How to Build a Concept Map

1. Identify a focus question that addresses the problem, issues, or knowledge domain you wish to map. Guided by this question, identify 10 to 20 concepts that are pertinent to the question and list these. Some people find it helpful to write the concept labels on separate cards or Post-its™ so that they can be moved around. If you work with computer software for mapping, produce a list of concepts on your computer. Concept labels should be a single word, or at most two or three words.

2. Rank the concepts by placing the broadest and most inclusive idea at the top of the map. It is sometimes difficult to identify the broadest, most inclusive concept. It is helpful to reflect on your focus question to help decide the ranking of the concepts. Sometimes this process leads to modification of the focus question or writing a new focus question.

3. Work down the list and add more concepts as needed.

4. Begin to build your map by placing the most inclusive, most general concept(s) at the top. Usually there will be only one, two, or three most general concepts at the top of the map.

5. Next select the two, three, or four subconcepts to place under each general concept. Avoid placing more than three or four concepts under any other concept. If there seem to be six or eight concepts that belong under a major concept or subconcept, it is usually possible to identify some appropriate concept of intermediate inclusiveness, thus creating another level of hierarchy in your map.

6. Connect the concepts by lines. Label the lines with one or a few linking words. The linking words should define the relationship between the two concepts so that it reads as a valid statement or proposition. The connection creates meaning. When you hierarchically link together a large number of related ideas, you can see the structure of meaning for a given subject domain.

7. Rework the structure of your map, which may include adding, subtracting, or changing superordinate concepts. You may need to do this reworking several times, and, in fact, this process can go on indefinitely as you gain new knowledge or new insights. This is where Post-its™ are helpful, or better still, computer software for creating maps.

8. Look for crosslinks between concepts in different sections of the map and label these lines. Crosslinks can often help to see new, creative relationships in the knowledge domain.

9. Specific examples of concepts can be attached to the concept labels (e.g., golden retriever is a specific example of a dog breed).

10. Concept maps could be made in many different forms for the same set of concepts. There is no one way to draw a concept map. As your understanding of relationships between concepts changes, so will your maps.

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