

# **TELLING OUR STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION: BRIDGING THE OLD TO THE NEW ADULT LEARNING AS A HERO'S JOURNEY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper focuses on the use of mythic structure as a model to illustrate transformational learning in the Skills for Tertiary Entrance Preparatory Studies (STEPS) bridging program at Central Queensland University. Joseph Campbell's (1993) stages of the timeless Hero's Journey have been adapted and used as a tool for reflection in the Language and Learning program of STEPS. I show how an understanding of both the 12 stages of the Quest and the six main archetypes present in modern Western society helps to bring about an appreciation of the transformational learning process in adult students, and assists them in the development of self knowledge and self awareness.

## **INTRODUCTION**

It was a cold, rainy Friday afternoon in week five of second semester of the STEPS bridging program at Central Queensland University. A class of 25 mature aged learners had gathered for an Author's Chair session as part of their Language and Learning program. This would be their first attempt to share personal and creative writing. The preceding weeks had not been easy for some of them and the class was beginning to fracture as personalities clashed. One or two of the group members had already asked to be shifted to another group that they saw as more conducive to learning. An Author's Chair session could be a gamble.

Ben was the first who wanted to share his story. The atmosphere was electric. Ben had been causing much of the dissatisfaction in the group with his aggressive manner and need to out-talk, but he had stayed up until 3am the previous night to finish writing and was determined to read his story. As he poured out his pain and his anger at the recent death of his still-born first son, his words faltered and at times he appeared as if the pain would not let him continue. When he had finished, the silence in the room was profound. Some of the men: hardened farmers, bricklayers, mechanics, an ex-drug dealer - were quietly weeping; women openly sobbed. The woman who had been the most keen for a new class leaned over to Ben, placed her hand on his knee and dedicated her poem to him. It was a reflection on the birth of her firstborn child.

The Author's Chair session continued for an hour, often in very light vein, but everyone in that room knew that the class would never be the same again. The sharing of their stories had been the first step towards bringing wholeness to the group.

American educationalist Parker J. Palmer (1993) writes about the need to educate in ways that might heal rather than wound us and our world. To be fully effective, adult learning must be transformative. A vital element of transformative learning is emancipatory learning, which frees learners from influences that bind and restrict them, and Cranton (1994) sees its fostering as the central goal of adult learning. Emancipatory learning can thus be a means by which adult learners can begin to find what Thomas Merton calls 'the hidden wholeness on which all life depends' (Palmer 1993, p. xix).

Often, adult learners who enter the STEPS program have been forced into study by a rapidly changing world and so are ripe for transformation. Much of that change has not been welcome. Although some certainly come with the intention of embracing a new way of life, others are at first unwilling, unconvinced, and frequently very frightened by the prospect of being in an environment that seems to them remote and beyond their intellectual capabilities. They have been sent by work place advisers and case managers, and many doubt their abilities. For some, the education system they have experienced in earlier times has not been kind to them and has left them with the sometimes misguided belief that they were failed learners. In thirteen weeks, the STEPS program sets out to transform this belief, both in themselves as learners and in learning itself. This is attempted through strategies that will develop whole learners, freed from limiting forces that have previously controlled them, learners who have both the skills and the confidence to succeed at University.

## **THE EMERGING WORLDVIEW**

In the first week of the Language and Learning program, recent learning theories are discussed. Students are introduced to the new paradigm of learning that reflects the discoveries both of modern science and personal transformation. The old values of domination, competition and independence have reflected the rational- analytic- reductionist- modes of thinking. However, the new sciences' advances in quantum physics, complexity theory and holistic biology, and the feminist insights that are emerging as women share their worldviews have created a shift in values from separateness to integration, and in thinking from the rational to the intuitive (Capra & Steindl- Rast 1991). Riane Eisler's 'partnership' model is indicative of the new paradigm of values. This model extols the feminine attributes of co-operation, nurturing and 'illuminating life', seeing love as 'the highest expression of evolution of life on this planet as well as the universal unifying power' (Eisler 1996, p. 405). Frijof Capra and David Steindl- Rast (1991) believe that the new paradigm is not 'new' but is really 'a recovery of our most ancient intuition'(p. 79). According to American psychologist, philosopher and teacher Jean Houston (1996), the human psyche is transforming by moving into different states of being. She declares in her book *A Mythic Life* (1996), 'We live in chaos that we may have created in order to hasten our own meeting with ourselves' (p. 6) and shows how, from these changes, is emerging world- wide, a new appreciation of myth.

