



# Map your mind around this!

The practice of creating pictures to help explain ideas has benefits in business and education.

By Karen Squire-Ryan

Have you ever created a ‘mind map’? If so, you’re one of thousands of people world-wide applying mind mapping to enhance the process of planning, teaching or facilitating.

Briefly, a mind map is an illustration that captures thoughts and ideas around a particular topic or situation and is unique to each user.

Mind maps – paper-based and electronic – can be used by adults and children in group or individual sessions to assist with planning, brain-storming new products, product improvements, problem-solving, preparing sales pitches, making telephone call lists and for capturing notes and thoughts.

Originator Tony Buzan calls mind mapping a thinking tool or “the Swiss army knife of the brain”. And many mind mappers are almost evangelical about its benefits.

But is it really so powerful that it can be applied universally, or is it just a feat of marketing genius? As a frequent mind mapper, and also a user of a variety of other techniques, I’m sceptical about some of the more excessive claims attributed to its effectiveness.

## How it works

A mind map mimics the working of the brain by requiring users to “branch out” and connect various thoughts and ideas with meaningful words and images that relate to a central point, says Buzan.

Mimicking natural brain function makes mind maps a natural, spontaneous and intuitive note taking or list creation, as opposed to the “left brain” and possibly limiting linear and sequential approach.

Buzan devised the mind mapping technique to improve his own learning process at university because he was frustrated by taking copious notes at lectures but remembering little. It seemed an inefficient way to learn and remember. The linear, mono-colour notes were boring and quite possibly putting his brain to sleep.

While doing some research in psychology and Ancient Greek civilisation, Buzan discovered that both psychologists and Ancient Greeks identified association and imagination as important to the brain when learning. He also noted the interconnectedness that occurs in nature and related it to the “branching out” that occurs in the human brain. This led to him coining the phrase “radiant thinking” to describe the technique in mind mapping of drawing lines that radiate from a centre.

Buzan created mind maps as an intuitive note-taking technique that would be different for everyone because it’s based on unique memory triggers and associations. His logic being that meaningful notes are more memorable.

He shared the technique with his brother Barry, Montegue Burton Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, who suggested mind maps could also be used for generating ideas and problem solving, thereby doubling its power.

“Graphic organisers” along the lines of Mind Maps have been used extensively in education and creative endeavours since the

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1970s\*. But the concept has been around for centuries.

Buzan is widely accepted as the creator of the term “mind map” for this particular type of graphic organiser and asserts his ownership over it, but freely acknowledges the tool’s historical links and predecessors.

**Hot or not?**

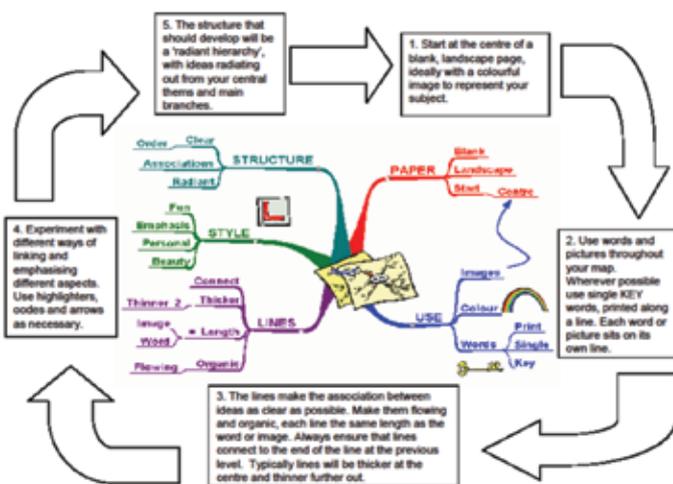
Some say mind mapping may be over-hyped and most of those critics agree that it’s not as useful as Buzan claims. It’s as a useful and effective technique that has become over-inflated and ubiquitous. There is also concern around non-specific, anecdotal claims and a lack of scientific data.

One favourable study was criticised for its conclusion that mind mapping was the most effective study method compared with other methods when the study method itself could not be isolated as the only differentiating factor (other factors such as motivation also played a part in the results so the conclusion was seen as poorly reached and unscientific.

Farrand, Hussain, and Hennessy (2002) and Daniel Willingham (2006) suggest that the motivation of learners plays a more significant role when evaluating learning techniques, than the techniques themselves. Willingham says it’s sensible to match certain learning techniques with certain topics rather than using a one-size fits all approach.

**Illustration**

**Make your own mind map (from [www.buzan.com.au](http://www.buzan.com.au))**



For more information and resources on mind maps, visit [www.buzan.com.au/learning/mindmapgallery.html](http://www.buzan.com.au/learning/mindmapgallery.html)

The Buzan mind map method is straightforward, logical and allows all users to create mind maps in their own way, using their own triggers. It also seems a logical, simple and effective way to provide an overview or a summary for students or business clients.

It’s certainly not the only way to make an illustration of topics using both images and text. Other options include spider diagrams, semantic maps, concept maps, knowledge maps and Rico clusters.

Many of these methods pre-date mind maps and can be as useful or perhaps even superior for some purposes and users. If you’ve not heard of these – “google” them and see if they suit your purpose.

To generate a firm answer on whether “is mind mapping is a useful learning technique and if so, how useful” more studies would need to be done under scientific conditions and also a larger literature review of reputable sources undertaken.

This is an edited version of a longer paper and series of reports on approaches to learning which form part of Karen Squire-Ryan’s portfolio of work for her Masters of Education. ■

**Karen Squire-Ryan** is a Training Consultant with over 15 years experience in the education and training sphere. Currently facilitating, designing and consulting with commercial clients and public and private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) she has recently completed her Masters in Education as well as seen her child start school! Karen has been an AITD member since 1993.

\* Materna, 2007, p. 95 author of *Jump start the adult learner : how to engage and motivate adults using brain-compatible strategies*. Sage, California.

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