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# Life Space Mapping

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A conceptual map is a method of depicting ideas and implicit meanings embedded within a framework of assumptions. In Deshler's (1993) words, "Concept maps provide a summary of what we say we believe, think, feel or value at a particular point in time" (p. 336). A concept map enables the individual to draw on a large amount of knowledge, beliefs, and values and transform this information into a wholistic, graphic presentation. Such information is traditionally presented in a more-or-less linear form as an essay or analytical paper. Using a conceptual map, instead of an essay, permits a more inclusive presentation which can represent interconnectedness of the elements of the map and facilitates a portrayal of the dynamical nature of human thought, feeling and experience.

Conceptual mapping is used in various knowledge domains. Chaffe (1988) has used conceptual mapping to promote critical thinking; Cummings, et al (1990) used Cognitive Mapping Task (a variation of conceptual mapping) to study the differences between novice and expert counsellor conceptualizations and Deshler (1991) has used conceptual mapping in working with individuals on retirement issues. Other researchers have used conceptual mapping to examine such areas as conceptualizations of physics (Larkin, J., McDermott, J.I., Simon, D.P., and Simon, H.A., 1980) and mathematics (Minemier, L., 1983).

Conceptual maps help learners to explicate their taken-for-granted assumptions upon which they make certain life choices, plans of action, interpretations of experiences and so on. Conceptual maps have a way of bringing forth or explicating the "objective world and the intersubjectivity of our life-world within that of society" (Deshler, 1991, p. 350). Deshler further states:

The explicative capability refers to our paying direct attention to language itself in an attempt to clarify the validity claims offered to us through our external sphere (natural events and facts), our social sphere (rightness of the rules governing relations between social actors), and our inner sphere (personal desires, wishes, and needs); and to reflect on, question, and reconstruct the language that we use to constitute reality (p. 351).

Language plays an important role in the mapping process. Language itself is the key to uncovering the personal meanings associated within a concept and between the various concepts that come together to make up the unique realities of individuals. Perhaps the most significant learning that occurs through the mapping process arises from the dialogue that describes how one concept is linked to another. Thus, in counselling the client's map becomes the catalyst for further discussion and uncovering of personal meanings.

Dialogue helps to prevent linear and circular thinking and brings taken-for-granted realities into awareness. In this way, validity or what is referred to in this

curriculum as 'viability' among assumptions can be examined. Dialogue also makes the negotiation of shared meanings possible (Deshler, 1990), however, it is only useful when it is critically reflective. This critical reflection occurs when time is spent examining the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values embedded within the relationships of the parts of the map. Using the map illustrated in Figure 1 as an example, a counsellor could pose the question: "What is it that you prefer about working with people who are on an 'equal level'?" The student is then encouraged to elaborate on the meaning of the value of being "challenged by colleagues." Counsellor and client then explore the relationship between concepts of "being challenged sometimes" and "working with challenging colleagues" as well as the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values, relating to those concepts that have significant meaning for the client.

The process of mapping consists of linking ideas and patterns in a systematic way. Drawing a conceptual map requires the individual to perform the tasks of: perceiving, symbolizing, describing, classifying, generalizing, interpreting, conceptualizing and defining. Mapping helps people to make sense of their worlds and to deepen their understandings. When referring to conceptual mapping, Chafee (1988) states: "As we actively discover and compose various patterns, what we are really doing is exploring the ways in which different aspects of our experience *relate* to each other" (p. 251).

