

SKETCHNOTING AND GRAPHIC SYLLABUS AS PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

By Lisa Dickson

In my classes, I often follow up on a good class discussion by translating some of the main insights into sketchnotes that I can then use for review and, later, as prompts and illustrations for subsequent classes. I find that this practice helps students to see *themselves* as originators and creators of knowledge, while using the sketchnotes in future classes helps students to see *other students* as legitimate creators of knowledge. Like the sketchnotes, the graphic syllabus is a means of shifting the tone of teacher-learner interactions and introducing creative non-linearity to the learning space. This shift to spatiality helps learners to step out of strictly a descriptive mode (that tends to manifest as species of “plot summary”) and into an analytical mode that emphasizes *relationships*.

Below you will find three sketchnotes and one graphic syllabus:

- Figure One: *The opening Chorus from Henry V*;
- Figure Two: NTSD Analysis of Act 2 of *Henry V*;
- Figure 3: *Language Apartheid in Medieval Britain*;
- Figures 4-6: Graphic Syllabus for a 1st-year “Ways of Knowing” Course.

Following each of the sketchnotes is a brief discussion of the exercise that produced them and the pedagogical principles that animated that exercise.

SOME SKETCHNOTE RESOURCES:

Barry, Lynda. *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*. Drawn & Quarterly, 2014.

Rhode, Mike. *The Sketchnote Handbook: The Illustrated Guide to Visual Note Taking*. Peachpit Press, 2013.

Stommel, Jesse. Main Website: <https://www.jessestommel.com/>

HENRY 5 1.0 CHORUS 1-35

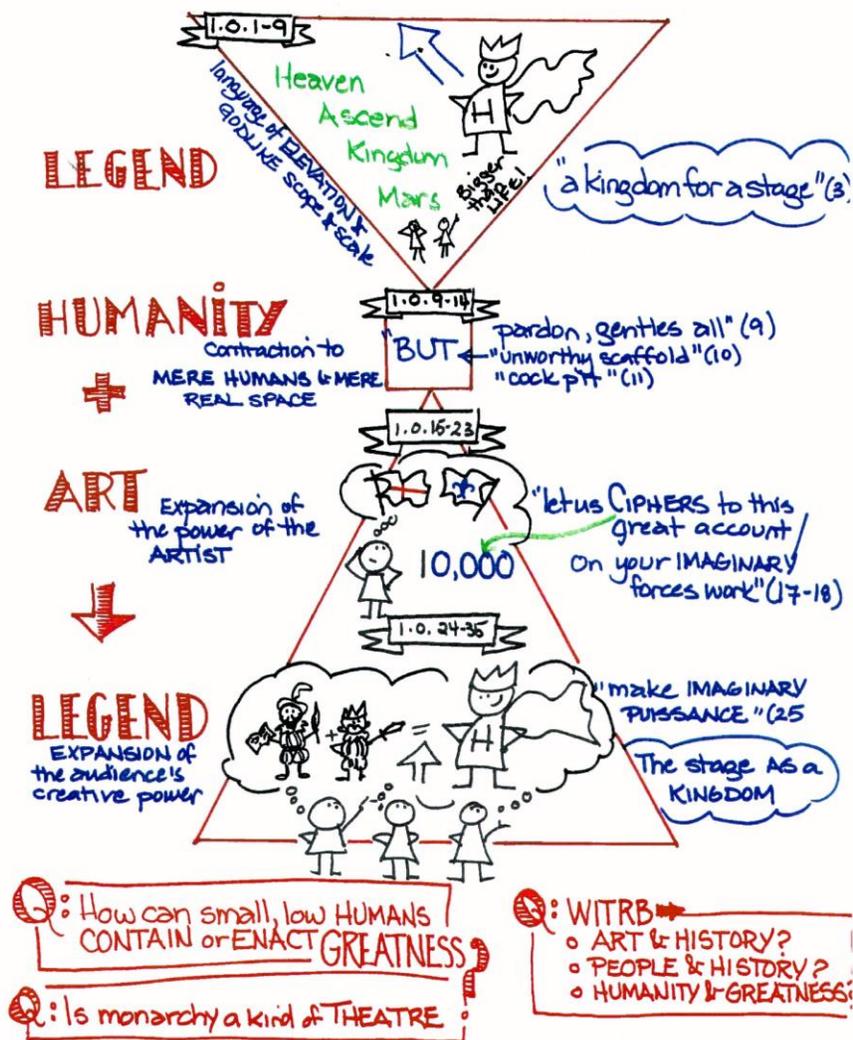


Figure 1 An analysis of the opening Chorus of Henry V showing the progression toward a privileging of human imagination and the theatre.

