From The Idler, December 2023

nany one

Essay

Mappers' Delight

Do you wish you could remember huge amounts of information, or have an in-depth understanding of big topics? Drawing mind maps is a simple way to do just that, writes John-Paul Flintoff

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, I took my beloved schnauzer Peanut out of the house while listening to BBC Radio 4 on my iPhone. It was just after 8am, when the *Today* programme features a big interview. And this was a particularly big interview, with the then-Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kwasi Kwarteng, on the occasion of his making a massive and humiliating U-turn.

Leaving the house, we crossed the road, went down the hill, turned onto the main road, then doubled back up a narrow path, opening onto a quiet road, then turned left at the top onto another main road, and finally left again onto the street where we started – and home.

In the kitchen, somebody else had just started listening to the Chancellor's interview on catch-up. Having already heard it to the end, I had no interest in listening again. But I had a cup of tea to drink, and as I slowly sipped it, I realised that I knew almost exactly what was coming next. It was surprisingly exciting.

I pressed "pause" on my companion's iPhone. "In a moment he's going to ask why the Chancellor sacked his most senior civil servant," I said, explaining that the interviewer had asked that at exactly the moment I crossed the road with Peanut.

It was just as I said. I remembered too the Chancellor's particular tone of rising frustration, as I had first heard it when Peanut sniffed flowers around a tree trunk on the first main road. I remembered letting Peanut off her lead as we turned onto the path, and a neighbour walking down the hill towards us, while the interviewer asked about how financial markets were driving down the value of the pound.

And I remembered needing to get a poo bag from my pocket at exactly the moment the interviewer stated that people around the country would now have to pay a "Kwarteng premium" on their mortgages. (This isn't political satire. It's exactly what happened.)







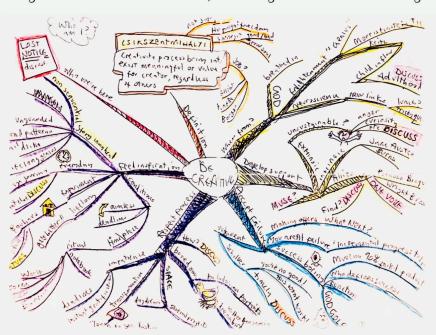
You might wonder why I bother to type up this dog walk in such detail. The answer is, because it demonstrates beautifully how we can memorise ideas, including specific words, by associating them with places.

It's easy to forget, but for most of human history there was no internet. Not being able to look things up at the touch of a button, people made more effort in the past to use their memories, and not only for their few years at school while cramming for exams. Cultivating memory was a task, indeed a pleasure, to last a lifetime.

The classical method of remembering, used in antiquity by people who didn't have plentiful stationery, let alone digital devices, was known as a memory palace. In brief, people were taught from a young age to place data, stories and ideas in imaginary locations in imaginary buildings and towns.

A modern counterpart to the mediaeval memory palace is a mind map – a kind of list with superpowers, created by writing down a combination of words and imagery. I'd never tried mind maps until I met a man who made a fortune out of persuading people to use them in his many books on the subject, the late Tony Buzan.

I was working at an organisation where Buzan was invited to speak to a large audience. I was to be his host, welcoming attendees and introducing







From The Idler, December 2023

FEATURES

him to the stage. Naturally, I bought some of his best-selling books first. As I understood it, his argument for making mind maps was twofold. The activity of physically drawing a map helps you (a) understand a topic and (b) memorise it.

Experience subsequently taught me that Buzan was onto something. Very soon after that event, I was invited to run a three-hour class on How to Be Creative, with just 24 hours' notice. The class came with a 15,000-word outline, which I was supposed to memorise.

Buzan's enthusiasm for mind maps was fresh in my ears, and I was inclined to believe his notion that making ideas into maps, rich with visual detail, could be the best way to absorb them. So, over several hours, I read and reread the 15,000 words of lesson notes. As I did this, I drew maps of it all: maps of the whole thing, then maps of the various individual parts, and maps of practical exercises that might come in useful.

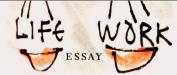
Finally, as darkness fell, I made one last map with coloured branches (as Buzan recommended) and little images scattered among them (ditto). One of those images, reminding me to discuss the importance of boredom in creativity, showed a man yawning. Another, to argue against perfectionism, hinted that "only God can achieve perfection" by means of a cartoony white-bearded deity.

I'm happy to report that the process worked well. When the class started, I took the precaution of warning participants that I might be a bit halting here and there. And they therefore looked unbothered when I did get a couple of minor things wrong. But in general, a single quick glance at that colourful map was enough to tell me where I was and where to go next – the point, after all, of any map.

I was especially pleased that when the class ended, people came over to ask if they could examine and admire the colourful sheet of A3. I used it many times afterwards to teach the same class, sometimes deviating considerably but always having the framework to come back to.

I'm not sure if I realised at the time how important it was that I made that mind map by hand. In an age when digital devices can quickly and accurately transcribe spoken words, it's not surprising that people resist writing by hand and eventually stop being much good at it. A survey in Britain not very long ago found that one in three people hadn't written anything by hand for six months. This is to be regretted because, time-consuming though it may be, writing and doodling by hand helps us to understand information and remember it.

Let me explain by talking about something slightly different. If somebody gives me complicated directions, I often find myself repeating them with



movements: waving my left hand for left turns, right hand for right turns, swivelling at the hips – or whatever – because at a deep subconscious level I know I won't remember anything without these tiny muscle memories. It's the same with writing and drawing.

To try making your own mind map, think of a topic and a reason for covering it – maybe to seek a better understanding of it, or to memorise something (or both). Making your own map, you might seek to impose structure on what seems too big to understand, or too chaotic. You might use branching structures to convey hierarchies (ideas, workplace greasy poles, family trees). You might borrow from flow charts to convey procedures. You could use the map to capture a picture of history unfolding (global technologies, or personal self-improvement). The way in which you distribute ideas around your sheet of paper might convey what is central, and what is peripheral. With strategic use of colour, or assorted typefaces, you can draw distinctions and highlight similarities. With arrows pointing one way or both ways you can show cause and effect. With speech bubbles, you can draw attention to important quotations. I hesitate to recommend any particular approach, because there's no correct way to do it. I like to add my own doodles. You might prefer to use a collage of photos.

When I was preparing to write this, I sat down and drew some mind maps. I started by writing "Idler Mind Maps" in the centre of the page. From there, I drew six branches, leading to these words: What Why When Where Who How.

From each of those words, I drew smaller branches. "What" led to further questions. What am I writing? What is a Mind Map? What is the *Idler*? "Who" caused me to think of all the different types of people I associate with the *Idler*, many of them fragmentary reflections of the founder, Tom Hodgkinson: writers, ukulele players, smallholders, newsletter writers, media people, literature fiends – and of course people who like idling. Each of these led me to further ideas about mind maps.

A smallholder might like to use mind maps to plan for the different seasons of the year, to allocate space, and rotate crops. A ukulele player might map chords, playlists, venues, other types of stringed instrument and musical accompanists – or whatever. You get the idea.

For a long time, a mind map doesn't feel finished. It remains, essentially, an exploded list until I've added sufficient visual interest. But if I'm not careful it can quickly become overdone – too structured, and boringly uncreative. I try to avoid perfectionism, try to remember

that cartoony white-bearded deity. And if that doesn't work, I'll put down my pen and go out for a walk with Peanut.