

What a great teaching idea!



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Using collaborative visual summaries to assess student learning.

Can you describe the purpose of the visual summary activity, and tell us about how you set it up in your course?

I use this strategy to help students visually summarize a unit of study before we transition to the next topic. Students are asked to reflect on the key learnings from the unit—identifying the main themes and ideas and determining the purpose of the unit. They are then placed in small groups of 3-4 students and are asked to create a visual representation that captures their learning. This visual should stand by itself as the summary, and I ask students to refrain from using text, except to label. Not having a traditional written summary means that students are engaged in thoughtful discussion both when creating the visual and when presenting it to the rest of the class.

Once students in the group have produced their visual, they are responsible for presenting their visual and eliciting questions and feedback from the class. After all the visual summaries have been presented, the class engages in a final whole group discussion about recurring themes they noticed across the visuals and take a critical look at any important aspects of the unit that may have been missing from the visuals. This leads to new questions and a nice transition to the next unit of study.

What makes this strategy effective? How do you know that it is working?

Creating a visual summary provides students an opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a unique, personal way as they collaboratively organize, express, and present their ideas. The real learning happens in each group as the students have conversations about what to include or represent in the visual. I can tell from the way students explain the choices they

made in creating the visual to the class that they have critically engaged with the content. This activity also helps bring out more student voices. I have noticed that the students who may be much quieter during whole group discussions in class are actively contributing to the conversations in their group, and they often shine in the creation of the visual itself. Additionally, I have found that when I refer to the visuals on reflective questions in the final exam, students are able to share very thoughtful and thorough explanations of their learning.

What advice do you have for instructors in other disciplines who are interested in doing a similar activity?

My advice is to give the students freedom to just create! Keep it open, because when we start to put the parameters on an assignment like this, it elevates the tendency for students to think “What exactly is my professor looking for?” rather than engaging in an authentic dialogue with their peers about how they are making meaning of their learning.

Samples of student visual summaries.



Tips from CET

Some things to consider when facilitating a collaborative small group visual summary activity.

1. **Give guidance for collaboration.** Suggest how students could collaborate, emphasizing the process (i.e. idea generation, organizing content, creating the visual). This will encourage students to actively engage and contribute to the process.

2. **Provide tools that support the activity.** Recommend or provide access to digital or physical tools that will enable students to create meaningful visual summaries. For digital tools, ensure they are accessible to all students, and offer tutorials or examples to get students started.
3. **Monitor group dynamics.** Circulate among the groups to check in on progress, address challenges, and offer support. Watch for students who may be struggling with group dynamics (e.g. one person dominating or others not participating) and step in with guidance or mediation if needed to encourage equal contribution.
4. **Provide time for reflection and revision.** Allocate time for groups to reflect on their visual summaries and revise them as needed. This will help students refine their understanding and communication of key concepts.

What the Research Says

Bobek, E., & Tversky, B. (2016). Creating visual explanations improves learning. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 1(1), 27–27. [USC Libraries Link](#).

Clarke, I., Flaherty, T. B., & Yankey, M. (2006). Teaching the Visual Learner: The Use of Visual Summaries in Marketing Education. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 28(3), 218–226. [USC Libraries Link](#).

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