Figure One: *The opening Chorus from Henry V*. In this exercise, we divided the speech into sections and assigned each section to a group who conducted a detailed close reading. We insisted that every insight or assertion be supported by a quotation or example from the text. At the end of the session, we did a gallery walk in which students could see what the other

groups had done. They were encouraged to write on each other's flip chart papers, adding examples from their own sections and asking questions.

We moved on to a round-up in which we began to draw connections among the insights of the groups, noting significant continuities and differences. We asked what core idea or theme emerged from each section and began to answer our "go-to" question: "What is the relationship between..." (WITRB), eventually drawing the pattern of development represented in the sketchnote, which summarizes the long process of investigation in one image that reveals the structural elements of the speech that are anchored by key quotations.

The image demonstrates how moving through a piece of literature does not necessarily entail doing "plot summary." Breaking the speech into sections for analysis and then asking "What is the relationship between..." we are able to shake students out of the "and then... and then..." linearity of pure paraphrase and begin to move toward a more spatially oriented analysis of relationships. By shifting back and forth between the very grainy exploration of details and the more "10,000-meter view" of a structural perspective, we can see how the speech develops its argument as a series of specific strategies or "movements" defined thematically and supported by evidence. Then, when we reassemble the speech in its linear format, we are not doing a simple "and then... and then..." of plot summary, but are more able to see the skeleton of ideas and strategies that hold it together. We can develop "SO WHAT" questions that we can use to explore the patterns, the "WHATs," that we have identified.

It is also possible to begin with the SO WHAT questions (a more "top-down" or deductive approach) and to use those to guide our observations, but, personally, I prefer to allow space for students to "get their boots dirty" by mucking around in the text in order to develop those SO WHATs out of their observations (a "bottom-up" or inductive approach). The latter takes more time, but produces deeper learning, in my opinion.

