

# The Eagle has Landed

**Daniel Wain maps the mind of Tony Buzan**

**I**magination and association: the intrinsic drivers of creativity. And the root of Mind Mapping. With whom do you associate Mind Maps? Almost certainly with their creator: Tony Buzan. Google his name and you're presented with close to 1.5 million results. 'Mind Map' gets you 550 million.

According to Buzan's own website, in 1994 this guru of the grey matter was "named alongside Mikhail Gorbachev and Henry Kissinger as one of the five greatest international lecturers". His schedule would shame the most stellar of operatic divas, both in its global reach and long-term planning. A Buzan performance is catnip for evangelical fans and curious virgins alike.

Decidedly the latter, I recently encountered a congregation of the former, and the man himself, at a Mind Mapping course in London. Only the third such UK event in a decade, it was naturally a sell-out, with eager Buzanites scanning the merchandise table, like trump card-carrying kids, for the one product missing from their collection.

I not only attend the course but gain a one-to-one audience. In neither arena does Tony Buzan disappoint, effortlessly passing the Ronseal test. Combining charisma with gravitas, there is substance and sincerity to support the spin.

I ask him how he created the 'Swiss Army knife of the brain' that made his name and fortune.



"I first developed Mind Maps while studying psychology in Canada, where my parents had emigrated in the 1950s. Assiduously reading through copious lecture notes, I realised I was picking out about 10 per cent of the information. Trying to learn everything for exams, I was wasting 90 per cent of my time and energy. It was an exciting journey from that light-bulb moment to developing a paper-and-pen representation of each subject, every key point branching out from a central idea, sub-divided and colour-coded to show logical associations, illustrated

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with images to 'fix' them in the memory," he told me.

And, lo, it came to pass that the Mind Map was born.

Back in London, Buzan refined his creation while teaching those written off as "the 3 Ds – disturbed, delinquent and disabled". Progressing to corporate training and editing the Mensa journal, Buzan continued to "investigate how to rescue my own brain, from memory loss, lack of creativity and fractured thinking". He describes the development of Mind Maps as a "30-year series of epiphanies based on scientific experiment and observation, with myself and friends as my laboratory."

His big break came in 1973 when, following publication of his first books, BBC Television commissioned *Use Your Head*. "Originally, BBC Education asked me for a half-hour

programme on new thinking about the brain,” recalls Buzan. “But when I Mind Mapped the possibilities, they asked for a ten-part series.

“It wasn’t me that convinced them, it was Mind Mapping.”

That initial tipping point established a cult following that’s grown until it’s now claimed that, every second of every day, someone somewhere in the world is creating a Mind Map. Though feasibly that could just be Tony and a loyal acolyte burning the midnight oil, it’s reliably estimated that 500 million people now regularly Mind Map.

Today, Buzan is more an industry than a cult. Author of a hundred books, published in 150 countries and 33 languages, he’s worked with governments as diverse as those of Australia, China, Bahrain and Mexico. His corporate clients include Oracle, IBM and Rank Xerox.

His primary focus now, apart from launching a dozen products each year, is training his trainers. Buzan World boasts more than 200 licensed instructors. “It takes three to six months to become accredited,” says Buzan. “Every instructor has to have applied Mind Maps, so they’re preaching what they practice.”

Cynics might argue that, no matter what the question, for Tony Buzan the answer’s always ‘Mind Mapping’, but he’s not just a one-trick pony. “My mission,” he says, “is to make the world mentally literate. Most people use only 1 per cent of their potential creativity, memory and ability to learn. What an opportunity!”

Hence his mantra that one should “make your brain your hobby” and develop a ‘brain operating manual’: as eclectic a combination of sports for mind and body as you can manage, from chess, crosswords and puzzles to music, dancing and the study of art. Buzan’s own interests now include the World

Memory Championships, the Brain Trust and the Festival of the Mind, the latter a showcase event for the five “Mind Sports of memory, speed reading, IQ, creativity and Mind Mapping”.

For Buzan, variety is obviously less the spice of life than the very essence. In his Mind Map workshop, he warns of the dangers of monotony. So how, I ask, does he himself avoid it when delivering the same course for 40 years? “People who get bored with their material aren’t really trainers,” he replies. “Real trainers don’t repeat by rote. They pause, reflect, review, develop. If you’re truly passionate about your subject, you never get bored. You’re continually finding new approaches, new angles, new audiences, new metaphors.”

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And Buzan certainly keeps abreast of scientific developments: “The latest neuro-scientific research has highlighted the mind’s ‘highway’, along which neurons send their signals and along which learning happens. The further along it information is processed, the deeper the learning that results.”

The process of creating Mind Maps may be simple, but the science behind it is complex. “They work because they’re expressed in the language of the brain,” he explains. “Brains don’t work in a straight-line, monochromatic, verbal way, but that’s usually how students are taught. The result is messy, difficult and time-wasting.”