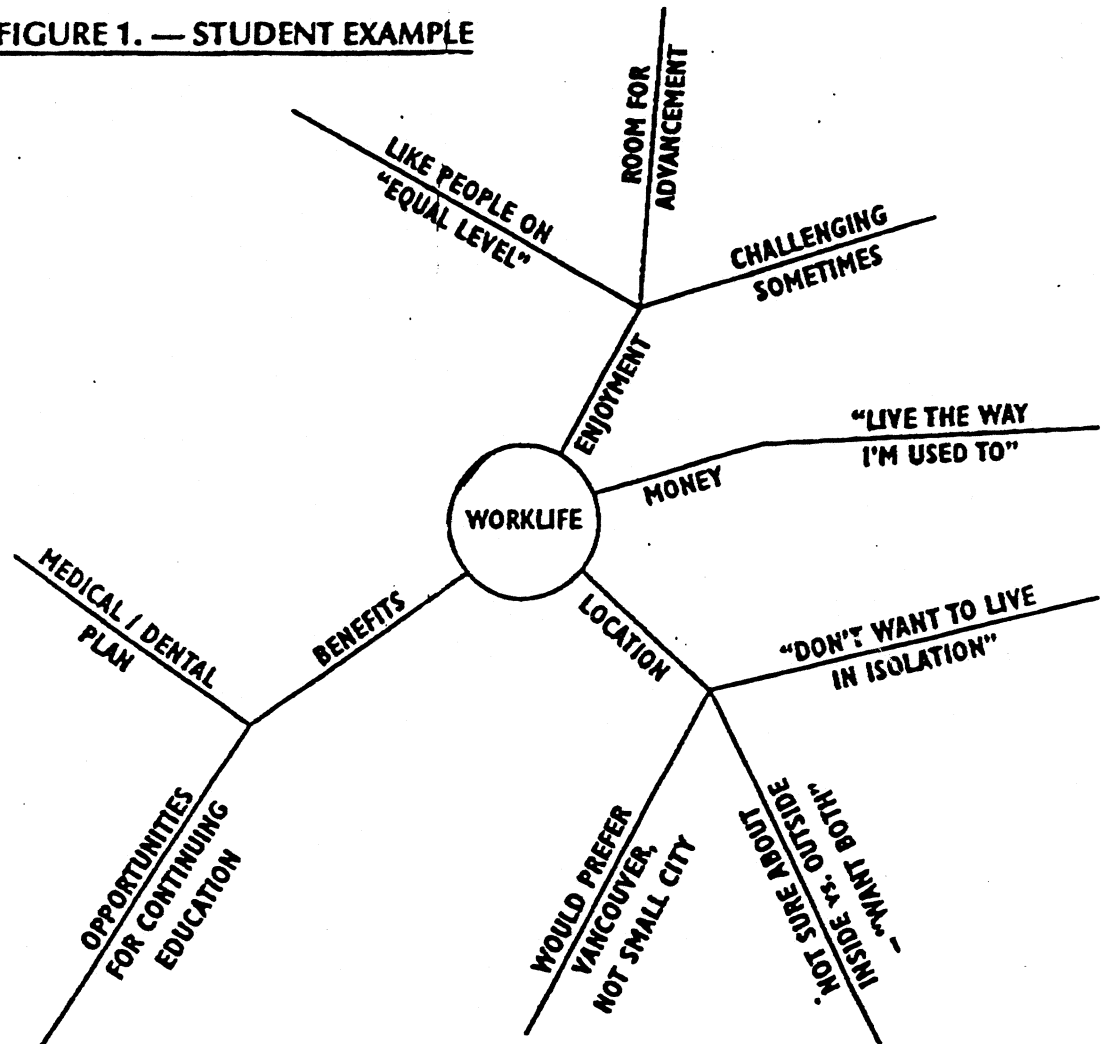
There are vast differences in the complexity of conceptual maps, determined in part by the intention and the ability of the person creating the map. Some are rather simplistic, such as the one illustrated in Figure 1; others are more inclusive and complex (Figure 2). Whatever the complexity, for the purpose of mapping career issues, it is important that the map be treated as a "tool for exploration" and not as a finished, detailed depiction of conceptual understandings.

Conceptual mapping may be applied in counselling in a variety of ways, both individually and in group counselling, and has multiple possibilities when used for the purpose of enhancing understanding of self and others. Participants are given opportunities to create an initial map from what they currently know, referred to as "prior knowledge" (Ausubel, Novak, and Hanesian, 1978). After engaging in a dialogue aimed at facilitating critical reflection, participants revise their initial maps. The reconstructed maps often reduce conceptual gaps, "contradictions, inconsistencies, circular thinking, unattached concepts and invalid conclusions" (Deshler, p. 345).

With reference to counselling and helping others, conceptual mapping is a useful activity in two ways. First, conceptual mapping can be used in learning to counsel and help. It is a method to be used by counsellors in developing a wholistic, relational understanding of one's helping self and the life space which one has as a counsellor/helper. The second way in which conceptual mapping is useful is as a strategy to use with clients to help them clarify and understand the situation which they are trying to deal with. The following explanation is designed to assist helpers-in-training in using conceptual mapping as a means of creating a detailed, dynamic understanding of the most important elements in their life space as helpers.

