

From overhead projectors to microwave links: A personal journey of learning and teaching using an educational technology

Jo Luck, Division of Teaching and Learning Services, Central Queensland University,
j.luck@cqu.edu.au

Abstract

This paper is a conceptually informed and critically reflective story of a personal journey with teaching, learning and research at a regional university. The metaphor of the Hero's Journey is used to describe my learning and teaching journey. Christopher Volger's twelve-stage adaptation of Joseph Campbell's mythological Hero's Journey is used as a framework to provide a rich description of my journey as a university lecturer from the late 1980s to the present day. My journey describes the demands of the changing face of tertiary education in the integrated multi-campus university where I work.

It is anticipated that other academics will be able to use aspects of my journey to help them form a model of teaching, research and personal learning to suit their unique circumstances. At the same time, the Hero's Journey provides a richly nuanced and effective tool for collaborative critical reflection on our teaching, research and learning endeavours.

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Introduction

One of the challenges facing university educators in the 21st Century is how to cope with the multitude of technological innovations in teaching and learning. This paper discusses one person's journey to with a technological innovations used for teaching. The metaphor of the Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1993; Volger, 1998) is used as a conceptual framework for discussion and analysis.

The pattern of human experience

In mythology, the 'heroic journey' is taken by the hero in order to accomplish some task such as killing the Minotaur or finding the Holy Grail. In 1949 Joseph Campbell (republished 1993) showed us that the Hero's Journey isn't just a pattern from mythology. He found that it is a universal pattern of life, growth and experience—across all cultures and time. We see it reflected everywhere, from a television comedy to the great works of literature to the experiences in our own lives.

The Hero's Journey is a useful 'guide to life' because it resembles the stages of the rites of passage (Volger, 1998, p. 3). First the initiate faces separation from his or

her familiar world. Once separated, he or she undergoes initiation and transformation, where the old ways of thinking and acting are altered or destroyed. This opens up the way to develop a new level of awareness, skill and freedom. After successfully meeting the challenges of the initiation, the initiate takes the journey's final step and decides to return to his or her ordinary world. When he or she does return, the person is more confident, perceptive, and capable, and discovers that the community now treats him or her as an adult, with all of the respect, rights and privileges which that status implies.

The psychological basis for the journey is largely credited to Carl Jung who believed that people from around the world shared in what he termed a 'collective unconscious'. He believed that all the knowledge we needed in order to know who we are and what is valuable and worthwhile in life lay dormant in our brains and that our unconscious minds, revealed through dream studies and psychological research, are quite similar the world over. Jung suggested that these similarities (or archetypes) reflected different aspects of the human mind and that our personalities divide themselves into these archetypal characters to serve various roles in our lives. In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1993), Campbell built upon Carl Jung's work to show how these archetypes reveal themselves in myth after myth in the universal theme of the Hero's Journey.

More recently, Christopher Vogler has written *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (1998) where he adapted Campbell's steps of the Hero's journey into 12 stages that I will use in the next section to describe my journey. He also describes six archetypes and explains how they are used in writing powerful stories. Vogler argues that the archetypes are not rigid character types but that they are facets of the hero's personality that can be witnessed as they travel on their journey. If one chooses to apply these archetypes to one's self, it could be seen how these aspects combine to create a rounded character, or a complete, whole, fully functioning human being. The journey could be seen as a process of self-discovery and self-integration and, as with any process of growth and change, it brings opportunities to develop confidence, perspective and understanding of one's self.

The hero's journey

A definition of the term hero—derived from Campbell (1993)—is any male or female who leaves the world of his or her everyday life to undergo a journey to a challenging, unfamiliar world where challenges and fears are overcome in order to secure a reward (such as knowledge or experience that leads to greater understanding) which is then shared with other members of the hero's community. The following description of my own journey uses the 12 stages described by Vogler (1998).

1. The ordinary world

A powerful element in many stories is the contrast between the Hero's ordinary world and the new special world they move into on their journey. This is a brief description of my life when I first started working as a university lecturer. It will be used to illustrate how far I have travelled on my journey.

When I started work as a lecturer, I become conscious of the fact that there are only two professions one can enter without any formal training: parenthood and teaching at a university. In Australia it is necessary to have a degree before

becoming a lecturer but there is no need for any formal qualifications as an educator, unlike school teachers who need a teaching qualification and have to be registered with the Board of Teacher Registration.

