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2021 Volume III: How to Do Things with Maps

A Cartography of the Self: Making Meaning of the World through Life Maps

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by William Wagoner

Overview

Our entire world has been mapped almost down to the last inch. Even the deep oceans and the distant stars have been marked and delineated. One vast territory that remains almost completely unexplored, however, are the inner vistas of the self. We can get precise directions to anywhere in the world at a moment's notice, but who we are and where we are going is often still a mystery.

I teach at a dual language school in New Haven formerly known as Christopher Columbus Family Academy. It is a school composed of almost all Hispanic students and designed on the exterior to resemble a ship. There is a large bust in front of the building of a navigator sighting land, an event commemorated on a nearby plaque celebrating the bravery and exploration of Columbus and his crew. The intended metaphor seems clear enough; the young students within the hull of this ship are also explorers of sorts. The school has since changed its controversial name, but the irony of the metaphor remains; students trapped within the hull of a vessel steered by imperialist authorities.

This unit would have the students up in the masts instead; to have them explore the world and map their journey through it, to make them navigators of their own identities and values. This unit introduces the concept of a cartography of the self. That is, by using the techniques and tools of mapmaking applied to our personal lives and literary stories, we can develop a much more clear and relevant sense of our own history, experiences, values, relationships, hopes, and fears. The aim of this practice is to give teachers and students, through the creation of a series of Life-Maps, a deeper understanding of who they are, what they value, where they wish to go, and who they wish to become. Map making of this kind is fundamentally empowering, as it necessitates the act of naming and ordering the world.

As Stephen Hall points out in an essay entitled "I, Mercator" in a book called *Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*, this mapping of the interior self is much like orienteering (the act of finding one's way through a wilderness armed only with a compass). As he explains, "Orienteering is such an odd but impressive word that it has always stuck with me, and in fact moves me to propel a related concept to describe a process somewhat like orienteering but more personal, more historical, more associative, more metaphorical, perhaps more spiritual: "orientating," or crashing through the larger landscapes of memory and

experience and knowledge, trying to get a fix on where we are in a multitude of landscapes that together compose the grander scheme of things.” (Harmon 15).

The maps of the self introduced in this unit can also be used to arrive at a deeper understanding of character and literary elements in any text, with the *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros used as an example. This unit is calibrated with 7th and 8th grade students in mind (*House on Mango Street* is currently a CORE New Haven District middle school text), but it is worthwhile to note that the strategies presented here can be modified to fit almost any age group, and you are encouraged to use the ideas presented here as guidelines to fit your own students and vision.

Content Objectives

The word “map” today often refers to a very specific kind of geographical image used to delineate physical and political boundaries. Maps did not always have this narrow form of meaning, however.

In Medieval Europe there was a type of map known as a “mappa mundi” that was not designed as simply as a document showing how to get from point A to point B, but instead contained the “history, geography, and destiny” of the human race. One of the most famous *mappae mundi* is the Hereford Map. Such maps offered those viewing it a narrative place and purpose in the cosmos and was often used as a teaching tool. Like roadmaps to life itself, rooted in the ancient wisdom of cultural stories, a communal reflection centered through the many people, places, and values was woven into its tapestries.

Schools today are expected to guide and help children also try and find their place in the cosmos, to understand their world as well as their own values and emotions, and grow up to be well adjusted, motivated human beings. This is a big ask, and as the mandates and required standards keep piling onto the teacher’s lap, we need tools that can address multiple aspects of child development and content knowledge at once.

The beauty of mapping our own lives, and the lives of the characters in stories we read, essentially perform a similar (and non-denominational) function of the ancient *mappa mundi*, with a distinct advantage: students, and not third party authorities, are the map and meaning makers. Their own wisdom, aspirations, values, and inner worlds deserve exploration, and are given center stage, in this unit.

The various maps of the self presented in this unit offer teachers today an interdisciplinary tool that addresses both social emotional learning (SEL) mandates as well as literary content in activities that are relevant, engaging, and rigorous for students. Furthermore, they can be adapted to a range of texts and even content areas, with potential application in any class or subject area.

The CT Department of Education defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults achieve emotional intelligence through the competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (Public Act 19-166). They can be powerful tools for processing volatile emotions and experiences, so common in adolescence, as well as framing the path one has been walking and delineating the future self one aspires to be.

