

# Mapping Literature

*by Kurt Wootton*



# Mapping Literature



## Chicago Partnerships in Arts Education (CAPE)

CAPE is one of the leading organizations in the United States partnering public schools with arts organizations throughout the city of Chicago. Creative Director Arnold Aprill describes CAPE's concept of arts-integration, "Our students are postmodern citizens. They grew up with, are interested in, and actively participate in contemporary art forms (technologically based arts, interdisciplinary arts, popular arts, multicultural and intercultural arts) in ways that mirror the most innovative thinking of contemporary artists, and often with greater skill and content knowledge than that possessed by their teachers."

[www.capeweb.org](http://www.capeweb.org)

In 2007, The Museum of Natural History of Chicago curated an exhibit called *Maps: Finding Our Place in the World*. One section of this exhibit that caught my attention was called *Maps of the Imagination*. Several of these imaginative maps took the form of literary maps that visually display works of literature using text and imagery. One map of the classic American novel *Moby Dick* tracked the *Pequod's* voyage around the world. Overlaying the world map were images of events in the novel that were particularly striking: Ishmael clinging to a piece of refuse from his ship, or Ahab on deck pursuing the great white whale. On the left side of the map were factual images about the history of whaling as a profession.

The Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) and Project AIM at Columbia College, Chicago, launched a project based on this exhibit called *Mapping: Cartographies of Learning*, in which local Chicago artists worked with teachers and students in eight public Chicago schools to create various maps of their schools, their communities, and their own lives. They exhibited a vast array of student

maps for the larger Chicago community. What struck me about both these experiences was how powerful mapping fits with literature and interpretation. How might students create a map of their reading of a work of literature? The maps of literature I viewed in the Museum of National History were aesthetically beautiful, but at the same time they were fairly obvious. The *Moby Dick* map charted the movement of the ship around the world and the *Huckleberry Finn* map tracked Huck and Jim's boat trip down the Mississippi.



How much more original might students be at mapping a text? How can we explore ideas about a text, emotions felt in response to a story, as well as characters, plot, and the complex interaction of themes? What would students view as important in a text and how might they convey this to another person visually?

Furthermore, mapping asks students to demonstrate cognitively not only what they read but *how* they read. What processes of reading does a map reveal? How can students push beyond the obvious—mapping of plot—to the more elusive and abstract qualities of reading and representation? For those students who have difficulty reading, mapping a book allows them to design a structure for understanding a work of literature. The visual connections parallel and make concrete the cognitive moves necessary for making meaning of print.



Mapping also creates the space for possibility of interpretation. When we engage students in the mapping process, we want them to think beyond the scope of the models. We encourage them to create a map that represents the text in a way that they want. We therefore, avoid lists of what you “must” include in your map: plot, characters, a key, text, image, and instead we let them roam freely in their creation. We want their artistic products to be filled with what Walt Whitman refers to as “original energy.”

So without guidelines, how do students achieve any kind of quality? First, the students are required to do multiple drafts. When students re-draft their writing, they often recopy the original text with perhaps a few grammatical changes. To avoid this, the re-drafting of the maps necessarily involves starting over again with a blank piece of paper. They hold the conceptual idea of their map and perhaps some key elements in their heads, but they need to re-conceive of the map over and over again, improving on and adding to the

previous drafts. Their work then develops with each draft. Furthermore, throughout the drafting process, the students find inspiration from each other’s work. They see the kind of innovations and bold ideas other students are employing in their maps. By the end of the process the students have maps they feel represent their best work.

What are the essential pedagogies embedded in this mapping process?

