

The Power of Self-reflection – Travelling the Hero’s Journey

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Abstract

A simple, self-reflective tool that has been used very effectively for well over a decade in a regional Australian pre-university preparatory program (STEPS) is the use of the metaphor of the Hero’s Journey (Vogler, 2007). STEPS teachers use this collaborative tool during term time to assist students in “normalising” their STEPS journey. In tandem with the enjoyment and satisfaction many will likely experience, students are reassured there may be degrees of apprehension and confusion as they occupy a “not so sure space” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 5). However, it is in this space that challenge can result in significant personal transformation.

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Introduction/Background

The 28-year-old Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program is a 12- or 48-week pre-university preparatory program that aims to provide its often more mature students (19+) with the confidence, knowledge, and skills required to undertake a university degree (CQUniversity, 2015). Offered both online and on campus by CQUniversity, a regional Australian university, STEPS attracts a large number of “first in family to attend university” students, predominantly from federal government designated equity groups. To contextualise the setting for STEPS, the latest statistics show that 36.10% of all CQUniversity students are from a low socioeconomic status (SES) background, representing the highest of all Australian universities. Furthermore, 66.3% of all CQUniversity students are from regional/remote areas (CQUniversity, 2015).

Many STEPS students relate stories of disadvantaged, interrupted, or incomplete schooling. Throughout the diagnostic testing procedure to gain entry to STEPS, many candidates display degrees of trepidation and tension as they seek to gain entry into an academic world quite alien to them. This juxtaposition between old and new worlds locates many in a conceptual “borderland,” a “space of ambiguity and reflection” (Alsup, 2006, p. 9), of “troublesomeness and stuck places” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 386). It is within this context that STEPS educators focus on ways to assist their often underprepared students in understanding not only the academic complexities and expectations of university study, but also the often institutionally ignored esoteric,

emotional and spiritual aspects that are likely to be manifested. One particular self-reflective, collaborative tool that has been utilised with success with students for well over a decade is the 12 stages of the Hero's Journey (Vogler, 1998; Vogler, 2007). This represents a valid theoretical framework for the personal transformation that many students come to experience during their time in STEPS.

Theoretical Framework: The Hero's Journey

Inspired by the patterns and writings of mythologist Joseph Campbell and depth psychologist Carl Jung, the renowned screenwriter Christopher Vogler (1998; 2007) has conceptualised a series of 12 journey stages that are reflective of age-old patterns in stories the world over. Underpinning the construct of the Hero's Journey is Vogler's belief that collectively, all stories are comprised of fundamental elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams and movies (Vogler, 2007, p. xxvii). Essentially, it goes something like this: The reluctant hero/heroine is suddenly forced out of his/her ordinary life on a quest fraught with challenges; and after a multitude of confrontations and frustrations, he/she becomes transformed and discovers that the power to find the answer he/she is seeking actually lies within. Vogler lauds the Hero's Journey as "nothing less than a handbook for life, a complete instruction manual in the art of being human" (2007, p. xiii).

Anecdotal findings over more than a decade in the STEPS program and findings from a doctoral thesis (Willans, 2010) are testimony to the efficacy of the Hero's Journey as a self-reflective tool in helping students make sense of the various personal and other challenges that they typically confront as they reconnect with formal learning. The 12 stages of the Hero's Journey, cautioned by Vogler (2007, p. xix) to be a "form, not a formula", and as just "one of many ways to get from here to there" (p.7), are as follows:

1. *The Ordinary World*
2. *Call to Adventure*
3. *Refusal of the Call*
4. *Meeting with the Mentor*
5. *Crossing the First Threshold*
6. *Tests, Allies and Enemies*
7. *Approach the Inmost Cave (Crossing a second threshold)*
8. *The Ordeal*
9. *Reward*
10. *The Road Back*
11. *Resurrection*
12. *Return with the Elixir.* (Vogler, 2007, p. 19).

Adding a further layer of complexity to the 12-stage Hero's Journey, Vogler draws from Swiss psychologist Carl Jung's work on archetypes. Archetypes, or patterns of personality, refer to the "constantly repeating characters or energies which occur in the dreams of all people and the mythos of all cultures" (Vogler, 2007, p.4). They are reflective of different aspects of the human mind. Given the complexities inherent in delving into mythological psychology with commencing STEPS students and the limitations of this paper presentation, the fundamental application of the 12 stages of the Hero's Journey as a self-reflective tool will remain the focus, rather than a discussion of the archetypes.