When I was appointed a lecturer in 1987, I was given no instruction in teaching methods or theory, and so I followed the teaching pattern of those who taught me. Or rather, I followed the practice of those whose teaching style I preferred. When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Queensland, some of my lecturers favoured a didactic method of teaching. They spoke non-stop for one, two or three hours and were frustrated by the failure of students to copy down copious amounts of notes and listen to the lecturer speaking at the same time. At the end of the semester these lecturers expected the students to regurgitate these facts during the 100% examination. These lecturers had a detrimental effect on my learning. There was so much pressure to perform a huge memory recall in the three-hour exam and too bad if one was were sick on the day!

Apart from resolving not to follow that particular teaching method, I gave little thought to how I should teach. I was more concerned with not being 'caught out' by inadequate preparation, inability to answer a student's question, or having insufficient material to fill the available class time.

Once I had taught a course and felt that I was getting on top of the course content, I allowed myself the 'luxury' of thinking about how I could improve my teaching of the classes. Up to this stage in my teaching career I was focused on improving the content of the lectures rather than teaching methods or the theory behind the content.

2. The call to adventure

The presentation of a problem or a challenge to undertake offers the opportunity to face the unknown. It makes clear the hero's goal. It may be a willingly undertaking of the quest, or the hero may reluctantly accept the call to adventure.

My Call to Adventure was when I realised that instead of focusing on the transmission of information or on what I was doing in the class, I needed to focus on teaching that leads to learning. A concept that Biggs (1999) refers to as teaching at level 3 where "[l]earning is the result of students' learning-focussed activities which are engaged by students as a result both of their own perceptions and the inputs of the total teaching context" (p. 61).

At the same time I needed to deal with the implementation of the interactive video-conferencing (IVC) facilities at CQU. The undergraduate course I was teaching was to be offered at the Bundaberg, Gladstone, and Mackay campuses as well as at Rockhampton, where I was based.

3. Refusal of the call (the reluctant hero)

Baulking at the threshold of the adventure or expressing reluctance. This stage is one of fear.

My biggest fear was stepping outside my comfort zone. I was not used to using the IVC facilities for teaching and I was considering a radical shift in the way I wanted to facilitate the teaching of this course.

The first step was to confer with my colleagues who were to be the local teaching staff at the Bundaberg, Gladstone, and Mackay campuses. We decided that we would overhaul the teaching strategies and assessment for the entire course. The purpose for that was twofold. We wanted to move to using student-focussed activities and to build on the knowledge that they had already gained in both their study and their life experiences and we desired to take advantage of the interactive capabilities of the IVC facilities. The lack of interactivity was a common student complaint about the use of the IVC facilities for teaching and learning at CQU (Bigum & Appleton, 1997).

We could not change the course content as the course was an integral part of a programme that had been accredited by the Australian Computer Society. We reworded the course objectives to make more explicit the learning outcomes for the course.

4. Mentor

This stage describes the formation of a relationship between the person and a Mentor. The mentor can only travel so far with the hero. The hero completes the journey alone. There can be more than one mentor.

My mentors were the three other members of the teaching team who were located on the Bundaberg, Gladstone, and Mackay campuses. We had a two-day workshop approximately one month before the start of the teaching term. Because not all the teaching team were able to travel to Rockhampton we conducted this workshop using the IVC facilities. This proved to be fortuitous as we were using the IVC technology to discuss how best to use to teach the class. It meant that we could practice the teaching techniques we had decided to use and then peer review them.

A valuable exercise at the beginning of the workshop was for each member of the team to describe their background and their teaching philosophy. During the discussion we realised that we had all come from very different backgrounds: educationally; geographically and in relation to work experience. Our teaching philosophies were more convergent. This discussion proved to be a valuable aid later when discussing the teaching strategies for the course. It helped every member of the team to understand and appreciate the strengths and recognise the weaknesses of the other team members. We were then able to work out how to use our individual strengths and avoid an individual being put in a position of weakness.

