

Keeping things in perspective – The Hero's Journey as a template for learning

Julie Willans, CQUniversity Australia

Rockhampton North Campus,

North Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia

j.willans@cqu.edu.au

Karen Seary, CQUniversity Australia

Bundaberg Campus,

Bundaberg, Queensland, Australia

k.seary@cqu.edu.au

Abstract

By virtue of our increasingly multi-cultural teaching contexts and rapidly changing world, there are many and rich pedagogical strategies that educators can use to accommodate diverse ways of knowing that have the potential to enhance equity and accessibility for students. However one simple technique, as old as humanity itself, is the use of narrative, a “basic structure through which we make meaning of our lives” (Clarke & Rossiter, 2006, p. 1). For over 15 years now, the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) tertiary enabling program at CQUniversity Australia has utilised Vogler’s (1998; 2007) Hero’s Journey metaphor as a framework for students to journal their learning journey while in the program. Such a useful tool has been found to serve many functions for students. This paper reports on anecdotal findings of a small-scale project based on documented evidence across several years to outline the main functions The Hero’s Journey has been found to fulfil. These include: acting as an outlet valve; a ‘normalising’ tool; and a focusing and motivational tool. We purport that when students are encouraged to self-reflect on their lived experiences, they can gain a “heightened insight into their own learning and development” (Clarke & Rossiter, 2006, p. 3). By empowering students to use reflective journaling to respond to the various challenges and rewards they encounter throughout their STEPS journey, they become foregrounded as protagonists in their own learning journey. When they have opportunities to understand that changing emotions associated with this trajectory is normal human behaviour, they can experience significant transformation in not only in how they engage with curricular content, but how they perceive themselves as learners.

Introduction

This paper begins by setting the scene, namely within the context of the STEPS program at CQUniversity Australia. It then outlines a reflective journaling strategy used in the STEPS program, notably *The Hero's Journey* framework, to guide and inspire written reflection. A definition of transformative learning theory is provided as personal change is a well-recognised outcome of students' participation in STEPS. Following this is a discussion of the practice of journaling in general, with mention made of some of the associated benefits and limitations. A brief description of how reflective journaling is guided in STEPS via *The Hero's Journey* is provided. The methodology for this small-scale study is outlined and the main findings presented as evidence that attests to the value and power of reflective journaling.

Setting the scene

The 30 year old STEPS program at CQUniversity Australia is an enabling program that provides a tailored pathway for those students 18 years and older seeking entry into university. Spanning some 11 campuses across four Australian states, this tuition-free program has provided in excess of 15000 students access to further education at the tertiary level. Acceptance to the program is via online diagnostic entry assessment, supported by an individual interview. One core and 11 elective courses comprise the program which can be undertaken on campus or by distance mode over a term of 12 weeks or a period of up to two years. STEPS courses encompass the areas of academic writing, computing, independent learning, mathematics, sciences and information literacy skills. Contingent on assessment results and the completion of specific program requirements, students articulate by direct entry to CQUniversity degree programs.

STEPS attracts the majority of its students from the federal government recognised equity groups: people from non-English speaking backgrounds; those with a disability; women studying in non-traditional areas; those who identify as indigenous; those from low socioeconomic status locations; and those from regional and remote locations (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2013). Thus, STEPS is comprised of what could best be described as a rich melting pot of socio-cultural, economic, religious and other backgrounds. Typically, students juggle the competing demands of multiple life roles

and associated pressures, and for many, a long period of time has lapsed since formal education. This means that returning to the formal classroom can be very unsettling and fraught with tension. The provision of guided opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and participation in STEPS is therefore vital in ensuring a positive learning experience. One strategy that has been found to be very effective in this pursuit is reflective journaling using a metaphoric framework known as *The Hero's Journey*.

The Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey is eloquently described by its creator, Christopher Vogler (2007, p. xiii), as “a set of principles that govern the conduct of life and the world of storytelling”. For Vogler, “life principles are embedded in the structure of stories” (2007, p. xv) and his guiding principle is that “all stories consist of a few common structural elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams and movies (2007, p. xxvii). Through the practice of reflective journaling, STEPS students are encouraged to use the 12 stage template of *The Hero's Journey* as a way to understand that learning can take us to places we did not know existed, and that measures of disequilibrium and uncertainty generally accompany this process; however experiencing, accepting and overcoming such challenges can bring significant personal, and in turn, wider social rewards.