Vogler (2007) invites and acknowledges criticisms of his construct of the Hero's Journey. These include claims that it is formulaic and that the terminology runs the risk of becoming too standardised and open to superficial use. In addition, the danger of cultural imperialism silencing local flavors has been raised, as well as 'hero phobia' from cultures with an inherent historical distrust of heroic virtues. Also, the issue of gender has been raised, the Hero's Journey being critiqued as a masculine theory with the embodiment of a male-dominated warrior culture. Finally, Vogler's cultural assumption

about change being generally a good thing evoked a cynical response from some cultures whose view is that efforts to change the world are rather pointless. Nevertheless, the way in which the Hero's Journey is utilised, as in the STEPS program, responds to Vogler's provocation to twist the mythic pattern to suit one's own purpose.

STEPS as the Hero's Journey

Understanding personal growth is an important part of the STEPS philosophy. Because of its universality and timeless wisdom, mythic structure has been found to be an empowering tool for developing in adult learners the reality that change and difficulty can be a transformative force in their lives. In positioning the students as the hero/heroine of their own adventure, they are imbued with the notion that they each hold the key to unlocking their own potential. The journey of the adult learner shares a number of parallels with the hero/heroine in storytelling. It involves a call to leave the ordinary world, to experience degrees of self-doubt and fear, to experience challenge and reward and to discover inner strength. At the outset of STEPS, and throughout the duration of the program, the Hero's Journey stages are offered to the students as a means of making sense of personal challenge and change.

The power of the Hero's Journey as a self-reflective tool resonates in its ability to not only encourage STEPS students to "normalise" the expected and unexpected challenges likely to confront them during their time in STEPS, but to reassure them that from challenge and confusion can come significant personal transformation. As various long-held worldviews and assumptions become unsettled by new knowledge and awareness, many students experience disequilibrium in their academic and personal

lives. Compounding this can be emotional tension related to issues associated with the students' juggling their competing, multiple life roles. Many soon discover that the Hero's Journey stages mirror not only their own life experiences, but also those stages within the transformative STEPS program.

Transformative learning Theory

Organic is nature, transformative learning theory has evolved since its inception by Jack Mezirow in 1978 from a cognitive, rational interpretation to a multi-dimensional theory. Essentially it is the cognitive, rational, spiritual and affective process whereby an individual's previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values and perspectives are questioned, and through observable action "become more open, permeable and better justified" (Cranton, 2006, p. vi). Each individual views the world through their own individual lens, coloured by epistemic, sociolinguistic, psychological, moral-ethical, philosophical and aesthetic habits of mind (Cranton, 2006, p. 37). When a long held worldview or assumption is unsettled, either by a sudden event or in a more cumulative way, disequilibrium can ensue, causing an individual to question and critique the particular point of view or habit of mind (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). However, it is through self- reflection on this previously uncritically assimilated assumption or worldview, and discourse, dialogue and the support of/with others that the transformation of a specific assumption or belief is activated. Living out the revised point of view would suggest that transformative learning has occurred. Such a change can be "personally emancipating in that one is freed from previously held beliefs, attitudes, values and feelings that have constricted and distorted one's life" (Merriam and Cafarella, 1999, p. 320).

However, such transformation can be problematic, one that many may find personally challenging. Maintaining our long held worldviews and assumptions provides us with safety, and to question them is to question our “assimilated ways of knowing, believing, and feeling” (Cranton, 2006, p. 23). Such feelings of uncertainty and confusion about long held beliefs in light of new perspectives, can situate an individual in a conceptual and emotional borderland, a ‘liminal’ space in which attempts to make sense of new meaning can be problematic. It is a place of uncertainty and tension.

