Mindmaps in the Literature Classroom: Building Self-Efficacy

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Abstract:

This paper is based on an experience of using mindmaps to teach literature in an undergraduate class. Though the intention was to teach a voluminous, culturally unfamiliar text in an organised, easily comprehensible, low-tech format, data showed that students reflected on their learning and picked up a learning technique which they realised could help them improve their self-efficacy. The pedagogy also seemed to encourage them to start reading the text.

Keywords: Mindmap, Learning Technique, Self-Efficacy, Reading, NEP 2020

"The first paradigm that shaped my pedagogy was the idea that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring."

(bell hooks 1994:17)

Teaching English Literature in an Indian college classroom is challenging. The predominantly Anglocentric, canonical, and culturally unfamiliar texts generally fail to enthuse students (Ramanathan 225, My Van 3, Banik 167). Few children have both the habit of reading and the patience to read through the multiple prescribed texts. Many students, especially those from non-privileged backgrounds, join the course expecting to learn the language, unaware that they are signing up for a course of literary study. Furthermore, after enrolling, a large number of students think that freely-available online content will guarantee them passing marks in the examination. Hence they see little benefit in attending class.

It is all the more daunting for teachers since they have not been trained in pedagogy which remains the preserve of Education Departments. Hence they must base their teaching practice on experience and reflection and sustain their enthusiasm and interest because that has a great impact on students.

This paper is based on an experience of teaching a voluminous 18th century English Literature text – *Joseph Andrews* by Henry Fielding – to undergraduate students in a University of Delhi

(metropolitan) college. Mindmaps were used along with interactive modes of teaching and learning. Two surveys were conducted – one before starting the text and the 2nd after completing it – to arrive at an understanding of how the students had responded. While the intention was to do the text thoroughly, from an examination point of view, it was seen that students reflected on their learning practices, picked up a technique which they saw as useful and also began to read the text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In *Teaching Literature*, Showalter notes that it is traditionally assumed that good teaching is about the quality and quantity of content, following Freire's banking model of adding to what the learner already knows (13). However easy online access to information means that the classroom experience can remain relevant only through the process of teaching and the quality of the pedagogy. She therefore suggests a process-oriented, collaborative mode of teaching and learning (36).

Drawing from cognitive psychology, Biggs and Tang advocate an outcome-based constructivist approach in which classroom activities help learners to construct knowledge by building on their previous understanding (36). Through "constructive alignment", activities may be chosen to help students reflect on their learning and improve their professional competence (33). Teachers can create an enabling classroom environment,by drawing upon their own "reflective practice" and "transformative reflection" (31).

The philosopher John Dewey, in a chapter titled "Aims of Education," in *Democracy and Education* notes the importance of creating a suitable environment and encouraging students to carry on their learning activities to continue their growth – "Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved" (146). Similarly, bell hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, writes that as a "performative act," teaching allows a modulation of approaches to engage students according to their perceived needs (17) and to make the classroom an inclusive, non-judgmental place where students feel free to express themselves (12). She also speaks of her debt to the Vietnamese monk, Thich Naht Hanh, who taught her that the classroom could provide knowledge of how to live in the larger world. NEP 2020 also seeks to prepare students for lifelong learning.

 In *McKeachie's Teaching Tips,* Barbara Hofer speaks of the need for a classroom environment which promotes the "mastery orientation focused on the development of understanding and mastery of material and skills" (149). Such practices increase self-awareness and metacognitive processes – whereby students can see themselves as learners and understand how they can achieve their goals (295). Stella Cottrell's *The Study Skills Handbook* also speaks of the importance of self-efficacy and self-management for students so that they can visualise their goals and adopt suitable strategies by organising themselves and their learning activities (23).

McKeachie's lays stress on organisation as an essential enabler for learning: "Without organisation, facts and concepts become subject to interference and are quickly forgotten and inaccessible (31). Since process-oriented teachers can model strategies for learning, the meaningful organisation of a lecture can help students to develop "conceptual structures" that will scaffold their own learning (57).