What we decided to do was to create an opportunity for students to experience peer learning. The students were required to work in small groups (three to four people) to present a key concept each week. This presentation was to contribute 25% to their final assessment for the course. For the remainder of the IVC session, the staff would lead discussions with the students on the work for that week. The leader's role would rotate around the teaching staff on all four campuses.

For the remainder of course assessment the students had to complete two written assignments. The final exam was removed. One of the written assignments was a real-life case study of an information system. The students were able to choose an information system to study and had to write a report within a given framework. The second assignment was to write an essay that demonstrated their understanding of key concepts in the course.

5. Crossing the first threshold

Once called to the adventure, the hero passes over the threshold and enters the unknown. It is the interface between the known and the unknown. In the known world, we feel secure because we know the landscape and the rules. Once past the threshold, however, we enter the unknown, a world filled with challenges and dangers.

Often at the threshold, we encounter people, beings, or situations, which block our passage. For adults these ‘threshold guardians’ can be our fears, our doubts, our ineffective thought and behaviour patterns.

For me the first threshold was the move to a facilitation role in the classroom rather than continue my previous role which was to give a lecture. This took strength and courage for the whole teaching team and we supported each other by having a short video-conferenced meeting every two weeks during the term to discuss the course and reflect on the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and the student learning.

6. Tests, allies and enemies

On the journey, the hero faces a series of challenges or tests and makes allies and enemies. The early challenges are relatively easy. By meeting them successfully, we build maturity, skill and confidence. As our journey progresses, the challenges become more and more difficult, testing us to the utmost, forcing us to change and grow.

One of our greatest tests on the journey is to differentiate allies from enemies. Enemies try to pull us away from our path. They use fear, doubt or distraction. They may pretend to be a friend or counsellor in an effort to divert our energy to their own needs, uses or beliefs. We must rely on our sense of purpose and judgment and the advice of our mentor to help us distinguish allies from enemies.

Whatever the challenges we face, they always seem to strike our greatest weakness: our poorest skill, our shakiest knowledge, our most vulnerable emotions. Furthermore, the challenges always reflect needs and fears, for it is only by directly facing these weaknesses that we can acknowledge and incorporate them, turn them from threats to opportunities. If we can’t do this, the adventure ends and we must turn back.

A considerable test was helping the students to accept that they had to perform a different role in the classroom. In this class there was to be both passive and active learning. Students were expected to contribute by preparing and presenting material to their peers and to listen and contribute to the discussions. In the discussions everyone was expected to share their work and life experiences with respect to the topic for that week.

Some students really resented this change. One student said that he knew he “could swot the notes and pass an exam” (personal reflective journal). He felt very uncomfortable with the new teaching strategies, as he was not sure of his abilities to learn and pass the assessment.

Another test was the complexity of the IVC teaching model at CQU. With a distance between classrooms of up to 700 kilometres the teaching team had to be extremely organised. For example, if I wanted to hand out notes for the class I had to post or email material to the other members of the teaching team well in advance

of the class so that they could copy them and hand out to the students in class time. We also made use of the Internet to load copies of notes and presentations for the students to download.

The teaching team also devised contingencies plans for each class in the event of the video connection being unavailable for all or part of a lecture.

7. Approach to the inmost cave

A dangerous place in the special world or where the object is hidden is the inmost cave. This is where the hero faces the greatest challenge of the journey. The challenge is so great at this point that we must surrender ourselves completely to the adventure and become one with it. In the inmost cave we must face our greatest fear, and we must face it alone. There is always the possibility that, because we are unprepared or have a flaw in our character, the challenge beats us. Or perhaps we can't surrender ourselves to it and must retreat. In any case, unless we set off to try again, our life becomes a bitter shadow of what it could have been. The approach is the preparations for entering the inmost cave.

In my Approach to the Inmost Cave I had a huge learning curve to understand the difficulties that staff and students would experience as they moved out of their comfort zones. There was also a need to expand my knowledge of educational theory and educational technology theory.

During this part of my journey I travelled across the conceptual landscapes of reflective practice (Schön, 1991), action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) and socio-technical networks—in particular actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1996; Law & Hassard, 1999)—before settling into the conceptual framework of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Becker & Andrews, 2004; Boyer, 1990; Schulman, 2000). This framework helped me to focus my teaching and personal learning.