Vogler's (2007) 12 stages, by no means linear in pattern or occurrence, accompanied by our adaptations for STEPS, are as follows: 1. Ordinary world (Life before STEPS); 2. Call to adventure (Why am I doing STEPS?); 3. Refusal of the call (Have I had misgivings or thoughts of withdrawing from STEPS?); 4. Meeting with the mentor (Who or what is inspiring me?); 5. Crossing the first threshold (What obstacle have I now overcome?); 6. Tests, allies, enemies (What or who is hindering or helping me?); 7. Approach to the inmost cave (What am I feeling vulnerable/worried about? Why?); 8. The ordeal (How am I facing my greatest challenge?); 9. Reward (How am I feeling after facing the ordeal?); 10. The road back (Am I now a stronger, more informed person in my ordinary world?); 11. The resurrection (What are my feelings about being 'reborn' with newfound knowledge?); and 12. Return with the elixir (What knowledge and strength do I now have to deal with future obstacles?). When students are encouraged to reflect on such questions of themselves and search for answers within, critical self-reflection can enable a deeper understanding of their personal transformation.

Transformative learning theory

Transformative learning theory, first conceptualised by Jack Mezirow more than four decades ago, was premised on perspective transformation, “a structural reorganization in the way that a person looks at himself and his relationships” (Mezirow, 1975, p. 162, cited by Cranton, 2016, p. 16). Since then, various conceptualisations of transformative learning theory have evolved (see Taylor, 2007). Essentially, we each view the world through our own unique lenses, layered as they are by social, cultural, psychosocial, physiological, spiritual, emotional and other influences. These lenses act as our default position and influence our way of being in the world, and until challenged, guide us day to day in the decisions we make, the opinions we express and the lives we live.

Transformative learning theory fundamentally holds that something occurs that disorients us, maybe a sudden event or trigger, cumulative events or even a feeling of disequilibrium, causing one to call into question a long held personal assumption, perspective or “expectation” (Cranton, 2016, p. 15). We then critique it as to why we have always held such a perspective and come to consider that there may be alternative viewpoints. This multi-layered process may not always be easy to isolate to a specific moment, but for some individuals, this may certainly be the case. Discussion and dialogue with others can facilitate meaning making, and when a revised or new perspective is acted upon, fundamentally, transformative learning can be said to have occurred (Cranton, 2016). This complex process involves the heart, the head and the soul and is contingent on individual differences and a myriad of socio-cultural characteristics. An excellent opportunity for students to process personal transformation and open up new ‘windows’ into their thinking about themselves as learners is through the use of reflective journaling.

Reflective journaling

Journals are “Of myself, for myself” Henry David Thoreau (English, 2001, p. 31)

Fundamentally, reflective journal writing is a tool that has been used variously in adult education for many years. There are numerous types and formats of journaling and the purposes for which they are used are just as varied. According to Hiemstra (2001, p. 20), they “are effective in helping students record information important to their efforts”. Reflective journaling can be a very useful and powerful tool in helping students make sense

of new knowledge and meaning. As Boud (2001, p. 9) notes, journaling is a “device for working with events and experiences in order to extract meaning from them”, to make sense of the world and how we operate within it and enhance it. One takes experiences and engages with them in ways to make sense of meaning (Boud, 2001, p. 10), allowing for the opportunity to “mull over ideas” (Hubbs & Brand, 2005, p. 62). The unconscious can connect with the conscious to integrate “mind and soul” (Hoggan, Simpson & Stuckey, 2009, p. 16) and this creative expression means one can draw on “the affective, somatic, and spiritual domains” (Hoggan, Simpson & Stuckey, 2009, p. 16). Such dimensionality of learning is integral to transformative learning, providing opportunities for students to reflect on “automatic thinking and habits of mind” (Hubbs & Brand, 2005, p. 63) and through critique and critical self-reflection, consider and act upon new possibilities or explanations.