The Borderland — A Place of Uncertainty

Meyer and Land (2005, p. 5) describe the liminal space (the Latin *limen* meaning boundary or threshold) as a “not-so-sure” space, a place of meaning making in which personal transformation occurs through the altering of one’s state to another. This, the authors explain, occurs as a result of the acquisition of new knowledge and subsequent new personal status that can be problematic for the individual, who is not positioned “fully in one category or another” (p. 3). Resonating with this conception of a place of uncertainty and tension is the concept of the borderland, portrayed by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) as a place that multiple identities and contradictions inhabit, where “two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch” (p. 19). Similar to Anzaldúa, Janet Alsup (2006, p. 15) conceptualises the borderland as “living at the intersection of multiple worlds and multiple ways of knowing” wherein a more complex understanding of self and others can occur. For many students, the STEPS journey represents one such place of uncertainty.

Practical Application of the Hero’s Journey

During STEPS Orientation Week, held the week before the commencement of the 12-week term, students undertaking the compulsory STEPS course *Preparation Skills for University* are presented with the metaphor of the Hero's Journey. The purpose of this classroom activity is to provide the students with a framework depicting how the following 12 weeks is likely to play out for many of them. It is also intended to assure them that as well as the possible joy and exhilaration they are likely to experience, much of the personal tension, confusion, and contradictions they will confront are common to most normal life journeys. Students are encouraged to be active protagonists in shaping their own futures and honoring their life stories. To encourage this, regular self-reflection is stimulated through the small gift of an exercise book to each student, the purpose being to use this as a self-reflective journal to record their day-to-day experiences throughout the term, sharing with others being optional. It should be noted that the 12 stages of the Hero's Journey are not necessarily linear but often random, with some stages not necessarily experienced while others recur several times over. Nevertheless, what follows is a description of the stages presented to students at the commencement and conclusion of term and then interjected at strategic times throughout STEPS. Anecdotal evidence over thirteen years of teaching and researching the STEPS program and qualitative research (Willans, 2010) provides tangible evidence to demonstrate how the Hero's Journey helps students make sense of their personal learning journey in the STEPS program. The following is a description of how the Hero's Journey is used with STEPS students.

The STEPS Journey as a Hero's Journey

1. The ordinary world: *What was your ordinary world before commencing STEPS?*

Presented to the students in Week 1, they generally write about work and family

situations prior to STEPS. Many reveal feelings of discontent and frustration with the point in life they have reached. For others, the timing is deemed to be “just right.”

2. The call to adventure: *What or who called you to STEPS?* Presented in Week 2, some students write of an immediate “aha” moment, but for most students, it is a cumulative set of disorienting events that called them. Many relate stories of mundane jobs and uncertain futures, unfulfilled desires and aspirations, or boredom and restlessness. Some link their call to financial pressures while others perceive the completion of STEPS as a way to earn recognition and respect from loved ones. Some are simply ready for a new adventure.

3. Refusal of the Call: *Did you experience a refusal, a block, hesitation, doubt, fear?* Posed in Week 3 or 4, some form of refusal occurs during this period, as for many, the novelty of commencing STEPS has waned somewhat. Many students experience personal tension as they find themselves in the borderland between their previous lives and ways of knowing and their new lives as students. It is within this space that many confront challenges to their long held worldviews and assumptions about themselves, others and their world. This can be very unsettling because when their “taken-for-granted beliefs about the world, and [their] place in it” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 2) are contested, they are personally challenged. In this space of “ambiguity and reflection” (Alsup, 2006, p. 9), students commonly list problematic classroom dynamics, the pressure of looming assessments, and heavy study loads as valid reasons to contemplate withdrawing from STEPS. Others list the juggling of multiple life roles as problematic, and many students express fear and doubt about their capacity to complete what they have started. A large majority express the fear of failure.

4. The Mentor: *Has there been a person to guide you? Yourself maybe?* Posed in Week 4 or 5 but recurring the program, students commonly respond to this question by naming a teacher, a friend, a family member (even deceased members), a famous motivational person, an inspirational poster or book or believe themselves to be their own mentor. Discourse, dialogue and support of and with others can be paramount to transformative learning as the adult learner seeks to make meaning of new knowledge and ways of being. As Cranton (2006, p. 36) notes, “we need to engage in conversations with others in order to better consider alternative perspectives and determine their validity.”