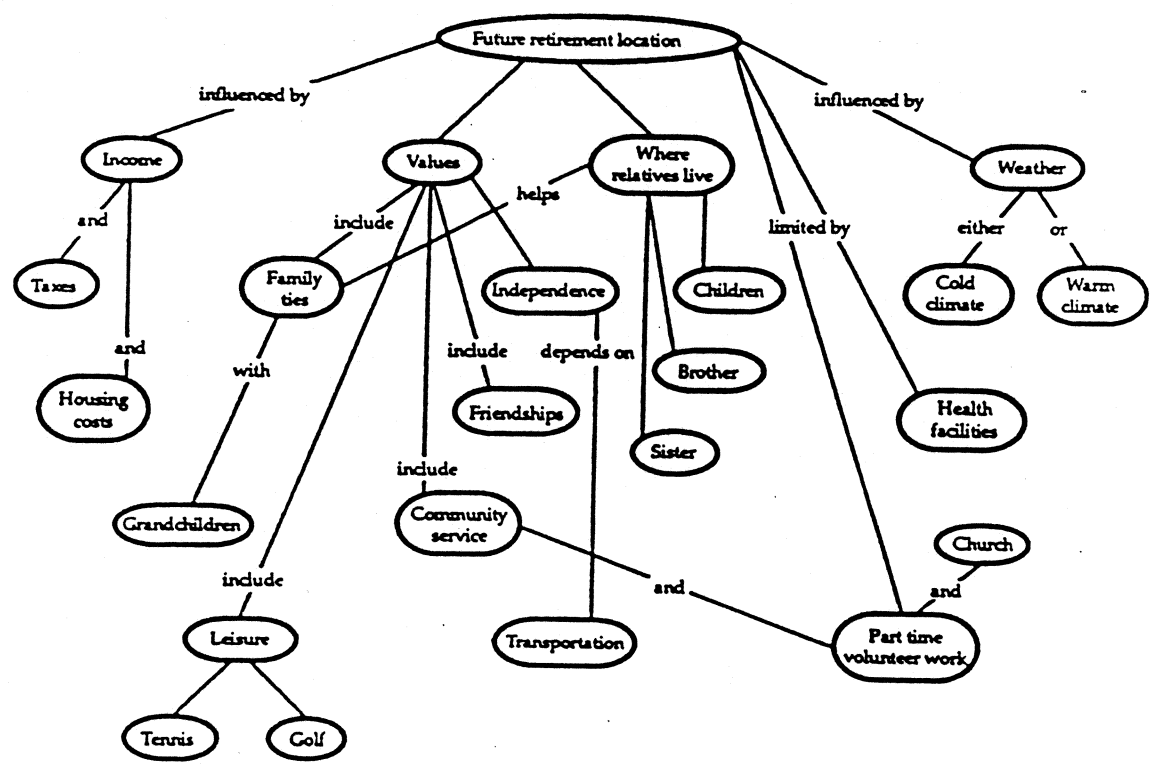
opportunities: 1) to examine, 2) to confirm or disconfirm, 3) to evaluate, and 4) to perceive information or experiences in new ways. Figure 1 is an example of a student's map created in response to questions pertaining to the most important aspects of their future worklives.

**FIGURE 1. — STUDENT EXAMPLE**



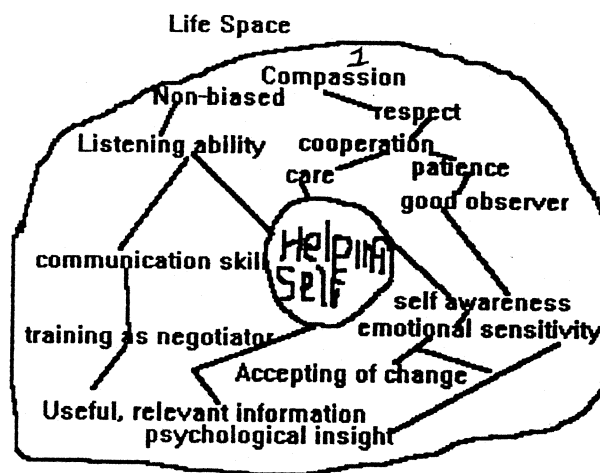
Conceptual mapping in research and education has recently gained recognition in the field of curriculum development. Novak, Gowin and Johansen (1983), Cardemone (1975), and Minemier (1983), have all applied conceptual mapping to