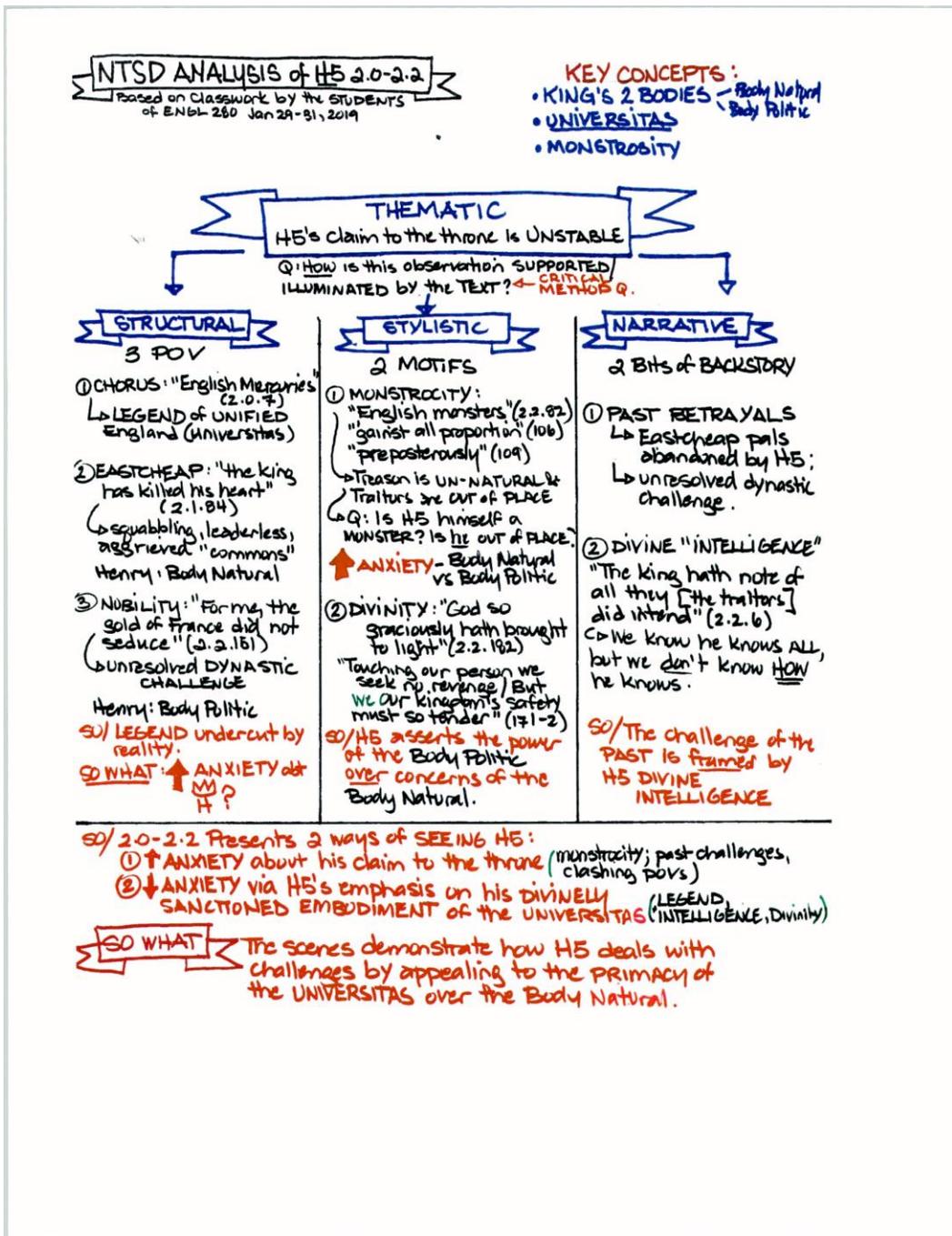


Figure 2 A summary of a Narrative, Thematic, Stylistic and Dramatic/Structural analysis of Act 2 of Henry V. The exercise demonstrates how the various elements of a scene work together to convey and support a particular reading.

Figure Two: NTSD Analysis of Act 2 of *Henry V*. This sketchnote illustrates the movement from the observation stage to the "SO WHAT" stage of an analysis of a scene and goes nicely with the "Questions to Ask of a Recalcitrant Scene" worksheet and the "NTSD Analysis" powerpoint presentation on the Early Modern Resources Padlet. Here, we can see how we can isolate Narrative, Thematic, Stylistic and Dramatic/Structural elements by asking specific kinds of questions. Then, we can isolate particular observations and examples

in each category that resonate with those in other categories, revealing a pattern of mutually-resonant elements that support the “SO WHAT” or thesis statement.

I often tell students that they know they have hit on a significant So What if supporting elements appear in all of the NTSD categories. This method tends to reinforce the idea of the text as essentially coherent, so may have limits relative to, for example, postmodern texts that resist coherence. But for Shakespearean texts, it helps students to hone their questioning skills and their abilities to integrate insights and stress-test their assertions against the evidence. The method structures that difficult leap from WHAT (description) to SO WHAT (analysis).

