Human Mind Maps

by TOM GLASS

Tom Glass recently retired after 16 years of dedicated service to *English Teaching Forum*, where he contributed not only as an editor but also as a thoughtful writer. Over the years, Tom penned several insightful articles that reflected his passion for language learning and innovative teaching strategies. To celebrate his contributions, we're pleased to reshare one of his creative techniques below!

When students generate mind maps, the maps are usually on paper, computer screens, or a blackboard. Here is a way for your class to create a Human Mind Map.

Human Mind Maps require few resources and little preparation. The main requirements are space where students can move around and a little creativity and imagination.

The technique works best if students are already familiar with mind maps (sometimes called concept maps). They should also have knowledge of a set of terms or concepts related to a particular topic. Before you begin the activity, select a topic. It could be one the class has just studied—perhaps weather, the environment, or your school. Then follow these steps:

1. As a class, brainstorm terms and concepts that are related to the selected topic. For the topic of weather, for example, the class might come up with words such as those listed below.

rain	downpour
snow	drizzle
hot	sleet
cold	forecast
wind	thermometer
clouds	barometer
temperature	windchill
sun	thunderstorm
overcast	lightning
breeze	thunder
drought	partly cloudy
flood	mostly cloudy
blizzard	high temperature
hurricane	low temperature
typhoon	heat wave

Ideally, you will generate as many terms as there are students (see options for large classes under Variations below). Including terms that are indirectly related to the main topic is fine and could lead to critical-thinking opportunities as the activity progresses. For example, students might suggest *umbrella*, *boots*, *gloves*, or *sunblock*, all of which are items we may need when we go outside, depending on the weather. (Write the words on the board as you brainstorm.)

2. Have students help write the terms from the board on pieces of paper—writing in large letters and putting only one term on each piece of paper.

3. Collect all the pieces of paper and then have each student choose one at random.

4. Tell students they will represent the term on their piece of paper. The student who has *wind* will represent the wind, the student with *hurricane* will represent a hurricane, and so on. Tell students that at your signal, they will stand up and mingle with classmates. Each time they meet someone new, they will do three things:

- Each person will tell the other what he or she is and then ask, "What do I do?" (Or, if a student is representing

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an adjective, the question could be "What am I like?")

- Each person will explain what the other person does (or is like).
- Together, the two students will think of two ways that they are related.

For example, suppose the student with *sun* meets the student with *rain*. The student with *sun* might say, "I am the sun. What do I do?" The student with *rain* might answer, "You shine in the sky and make everything warm." (Many other answers are possible.) The student with *rain* can then say, "I am rain. What do I do?" The student with *sun* might answer, "You fall from the clouds and make everything wet." (Again, many other answers are possible.)

(Note that the reason the student with *sun* does not simply say, "I am the sun. I make everything warm" is that then each student would be repeating the same information over and over again during the mingle. By answering "What do I do?" or "What am I like?" questions, students must formulate and express ideas about each of the terms they encounter.)

Next, the two students will look for ways that *sun* and *rain* go together or affect each other. They might say, "After it rains, the sun comes out and dries up the water on the ground" and "When the sun and rain are together, we make a rainbow." After coming up with at least two ways the terms are related, students move on to find other partners. They mingle until they have met all their classmates, or as many as time will allow.

5. After students have mingled and reactivated their knowledge of the terms, they are ready to make a Human Mind Map. They will move around and form groups with classmates who have terms that relate most closely with their own. You might tell them, "You have met the other weather terms, and you have talked about your relationship with them. Now, find the weather terms that connect most closely to yours. Who has the most in common with you? When you find someone who has a lot in common with you, try to find others who have a lot in common with both of you."

Students move around the room, forming pairs and then groups. It is important to tell students that in this exercise there is no right answer or wrong answer. The important things are for them to find and understand relationships between and among the terms they represent, and to be able to explain them.

6. Position a symbol for the general topic of weather in the center of the room. The symbol could be a chair, or it might be you. Have the groups stand around the weather symbol just as subtopics are positioned around a central topic on a written mind map. The students, and the terms they represent, are now a three-dimensional representation of a mind map.

7. Ask a spokesperson for each group to identify the common connection among the terms in their group. Students representing *rain*, *snow*, *drizzle*, and *sleet* might be grouped as kinds of precipitation, while students representing *thunderstorm*, *blizzard*, *hurricane*, and *typhoon* might have put themselves together as kinds of storms. Or perhaps the precipitation group and the storm group have joined into a larger group. That is fine, as long as students can explain why they made the connections they did. (If you wish, have each group write its name on a large sheet of paper.)

You might ask students if any of them feel they could be in a different group than the one they are in.

If you have string or yarn, you can show relationships more visually at this point by having each group extend a piece of string from the central idea (in this case, "weather") to the group. You can take the connections a step further: give out more pieces of string and have students connect to other groups (the precipitation group might connect to the storm group) or to an individual member of another group (a group including students representing *hot*, *cold*, and *temperature*, for example, might connect to the student with *thermometer*, who might already be in a group with the student representing *barometer*). Have students explain these new connections—and see if they suggest even more. Depending on the amount of string you have, students might discover that they are part of a tangled web of connections—and that they are noticing relationships among terms and concepts that they never considered before. (Once students are in place, you could take a photo of the Human Mind Map.)

VARIATIONS

If you have a large class, you can make more than one set of pieces of paper and divide the class, giving each group a set. Each group will construct its own Human Mind Map, and as a class you can see whether the mind maps are the same, how they differ, and why.

You could also ask each group to generate its own list of terms and, later, compare the connections and the mind maps that were generated from them.

Students at lower ability levels can make Human Mind Maps with other sets of vocabulary. The pieces of paper might show kinds of food, kinds of animals, or kinds of objects. Or the pieces of paper might show vocabulary related to school; the following list offers suggestions:

student	notebook
teacher	blackboard
classroom	chalk
hallway	eraser
book	cafeteria (canteen)
playground	English
paper	Math
pencil	Science
pen	friends

Of course, many other terms are possible. You and your students can brainstorm terms, write them on pieces of paper, and then be ready to make a Human Mind Map.

CONCLUSION

Mind maps can be used for a variety of purposes, and Human Mind Maps are no different. The topics you choose can be abstract; they can be controversial; they can be arguments for and against a proposal; they can be students' own opinions about an issue you are discussing in class.

In this activity, students must think critically and creatively. They must use the vocabulary and concepts they have studied. They must move around—purposefully—and communicate in English and collaborate. And they, and you, will probably have fun doing all those things.