One such teaching tool is the mindmap. Arulselvi notes that the visual representation of information goes back over centuries (51). However, it wasTony Buzan who popularised the technique through his books, talks and workshops. His mindmapping principles focus on the need to engage the creative power of the right brain in our learning. Pictures, colours and keywords help us to use whole-brain thinking to organise our knowledge in a non-linear,manner which helps us to remember things better. Howe talks of how finding keywords imposes a cognitive discipline on the learner's mind (Arulselvi 59). In *How to Study with Mindmaps* Toni Krasnic explains that mindmaps replicate the way that neurons in the brain radiate in all directions forming millions of connections based on our associations.

Daniel Weinstein calls mindmaps "the antidote to soporific classes, boring outlines and frustrating writer's block" (44). He says that though it took his students a mere 10 minutes to learn the technique, it helped them to introspect, reflect, brainstorm, take notes and even to set goals. Rafik-Galea and Singh write about their experience of using mindmaps to teach literature in an English language classroom in Malaysia. Mindmapping software has been used for reading comprehension (Mohaidat, Al Jarf "Teaching Reading") and English Writing skills (Al Jarf, "Enhancing"). However, as a competency, mindmaps have not been used sufficiently in Higher Education (Jennifer Wright 23).

THE STUDY

Research Questions:

1. Could a large text be taught in an undergraduate Literature classroom using mindmaps on the board?
2. Could Mindmaps add to the classroom learning activities?
3. Could Mindmaps ensure that students engaged with the text beyond the classroom?

Objectives:

1. To use Mindmaps to teach the text in an organised, analytical manner.
2. To get students to reflect on their study habits.
3. To look at their habit of reading the text.

Methodology:

Pilot

A pilot study was first conducted using a qualitative method (classroom observation) in the 3rd year undergraduate classroom (for Semester 6 students). Mindmaps were used on the blackboard for lectures on short stories. While teaching Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the students were asked to draw their own mindmaps to prepare for a brief class presentation of a particular chapter. They responded with enthusiasm and also discussed why it was an engaging activity.

Main Study

The methodology was largely quantitative with 2 questionnaires being administered, one before starting the text, and the other after the text was completed. There was a qualitative component which consisted of classroom observation.

The 1st questionnaire asked about their familiarity with Mindmaps, whether they intended to read the text, and about their learning strategies – in the classroom and for the examinations. The 2nd questionnaire had more questions about Mindmaps, their understanding of the text and their reading of it.

The questionnaires were sent on Google forms using the class Whatsapp group.
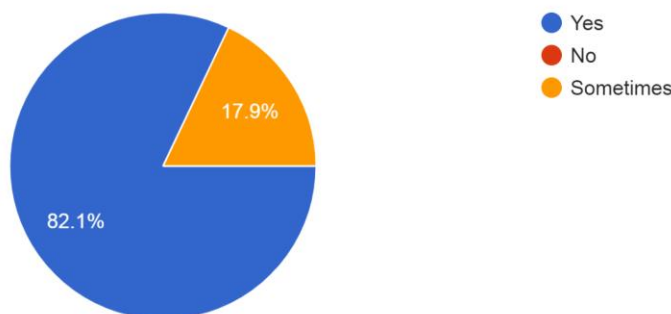
FINDINGS

Out of a class of 50 students, 39 participated in the 1st survey and 41 in the 2nd.

The results of the findings will be discussed under 2 heads: 'Students' Learning Strategies' and 'Reading the Text.'