Consciousness raising is an important part of transformative learning. According to Chaplin (1985; cited in Cranton 1994, p. 174), consciousness raising is 'the process of developing self-knowledge and self- awareness.' Hart (1990; cited in Cranton 1994, p. 173) describes conditions of consciousness raising as including: 'acceptance of the importance of personal experience, homogeneity of the learning group with respect to social differences, and a structure of equality among all participants of the group, including the teacher.'

Telling their stories and gaining a deeper understanding of the power of myth to help them make meaning of their lives has proved for many STEPS students to be an effective method of consciousness raising. The use of stories to instruct is timeless. Ted Hughes (1989) believes that myths can be used in education to transform us by helping us to understand our psyches, and Campbell (1993) has shown that, when we set out to make sense of our lives and thus ourselves, our lives can become a lifelong quest. Because the Hero's Journey model helps students to see that change and difficulty can be a positive force in their lives, mythic learning is celebrated in the program alongside the development of the more traditional logical/rational thinking and writing skills.

## THE TRUTH BEHIND MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Myths and legends throughout history have expressed truths about what it is to be human. Since the 1970s, the study of the mythic dimensions of our lives has been advanced through archetypal psychology (Hillman 1975). Archetypes, according to Carl Jung, are repeating patterns or characters in our dreams and in the myths and legends of all cultures, which reflect different aspects of the human mind. Hillman calls them 'the deepest patterns of psychic functioning' (Pearson 1998, p. 17). Pearson also shows that these archetypes are the structures that are prominent in social systems. Joseph Campbell made a study of world hero myths and in 1949 published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (republished 1993). He found that the theme of each story was universal as they were all basically the same story told across cultures and time. Like Jung, Campbell suggested their source is the collective unconscious of the human race and, because of their universality, these stories can be keys to understanding the complexities of human existence.

Campbell shows how the Hero's Journey passes through many stages. These represent, although not always in that exact order, events in our lives that bring change. The Hero's Journey is a metaphor for life itself; it is both the outer journey and the inner journey. This journey can be difficult when crises force hard decisions. However, after the difficulties of life have been faced and overcome, the sword is finally seized. This sword can be knowledge, improved circumstances or maturity and greater self-awareness (Flowers 1988). Writer Christopher Vogler in his book *The Writer's Journey* (1996) has adapted Campbell's steps of the Hero's Journey into the twelve stages used in the STEPS program. These are Vogler's stages of Campbell's Hero's Journey:

- the ordinary world
- the call to adventure
- refusal of the call
- meeting with the mentor
- crossing the first threshold
- tests, allies and enemies
- approach to the innermost cave (the second threshold)
- the supreme ordeal
- reward (seizing the sword)
- the road back
- resurrection
- return with elixir (freedom to live)

Towards the end of the course, as part of the reflection on their learning journeys during the program, STEPS students are asked to discuss or journal on each of the twelve stages. Students often express surprise that their shared experiences follow a pattern. For most of them this is a revelation. It is very freeing for them to see purpose in the difficulties their participation in the program has brought.

# **STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS USING THE HERO'S JOURNEY STAGES**

## **The ordinary world**

- For six long years I had remained in my comfort zone. My house, my daughter, my solitude. This was my ordinary world. There was no alteration to the daily events. There was just living and surviving. I had created this area to keep myself away from the outside world. To venture out meant realising and facing my fears.
- Drinking - partying with my friends - fun - my children. I have all I need so why do anything else? All things will resolve themselves eventually, so why worry? I did not need to bring additional discomfort into my life, so like the rest of the world, I shut them out, ignored them or did anything that helped me avoid facing reality.