Prior to learning of the scholarship of teaching and learning I was regarded as a bit of an oddity in my Faculty. I was working in the Faculty of Informatics and Communications, my teaching discipline area was information systems but my research area was becoming more focused on teaching and learning especially teaching and learning supported by technology. My colleagues thought that I should be working in the Faculty of Education or that I should be researching in the area of Information Systems. The scholarship of teaching and learning proved to me that researching teaching and learning and applying this research to my role as a lecturer was just as important as researching in my teaching discipline area. It enhances the practice and profession of my role as a lecturer. It helps me when evaluating my own teaching practices and in the development of ideas on how to improve my teaching.

8. The ordeal

The fortunes of the hero hit rock bottom in direct confrontation with their greatest fear. This marks the most critical point of any story.

Having survived the ordeal and overcome our fears, our transformation becomes complete. The final step in the process is a moment of death and rebirth: a part of us dies so that a new part can be born. Fear must die to make way for courage. Ignorance must die for the birth of enlightenment. Dependency and irresponsibility must die so that independence and power can grow.

At this point a helper can be met on the Hero's Journey. The helper keeps us focused on our goal and gives us stability, a psychological foundation for when the danger is greatest. Helpers may appear throughout the journey. Fortunately, they tend to appear at the most opportune moments. Carl Jung called these 'meaningful coincidences' synchronicity.

My helpers appeared in the shape of a group of mature-age students in the class. Earlier in the term they had been enemies and would criticise the changed teaching strategies. Just after the midway point of term they came to see me and told me that they could now see what the teaching team trying to achieve and they were starting to enjoy the class. They had felt uncomfortable earlier because it was presented differently from their other classes and they had doubts about learning from other students, most of whom were much younger than them. The turning point was the realisation that when their fellow students explained new concepts they were doing it in a language and a manner that all the students could understand. The students also linked their presentations to material that was simultaneously being learnt in other courses. This application of knowledge from one course into another course helped them to integrate their learning during term.

This group of mature-aged students used their voices to talk to and help other students in the class. This help contributed to the class and improved the experience for everyone.

9. Reward (seizing the sword)

The hero has cause to celebrate and take possession of the treasure—the reward. In my case the reward has been knowledge, experience and greater understanding of both students' learning and my own learning.

The greatest reward has been students talking to me after they graduated and saying that the undergraduate course I co-ordinated was one of the best courses that they completed in their degree. Some graduates stated that they used the real-life case study assignment as part of their portfolio when applying for jobs. The employers appreciated the fact that the students had worked on an actual information system.

With respect to my teaching the major changes have been: to move away from assessment that includes a formal examination and assignments based on artificial or contrived case studies; and to use most of the class time for discussion of key concepts not the transmission of the course content.

Wherever possible I write assignments in a generic manner and ask the students to find a real-life situation to use as a case study to complete the assignment. The case study used could be their workplace or some sporting club or a hobby centre of interest to the student. The philosophy behind this suggestion is that getting the students to apply their learning to a case with which they are familiar will assist them to make the necessary links between theory and practice.

For each lecture and tutorial class there are set readings or activities that I expect students to complete before class. At the beginning of the class I highlight any key concepts for the week and then ask one of the students to explain them to the rest of the class in their own words. I then move into discussions around the topic for that week. I expect the students to engage in the discussion and I work hard to ensure that each student speaks at least once during each class. Students are

encouraged to talk about their assignments to the rest of the class and if they are having problems with the assignment I ask their colleagues to make suggestions for solving the problems.

I believe that working on actual cases and discussing cases as a group helps the students to learn from each other and to apply what they have learnt to their assessment. Classes are very interactive.

10. The road back

After Seizing the Sword there is a decision to go back to the Ordinary World. This stage is about dealing with the consequences of confronting the dark forces of the ordeal. There is a realisation that there are still dangers and challenges ahead.

At completion of this course, I was able to use the skills and knowledge I had learnt to improve other courses that I was co-ordinating. This was akin to travelling on the journey again with different tests, allies and enemies.

11. Resurrection

After we have been transformed, we go on to achieve atonement, that is we are ‘at-one’ with our new self. We have incorporated the changes caused by the Journey and we are fully ‘reborn’. In a spiritual sense, the transformation as a result of the ordeal has brought us into harmony with life and the world. The imbalance that sent us on the journey has been corrected—until the next call.

