The first-semester sophomores were assigned an object (iPod, dictionary, punctuation, household appliance, T-shirt, etc.) for the course. We gave them this map as a template for understanding the “situatedness” of the object within larger contexts (technological, physical, social/cultural, cognitive). They then built their own maps (24” x 36”) based on readings we assembled in the library. We selected readings that went beyond mere description of the object. Things like the Cooper Hewitt catalog *Feeding Desire* on cutlery or Ellen Lupton’s *Mechanical Brides* or *Never Done* (a history of housework). These enabled them to flesh out a duplicate map for their own object. This was the framework for the semester, so every subsequent project could be located conceptually on the map.

Next they built and designed a timeline of the object (you can see the technological lineage issue to the left of the object in the template). The iPod, for example, is the current iteration of “music listening devices” that include the phonograph, Walkman, etc.

They selected two points on the timeline, wrote a 3-page paper on those two periods in history, and then did two posters (one on each time period) for a hypothetical exhibition at the Smithsonian on Material Culture. The papers were to describe the social consequences of each device in its own time. So the student who had the watch wrote about a sundial fostering a sense of time related to work in the outdoors and nature, while contemporary time is measured mechanically in increasingly smaller increments that keep us from noticing the small things in life. The student who had the personal letter as her object wrote about formal manners in letter writing by Victorian women and the shift in language in how we invite someone to a party in text messaging on a cellphone. The student with games as her objects wrote about the board game providing an escape from the worries of the Great Depression (which was the basis of Monopoly, to buy and sell what you didn’t have in real life) in comparison to becoming totally lost in first-person shooter video games today. The student with the camera as her object looked at early photo albums and Facebook. The student with punctuation compared its use in oratory to emoticons in email and text messaging where intonation and inflection in the voice is not possible.

They had to select these two points in history and then find a comparable or contrasting interpretive position on the contemporary example, so these weren’t book reports. They were issues of concept development and using history as a way of understanding something in their own time. My evaluation included not only their grammar, but whether they could set up this comparative structure in the writing and go beyond mere description to a critical analysis of what social/cultural issues on their concept maps shaped these designed objects.

They are kept on track in designing the posters by the written paper. It slows down their process into two steps - 1) processing the content and interpretive position through the writing, and 2) exploring how the concept should be represented visually through the design process. What they write never appears in the poster - it is a step in a process of understanding the problem. And when they’re writing, they see the larger context for the issue they’re writing about in the narrative concept map - so the student with the watch can also locate on her map the issue of punching a time clock on the assembly line, for example.

The second writing assignment for the semester was to recall an experience with their object - again, they look at the concept map for references to issues such as settings, use, etc. to include in their story. They read John Dewey’s description of an “experience” (in *Art as Experience*) as being composed of doing (the physical act) and undergoing (the reflection). Dewey talks about some experiences as having an excess of doing or an excess of reflecting, while other are more balanced.
The project is to design a book that describes the doing and undergoing of the experience with the object from its start to its end. Their written text is included in the book with their own images. They begin by physically cutting up the word-processed text into “episodes” and distributing it across the 8 pages of the book. This forces them to see discrete moments in their own narrative and to design the transitions between (another one of Dewey’s discussions). It gets around the more typical pattern of designing the first spread, then moving to the next, etc. until they finally “run out” of text or of arbitrarily emphasizing certain words and phrases as important but not integral to the writing structure. I think the software encourages them to do serial design (rather than sequential design) and they never see the text as having a deliberate structure that is inherent in the narrative. This project gets them over that very quickly. The cover designs respond to Dewey’s notion of entering and leaving an experience.

So the student with the watch wrote about using her cellphone to tell time, leaving it a home and having this constantly disorienting experience of looking for it every few minutes. The student with punctuation wrote about typing an angry email to a friend, sending it, and regretting it minutes later. The student with the dictionary wrote about deciding to buy an unabridged dictionary at a flea market, against the recommendation of a companion, through which she realized what was important to her as a college-bound student.
Concept Map Template (given to all students)

- **object**
  - arises from an historical lineage that includes
  - that has evolved a visual language and associated behaviors such as
    - made possible by technology such as
      - with associated social practices, values and rules such as
  - is used in settings characterized by
  - that extend or distort its meaning by
  - that enhance or diminish its use by

- **social**
- **individual**

- Encourages enables, alters practices, technologies or perspective such as
The home washing machine revealed

Washing Machine
This concept map was developed from the template map.
Online Community
A narrative concept map defining the relationships among users of an online site for parents of autistic children.