

Review Essay: Inspiration® v6.0, Classroom Ideas: Using Inspiration® for Teachers by Teachers, and Exploring Inspiration®

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Inspiration Software, Inc. Portland, Oregon, USA. (2000). <http://www.inspiration.com>

Inspiration v6.0 (software) - single unit Education Price for students/faculty \$95 Cdn.

Exploring Inspiration (Interactive Training CD-ROM) \$36 Cdn.

Classroom Ideas Using Inspiration (Book) \$29 Cdn.

"INSPIRATION® is a powerful visual learning tool that inspires students to develop ideas and organize thinking."

<http://www.inspiration.com/beta.html>

Inspiration® v6.0

Inspiration® claims to be an appropriate tool for brainstorming, planning, organizing, outlining, prewriting, diagramming, concept mapping, and webbing. However, as most of these are arguably variations of concept mapping it makes sense to focus on Inspiration's ability to work with concept maps.

Concept maps are visual representations of the relationship between and amongst ideas. A good concept map editor should allow the user to create nodes (ideas), link them to other nodes (ideas) and allow labeling of both nodes and links (relationships). And, of course, a good concept map editor should allow the user to easily move the nodes around while retaining the linkages (try this with paper-and-pencil!). Inspiration® does everything you would expect in a concept map editor, plus adds a host of features that make the process of creating, editing, and using concept maps easy for both novice and experienced users.

The construction and editing of concept maps in Inspiration® is achieved with a fairly easy-to-use interface. A toolbar provides you with a wide variety of node shapes. One clicks to choose a shape, and then clicks on the map surface (screen) to create a new node. The node shapes are worth noting because of the range of shapes and ease of changing them on an existing node. Inspiration® includes the normal shapes one might expect (flowcharting symbols, squares/circles, etc.) but also includes sets of graphics such as 'animals', 'people', and so on. You can, if you like, add your own set of symbols. Connecting nodes (links) is similarly easy to master requiring the user to simply click on the start node and the end node to link the two. Both nodes and links can be labeled thus describing both the concept and the connecting idea.

Beyond the basic editing capabilities, Inspiration® adds features such as templates, child maps, an outline view, and the ability to export maps in a number of formats. There are a number of situations and tasks in which templates (the ability to create a new map with a set of pre-defined features, nodes, and links) can be very useful. For example, teachers can create a template to evaluate students' understanding of the relationship between nodes. A template containing nodes, but no linkages, could be prepared by the teacher; students would use the template to create a new concept map and link and label the nodes to demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between ideas.

Concept maps can get very large and complex. Inspiration's designers dealt with this problem by allowing a node to 'spawn' a new child map. In this case, a child map is a new concept map that has its starting point as a node on another preceding map. A higher-level map, in this case, would contain a simpler map of only the higher order ideas. Each idea can be expanded upon in further detail in a child map. Thus the complexity of a map can be revealed in stages. The major problem with this feature is one of usability; it is not easy to go from higher level idea to its child map, or to return to the higher level map again.

Inspiration® considers concept maps to be outlines of one sort or another. In fact you can switch from outline to diagram view at any time. Diagram view is the graphical version of the map, while the outline view represents the

ideas and linkages as a text-based outline. A map can be created or edited in either view. The ability to switch back and forth provides a way to see a set of hierarchical relationships both visually and verbally.

The last major feature of note is the ability to save concepts maps in different formats. These include graphic formats, such as 'jpg, bmp, pict, wmf,' as well as HTML pages, thus allowing a high degree of portability. The outline view can be exported in even more formats including rtf, html, text, and most major word processor formats.

In a series of studies comparing essay writing, and short and long term recognition of Introductory Psychology concepts, Inspiration® was used to provide support for student-created concept maps (Johnson, Scialfa, Mueller, Ellard, Nairn, & Simms, 1999). Concept mapping was compared to outlining and a control group that neither mapped nor outlined. Methods included paper-based and computer-aided support for outlining and concept mapping. Although results were equivocal, the concept maps created by participants using Inspiration® were richer in terms of the number of nodes/concepts generated and in the use of different shapes to represent concepts as compared to paper-based methods. The general conclusions of the study suggested that computer-support for both outlining and mapping encouraged students to spend more time with the learning material. A secondary conclusion was that the content being mapped had to lend itself to mapping. For example, it may be that factual content doesn't take advantage of mapping as much as more abstract, conceptual content.

Inspiration® does a good job of making mapping accessible and easy for users of all ages. The range of options and features make it a very useful program for instructors interested in integrating concept mapping into their set of instructional methods. Inspiration® works on both Macintosh and PC-Windows platforms. This cross-platform capability makes it easier to incorporate Inspiration® into educational environments that are likely to include both platforms. Installation on workstations and networks was straightforward. The only real problem was mistakenly entering a single-user license key on the network (i.e., the network installation monitors running copies of Inspirations to ensure only the licensed number are concurrently running). Lastly, the minimum system requirements make Inspiration an attractive program for schools that may have older technology (i.e., Macintosh or Power Macintosh System 7.0 or higher and a 486 processor or higher on Windows 95, 98 or NT 4.0).