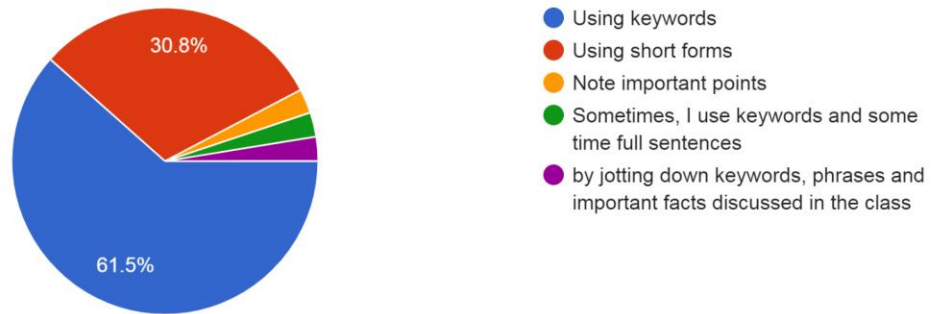**1st Survey (Before starting the text)**

STUDENTS' LEARNING STRATEGIES

Do you take notes in class?
39 responses

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

17.9%
82.1%

In effect all of them said they took class notes though 7 said they did it only sometimes.

How do you take notes in class?
39 responses

- Using keywords
- Using short forms
- Note important points
- Sometimes, I use keywords and some time full sentences
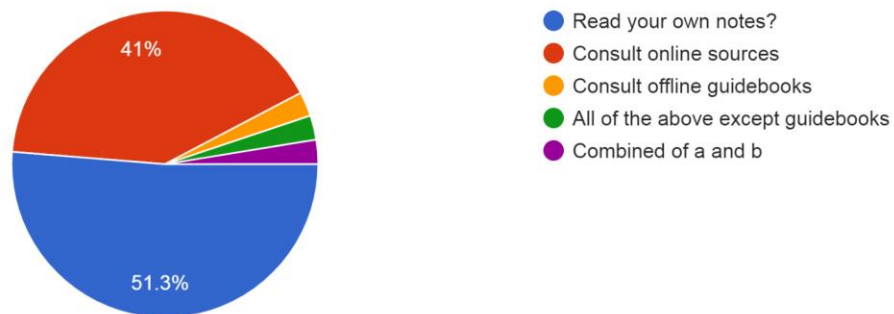- by jotting down keywords, phrases and important facts discussed in the class

30.8%

61.5%

24 (61.5%) said they used keywords while 12 (30.8%) used short forms.

When you prepare for the exams, do you
39 responses

- Read your own notes?
- Consult online sources
- Consult offline guidebooks
- All of the above except guidebooks
- Combined of a and b

41%

51.3%
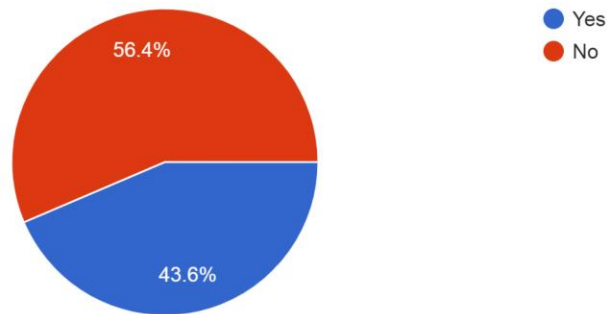
A little more than half reported that they preferred to rely on their own notes. A sizeable number (41%) however admitted that they depended on online sources.
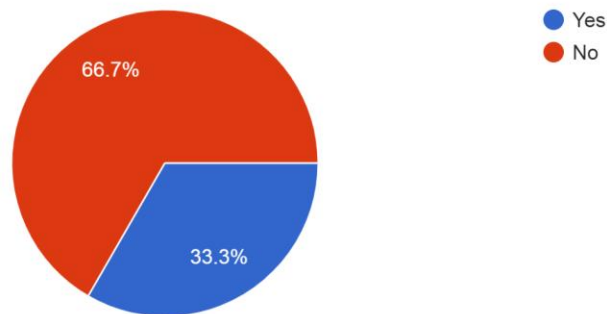
Have you ever used Mindmaps?
39 responses

More than half (56.4%) said they were unfamiliar with the tool. 43.6% however said they had used mindmaps.