## **The call to adventure**

- Life seems to be travelling along without incident. You are relatively happy with the ways things are going- that is until one day you find out that the department where you work is about to be disbanded. The challenges thus far in your life appear to be insignificant compared to what you are about to face.
- My life was going nowhere which is what I thought I wanted at the time. Maybe it was the separation from my defacto or maybe it was having my children taken from me and not being there to see them - at any rate, realisation dropped on me like a rock. The world wasn't always going to be a safe comfortable place. There were dragons hiding in the shadows of my reality that I would have to face in order to grow and progress.

## **Refusal of the call**

- At the time the answer lay in the safe option of working for another department as opposed to studying. Why not study you ask? Because you fear the unknown.
- My past education was only very basic and my ability to be without a regular income made me really evaluate this decision.
- I had to wait a week before I knew if I'd been accepted and that week was the longest I've ever had to face. The amount of hope, fear, reluctance and excitement I felt during that week was overwhelming. I remember hoping in a way that I wouldn't be accepted in uni. Then I could remain in my comfort zone.

## **Meeting with the mentor**

- The teachers right from the very first day were so friendly. In this course they're like family. It's unreal! There's nothing I can't ask them. They are always there for us. I also like the fact that we're encouraged to be peer teachers. We're all here for each other.

## **Crossing the first threshold**

- In July of 1998, I crossed the first threshold. I left home, took my daughter to school and drove to university. I sat in my car for what seemed like hours but in reality was only a few minutes. I had to gather my thoughts and control my fears before going to our first meeting. We gathered in the courtyard. As I looked around, everybody appeared calm, laughing and standing with friends. I stood alone, not game to talk to anyone. I felt so out of place- an imposter- asking myself - can I really do this?

## **Tests, allies and enemies**

- Being out of the real world for so long brings with it a naivete. I thought I would go to uni, come home to my children and manage this way for 13 weeks. How wrong I was! My daughter decided she didn't want me going to uni. She said she couldn't cope with me not being there for her all the time. I started to doubt myself as a caring mother...
- I have no time to sleep. I have to wait till the children are in bed to work and I'm going to bed at 12 and I o'clock. Then I'm getting up at 6 o'clock.

## **Approach to the innermost cave (the second threshold)**

- We've been set high goals to attain which by week 6 seemed daunting to meet - if not impossible. The maths chapter 1 - 4 exam was so physically stressful I couldn't think during the exam. Waiting for the results, I was as fearful as I'd been when telling my parents lies when I was a kid. Next, I was terrorised by the supervised writing piece. All I can think now is 'Not another bloody cave!'

## **The supreme ordeal**

- My outside support was failing. With added pressure from home and family I was on the brink of giving up. My determination to succeed deserted me when I needed it most.
- For me, this was when the computer ate my assignment the day before it was due. And I hadn't saved a word on disk! When this happened to me I was devastated. I felt like saying 'Screw it! I don't care!'

## **Reward (seizing the sword) - the road back**

- My knowledge is growing as I nurture my cravings for learning. I feel like a child let loose in a candy store. The awe of what is out there is breathtaking and trying to decide where to start exploring and which path to choose next is exhilarating. I am like a child again, still having a lot to learn, but now I am aware of the importance of learning.

## **Resurrection**

- I now have a passion for learning and embrace this passion with open arms. I have seized the sword of knowledge- not just the knowledge of how to write academic essays, how to do algebra and exponents, how to speak publicly and research information from the library, but a better understanding of life.
- Right at the point when I felt like hell about losing my assignment to the computer, I found in myself the resolution to fight. I knew that if I let this beat me, it would destroy all I'd won. Through my desperation, I found in myself a new strength and drive. Not only did I hand in the assignment on time but I find it a great source of pride to have received a high distinction for it.

## **Return with Elixir (Freedom to live)**

- I came here feeling like a little lost girl; I was so nervous and shy on my first day. Nothing has been what I'd thought it would be. I have become a stronger person. I don't let assignments worry me as I used to and I've created a knack of working out personal

problems. Self- confidence is the key to these things and now I have so much more. I can feel the change in me and because of this I have a brighter outlook on life now.

- The world is now my oyster. I now know that what I set my sights on can be accomplished and I am surrounded by positive vibes. The learning strategies the lecturers introduced us to were wonderful and are working well in other parts of my life. Also the understanding I gained about myself from the reflective sessions will now lead me into my future with renewed confidence.