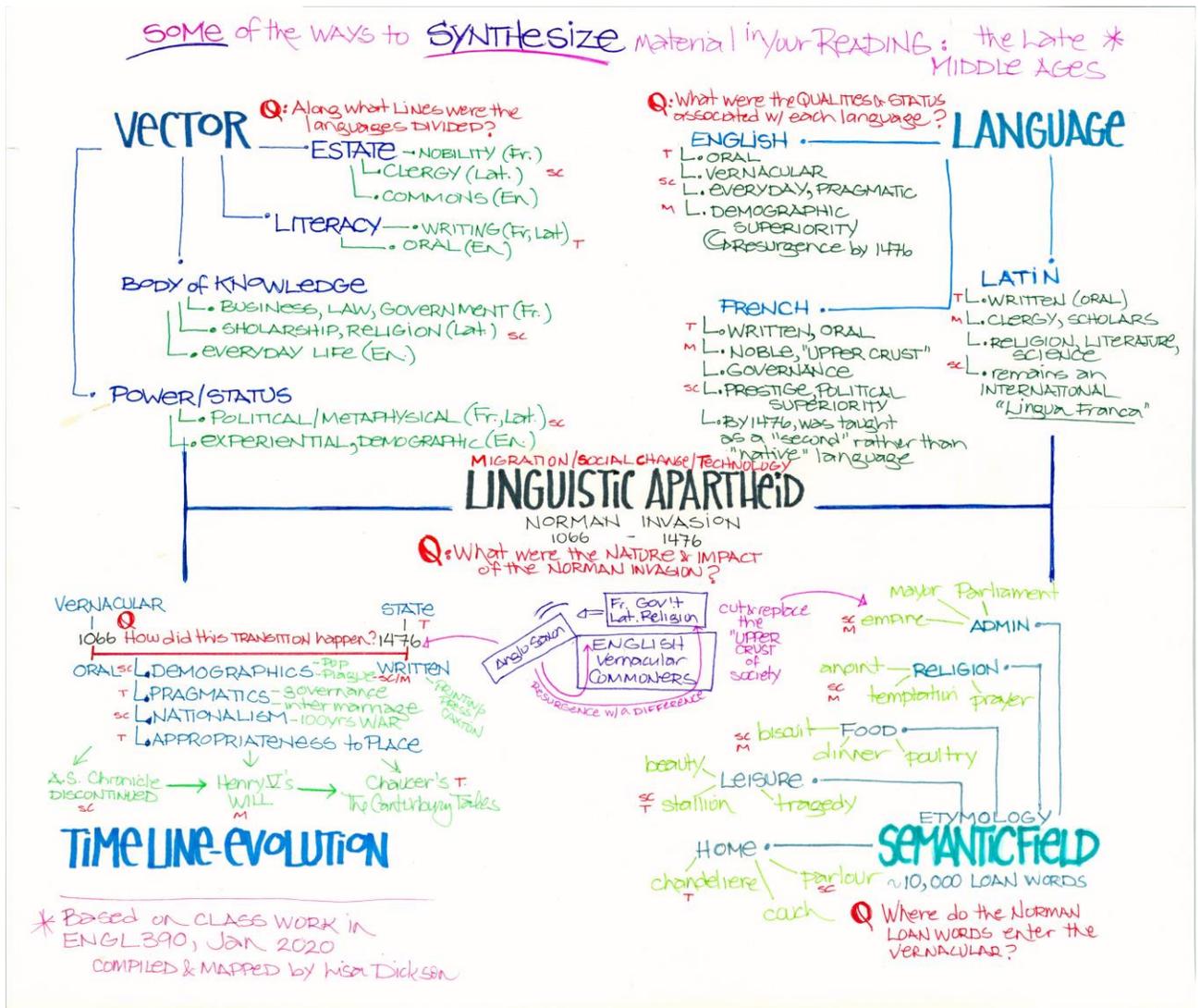


Figure 3 Language Apartheid in Medieval Britain. A sketchnote summarizing four different ways to organize dense material in a chapter of reading.

Figure 3: *Language Apartheid in Medieval Britain: Synthesizing Detail*. Students in a content-heavy course like the History of the English Language often have difficulty absorbing the copious detail available in the textbook, and often resort in their notes to a kind of “plot summary” that tends to flatten the significance of all details to one level. It becomes difficult for them to figure out what is important and they end up trying to memorize everything. A tell-tale sign is the textbook in which the student has highlighted every line on a page.

This sketchnote demonstrates how students can organize details by using specific themes or questions as points of entry and organization. Each group was asked to “summarize the week’s reading” and were provided with the course’s overall thematic touchstones: social change, migration and technological innovation. At the end of the session, we did a gallery walk and a round-up in which we discussed, not the *content* of each summary, but rather the *method* each group used, and the *questions* they asked as they organized the material. Many groups built a

timeline and then retroactively asked which factors influenced the developments they saw. Others organized their summaries around social issues or questions of etymological change and vocabulary development. We talked at length about how each approach organized the same details into different relationships that revealed different “stories” about the English language in the Medieval period. Same content, different insights.

The exercise helped students to understand that the questions you ask influence how you see the “information,” which in turn helps you to take a whole jumbled box of “details” and MAKE SENSE of it by sorting the details into different “boxes” or significant dimensions within a chapter. Instead of highlighting every line of a book, they could now sort information and understand the relationships that make the details significant.

In this case, students developed their own guiding questions from the messy business of wrangling the details into a “shape.” It is possible to do the exercise by providing the questions first (a deductive approach) or by giving them a whole stack of post-its and getting them to sort them on a wall (an inductive approach). Both approaches have benefits but will require slightly different framing in the round-up discussion.

The sketchnote is a “boiled down” version of a lengthy and messy process of working with dense material. In the process of *thinking about process*, the students were able to learn the content almost, it seemed to them, by “accident.” The exercise reminded me that we do not sacrifice “content” by dwelling on process. In fact, *more* content can be assimilated in this fashion, not less.

