something to say to the Occupy generation or to postcolonial peoples. At its best, “Mapmaker” poignantly brings the author’s world into contact with students’ own sense of space and place.

This exercise also gives students a new appreciation for narrative structure—the ways stories take (and make) their journeys. One student may note that the journey in *The Sound and the Fury* is nauseatingly cyclical; another that many works of the American Renaissance feature a movement out from society and back; yet another that Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* seems more interested in labyrinthine wandering than in getting anywhere in particular. In discussing and arguing with each other about the nature of the literary journey at hand, students make a collective trip, not unlike Chaucer’s travelers: “In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle.”

Diagram This

*Erin G. Carlston*

An exercise that asks students to think visually about narrative structures and patterns.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: introductory
Student Difficulty: easy or moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: in class
Close Reading: medium
Estimated Time: 50 minutes

**EXERCISE**

This exercise asks students to create a diagram of a work of fiction. The range of structures and patterns you can ask your class to visualize is quite broad. I have used this exercise, for example, to ask students to diagram the relationship between the provinces, the metropole, and the British Empire in Arnold Bennett’s *Old Wives’ Tale*; the interaction of race and class in Dorothy West’s novel *The Living Is Easy*; the connections among Dorian Gray, Dorian’s
Diagram This

picture, Basil Hallward, Lord Henry, Life, and Art in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; and the chronology suggested by the first hundred lines of Homer’s *Iliad* compared to the first hundred lines of the *Odyssey*.

At the beginning of class, divide the students into groups of three or four and provide them with pencils, erasers, and 8.5 × 11–inch sheets of paper. Then choose one of the following aspects of that day’s text for the groups to diagram: either the structure of the work as a whole, or the relationship among a set of characters, places, events and/or themes (which you will specify) in that work. Give the students your chosen prompt, along with two simple rules: (1) don’t draw representational pictures—no stick figures or symbols like smiley faces, and (2) use absolutely no written text. Instead, ask the students to think in terms of pattern, shape, and relationship.

To help them get started, offer examples of diagram types or invite them to brainstorm a list as a class before beginning. Possibilities include flow charts, Venn diagrams, timelines, food pyramids, geometric forms, graphs, and abstract transit maps, among other forms. Stress that this isn’t a test of drawing ability and that students won’t be judged on their artistic talents. Ask each group to designate one member who will do the actual drawing.

After they have finished drawing their diagrams (this should take about fifteen minutes), ask each group to pass its diagram to the group on the right. Each group should now spend five minutes trying to figure out what the group to their left is getting at—without asking that group any questions. When everyone is ready, have each group present the diagram they were given and propose their interpretation of it to the rest of the class. Project each diagram in the front of the room for everyone to see, if possible. Let students from the other groups offer comments or questions, and before moving on to the next group, invite the students who drew the diagram to say whether the interpretation accurately captured their intention. (If you are pressed for time, you can also simply have each group present its diagram to the rest of the class directly without passing it to the right first, though passing introduces an extra layer of interactivity and interpretation that students particularly enjoy.) In the last ten minutes of class, ask the class as a whole how the diagrams have shaped their understanding of the text and whether, after seeing other diagrams, they would alter their own in any way.

**REFLECTIONS**

The primary goal of “Diagram This” is to get students, especially first-year students or nonmajors, to think about narrative fiction in terms of structure and pattern rather than the more accessible character and plot. It teaches them that the way a work is constructed affects what it says. While many students are perplexed by the exercise for the first few minutes and often ask for examples—which I refuse to give them because then they’ll just copy the model—almost
all of them rise to the challenge. The visual act of diagramming encourages students who are less comfortable with written and spoken language to get their ideas about a story into a form in which they can literally see what they think. And for students who are adept at written or verbal analysis, the assignment requires that they temporarily set aside the tools with which they’re comfortable and conceptualize more abstractly how texts function.

When I use this exercise with Virginia Woolf’s short story “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” I ask students to diagram its structure and then, if they need more prompting, encourage them to think specifically about how time works in the story: it begins and ends in almost the same second, and the entire body of the story consists of flashbacks and mental associations. Some students end up drawing two fixed points connected by squiggly lines or large tangled loops. Others have drawn parallel lines representing “real time” and “internal time” and have added elements suggesting how they’re connected. Some have shown external reality as a very small element contained within a much larger figure representing the psychological interpretation of reality. Within the short space of a fifty-minute class period, students can go from being baffled by Woolf’s elliptical methods to working out quite successfully how she weaves in and out through time and memory.

For a variation useful for small classes (under fifteen students), you can have each student draw an individual diagram and, again, if you prefer, eliminate the step in which they pass around the drawings. Instead, go straight to asking a few students to share with the whole class. Done in this fashion near the beginning of the class, the exercise is a more concise way of starting off discussion and close reading of the text, rather than a task occupying the entire hour.

Bridges

Joseph Fruscione

A flexible exercise that teaches narrative structure.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: moderate
Teacher Preparation: low to medium
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any

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