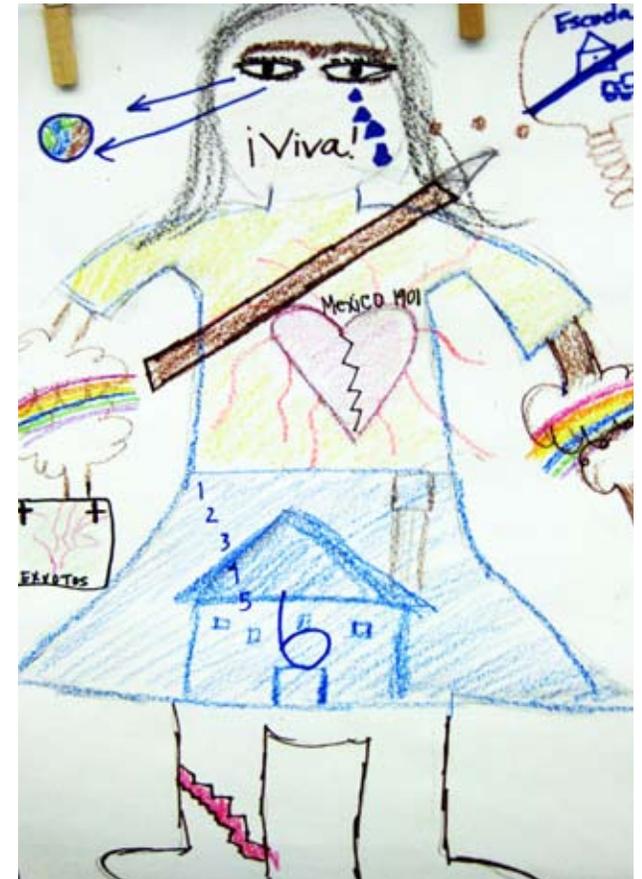
1. Look at models for inspiration.
2. Emphasize a value on both surprise and original energy.
3. Require multiple drafts.
4. Facilitate a collaborative space for looking at each other’s work and exchanging ideas.
5. Exhibit final products professionally.

## Procedure

**1. Learning with the end in mind.** Share with the students an overview of the process. Explain they will be reading a text (short story, novel, or poem) and creating an imaginative map of the text. After plenty of time for reading, creating, and revising the maps, they will exhibit their maps for other classes or for their parents in a gallery space.

**2. Sharing models for inspiration.** There are many models of various kinds of maps on the Internet as well as in numerous publications. Three very good books with diverse maps are *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* by Peter Turchi, *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and other Maps of the Imagination* by Katharine Harmon, and *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* by Reif Larsen. Bring some of your favorite models to class and share with students. Also allow them time to surf the Internet and find new models to show to the rest of the class. As a teacher, archive examples to share with students in future years. If you have worked on this project, show students some of your most innovative maps from past classrooms. This allows students to see that they can achieve high quality results and that not all the maps that have been created are from the hands of professionals.

**3. Journaling.** As the students read the text, ask them about the possibilities for mapping. What kind of map do they want to create? They need to begin to form an idea of this early on in the process so they can take notes and track how this idea develops as they read. For instance, if they are tracking change in characters, how might they use quotes and images of characters as they read? What are the moments in the book when the characters undergo the greatest challenges or changes? If a student decides to follow the colors of a book (in *The Great Gatsby* for instance) how will they keep track of the various colors and what they symbolize, and how do the colors develop with the characters and the plot throughout the text? Other students might opt for an even more abstract map—the moments when a Marquez text lifts off the ground of reality and floats in the air. How will they document these moments and capture them in a map? Students will want to keep a journal of their ideas for their maps. In this journal they might include sketches, quotes, free writes, and even early rough drafts of what their map might look like.



**4. Conceptual Sketching.** On a small sheet of paper, students draft a conceptual sketch of their literary maps. Ask them to share their sketches with multiple peers in their classroom, not to elicit advice, but rather to help them think through the design of their own maps. They might also think about what materials they need to create the next drafts of their maps; will it be digital, three dimensional, in black and white, in color?

**5. Drafting.** At this stage students create multiple drafts of their literary map. Each time they need to start from scratch again, holding the overall ideas of the map in their minds and developing them with each draft. For each draft, ask students to identify a peer coach who offers the student ideas, feedback and advice. Provide many opportunities for students to present their work to the class and refine their ideas. This creates

an environment where students are seeing the development of each other's work, and ideas begin to flow from student to student, improving the quality of all of the projects in general.

**6. Exhibiting.** When the students have reached the final draft of their work, exhibit the work in a high quality format. It is important that the quality of displaying the student work is in concert with the time students spent creating the work. Typed titles and nameplates beside the work, attention to lighting, space, and an exhibit title and overview are all important. Quotes or phrases from the original text can be interwoven throughout the exhibit so the audience gets a feel for the text and sees the relationship between the student work and the original.



### Project AIM at Columbia College, Chicago

Project AIM under the direction of Habla Architect Cynthia Weiss develops a professional cadre of teaching artists who collaborate with teachers in public Chicago schools. The professional artists and teachers work together to co-create arts-integrated teaching units that promote reading and writing through the arts, emphasizing cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approaches.

[www.colum.edu/ccap/](http://www.colum.edu/ccap/)





**Habla** is an educational center and lab school based in Mérida, Yucatán, México, dedicated to fostering school environments that promote the success of all students from multiple cultural backgrounds. For teachers, artists, and school leaders, Habla offers: cultural and language experiences, teacher institutes, and an annual international educational forum.

***[www.habla.org](http://www.habla.org)***