IASK103 ASSIGNMENTS & ACTIVITIES



Figure 4 A Graphic Syllabus for a 1st-year Ways of Knowing Course

TASK 103 AWAKE & LEARNING JOURNAL 30%

DUE: Random collection 2X/semester + FINAL collection on EXAM DAY
 NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS will be ACCEPTED.

Learning Outcomes:

- BE AWAKE!
- PRACTICE observing + listening;
- PRACTICE asking questions;
- REFLECT on your learning experience
- ARTICULATE your thoughts clearly.
- RECOGNIZE that learning is an ongoing PROCESS!

The AWAKE & LEARNING JOURNAL is a place to record your day-to-day learning experiences and to hone your awareness of the world around you. Each journal will be unique. It's your journal. BUT there are GUIDELINES & CRITERIA:

① 2 ENTRIES/week

1. A) AWAKEPAGE

DID Record 10 things you did.	SEEN Record 10 things you saw.
HEARD Record 3 things you heard.	Wondered 3 things that made you Hm?
	Question about what you saw/heard/wondered.

IDEALLY: Do a page EVERY DAY!
 pick one to be your ENTRY.

BE SPECIFIC!
 Pay attention to the OBVIOUS

1. B) LEARNING

min 200 words

- Respond to themes/ Prompts I will give you each week;
- Record + REFLECT on
 - CHALLENGES
 - BREAKTHROUGHS
 - RETRENCHMENTS
 - STRATEGIES
 - EXPERIENCES
 - ACTIVITIES
 - THINGS PROMPTED by the AWAKEPAGE

② JOURNAL PRESENTATION

- Use a composition book for all entries
- Feel free to DRAW or paste items related to your reflections
- keep your Journal with you all the time so you can record on the go.
- make sure actual entries are LEGIBLE. (Your rough notes don't have to be) & DATE & LABEL your actual entries CLEARLY so I can find them easily.

BE AN EYE & AN EAR
 Is the OBVIOUS quite so OBVIOUS?

BE THOUGHTFUL
 Connect PAST to the FUTURE

REMEMBER:
 Learning is an 

Figure 5 A Graphic Syllabus Assignment Description: Learning Journal

Figures 4-5: *Graphic Syllabus*: This was an early attempt at a graphic syllabus. There are things that I would change to make it more streamlined and easy to follow, and many of my policies (the no late assignments one, for instance) have been adapted or dropped since this syllabus was made. However, as an example, this presentation of course materials offers some interesting possibilities for shifting the tone of my interactions with students. I began using the graphic syllabus because I developed chronic bursitis and biceps tendonitis in both of my shoulders and had to drastically cut down on my computer work. Lynda Barry's *Syllabus* arrived at exactly the right moment for me.

Jesse Stommel and others have noted that the confrontational language that characterizes a lot of our communications with students makes it difficult to cultivate nurturing and courageous spaces for learning. The graphic syllabus introduces the idea of creativity, non-linear associations and play while also offering relevant information in a less formal (but still formalized) medium.

This graphic syllabus arranges the course assignments around the core pedagogical principles of the course: the ART of Learning (Acquisition, Retention and Transfer) which is situated within a recursive model of PROCESS, PRACTICE and REFLECTION. The central graphic emphasizes PROCESS over MASTERY in an attempt to communicate the importance of the growth mindset that was the goal of the course. The assignments are then located around that central principle so that their relevance to that model is more clear.

I am a fan of the stick person which is at once more “neutral” (although I have to work on that—I.e. including more physical diversity for instance to counter an unexamined ableism on my part) and more personal. As I grew up as an educator through a Learning Outcomes design model, I tend to favour VERBS (Hope is a verb; learning is a verb), and the stick figures help to move us from a more impersonal, textual, abstract mode into a more personal, graphic, active mode.

In practice, students were quite disrupted when they received this version of a syllabus. To frame that sense of unease, we did an in-class exercise where we compared the graphic syllabus to a standard text version of the exact same information, looking at tone, expectations and content, and explored the range of conventions that shape our responses to the materials presented to students in an institutional context. We interrogated attitudes toward and assumptions about ideas like “seriousness,” “formality,” “appropriateness” and “authority” and talked about how different kinds of presentation create different kinds of relationships between presenter and observer. The disruption led to a robust discussion of not only how information is presented but also how our identities are “interpolated” or called into being by all kinds of often invisible or uninterrogated factors and conventions.