Using maps as a useful strategy for comprehending not only the world and oneself, but also literary elements. While almost any concept diagram can be considered a map, the kinds of maps showcased in this unit be

created as a tool to analyze any character or story, and is a wonderful, visual way to combine understanding and insight into plot, character, and other elements such as symbolism into a unified, rigorous demonstration of learning. They are also excellent tools for writing, and these strategies will be outlined in the teaching strategy section of the unit.

Finally, as maps are visual artifacts, and interdisciplinary in nature, they are fantastic teaching tools for EL students and students who struggle with long form writing. The same level of depth and subtlety of the best writing can be achieved through mapmaking, and it gives many students uncomfortable with writing (and reading) a rigorous and engaging way in to the richness of the world and their own lives.

Possible Performance Task: An Atlas of Experience

As mentioned before, a portfolio of various maps of the self can form the basis of a summative performance task, that when compiled together offer a kind of “Atlas of Experience” in which lands that have been explored and staked out, as well as all the wide open frontiers and vistas of the future. It also offers a way to dive into an extended memoir and reflection writing or essay on what the students have learned about themselves, and who they wish to become / aspire to. A collection of various life maps (as outlined in the teaching strategies section below) as well as any related writing can form a transformative product, a personal atlas and visual memoir of their lives.

As Hall points out, “As we nose around these newfound territories, we may begin to create an ever more complex and useful geography of survival: atop our maps of land, sea, planet, chromosome, and cosmos, we superimpose maps of pain, of revelation, of joy, of disappointment. To each emotion, there is a pin on the map, the pattern of each accumulating and filling in until they have the appearance of growth rings.” (Harmon 19).

Teaching Strategies

This section will outline the various kinds of maps that can be applied to the Self, either one’s own or to a literary character. This is intended as a selection and a starting point. They can be mixed and matched at the teacher’s discretion as well as offer ideas to create your own, newly invented kinds of maps, or even hybrid maps.

Map Forms

Any aspect of our lives can be mapped, from what is in our minds, to our hearts, our bodies, our past and future. By slight changes to content and form, a variety of personal geographies can be mapped. As Jill Berry states in her book *Personal Geographies*, “You can make a map of nearly any journey, place, day or experience... maps can be intimate and personal, or grand and inclusive. They can be a ritual way to journal your day, or a permanent and elaborate illustration of your life’s journey” (Berry 7)

Included in the appendix are sample handouts and examples for some of the included map types.

Heart Map

A map of what is in your heart (what is most important to you). By giving students an initial frame canvas of a blank heart (or letting them draw their own) and simple instructions, the heart map is a great place to start the personal cartography project, because it allows students to jump right in, while also allowing for great depth in form and content (it is in effect a 'self-differentiating' assignment).

Some questions from the book Heart Maps to get students started:

- What memories and feelings have you stored in your heart?
- What people have been important to you?
- What are some experiences or central events you will never forget?
- What happy or sad memories do you have?
- What makes your heart sing?
- What is most important to you right now?
- What do you want to tell others about yourself?
- What is unique about you?
- Other things you might include:
 - Your future
 - Your life history
 - Your wishes and talents
 - An idea you've had
 - What you are grateful for

In my own experience using this tool with 7th and 8th graders, many students will alter and deepen the given form of the heart map on their own, by changing the form itself and/or modifying the content. For instance, one student opted to use a more anatomically correct outline of a human heart, along with sections of its geography that showed not only the joyful values, but also the wounds and trauma of lived experiences, and by doing so formed a more coherent view of oneself, where the chaos of past events are given meaning and purpose and lessons learned.

I often give students this map assignment in the very beginning of the school year for three reasons: it provides a creative and fun initial activity for students, it gives each of them a way to introduce themselves to me (and the class) at a deeper level, it serves as a repository for writing and poetry prompts, and by looking at this initial map later in the year it offers valuable material for personal reflection.