READING THE TEXT

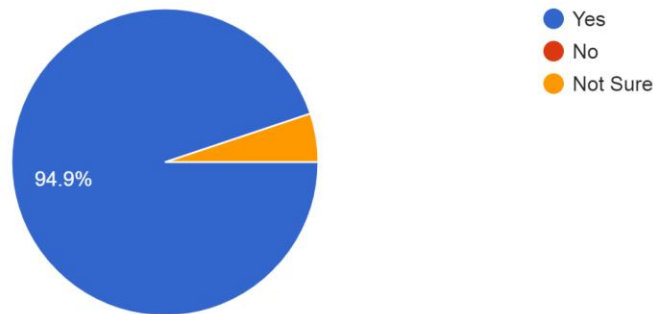Have you started to read the novel "JOSEPH ANDREWS"?
39 responses

A third of the respondents said that they had started reading the text.

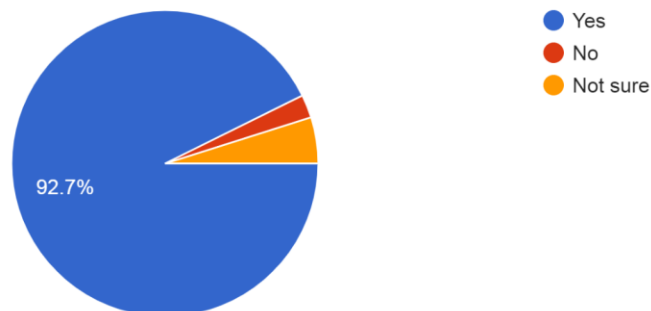Do you plan to read the novel "JOSEPH ANDREWS"?
39 responses

An overwhelming majority said they planned to read the text.

2nd SURVEY (administered after the completion of the text in class)

STUDENTS' LEARNING STRATEGIES

The teacher used a form of Mind Maps to explain the text in class. Did you find the Mind Maps helpful?
41 responses

A huge majority said that they had found the mindmaps helpful.

Mindmaps enable many of the qualities that Showalter recommends for a good lecture.They allow the teacher to organise the lesson with an outline, objectives and signposts and also to include activities for student participation - such as Q and A, Opinions, in-class writing and small discussions (51). She notes that "attention levels and memory can be stimulated if there are

breaks, or changes of approach, about every 15 minutes and if key points are signalled as 'advance organisers' (49).

I supplemented the mindmaps on the board with some micro-level reading in class so that students could get a feel of the text. Low-stakes in-class writing (Elbow & Sorcinelli, 214) was used so that students could summarise what they had understood and then briefly speak about it. In between, I would ask recall-based questions. The class often began with a short quiz to stimulate recall. In every class I would encourage their analysis of the events in the text. This helped them to exercise their critical thinking skills as every inference needed to be justified with textual evidence. It also gave them a perspective on how 18th century England can be compared to contemporary India, despite the difference in space and time. The book in a way defamiliarised their own context by seeing the same issues in the England of that time. They found similarities in some of the themes that other familiar 18th century writers had presented. They were therefore eager to discuss their views and the associations they had drawn based on their own experiences and movies that they had seen.

Students also mentioned, in the classroom, how the visual representation made it easier to keep track of the storyline, the movements and behaviour of the characters and the themes.