5. Crossing the first threshold: *What has been your first main challenge or problem?* This question is posed in Weeks 5 or 6. A common response that highlights the borderland tensions associated with the students’ negotiation of ‘being a student’ versus ‘life before STEPS’ relates to the emergence of the imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978; Yates & Chandler 1998), the feeling of personal inadequacy or fraudulence. Students commonly question themselves: Am I too old? Too dumb? Should I be here? Do I belong? Other challenges at this time relate to the submission and return of their first piece of formative assessment and dealing with sometimes poor results or well-meant constructive feedback from their lecturers. Personal problems related to family relationships are also raised as are challenges associated with paid work commitments and financial pressures. Dealing with cultural, social and philosophical diversity in the classroom are other issues noted by some students as a challenge at this point of the journey.

6. Tests, allies and enemies: *What have been your tests, allies and enemies so far in STEPS?* This is posed in Weeks 6 or 7 but appears and reappears in different forms

many times throughout the 12 weeks. Tests most commonly cited by students come in the form of family sicknesses (particularly children) and associated guilt, changes in dynamics at home, ill health and the strain on finances. With regards to allies, students most commonly list other classmates, friends, specific family members, their own organisational skills and teachers. Enemies are most commonly listed as fear of failure, self-doubt, time restraints and management issues, the juggling of multiple life roles, family issues, and troublesome knowledge.

7. Approach to the inmost cave: *Is anything particularly challenging for you at the moment?* Presented in Weeks 7 or 8, for some students, lack of motivation and confidence becomes manifest in lack of attendance in class, late submission of assignments, ill health leading to falling behind and feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to continue in STEPS. Self-doubt and mental health issues besiege some and they withdraw from the program at this point.

8. Ordeal: *What is your greatest test at the moment or your greatest test so far?* This question is posed in Weeks 9 or 10 and of course not every student has an ordeal, but having to deliver an oral presentation to the rest of the class is frequently reported by most students as a real ordeal for them. Other ordeals are related to ongoing family issues such as ill health and changed relationship dynamics, and even relationship breakdowns. Quite frequently, students speak of cognitive challenges such as the comprehension of mathematical concepts or the comprehension of abstract knowledge. Some also experience feelings of self-sabotage and anxiety, a low point in the program for them.

9. Reward: *What have been some of your moments of triumph?* This question is posed in Week 11 where most students relate feelings of the pride and increased

confidence they have experienced upon receiving positive affirmation from their lecturers. This may be related to classroom participation but generally to formative assessment results and performance; others speak of the replacement of failure and fear with self-satisfaction and reassurance.

10. The road back: *Have you or others noticed anything different about yourself/you and your learning?* Posed in Week 11 or 12, students generally indicate that they feel a little wiser; they tend to be reflective of the ups and downs they have experienced during STEPS. They now look to the future and contemplate the undergraduate degree program they hope to articulate into, and as well as excitement, some demonstrate the same trepidation they displayed at the commencement of STEPS as they look back and look forward.

11. Resurrection: *Do you now feel any different as a result of almost completing STEPS?* Posed in Week 12, this question reveals that many students express sentiments of relief and revitalisation. Many quite thoughtfully reflect on their personal achievements and express great satisfaction. A sense of tranquillity pervades and most are quick to volunteer to help at Orientation for the next STEPS intake!

12. Return with the elixir: *What have you learned about yourself and your ability to overcome future obstacles?* The final stage is presented in Week 12 when many students demonstrate a sense of empowerment and altruism as they want others to experience what they have. Students generally talk of their increased resilience and perseverance and there are usually expressions of confidence and determination to continue to undergraduate studies. New friendships are bonded and a camaraderie is experienced as many students relate to having survived the journey together. There is commonality and oneness.

Conclusion

The Hero's Journey can be used to enhance student engagement by creating awareness of the possible challenges that will likely be confronted in undertaking formal learning and indeed, any new adventure. Although the distinction of Vogler's (2007) 12-stage framework is evident in its successful application in the movie writing genre, the power of the Hero's Journey as a reflective tool in the formal classroom resonates in its ability to "normalise" the expected and unexpected. When the vast range of emotion is viewed as part of what it is to be human, there is a greater propensity for students to use self-reflection to "build new bridges" and "find connections" between their old and new ways of knowing (Alsup, 2006, p. 71). This deconstruction of past negative learning experiences for many STEPS students and the adoption of revised perspectives reveals true personal transformation.

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