Benefits of journaling

There are many documented benefits of reflective journaling. O’Connell and Dymont (2011, p. 674) applaud it as stimulating “unencumbered and free-flowing” writing, as well as assisting the development of writing skills. Hammond believes it provides an open opportunity for students to express themselves “graphically, poetically, metaphorically and informally (2002, p. 34), while O’Connell and Dymont (2006) contend that it improves listening behaviour and encourages reflections and the sharing of experiences. They add that journaling can be a positive experience because it is student centred, enables students to be responsible for and actively engaged in the reflective process, and provides the impetus for students to “shape knowledge as they see fit” (p. 675).

Multidimensional benefits of journaling are recognised by others. Shapiro (2009, p. 104) believes it enables learners to make use of other ways of knowing, to make “space for the expression of feelings as well as thoughts in the learning process... access to the deeper, subconscious parts of ourselves” (2009, p. 104). When the head, heart and soul are engaged ‘we open more pathways to transformation’ says Shapiro (p. 104). Reflective journaling can be particularly useful in helping adult learners move towards higher levels of critical and analytical thinking (Hubbs & Brand, 2006, p. 63), and it also provides opportunities for reevaluation, “finding shape, pattern, and meaning in what has been produced” (Boud, 2001, p. 15). It is as Jarvis (2001, p. 79) suggests, a way to help mature age learners “break habitual modes of thinking and change life direction”. In a constructivist way, what has been

recorded can be revisited, new ideas can be added and “extensions to partially formed ideas and thoughts” made. Boud goes so far as to say that journaling can be “a form of therapy” (2001, p. 9).

Limitations of journaling

Of course there are limitations and cautions associated with reflective journaling. For one, it can be seen as “a manifestation of disciplinary power” (Cranton, 2016, p. 114), thus requiring caution about decisions by educators regarding the use and purpose of journaling and an awareness of its possible overuse. Associated with this are the subjective tensions and ethical issues related to formal evaluation of reflective journals. Students may be fearful of who will read their journal (English, 2001), and if the journal is to be graded, this can result in them “portraying themselves in the best possible light ... quite the opposite of that required for reflection” (Boud, 2001, p. 16). Thus the need for sensitivity is essential (Jarvis, 2001).

A further limitation could be a student’s dislike of journal writing and its lack of clear structure and purpose, while for others, the lack of the “sounding board effect” (Hubbs & Brand, 2006, p. 67) and the solitary nature of journaling may prove challenging. Without feedback from others and little challenge to accepted beliefs or ideas, critical self-reflection may be limited and unproductive (Boud, 2000; Hubbs & Brand, 2006), “mir[ing] the writer in those endless loops of self-modulated introspection” (Hubbs & Brand, 2006, p. 67).

Reflective journaling in STEPS

It is vitally important to dispel any negative issues that STEPS students may harbour about journaling by clearly explaining its purpose and reassuring them that it is a private conversation with them and their journal. As English and Gillen (2003, p. 87) point out, it is a real challenge for educators of adults to encourage the writing process as a “positive learning and language practice”. In STEPS, *The Hero’s Journey* provides a meaningful framework within which students can be encouraged to reflect on their learning journey. Considering the powerful effect of the conditions under which journal writing takes place (Boud, 2001, p. 17), from the outset of STEPS, students are told that their reflective journals will not be assessed nor viewed by anyone but themselves. Rather, they are to be used as a place to reflect on themselves as learners, write about their experiences as a newly arrived

student, and record any “pent-up emotions, counter anger or frustration” (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 24) that can be associated with the busy lives many live. Of course, students are encouraged to write and reflect about personal achievements, rewards and all manner of life events.

It has been found in STEPS that at times, students may share some of their journal entries with staff and peers, but in showing respect for students, this is always unsolicited. The continued use of *The Hero's Journey* as a framework for journaling has been fuelled largely by the feedback from students. This paper focuses specifically on student feedback about the use of *The Hero's Journey* framework to guide their private reflective journaling which was not subject to any form of institutional assessment or teacher surveillance.

Methodology

Thematic analysis within a qualitative framework was employed in this small-scale study to gain an understanding of how useful the students found reflective journaling by using the template of *The Hero's Journey*. In terms of the data method, unsolicited written feedback from approximately 60 on-campus students who were invited to comment on the usefulness of *The Hero's Journey* framework in assisting their journaling over the 12 week course term, was utilised. The data gathering spanned a five year period and the feedback was completed voluntarily and anonymously by the students at the conclusion of each 12 week *Preparation Skills for University* course in the STEPS program. Given the longitudinal and informal nature of the anecdotal research, institutional ethics approval was not sought for this project, thus not allowing for inclusion of the student's words as evidence of our claims in this paper.