In her book on heart maps Georgia Heard lists many useful variations on the heart map, each with their own slightly different thematic and content focus, but all using the same heart canvas. This makes the use of the strategy endlessly usable with variation according to the lesson or emphasis. Note that the form itself, the blank heart canvas, can be anything as well; it could be the form of a "real map," or a tree, or a house, etc. They can all also be part of a year-long Atlas of Experience performance task, each showing a different aspect of the self, and growth. Some of her variations are listed here for reference and ideas

- A Reader's Heart Map. "Students can use a heart map template to map themselves as readers: their reading lives, reading memories, and favorite books and authors." (Heard 34). Some ideas to include in a reader's map:

- Favorite authors
 - Favorite books or poems and why you like them
 - Memorable lines or phrases or words from books you've read.
 - Favorite place to read
 - Memories of reading
 - Books or characters that have influenced you
 - Favorite type or genre of book.
- Family Quilt. "Writers can map the people, stories, memories, rituals, and traditions on their own family quilted heart map." (Heard 50).
 - What family stories or memories can you include?
 - Write down any family songs, traditions, rituals, or foods that make your family unique.
 - Write any family stories that your family tells and retells to each other.
 - Include any details of place such as family home or town, city, or country where your family comes from and how that has shaped your family memories and stories.
- My Name Map. "After writing their name in the small heart in the center, writers can explore the stories behind their names to discover how their name has shaped their identity and made them who they are." (Heard 54).
 - What is the story behind your name? (If you don't know, ask someone who might).
 - Whom you were named after, and why
 - How you feel about your name
 - What your name means to you
 - Your nickname and where it came from
 - The name teachers use
 - The name friends use
 - Questions you have about your name
- Gratitude Map. "We all have things, people, and experiences that we're thankful for. When we focus on them, worry, sadness, and anxiety can be eased." (Heard 62)
 - What people are you grateful for and why?
 - What makes you happy?
 - What brings you peace of mind and comfort?
 - Whom or what do you love?
 - What things inspire you?
 - What places do you love?
 - What are some things you observe and are interested in in the world?

Body Map

Inspired by Art2be, a group of visual artists who use body mapping as a "creative and therapeutic tool for people often left in the periphery of society for economic, social, or health reasons" (Berry 27), mapping one's

physical self is intimately linked to one's sense of identity and self-worth.

As personal cartographer Jill Berry states, "no matter how long you have lived, your body has stories to tell. Scars, illnesses, childbirth...the things you've been up to all this time weave a map of stories from head to toe. A part of that terrain also includes what didn't happen: the vacancies, empty spaces and silhouettes of unrequited relationships or events" (27).

"In this exercise, you will make a two layered map of your body. The first layer is symbolic (graphics, drawings, and symbols), and the second layer is prosaic (words or journaling). The symbols used here are abstracted to represent your experiences. Working this way frees you to say what you like, and because you invent the symbols, no one else need know what they stand for." (Berry 28).

This is essentially a map with two physically separate yet connected layers. Two copies of a simple body frame outline can be handed to students, and much like the heart map they have very simple and concrete ways to begin (such as mapping physical scars), with the built in potential for deep symbolic meaning and representation (the emotional and psychological links between the physical body and mental well-being).

Neighborhood Maps

For this map, the frame itself should be chosen and drawn by the students beforehand. Where does one live and grow up? This could begin as a discussion itself, with many options; a room, a computer, a street, a city. However they decide to frame and define it, students will draw a map of their corner of the world, with the important people, places, and memories that are linked to it.

One student, when asked to map his "neighborhood", created an island in the video game Minecraft, replete with a mausoleum honoring his ancestors, homes for those most important to him, and bridges to other lands with other languages and customs and cultures. He was in effect creating a fantasy themed map of his childhood world, which expands outward as he continues to make sense of the expanding nature of his own experiences and interactions with others. It is an ongoing cartographic project, a deeply personal geography, one in which he has started with a foundation of personal relations and ritual, and is expanding outward to include (and invent) other ways of knowing, and being, in complex relationship with his own innermost "lands."

Family Tree

A simple genealogy or family tree is a useful way to map relationships. By beginning with the physical lineage (who is born of who, etc), students can add a layer of numbers for each person on the tree with corresponding notes on what the student learned or remembers most about them, as a way to reflect and map the impact of the relationship itself. This can be done as a more traditional family tree bracket map, or as a simple web with the student in the center branching out to all known family members. Each of these can be a springboard for poems, vignettes, memoirs, or additional maps.

Timeline Maps

Essentially a chronological list, students can map out the past events that were important to them and what formative impact each experience had on them (i.e. how did each event change or shape you? What did you learn or 'take away' from each event?)