## **THE BUTLER MODEL**

A model suggestive of the Hero's Journey that demonstrates the power of reflection in changing worldviews through adult learning has been created by Jim Butler, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Queensland (1993). Transformational learning empowers learners to challenge and change their worldviews, thus preparing them to face new opportunities as they overcome their difficulties and disadvantages (Lepani 1995). Butler shows that worldviews are very powerful because they are deeply held and expressed in everything we do; however, we cannot always see this essential self that is truly us. The development of reflective practices allows us to do this. Reflection is the process that connects the outer with the inner, and looking at our own beliefs, assumptions and values is a critical starting point for change and growth. Public information (PK) is the information that is passed on in the outside world. It is external to the learner. The Butler Model shows how this store of knowledge can become internalised (PPK) and thus, through reflection, become part of the learner's worldview. Further reflection will allow this worldview to impact on personal action. Thus, people change and grow.

Figure 1 (Edwards, Butler, Hill & Russell 1997, p. 175)

Adult learning can be seen as a Hero's Journey because it is not a straightforward process. Butler (1993) warns that any transformational learning event must have its unsettling periods. He agrees with Jackson (1968, p. 166) that 'the path to educational progress more closely resembles the flight of a butterfly than the flight of a bullet'. As the twelve stages show, any worthwhile learning experience will encounter negative periods and discomfort. Because learning takes us somewhere that we did not know exists, the journey of discovery must pass through confusion, uncertainty and challenge. This is the Hero's Journey. The learner leaves the comfort zone of the known and, crossing the first threshold, encounters trials as he or she unlearns outmoded habits. The past must be deconstructed before the learner can reconstruct the future. Once the future is reached, the learning can be said to have been truly transformative. If it does not pass through this stage of confusion and conflict and then be transformed through reflection, adult learning is less effective (Butler 1993).

# ARCHETYPES

Mythic learning also provides students with characters to help them understand their present and changing worldviews. According to archetypal psychologist Carol Pearson (1998), there are six main archetypes, all strongly present in today's Western culture, that impact on our lives as we experience our heroic journeys. They are: the Orphan, the Wanderer, the Warrior, the Altruist, The Innocent and the Magician. Possessing very different characteristics, these archetypes govern the ways we each see reality. Pearson suggests that we can think of the archetypes as inner personalities, agents that help us learn. As we travel on our Hero's Journeys our worldviews change as different archetypes enter our lives and we unconsciously succumb to their different archetypal plots that are so powerful.

ARCHETYPE	PLOT STRUCTURE	GIFT
ORPHAN	How I suffered/how I survived.	Resilience
WANDERER	How I escaped/how I found my way in the world.	Independence
WARRIOR	How I achieved my goals/how I defeated my enemies.	Courage
ALTRUIST	How I gave to others/how I sacrificed.	Compassion
INNOCENT	How I found happiness/the promised land.	Faith
MAGICIAN	How I changed my world.	Power

It can be healing for students to gain an understanding of these stories that we all unconsciously tell ourselves about our lives and to know that it is possible to change to a different story. To illustrate the need for humans to find purpose in the complexities of living, Viktor Frankl (1964) often quoted Nietzsche's 'He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how' (p. iii). Not all STEPS course participants want, or are ready for, this understanding, but those students who volunteer for the archetype workshop near the end of the course become aware of the plot lines they are living, and this insight, says Pearson, can bring a sense of freedom. 'Becoming aware of and then questioning one's construction of meaning' (Cranton 1994, p. 174) can be a transformative experience.

Ben's Hero's Journey was a triumphant one. In the final week of the program he wrote these words which he presented at the STEPS graduation ceremony:

Something keeps me going.  
Along this journey a Warrior has emerged from me-  
not to conquer,  
but to lead the Wanderer back to himself.  
Life is my quest and I have much to learn.  
I have feared myself -  
I have hated myself -  
and now I am at peace with myself.  
I was lost  
but now I have taken steps to soothe my weary feet.  
I am ready to celebrate the magic of learning -  
the magic of life -  
the magic of me.  
I will go boldly on beyond the edge of my world  
into an exciting future.

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