My ‘resurrection’ came when I was deciding on a worthy topic to use as a focus for my doctoral research. I regarded myself as a reflective practitioner and I had a strong interest in the use of technology to assist the process of teaching and learning. When used well, technology can provide innovative solutions to the problems of teaching and communicating with the diverse and distant student population we encounter at Central Queensland University (CQU). My discipline area was Information Systems.

Working full-time and studying part-time while still having a personal life is a delicate balancing act. To reduce the complexity I decided that I needed to choose to research a topic that would have synergies with my teaching discipline and my profession as an educator. For these reasons I chose to research the use of educational technology in higher education in my Doctorate. To be more precise, I chose to investigate the use of interactive videoconferencing at CQU for supporting teaching and learning across multiple campuses.

This combining of research, study and work has allowed me the headspace to complete my doctorate—bar finishing the thesis writing (due to be submitted at the end of 2005). The doctorate has been a long journey for me but most of the constraints and hold-ups have been as a result of personal issues taking up my time and attention not the research itself.

12. Return with the elixir

After resurrection we face the final stage of our journey, the return to everyday life. Upon our return, we discover our gift, which has been bestowed upon us based on our new level of skill and awareness. We may become richer or stronger, we may become a great leader, or we may become enlightened spiritually.

The essence of the return is to begin contributing to society. Sometimes, however, things don't go smoothly. We also run the risk of losing our new understanding, having it corrupted by putting ourselves back in the same situation or environment we left earlier.

In some cases, the hero discovers that her new level of awareness and understanding is far greater than the people around her. She may then become disillusioned or frustrated and leave society to be on her own. On the other hand, many great heroes have sacrificed the bliss of enlightenment or heaven to remain in the world and teach others.

Unless something is brought back the hero is doomed to repeat the adventure.

The final stage of my journey is still in front of me. I will submit my doctoral thesis later this year. I am looking forward to an academic life after the doctorate where I can apply all my new skills and knowledge to my teaching and research and to use the scholarship of teaching and learning to help other academics to learn from me and build on what I have achieved.

I view this journey as my maturing as an academic. Having survived the journey I feel the need to pass on my learning to others. I plan to do this by writing articles and by working with new academics in the faculties. I think that the best way to improve teaching practice across the university as a whole is by showing other academics that there is value in engaging more with educational literature and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In this paper Campbell's (1993) stages of the timeless Hero's Journey was adapted and used as a tool for reflection in telling my story and how I learnt from change, in particular with respect to changing technology options for tertiary educators. I have shown how an understanding of the twelve stages of the Quest can help to produce a better understanding of the journey educators need to travel to assist them in the development of technology-supported materials for their students and help—through critical self-reflection, peer discussion and other scholarly activity—to develop a scholarship of teaching and learning to benefit educators who are also wanting to conduct research in higher education.

The journey is a process of self-discovery and self-integration, of maintaining balance and harmony in our lives. As with any process of growth and change, a journey can be confusing and painful, but it brings opportunities to develop confidence, perspective and understanding.

Understanding the Journey pattern can help us understand the experiences that shape our lives. By recognising the Journey's stages and how they function, we will develop a sense of the flow of our own experience and be better able to make decisions and solve problems. More importantly, we will begin to recognise our own points of passage and respect the significance they have for us.

The adventures we face will be challenging and exciting. They can open the doors to knowledge and understanding. If we understand the Journey pattern, we will be better able to face difficulties and use our experiences to become stronger and more capable. Understanding the pattern can help us achieve wisdom, growth, and independence, and taking our Journeys helps us become the people we want to be. I

have described my journey as an educator in the hope that others will find the Hero's Journey to be a useful tool for critical reflection and scholarly activity.

Remember that the journey is a process of separation, transformation, and return. Each stage must be completed successfully if we are to become Heroic. To turn back is to reject our innate need to grow, and unless we set out again, we severely restrict our potential as human beings.

Perhaps a hero is in each of us because all of us participate in a life journey that is a quest for self-awareness and self-development. From cradle to tomb, we are all searching to discover who we are and why we are here. Spiritually and psychologically, the journey is a metaphor for growth.

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