Google Maps has an included option called Timelines, which can automatically show you the places you have visited, along with pictures and timestamps. This can be a very useful tool for creating one's own timeline, but also be advised that it is also can be invasive, and students and teachers may not be comfortable with allowing an app to collect / display such personal data. Use discretion is advised.

The Legend

The legend of a map is essentially “what is read” in implicit contrast to “what is seen.” There are many varieties of map “legends,” and incorporating them can enrich the meaning of any map, and is an excellent way to bridge the gap from the visual to the written, or perhaps more importantly, fuse the two together.

Encourage students to notice different legends on different maps and discuss the differences. You can also encourage students to create legends in “long form” or as extended and ongoing notes that accompany the map. Many times great stories and projects can come over time by marking places on an imaginary map and building a world around them, each marker containing its own notes and details to be fleshed out.

Memoir Maps

Most, if not all maps, have writing of some kind. These can be limited to place names and a legend, to additional notes on locations, to even entire books attached to the map (think Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or Stevenson's *Treasure Island*).

Maps are an excellent method of pre-writing activity for students, but they can also be much more; they can serve as the foundation of a unit of writing. In a heart map, for example, any value, place, or memory written down on the map can be the springboard to a journal entry or memoir story attached to it. The writing can also inspire additional things of importance to the cartographer, which can be added back onto the map. In this way, maps and writing are symbiotic and iterative, and can lead to a fruitful exchange and extension of writing craft when used in such a way.

Encourage students to add legends, notes with corresponding numbers, journal entries, and any other form of writing and note taking while creating their maps. Many maps offer excellent examples of various methods for this purpose. Also encourage the revisiting of maps frequently, to both think of new writing material and also to reflect on one's personal growth.

Classroom Activities

The House on Mango Street

“The house on Mango Street is about a young woman's search for a house of her own, and by that I meant, the character was looking for another way to be” - Sandra Cisneros

An example text for this mapping unit is the *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, written in a series of short vignettes from the point of view of Esperanza, a young girl growing up in Chicago struggling to make sense of her world, as all young people are wont to do. A “deeply cartographic novel,” *The House on Mango Street* is indeed an attempt to map (and thus create) the microcosm of a world, an identity, a self, through words.

As the author says in the above quote, the search for a house of her own was at the same time a search for an identity, a place and understanding and purpose in the universe. In the very first vignette, for instance, a nun walks by a young Esperanza and points to the ramshackle apartment and asks, “You live *there*?” This pointing and naming and mapping of her home, her world, as a place of no value, consequently, imbues those who live there, as having little to no worth or meaning. The fact that this third-party judgement is made by a nun, also implies that perhaps God himself has decreed such a Divine Order to things, with Esperanza at the bottom of that transcendent and immutable hierarchy. The rest of the novel is her attempt to rename and remap the spectacle of her world, to re-value the given judgments, to wrest her destiny back from the clutches of the world, to become Self-authoring.

By mapping Esperanza’s own experiences and life journey, students can use the personal cartography strategies mentioned above as tools to think more deeply about her character change, and how those same lessons apply to their own lives. The vignette form is also a great starting point for mapping and writing about the self. The short sketch form allows them to be written frequently on all manner of specific places, memories, people, etc that usually form a larger narrative memoir, without being presented as a long form essay assignment.

Mapping Esperanza’s Heart

Give every student a blank heart map form. Explain to them they will be creating a heart map for the main character in the story, Esperanza. They can begin this at any time after starting the novel. What are the things, people, places, and memories that are most important to the main character? What does she most value and aspire to? This can be done in groups or individually. These can then be compared and discussed as a class, with attention given to the varying form and content. For instance, what are the differences between what students decided to place more in the center of Esperanza’s map? Are there differences in the frame? (i.e. did some students use a different frame than a heart? How might that change the meaning of the map?). The heart maps of Esperanza can be used as notes for a written character analysis. Also consider having students create two heart maps for Esperanza, one near the beginning of the novel, when Esperanza is a child, and one later on when she has grown up and experienced more of life. By comparing the two maps side by side, students have a visual and symbolic representation of character change and growth over the course of a novel. This can also be very helpful in writing a literary character analysis.