Classroom Ideas Using Inspiration: For Teachers by Teachers

Classroom Ideas is a 78 page book of lesson plans for teachers of kindergarten to grade 12 students. At the start of the book is an explanation of the various uses for Inspiration® including Idea Maps, Webs and Concept maps. Lesson plans are included for English/Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies/History. The lesson plans help to orient instructors to ways and methods of using Inspiration® in educational settings. However, in a number of cases the necessary templates must be downloaded from the Inspiration Software Inc. [web site](#). While connectivity and bandwidth may not be a huge issue for most college and university campuses, it would have been nice to see the templates included as either part of the Inspiration® installation CD-ROM or included on a diskette for classroom teachers. This would be especially useful in installations that don't allow student downloads and more importantly, because access to the internet is still not ubiquitous in schools, requiring a download may make these materials inaccessible to some.

Overall the lesson plans are useful and integrate Inspiration® into the activities both appropriately and well. For example, a lesson plan is included that presents a section on Evolution for grades 9 to 12. The idea is to have students create concept maps from a list of key terms, and to connect the terms by labeling the links appropriately (see Figure 1).

Example of an Evolution Concept Map

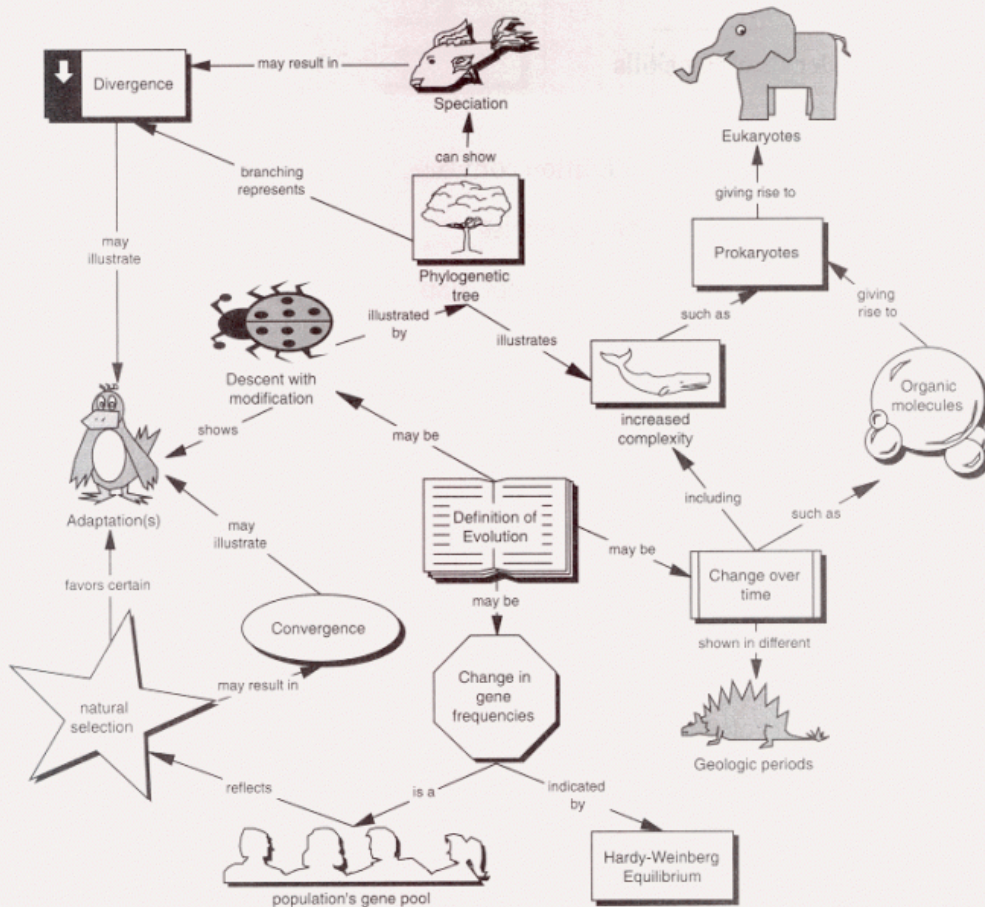


Figure 1: Example of a concept map (Classroom Ideas Using Inspiration, p 52).

Exploring Inspiration®: Interactive Training CD-ROM

Exploring Inspiration is a multimedia tutorial that is clearly intended to give users an overview of what Inspiration® is and what it can do. By some coincidence, the first encounter with the CD was with the sound on the computer turned off. The long waits while the narrator made his point coupled with a lack of visual cues, made its use tedious at best. Once the audio was turned on, however, the presentation was more continuous. The tutorial covers the different types of mapping activities best supported by Inspiration® (Concept Mapping, Webbing, Planning, Graphical Organizing, Brainstorming) as well as modules on teacher planning and using Inspiration®. The CD also includes a number of PDF files which contain extensive ideas about how to use Inspiration®. Overall this CD provides a good overview and tutorial but is lacking in visual feedback and interactivity (i.e., usability could be improved). Most, if not all, of the content could be as easily conveyed in a small color manual.

Concluding Remarks

Inspiration® provides a useful and usable program to facilitate the construction of concept maps. It's the kind of tool that you'll find yourself using both personally and in the classroom because of its flexibility and ease of use. The range of features, from templates to outline view, makes integration into classroom activities as easy as it's likely to get. The supporting materials are worth a look and the Classroom Ideas Using Inspiration book is definitely worth the purchase price.

References

Johnson, B.F., Scialfa, C.T., Mueller, J., Ellard, J, Nairn, S., Simms, C. (1999). **Concept-mapping, outlining, and essay-writing: Influences on retention and transfer in Introductory Psychology**. Unpublished Learning Enhancement Envelope Research Report, University of Calgary.

Author Note

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