Have you used Mind Maps for any text?
41 responses

- Yes
- No

19.5%

80.5%
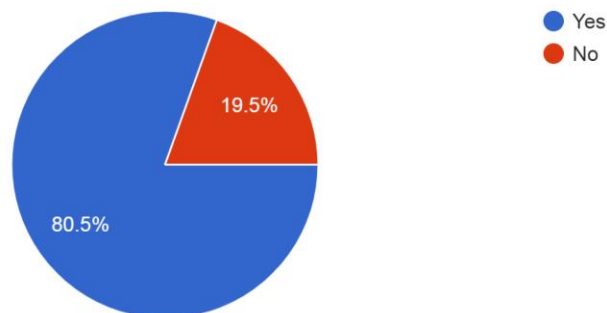
This is where the survey actually began telling its own story – 33 students reported using it for other texts – as compared to 17 who said they were familiar with the technique in the 1st survey. This was an increase of 94%. The base being small, this is not much in absolute terms, but on a local, classroom level, this may be regarded as significant.

Do you use Mind Maps for other purposes?
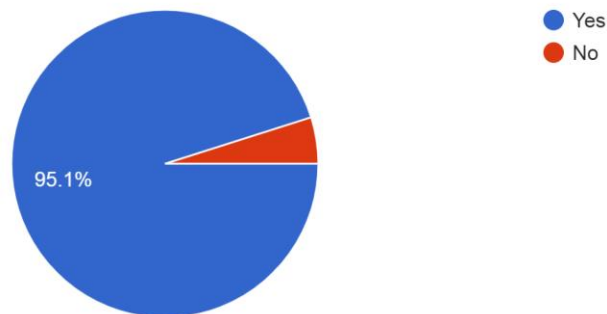41 responses
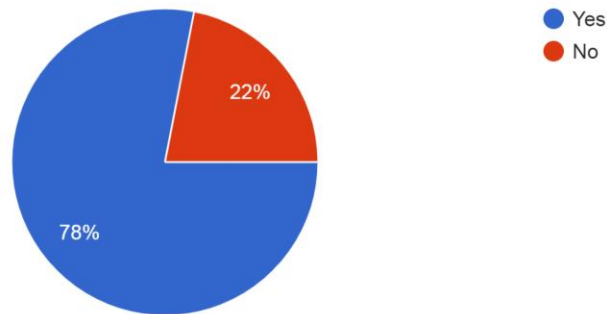
This corroborated the previous finding: that students were applying the technique of mindmapping outside the literature classroom. In other words, they had reflected on its utility and were proving themselves to be strategic learners.

READING THE TEXT

Did you start reading the text "Joseph Andrews"?
41 responses

This was roughly approximate to the number who had planned to read the text. Clearly they had made a genuine effort to do so. Furthermore, it is a great increase over those who had said they had begun reading the text in the 1st survey (33%). An optimistic inference is that they did find it

interesting   enough   to   begin   reading   it.

Did you complete reading the text "Joseph Andrews"?
41 responses
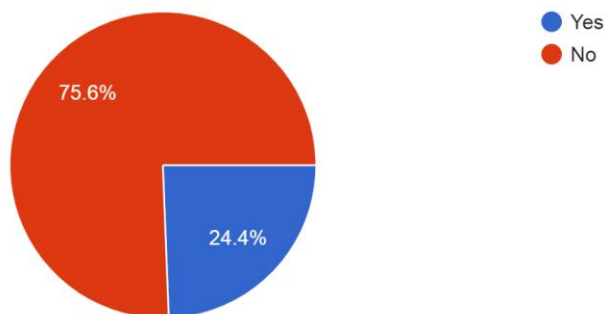
Only 10 out of 41 (24%) of the class had completed it. 76% had not finished the task.

There have been batches where out of a full class of 50-60 students, there would be just one or two hands raised when asked whether they had read the text. Hence, by that parameter, 10 out of 41   seems   significant.