Thematic analysts primarily focus on ““what” is said, rather than “how” or to “whom” and for “what purpose”” (Riessman, 2008, p. 59), so the thematic analysis process basically followed the five stages as purported by Richie and Spencer (1994), entailing familiarisation with the raw data and listing obvious themes; identifying key issues and themes and labelling them into chunks; indexing or making annotations within the data; charting or abstraction and synthesis of the data; and mapping and interpretation to identify associations between themes within those abstractions. As a result of this process, the

following three themes emerged to attest to the value of reflective journaling to *The Hero's Journey*: 1. an outlet valve; 2. a 'normalising' tool; and 3. a motivational tool.

1. An outlet valve

Reflective journaling using *The Hero's Journey* framework was identified by many students as a release for their stress. Many typically applauded the value of reflective journaling as a private place to let out their current and ongoing challenges and emotions. Associated with the venting of emotions was the vanquishing of self-doubt and the reduction of associated stress. Reflective journaling quite simply allowed the students to be centred in their own experiences and it was how those experiences were interpreted by them that was paramount (Mills, 2008) to the purpose.

Reflective journaling also acted as a coping tool whereby challenges could be recorded, examined, mulled over, critiqued and assessed. These phases of transformative learning can facilitate self-regulation and lead to new perspectives and possibilities, providing a sequential pattern that can help students understand the ups and downs in life and awareness that these mirror many life patterns. Use of *The Hero's Journey* also provided emotional resilience for students, whereby according to Nelson (2009, p. 211), a greater appreciation of human strength can be experienced because the pitfalls and adversities in life can be put into perspective.

It became clear that in being able to use their journal as an outlet valve, many students were able to gain a greater understanding of their potential and their ability to learn from failure, thus encouraging personal growth, development and maturation (Hiemstra, 2001). They discovered that often the tests in life "bring out hidden characteristics" (Nelson, 2009, p. 213). Introspection boosted their self-confidence and it appeared evident that journaling using *The Hero's Journey* framework provided a means to cognitively and emotionally process changed perceptions about their individual ability and come to visualise new future possibilities.

2. A 'normalising' tool

A prevalent theme to emerge from the data was the 'normalising' function that reflective journaling to *The Hero's Journey* framework provided for students. The framework clearly

articulates to students that adversity of some type “abounds in life” (Nelson, 2009, p. 213), and that in being made aware of such tests, “one comes to a greater acceptance of life’s traumas and gives ... a map of how to face them and hope that one will emerge, survive, and thrive through tests”. It was found that in general, students took great comfort in knowing that the sometimes erratic, emotional trajectory their learning journey took in STEPS was very similar to that experienced by most other students. This knowledge of ‘normality’ appeared powerful in deflecting the catastrophizing and self-sabotage behaviour that many STEPS students can typically revert to when personal, institutional and other challenges arise.

In using the generic pattern of stories, myths and legends as purported by *The Hero’s Journey*, a sense of self was built, cultural affiliations were established and a sense of personal power was constructed (Cranton, 2016). Many students noted that journaling helped make their time in STEPS more enjoyable because they gained a greater understanding of their potential and could see failures as a normal part of life, as something they could learn from. Many could appreciate the transitory nature of adversity, particularly when reflection on such instances allowed for deconstruction and appropriate action. Others noted that the sequential pattern of *The Hero’s Journey* was actually helpful to them in the sense that it generally mirrored life patterns and made things feel ‘normal’.

3. A motivational tool

Reflective journaling to *The Hero’s Journey* template enabled many students to pay attention to their goals and reaffirm their motivations for enrolling in STEPS. Such reflective practice inspired them to keep on track, to re-focus after challenging incidents, and to develop resiliency to survive the difficult times. It was found that reflective journaling encouraged the practice of keeping things in perspective and was instrumental in helping students visualise and prepare for their future undergraduate studies. Having a place to privately record emotions and reactions that were not scrutinised or subject to “the inhibiting gaze of others” (Boud, 2001, p. 15) was motivational for students in helping them reflect on past experience and envisage their future in undergraduate studies. Furthermore, they were empowered to identify ways to overcome personal obstacles, reach beyond their comfort zones and recognise ways in which perceptions about themselves and others had changed.