FIGURE 2. Reconstructed Concept Map on Choice of Retirement Location. (Deshler, 1991)



What is meant by 'life space'? I have chosen this term to include all of those factors which the individual experiences as relevant and significant in their everyday life. When the phrase 'as helpers' is added to 'life space' this defines the boundaries of life space in specific ways. The center of a person's life space is the self. When I think of my life space as a helper, I visualize a space in which I am the center. Then a great many things come to my mind which I believe are important to me as a helper. I hold certain attitudes, values, beliefs and assumptions in relation to helping. I have certain skills and knowledge, I know certain counselling and problem-solving procedures, and I have access to certain resources. My knowledge, values, experience, abilities and relationships make up my life space. A life space is not necessarily constrained by distance or time. For example part of my life-space as a helper, is my relationship with a colleague in Nokia, Finland. While he is physically in Finland, he (and his knowledge and support of me) is very much a part of my life space. Moreover, some of my 'helping self' has clear roots in the past, for example my experiences as a youth growing up in a rural community where neighbors helped neighbors. Other aspects of my life space reach out into the future, for example in my efforts to teach about how to counsel and advise adult learners. This, too, is part of my life space as a helper. My ability as a listener, writer, discerner of subtleties, and my wisdom as an 'elder' are all important elements of my helping self and therefore of my life space.

A life space in which 'helping' is emphasized, includes the 'self' of the helper and all of the relationships, resources, personal perspectives, knowledge, skills and experiences and experiences relevant to helping of which the individual is aware. An example rudimentary conceptual map of a novice helper is shown below. Notice how the different concepts are linked to each other and to the helping self in the center of the life space. It is very important to realized that there is no "one right way" to make a conceptual map. They are individualized and will reflect your own way of thinking, feeling, valuing and describing your knowledge and skills which you believe are related to your way of helping and are part of your life space.



**Instructions for making a conceptual map of your life space as a helper.**

1. On a sheet of paper (either letter or legal size) draw a small circle in the center and write or type My Helping Self in the circle.

2. Now on another piece of paper make a list of 10 characteristics of your self and your life space which you believe are important contributors to your ability to be a helping person. These characteristics can be aspects of your self such as abilities, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, skills; clumps of knowledge, past experiences, events in your life, or they can be resources which you use to be helpful and which are definitely a part of your life space. In a broad sense, anything which is personally meaningful to you and which in your mind contributes to your being helpful to others can be included.
3. When you have developed your (initial) list, place them on the page. The page represents your life space. Perform this task in a reflective way, trying to see just how each is meaningful to you as a helper and think about how they may be inter-related. Once you have placed these items in your life space, draw lines to connect those you understand to be connected and connect key items to your 'self circle'.
4. As you reflect these first items, no doubt others will come to your mind. Allow yourself to add, delete, elaborate, change and develop your life space map. Don't rush and remember that you can come back to it later and make changes. Some people use their computer to design the life space, others work freehand. You are constrained only by the space available.
5. When you are satisfied that you have developed a life space map which represents your helping self in its life space, give each item a number. From the example above we can give the item 'compassion' a number 1. On a sheet(s) separate from the life space map, write a brief personally meaningful explanation for each of your life space items. For example, using the example above we have:

1 Compassion. *I believe that I am in some way related to all other human beings so I participate in both the sorrows and the joys of people everywhere. When I see others who are suffering or less fortunate than me I feel a tug in my heart. I always want to do something to help, even if it is just a single act. I think this feeling for others, which I call compassion, is very much a part of what makes me able to help others, and more than that, makes me want to help others.*

### ASSIGNMENT

6. When you have completed your map to your satisfaction, and have written a brief personally meaningful comment about each of your map items, copy all of the sheets, put them in a binder or staple into a file folder or plastic protective envelope and send them to me. Be sure to keep a copy for yourself, or send me the copy and keep the originals for yourself. Feel free to use creativity in preparing the life space map. The most important purpose is for you to graphically represent those aspects of self and life space which you believe contribute to your efficacy as a helpful person.

### CONCEPTUAL MAP

