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Exploring the use of the personal meaning mapping method in dress and textiles scholarship

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Gaimster (2011) acknowledges mind mapping as a useful technique for brainstorming ideas about a research problem in fashion scholarship. Recent literature has provided evidence that variations of mind mapping (see Buzan, 2003) and concept mapping can also be used as a research method. Personal Meaning Mapping (PMM) is a recently developed data collection technique “designed to measure how a specific learning experience uniquely affects each individual’s understanding or meaning-making process” (Adams, Falk, & Dierking, 2003, p. 22). The purpose of this paper is to share my introductory use of the PMM method in dress and textiles scholarship and explore other options for its application. I used the PMM method as a data collection tool to investigate the role of dress artifacts and displays in learning about a historic event (in this case, Titanic) in museums. Four permanent Titanic museums were selected as sites of study in Branson, MO; Pigeon Forge, TN; Orlando, FL; and Las Vegas, NV. Twenty-nine participants were included. The PMM method was supplemented with phenomenological interviews. Data were analyzed using the descriptive phenomenological method.

Participants were given a mostly blank piece of paper containing a series of one-word prompts (see Figure 1) and asked to write down any and all words, ideas, images, or phrases they had in response to each prompt with no time limit. The participant was then instructed to visit their chosen Titanic museum. Within one week following the visit, each participant revisited the ideas and thoughts previously recorded on the PMM document. Participants were asked to write responses to the prompts based on their museum visit, but they were also given the opportunity for review and revision of ideas and thoughts recorded during the pre-visit session (see Figure 2). The completion of this review process was followed by another in-depth interview. PMM responses formed the basis of pre- and post-visit interviews. Participants were instructed to use two different colors of ink to differentiate pre- and post-visit responses. The data analysis process is often a comingling of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Four quantitative dimensions (e.g., extent, breadth, depth, and mastery) are most commonly used (Falk, 2003). While I analyzed the use of vocabulary via the extent dimension, data analysis primarily consisted of identifying themes in responses.

The use of the PMM method in this study was beneficial in the assessment of how participants’ understanding transformed after an educative experience. The findings of this study revealed that participants gained (1) a greater understanding of how dress artifacts fit into and reflect the social context and values of the time period and (2) a range of new vocabulary with which to conceptualize and discuss both history and dress. For example, participants learned that dress was indicative of social class and were able to differentiate the times of day and occasions for which specific types of dress were worn after their museum visit. They were also able to recall a specific period designer discussed in the museum, the designs/styles she was known for, and speak of specific artifacts while tying them to specific passengers or a class of passengers.

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Several participants expressed great concern about their PMM responses being “wrong.” Thus, it is important to emphasize that responses will vary because each individual has unique experiences and knowledge. I found that the PMM method is difficult to explain to lay individuals because it is not a routine activity. Instructions must be precise, particularly if the activity is completed remotely. Also, most individuals did not engage in PMM using a “traditional” visual mind-mapping format. For the most part, they felt more comfortable making lists of words under each prompt. If researchers wish to have participants engage in PMM using a specific format, participants can be provided with a PMM exemplar to be used as a guide.

Future use of PMM in dress scholarship may be adapted to include diverse subject matter, such as (1) participant assessment of apparel prototypes before and after wear and (2) participant assessment of retail store atmospherics before and after a store visit. PMM could also be used by dress and textiles educators as a means to assess students’ understanding of course concepts and tailor their teaching to the resulting needs of students. Instructors could also assign this activity as part of a research project to assist in defining a research problem, recording citations and relevant ideas, and enhancing critical thinking skills by making connections among relevant ideas.

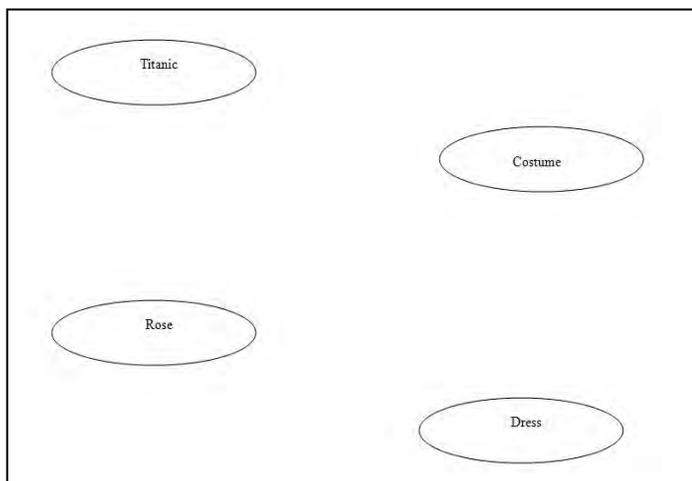


Figure 1. Blank PMM document

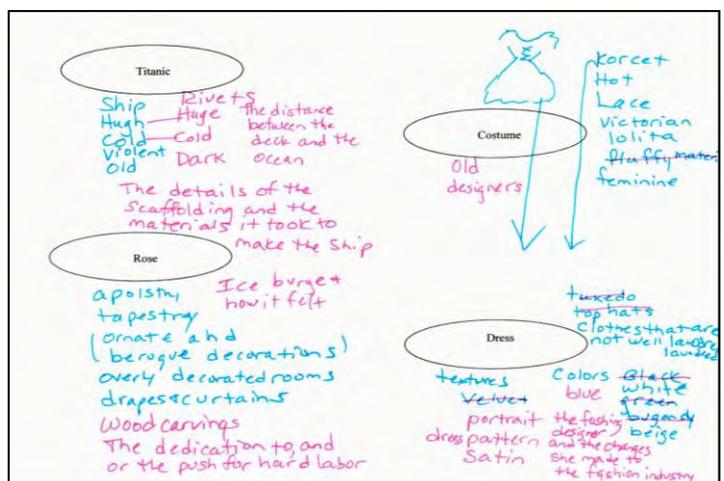


Figure 2. PMM document completed by participant following pre- and post-visit interviews

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