If your answer to Questions 1 or 2 is "No", then why?
28 responses
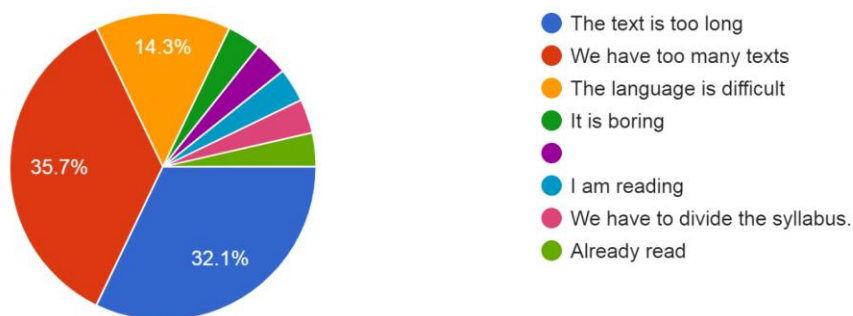
When reasons for not completing the text were asked for, the main ones given, in declining order of importance, were the need to read multiple texts, the length of the given text and the difficulty of the language.

While one student found it boring, nobody spoke about the cultural unfamiliarity of the text.

Do you use a pdf on your mobile phone for the text?
41 responses
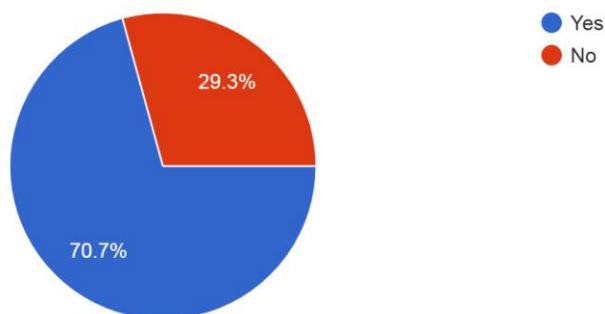
This question was based on classroom observation. 71% admitted to using the pdf version on the mobile phone. In class, they were forever losing their places as pages on the pdf would often slip. Moreover, social media messages would also clearly distract their attention. These freely downloadable mobile pdfs clearly come with a hidden cost and could well be a major reason why so many could not complete their reading of the text. However, they give every student access to the text and this is helpful for the teacher in class too.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The mindmaps helped me to organise my lectures and my enthusiasm affected the students. However, mindmaps were only part of my repertoire. I encouraged students to speak, write and present their views, ensuring that there was sufficient Student Talking Time (STT).

The analytical presentation facilitated by the mindmaps helped to demystify the socio-economic conditions of 18th century England and encouraged them to bring up their own experiences and knowledge of the Indian realities. This created a good atmosphere for discussion and gave a noticeable focus to their short in-class writing.

The study showed that students are willing to put in some effort at reading the text. At the same time, their habit of using pdf versions on the mobile could be an interesting topic for further research.

Another key learning was that students had the capability to reflect on their own learning habits and could pick up a learning technique which they sensed had value. It was humbling to realise that we teach not only for the examination but also for life and growth.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The first limitation was the small size of the sample (39 and 41 in the 1st and 2nd surveys respectively).
- The sample was homogeneous: the surveyed students belong to a metropolitan college. Non-metropolitan students or a more heterogeneous sample may show different trends of behaviour.
- Student behaviour in this study may reflect the pre-existing relationship with the teacher who had taught them in a previous semester. It may not be replicable in a more impersonal set-up.
- Interactive modes of teaching, detailed as necessary adjuncts to teaching through mindmaps, may not work when the class size is very large.
- It is only an indicative trend and may be only short-term in its impact.

CONCLUSION

Drawing upon Showalter's 12 competencies and skills for successful literature teaching, we may say that the pedagogy is appropriate if students are able to detect cultural assumptions and references in the text and thereby clarify their own. They need to find connections between the text and their own lived contexts and defend their critical judgment against the informed opinions of others (Showalter 27). In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope,* bell hooks notes that for teachers, success may be seen "as the degree to which we open the space for students to learn, getting at that root meaning of the word 'to educate: to draw out'" (130).

Since teaching and learning are continuous processes, we may continue to reflect on each classroom experience as an opportunity to deepen our praxis.

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