Guided journaling allowed for opportunities for students to “illuminate automatic thinking and habits of mind” (Hubbs & Brand, 2006, p. 63) and scrutinise their personal thinking patterns and beliefs to encourage more assimilative learning that supports transformative learning. Reflecting via *The Hero’s Journey* framework was found to replicate Nelson’s (2009, p. 214) findings that journaling helps impart emotional resiliency, such as a sense of inner strength. This was typical of many students who were motivated to problem solve in order to cope with adversity and who came to recognise and appreciate their own personal strengths.

Conclusion

Despite some documented disadvantages related to the use of reflective journaling in formal learning contexts, the findings in this small-scale study demonstrate that many benefits of its use have been experienced by students in the STEPS program at CQUniversity Australia. Having a place to privately write and express their feelings about their learning trajectory as they were experiencing it has been found to be of great benefit to many students. Using the 12 stages of *The Hero’s Journey* has proven over and over again to be very useful for students in providing an outlet valve, an opportunity to normalise their STEPS experience and a focusing and motivational tool, all of which assist them in making sense of new knowledge about themselves and their world and the potential this can unleash.

Through the use of journaling using *The Hero’s Journey* framework, STEPS students are afforded a chance to come to know themselves more deeply on many levels. They find an avenue to believe in their ability and realise that through perseverance in the face of adversity, they can become independent, self-directed and successful learners at the tertiary level. By employing the concept of *The Hero’s Journey*, the transition to the unfamiliar world of academia is normalised as yet another journey, one, which endured, will result in positive outcomes.

References

Australian Government Department of Education and Training. (2013). *2013 Appendix 2 – Equity groups*. Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/35979>

- Boud, D. (2001). Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90, 9–18.
- Clarke, M. and Rossiter, M. (2006). “Now the pieces are in place...”. Learning through personal storytelling in the adult classroom. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 20, 19-33.
- Cranton, P. (2016). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning – A guide for educators of adults* (3rd ed). Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- English, L. (2001). Ethical concerns relating to journal writing. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90, 27–36.
- English, L. and Gillen, M. (2001). Journal writing in practice: From vision to reality. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90, 87–94.
- Hammond, W. (2002). The creative journal: a power tool for learning, *Green Teacher*, 69, 34-38.
- Hiemstra, R. (2001). Uses and benefits of journal writing. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90, 19–26.
- Jarvis, P. (2001). Journal writing in higher education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90, 79–86.
- Hoggan, C., Simpson, S. & Stuckey, H. (eds) (2009). *Creative expression in transformative learning – Tools and techniques for educators of adults*. Florida: Krieger Publishing Company.
- Hubbs, D. & Brand, C. (2005). The paper mirror: understanding reflective journaling. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 28 (1), 60-71.
- Mills, R. (2008). “It’s just a nuisance”: Improving college students’ reflective journal writing. *College Student Journal*, 42(2), 684-690.
- Nelson, A. (2009). Storytelling and transformational learning. In Eds B. Fisher-Yoshida, K. Geller & S. Schapiro, *Innovations in Transformative Learning: Space, Culture, & the Arts*, (pp. 207-222). NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

O'Connell, T. & Dymont, J. (2006). Reflections on using journals in higher education: a focus group discussion with faculty, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(6), 671-691.

Richie, J. & Spencer, L. (2002). Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Policy Research. In A. Bryman & R. Burgess (Eds), *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (pp. 173-194). London: Taylor and Francis Group.

Riessman, C. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. CA: Sage.

Shapiro, S. (2009). A crucible for transformation. In Eds B. Fisher-Yoshida, K. Geller & S. Schapiro, *Innovations in Transformative Learning: Space, Culture, & the Arts* (pp. 87-111). NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Taylor, E. (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: a critical review of the empirical research (1999–2005), *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26(2), 173-191.

Vogler, C. (2007). *The writer's journey: mythic structures for writers* 3rd ed. CA: Michael Wiese Productions.