X Marks the Name

As an example of how easily any of the map strategies can be adapted for a lesson:

1. Have students (re)read the vignette “My Name.”
2. Give students a blank (heart) map form
3. Have students create a Name Map (See teaching strategies above) for Esperanza.
4. Have students create their own name map in a similar style.
5. Have students write their own name vignettes based on their map. Include the resulting work in their Atlas of Experience portfolio.

Mapping our World and our House

Having students create a neighborhood or “home” map is a perfect mapping assignment to use with the House on Mango Street since that novel is so centered on physical space and its influence on identity. By inviting students to map their home (and the idea of ‘home’ should intentionally be left nebulous. It can mean a child’s room, or house, or street, or neighborhood) they will automatically be in a conversation with Sandra Cisneros and the issues of the novel.

For example, one 7th grader named Cristian wrote a series of vignettes each focusing on persons that lived near him on the street he grew up on, inspired by *The House on Mango Street*. When asked to draw this microcosm “world” as a map, he drew the street he lived on with the houses next to his in bright vivid colors, each belonging to people which have influenced him in various and positive ways. The street and block across from him was depicted as a wide grey no man’s land, a forbidden territory of drug use and violence where he was not allowed to go. A solitary figure was drawn in this area, a person Cristian called “Jay” who is a drug dealer. Jay is judged by everyone, including the world and Cristian’s parents, as a degenerate to be avoided, and yet, in a profound value-rendering within his written vignettes, Jay becomes to Cristian a kind of Virgil figure, one who lives in the “land of the dead” and yet is very wise, and acts as a guide and protector of Cristian, who also does not allow Cristian to visit his side of the street or become involved with drugs, but tries to guide him in positive ways as best he can. In a very real sense, Cristian’s microcosm, his world is bound by the street block, and yet all of heaven and earth exists there in full. Cristian’s maps and vignettes formed the cornerstones of extended conversations and thinking about what he values and why, and a deep reflection on how to navigate difficult moral and social interactions without losing his own conscience.

Conclusion

Using personal and literary cartography in the classroom is a way to combine and achieve many things in the classroom at once. It engages students’ creativity in a rigorous medium that can teach us about social and emotional learning, content area skills, character and plot arcs, as well as being a springboard for long form writing or projects, connections to different content area or interdisciplinary projects, and “self differentiates” based on the user. It is rare that a single teaching tool can cover so many bases, and be so fun and easy to use at the same time.

Just like the inner maps of the self, personal cartography maps are still a relatively unexplored space in schools, and there is much left to be explored and invented. Perhaps the most exciting and best part of these maps, is that they awaken a seemingly inborn instinct to explore, to chart, to adventure. It gives back to students that all important sense of autonomy, so often removed forcefully at school, to impose their own order and meaning on the universe, and not blindly accept everyone else's. It can make us less the passive passengers on this ship of life, and more the captains of our own destiny!

Resources

Annotated Bibliography

Heard, Georgia. *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*. Heinemann, 1999. An excellent foray into the possibilities and connections inherent in personal cartography. A great starting point for teachers of students of all ages.

Berry, Jill. *Personal Geographies: Explorations in Mixed Media Mapmaking*. North Light Books, 2011. An excellent book with many fine illustrated examples of producible and meaningful maps of the self. Highly recommended, one of very few books of its kind.

Harmon, Katharine. *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2003. A finely produced book with high quality illustrations paired with thoughtful essays, this is another great book full of examples of maps to show students.

Lewis-Jones, Huw. *The Writer's Map: An Atlas of Imaginary Lands*. University of Chicago Press, 2018. A wonderful full size and color reference book for literary and imaginative maps of all kinds. A terrific resource for the classroom.

Turchi, Peter. *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*. Trinity University Press, 2007. A superb book on the virtues and connections between mapping and literature, and the overlap between the two art forms.

Websites

The Hereford Mappa Mundi (<https://www.themappamundi.co.uk/>)

Life Maps by Pier Gustafson (<http://www.piergustafson.com/pages/lifemaps.html>)

Book on body mapping: <https://ukhealthcare.uky.edu/sites/default/files/body-mapping-book.pdf>

Appendix: Implementing District Standards

CASEL Components

- Self Awareness and Self Management.
- Relationship Skills
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision Making

Reading

- RL7.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text
- RL7.3 Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact
- RL7.6 Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

Writing

- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well structured even sequences.
- W7.10 Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of discipline specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

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