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Mapping the Hero's Journey into Thinking: Assigning a Geo-Literacies Multimodal Assignment in a First-Year Honors Seminar

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Abstract: By incorporating visual mapping into students' thinking and writing processes, a narrative assignment in geo-literacy creates a reflective and agency-based learning experience for student writers in a first-year honors seminar.

Keywords: geo-literacy curriculum; visual literacies; rhetorical awareness; storyboards; My Maps (Google Inc., Earth Education); Auburn University at Montgomery (AL)–Honors Program

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At Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM), I ask my first-year honors students to reflectively examine and practice habits of thinking and knowledge-building in a series of interrelated writing projects and readings. Each reading and writing task is designed to give students the opportunity to build their synthesis-level critical and creative thinking habits. The course theme of "Hero's Journey" challenges students to consider the idea of the heroic, especially as it pertains to their own lives and to the time they will spend at AUM. Special emphasis is placed on the nature and value of education and the question "What does it mean to be an educated person?" To this end, I begin by introducing students to our central text, Alan Jacobs's *How to Think*. This text is the foundation of the first writing project, in which students examine their view of learning and their roles as knowledge makers, a first reflective step toward understanding their agency in a journey that begins with examining preexisting knowledge and habits of learning and thinking.

To frame this semester-long journey, we begin with an exercise in self-reflection that our composition program uses as its opening writing project: a literacies narrative. For honors students, however, this genre approach is deepened to target honors' key goals of helping students develop as creative thinkers, critical thinkers, global citizens, teammates, and leaders. Their literacy topic, then, is more meta in nature than mere reading/writing experiences; instead, students must examine formative experiences that shape what they see as a personally defining belief, considering the role communities play in that development. This first assignment is a key step to constructivist-based learning, a cornerstone of pedagogy common to honors program design and to a focus on agency, reflection, active learning, and metacognition. The assignment is "designerly" in nature (Cross): a geo-literacies narrative. In an act of embodied cognition, students engage in both writing and mapping their personal narrative of growth using Google's interactive My Maps space, graphically incorporating text, geographic locations, and concepts through narrative and graphic rhetorical choices. They not only consider their own stories, but how an audience will encounter (and thus shape) that narrative. Such rhetorical awareness takes students on the first steps of their Hero's Journey to critical thinking.

Step 1: The assignment is introduced by locating students in their roles as agents of knowledge-building; it asks them to compose a narrative that chronicles and explores the origins and development of a belief that defines them (self-knowledge) by locating and narrating specific, key life experiences that have helped them become who they are as honors learners today. In other words, students focus on exploring a defining belief about knowledge and learning as a literacy: a process of becoming literate in learning.

Step 2: Following the process model of writing, students begin by engaging in brainstorming to reflect on how they learned to learn. This activity becomes the foundation of our discussion of the many systems of knowledge-making we encounter throughout our lives, from families to formal institutions of education.

Step 3: In keeping with our mentor text by Alan Jacobs, the assignment then shifts to considering thinking as a process, not a destination, and one that is a communal activity. This concept often shocks students as they have come to believe that learning happens independently from others; admonitions of "think for yourself" is often a hallmark of Western educational systems. By asking them to see that learning happens in and because of the formative influences of varied discourse communities, the assignment endeavors to make their thinking visible in the effort of mapping their narrative.

Following topic brainstorming, students read and discuss a model multimodal narrative: Dinty Moore's "Mr. Plimpton's Revenge," a Google Maps-based narrative essay that exposes students to different ways of experiencing—not just reading—a narrative's concepts and purpose. A collaborative workshop then introduces students to the affordances and design features of the Google My Maps space as a site of creation. The collaborative workshop helps students avoid cognitive overload; they can offload some of their anxiety by seeing how classmates navigate and alter the space for a shared purpose. The workshop also opens discussion on how each choice creates meaning, drawing students' attention to thinking about the *why* of their rhetorical choices of representational tools (words vs. graphics).

During the workshop, students first create a pin that visually marks their high school, followed by a second pin for another significant-to-them location; finally, they practice adding text in one pin's composing box that explains the significance of this choice. Combined with the next step of storyboarding, this activity engages students in thinking both conceptually and spatially in order to see narrative structure as more rhetorically complex than a simple 2-D timeline of events.

Next, students create a storyboard, a series of interconnected rectangular spaces representing vignettes that are scenes of their envisioned narrative. Students decide how to position their selected places, people, and events that play a role in shaping a belief that has constructed their thinking identities. Students draw five connected rectangles—much like a traditional comic strip—to represent their story's key scenes, forcing them to limit the scope of their narrative, focus their ideas, and make room for deeper development of descriptive detail. Students work through their agency as meaning-makers and knowledge-builders with audience in mind, an essential to rhetorically based critical thinking and writing.

After the storyboarding workshop, students write and answer the reporter questions (who, what, where, when, how, and why) to generate detailed content for one of their storyboard squares and, after sharing their work within groups for feedback, for each of the storyboard's spaces. Subsequent peer workshops allow them to try out their narratives on readers, who then provide feedback on the impact of their choices. Such visual outlining facilitates a different level of cognitive engagement as students see their narrative as more than a text on a page; it is, in fact, a three-dimensional act of creative agency that disrupts familiar approaches to essay writing by creating critical and reflective opportunities to explore preexisting knowledge of writing and thinking habits as a precursor to creating new habits.

Once students complete their first storyboard draft, they map these scenes as locations in their Google Maps shell, which can be challenging for those who see their story taking place in one location (a school, a classroom, a home). The mapping affordances create an opportunity to think about how their beliefs developed interstitially at the conceptual level: the why as well as the how. Making the journey metaphor literal, the assignment creates a need to think about what they are thinking about by having them visualize their ideas as a journey, by learning to value meaning-making as a process, not just a destination. The map also forces students to bring the rhetorical audience to the forefront of their processes. Design becomes a conscious effort at making their thinking visible.

According to research, activities that make visible students' intentional and reflective knowledge-building efforts deepen critical thinking skills ("Visible Thinking"). In post-project reflective writing, my students' reflective journaling included remarks that the assignment was "unconventional," "challenging," "uncomfortable/out of my comfort zone," "weird," and "wackadoodle." But they also pointed to the results of such an unconventional learning activity: mapping their narratives helped them break from "traditional school system ways of learning," "learn there are multiple ways to communicate ideas," and "explore different ways of thinking." Such are the very building blocks of the honors experience.

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