material we had been studying for that week and together construct a rudimentary concept map on their chosen topic. After, a few volunteered their work which I reproduced on the board, then as a class we critiqued them for completeness, appropriateness of the linking words and subsequent propositions. For the third step I more formally introduced concept mapping by having the students read "What is a Concept Map" by Cañas and Novak from the IHMC website (Cañas & Novak, 2009). We met the next class period in one of the campus computer labs where I introduced them to the IHMC *Cmap Tools*, then set them to the task of constructing a formal concept map on an event of their choosing. Figure 1 below is an example of one student's first "event-specific" concept map, this one delving into why Richard Nixon was elected President of the United States in 1968. After that first concept map the students constructed two more maps on events of their choosing across the remainder of the semester. They finished the semester with a concept map on a specific historical concept as described above.
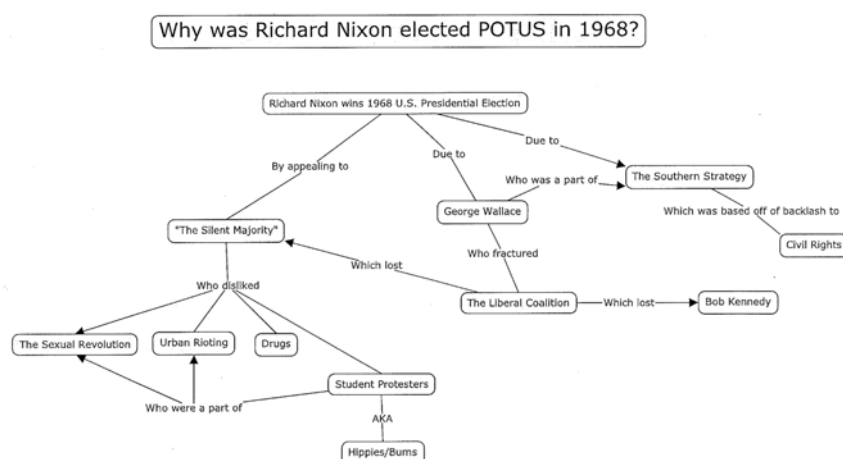

Figure 1. Example of student-produced first round "event-specific" concept map.

3   Summary

Concept mapping proved to be very useful in helping collegiate history students learn to think like historians. As a class the students and I quickly saw that concept mapping will never replace narrative in historical understanding, however concept mapping proved to be a very powerful analytical tool helping to display the complex nature of many historical events in a way that traditional narrative often could not. Concept mapping proved to be especially useful in helping students gain a more thorough understanding of such key historical concepts as context and gave students a new way to describe and inquire about the past.

4   Acknowledgements

References

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