So where is Buzan’s own highway heading? “The natural progression is undoubtedly the Internet,” he says. Cue iMind Map: the downloadable programme that’s enabling users

to create Mind Maps on screen and Buzan to branch out into a fertile new area of business. According to Buzan, he’s long wanted to create iMind Map “but we really only cracked it two years ago. It’s still being perfected, but has already proving hugely popular. When piloted in Japan last year, it immediately went to number one in the Amazon software and games chart”. Other areas of canny cross-selling now include foreign language learning and the marketing nirvana of ‘Mind Maps for Kids’.

Focusing on future generations, will Mind Maps become ever more essential? “The information age led to overload. Knowledge management hasn’t worked, and one can’t manage time, but only oneself in time. So we’re now entering the ‘intelligence age’,” Buzan believes.

I can’t resist asking if the current global economic crisis reveals the paucity of intelligence. Buzan is characteristically candid: “The financial bankruptcies were caused by bankruptcy of thought: linear systems, people trained in routines rather than to think, feedback only encouraged in silos rather than on the whole system, lots of meetings and interference, and no real thought. The common corporate cry has been ‘I had no idea’. That says it all.”

Buzan, however, is a born optimist: “During a time of crisis, many new opportunities arise. When all forms of capital are declining, there’s one that always increases if you invest in it: intelligence.” So while the bulls and bears stampede in panic and fear across the financial plains, those who think will grow. But can the corporate learning and development function help achieve that? According to Buzan: “L&D hasn’t come of age as yet. But to do so it has to get its house in order. So much corporate training is useless, the



very opposite of what it ought to be. Too frequently, we burden employees with classes and manuals at great expense, we bore them or position training merely as a break from work, without adding any real value or having any real impact. No wonder the CFO then cuts the budget. First, we must train people how to learn, how to remember, review and apply what they learn. Then we must prove the business benefits. If you took two identical organisations, waved a magic wand over one to increase the multiple intelligences of all its employees by just 10 per cent, then put those two companies into public competition, the one not touched by the wand would be eaten alive."

Buzan's magic wand has obviously touched many worldwide but I have to ask why, if his concepts are so immaculate, they aren't universally accepted. "My mentor, B F Skinner [the father of Radical Behaviourism], once said that any great idea takes a minimum of 25 years to be accepted, like grains of wheat slowly but inevitably accumulating on a chessboard." Mind Maps have faced resistance from the business world, he believes, "because they look

immature, even though they're quite the opposite. In the 1970s, I gave a lecture to British politicians and entrepreneurs. A senior MP and businessman said my material was interesting but he couldn't see what knowledge of the brain had to do with business. Now, many of those barriers have fallen".

That said, he sees the current UK education system as a self-defeating assault course: "It's chaotic, with teachers largely abused and unsupported, transformed from guides and facilitators into powerless robots and form-fillers."

Tony Buzan clearly comes down on the side of nurture over nature. "Most people's creativity declines rapidly once they leave kindergarten," he says, "whereas it ought to increase with age. Look at Verdi, creating his sublime Requiem at the age of 90+. Normal is not necessarily natural."

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**Tony Buzan helps a participant in his recent course to Mind Map**

He put his reputation on the line in another BBC programme. *In Search of Genius* saw him return to his roots, teaching six 'failing' children in a south London school. After just a few weeks, they increased their mental and intelligence skills demonstrably. "Humans are hard-wired to learn. We proved that no child is ever a lost cause."

The bulging Buzan casebook also includes his input to training manuals now distributed to every teacher in Vietnam, his development of thousands of Singaporean civil servants in thinking, creativity and learning skills, and the unveiling of a government-sponsored 'State Buzan Centre' in Mexico.

"Travelling across cultures, I see more similarities than differences," he says. "Every culture loves dancing, for example. It's only the type of dance that varies. We all speak the same language, that of imagination and association."

Seizing upon this serendipitous segue, I ask about his poetic interests. "As a teenager, I was educated to think poetry was for wimps, until I read 'The Eagle'."

Tennyson's famous phrase "nature, red in tooth and claw" seems, to me, particularly resonant of both Buzan and his great friend, the late Ted Hughes, Poet Laureate and creator of 'Crow'. "Poetry is condensed imagery and association," says Buzan. "If I'm writing a complex poem, I Mind Map first. It allows me to see the whole structure before drilling down into the precise expression of ideas." A playwright myself, I might well give it a go before I next type 'Act One'.

As for Buzan's own first scene, his childhood home was called 'Shangri-La'. I ask what his own version of that utopian valley would be. "Walking into any classroom, asking 'do you know about your brain, and how to continually apply it?' and getting the unanimous answer 'yes'." ■