Visual Diagramming with Inspiration®

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Introduction

Visual diagramming techniques are often used in recreation courses to assist students to recognize patterns and to process complex information. The research on visual diagramming reports helping students to clarify thinking, reinforce understanding, and integrate new knowledge, as well as helping instructors to identify students' misconceptions, as the four main benefits (Bromley, K., Irwin-DeVitis, L., & Modlo, M., 1995; Hyerle, D., 1996).

In any given classroom it is common to see a flow chart on the chalk board or a wall full of post-it notes being arranged and categorized by students as a way of grouping concepts and ideas. And while these techniques are effective, there are obvious drawbacks. First, chalkboard drawings cannot be taken home by students at the end of class unless they write as the instructor writes, decreasing class participation. If the instructor wants to use that drawing for a future class, perhaps to integrate new information, he or she also has to copy it. And what happens when the class decides to rearrange that diagram? The board is erased and they start from scratch. Writing ideas on post-it notes and arranging them together is certainly affective as a grouping exercise, but the problem with the future use of those slips of paper remains.

Combining these concerns with the growing availability of technology in the classroom has led to the use of a visual diagramming software package called Inspiration®. This easy to use software allows the instructor, or one of the students, to create a diagram on the computer and project that creation via an LCD projector. As the classroom discussion of a topic moves forward, any part of the diagram can be moved, added to, or deleted. At the end of class, the diagram can be saved for future classes, printed, copied into a Word or PowerPoint document, or uploaded onto a web-enhancement classroom tool such as Blackboard or Web CT. Classroom results include enriched class discussions, increased willingness of students to answer questions, and greater opportunity for student leadership in class.

Description

From facility design to leisure theory, numerous applications exist for visual diagramming within recreation courses. The following are two examples from an introduction to leisure course.

Definition of leisure. Understanding the contemporary definitions of leisure is a major component of an introductory course. Using the visual diagramming software, the

class begins by brainstorming all the ways in which leisure is defined. As students contribute ideas, they are typed into the computer and instantly become a "bubble" on the screen. Typical answers might include "playing games," "having fun," and "free time." With the brainstorming complete, the three contemporary definitions of leisure are introduced and explained. Using time, activity and state of mind as headings, the class proceeds to arrange the generated ideas into these three groups (done simply by pointing and capturing a bubble with the mouse) and can discuss the impact of differing views of leisure.

Leisure Around the World. Another common topic for an introductory course is the world view of leisure. Students often lack an understanding of how recreation and leisure relate to the political, social, and geographical realities of any given country. With this in mind, as the recreation patterns of a particular country are discussed, the class creates a visual web which links the recreation interests of a particular culture with the social, political, and geographical factors that influence those decisions. This is done both as a whole class discussion, to stimulate recall from reading, as well as part of a group project presentation in which each group is required to report on the recreation patterns of a specific country.

Outcomes and Recommendations

Noticeable changes have occurred in the classroom using this software. Students are often pulled in by the novelty of the technology and are eager to contribute ideas to the diagrams. With the ability to save a diagram, diagrams from previously discussed concepts can be reintroduced, then added to or modified as the class integrates new information. With the ability to post diagrams on a course Blackboard site, students are freed from taking notes and can focus their attention on the discussion, creating a richer classroom dialogue. More opportunities for leadership within the classroom are also available. Students are assigned as moderators and recorders of brainstorming sessions, requiring them to learn to use the software as well as to lead the group discussion. Finally, through the process of rephrasing and connecting concepts, the visual techniques are working in conjunction with lectures and in-class exercises to enhance the critical thinking of students (Hyerle, D., 1996; Paul, R. & Elder, L., 2001).

Limitless applications exist for recreation courses. To date, this technique has been incorporated into special populations courses (mapping the history of legislation pertaining to people with disabilities, identifying the benefits of inclusive recreation), leisure and human behavior courses (play theories, lifespan factors for leisure), program design in therapeutic recreation courses (activity analysis, comprehensive program design), as well as internship seminars (comparison of profession organizations, path for certification), in addition to the introduction to leisure course. From assessing student's knowledge of a concept to comparing and contrasting two subjects, visual diagramming can be a useful tool. One caution, like any classroom activity it can be overused. Good judgment is needed to adequately assess the most appropriate uses for any course.

Resources

Inspiration® Software, Inc., phone (503) 297-3004, www.inspiration.com.

References

Bromley, K., Irwin-De Vitis, L., & Modlo, M. (1995). *Graphic organizers: Visual strategies for active learning*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Hyerle, D. (1996). *Visual tools for constructing knowledge*. Alexandria, VA: The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2001). *The miniature guide to critical thinking concepts and tools*. Dillon Beach, CA: The Foundation for Critical Thinking.