


Using reflective mapping to help grad students understand their transferable skillsets

 universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/responsibilities-may-include/using-reflective-mapping-help-grad-students-understand-transferable-skillsets

This exercise is key to enabling positive mindsets.

We are in a large classroom. There are at least 20 graduate students ranging in disciplines from engineering to health promotion to gender studies. The room is silent – you could hear a pin drop as each student stands at their own table, intently staring at the large flipchart paper covering it, a stack of colored markers adjacent. The graduate students move erratically – periods of stillness are followed by bursts of furious writing and drawing. Someone peeking into the room might assume an exam is in progress as the room is quiet yet filled with intensity. But no – this is reflective mapping.

Reflective mapping is a tool used at Simon Fraser University in the [APEX workshop series](#) to help graduate students recognize and gain confidence in their skillsets and experience. APEX was developed in 2013 as a partnership between SFU's graduate studies unit & SFU's career services unit. We intentionally created a program that infused constructivist notions of *career* to help graduate students engage in self-discovery of their careers over time. A foundational piece is the reflective mapping activity where students engage in making sense of their career experiences, their interests, and their future goals.

Graduate students feel pressure to establish themselves and carry enormous anxiety about what the future holds. They are often torn by a myriad of career choices and want to choose the perfect path for their future. Student's graduate education and possible career options can sometimes feel disconnected, especially in this [VUCA](#) world. As career and professional advisers we don't have a crystal ball and unfortunately can't provide the black and white answers students sometimes wish for. At APEX we found reflective mapping to be a useful technique to help students recognize their own skills and talents. Understanding this builds confidence – which is sometimes all it takes to reduce a student's anxiety and enable a more positive mindset.

From the outset, our team firmly believed that graduate students are highly skilled (a counter-narrative to the notion of skill deficiency which abounds in much of the literature on grad students). We suspected it to be an issue of *recognition* and *translation* – where skills and knowledge that are developed over time at the university are not well understood by students themselves, and therefore not able to be translated to non-academic audiences (ie. employers). The reflective mapping exercise is related to the [River of Life](#) exercise (used in social work and community-based settings), adapted to fit the needs of the graduate student population we work with. For those students who complete the APEX series of workshops, the

mapping exercise is routinely cited as a highlight of their learning. We've seen positive impacts on students across the disciplines: even those who are slightly resistant to the exercise usually warm up as their map begins to take shape.

So, how does the mapping work?

It takes a skilled facilitator to set the tone for the activity, and manage the expectations and anxieties of people who are not used to the creative element of mind mapping. Each student starts with a large, blank flipchart paper and a set of multicolored markers. They sit at their own table for the duration of the exercise (1 to 1.5 hours). Facilitators ask guiding reflective questions throughout and students reflect and write on their maps as they go along. The exercise is separated into three periods of time: present, past and future (i.e. goals). The facilitator asks guiding prompts to enable students to brainstorm about their life, their world, and their experience (their own context!) during those three periods of time. For example:

“Think about all of the activities that make up your world right now. This might include paid work, community work, research work, writing, or work with associations; it also includes your home life, such as parenting or caring for family members; your hobbies or extra-curricular interests; these might be at school or completely separate from that. What is your world made up of right now? List these on your paper.”

Through a series of guided prompts like these, students begin brainstorming on their paper. Then we use a series of questions to help them analyze various aspects of their maps. As they move from past to present to future, they begin drawing connections between their experiences, things that they love, and things they are good at. The mapping helps them zero in on what's important to them by locating similarities and patterns across experiences. Often people forget about experiences in the past, but this activity helps students see those connections.

From the outset the student may have perceived their choices of work/experience to be random or just a series of disconnected opportunities. We find some students have preconceptions about their experiences: for example, that university-related work (such as TA and RA-ships, committee work, even leadership roles or published papers) doesn't count in the outside world – that work is only valued in academia. But we push them to consider the skills and knowledge needed to participate in those activities, which leads them to better understand how those activities contribute to their skillset. It's a huge confidence booster. Students realize they are more than students (another preconception!) – that their academic experiences do count, that they are highly skilled, and that they have been building a career over time (without realizing it).

Through this mapping exercise our suspicions have been confirmed. Graduate students do not lack skills, knowledge and experience. But they do need support in understanding their non-linear careers and experiences. Once their confidence is built, this transforms the way they tackle career preparation: better CVs, more confidence in speaking and writing about their

skills and talents, and more success in networking. While we cannot offer students a crystal ball to view their future, we can improve students' self-efficacy to shape their own future. And many can take it from there.