Choose Your Own Adventure: The Hero’s Journey and the Research Process

Helen Georgas, Mariana Regalado, and Matthew Burgess*

In Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey, the hero of the story embarks on an adventure and returns transformed, empowered, and enlightened. Two academic librarians and the research process itself were incorporated into the curriculum of an undergraduate composition course that was structured around the research and writing process as a hero’s journey. The experience, which was student/hero-centered, self-directed, self-defined, investigative, and exploratory, was transformative for the students and the librarians as well.

In Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey” the protagonist of the story embarks on an adventure, meets and overcomes a daunting challenge, and returns transformed, empowered, and enlightened. Campbell found this motif repeated across stories and cultures, citing it as a common and shared experience. This paper discusses the use of the hero’s journey as a metaphor within an undergraduate English composition classroom, in which the hero-student embarks on the journey of writing a paper, and also as an approach to research itself. When framed by the hero’s journey, the research process becomes student-centered, self-directed, self-defined, investigative and exploratory, with a focus on research as a process that, in tandem with writing, is iterative, ongoing, sometimes painful, and yet ultimately leads to knowledge and growth.

Use of Campbell’s hero’s journey as a metaphor in teaching is not new. Most commonly the literature reflects use of this metaphor in a wide variety of higher education contexts such as freshman orientation, teacher education, music therapy, forestry, and management, as well as instructor self-reflection. Many applications of the hero’s journey metaphor can also be found in the literature of psychotherapeutic training. Examples of its use in library education are few and are focused on K-12 education.

At Brooklyn College, all undergraduate students are required to complete English composition. This course is intended to “introduce students to modes of academic writing and help develop and refine writing skills that will serve students in all academic disciplines,” and culminates with a research paper. For the past few years, Professor Matthew Burgess has taught the basic structure of the hero’s journey in his freshman composition courses. While Professor Burgess provides students with Campbell’s terminology, they intuitively understand the steps of the journey, which they have absorbed from books, movies, and stories such as Star Wars, Harry Potter, and The Odyssey. Indeed, part of the pleasure in “teaching” the hero’s journey is in allowing students to visualize, recognize, and see themselves within a structure that is familiar and to watch the students—using these stories as references—supply the steps, stages, and archetypes as they formally progress through the cycle. Professor Burgess draws the structure of the hero’s journey on the chalkboard for the students near the beginning of the semester.

* Helen Georgas is Associate Professor at Brooklyn College, CUNY, hgeorgas@brooklyn.cuny.edu; Mariana Regalado is Associate Professor at Brooklyn College, CUNY, regalado@brooklyn.cuny.edu, Matthew Burgess is Assistant Professor at Brooklyn College, CUNY, mburgess@brooklyn.cuny.edu.
First, the hero of the story—who begins as an underdog, an orphan, an ordinary person—receives a “call to adventure” from a “herald” or “messenger.” The news comes as a surprise: “what do you mean I am called to leave what is familiar and venture out to face unimaginable dangers?” This moment of hesitation or denial is “the refusal of the call,” and the hero’s anxiety is what makes us relate to them. At this point someone or something—
a mentor, a guide, a celestial apparition, an inner voice—emerges to reassure the hero, and offer some tools, weapons, talismans, or counsel to aid them. The second stage of the journey begins when the hero “crosses the first threshold” into the unknown world. Now the hero is joined by allies and helpers who assist in completing a series of tests, a long “road of trials.” Meeting multiple obstacles, the hero moves toward a culminating “supreme ordeal,” and if victorious, wins a treasure or reward. In the final stage of the journey the hero returns to the known world and shares the special knowledge or power gained.

Professor Burgess begins the semester without making direct parallels to the research paper process. Instead, students are invited to relate to the cycle of the journey in personal ways when Professor Burgess asks questions such as, how many students have left a familiar world and moved into the unknown? At Brooklyn College, many students have immigrated to the United States and faced challenges associated with integrating into a new culture, new language and new customs. For these students, the “call to adventure” might be the moment they received news that their Visa application was approved. For both immigrant and non-immigrant students alike, the first day of college is a universal example of “crossing the threshold”—the experience of showing their student IDs to pass through the Brooklyn College gates and walking into a college classroom for the first time.

In his role as mentor, Professor Burgess has students read essays that incorporate aspects of the steps and stages of the hero’s journey, practice textual analysis, make observations, and apply the terminology. The syllabus scaffolds in writing skills and practice. About four weeks into the semester Professor Burgess issues the “call to adventure” when he distributes the research project description (and deadlines) to the students, and begins the dialogue of direct parallels between the hero’s journey and the research process itself.

By invoking the hero’s journey as an analogy for research, the imperative for students is to frame the research process as a personal and meaningful one, rather than merely going through the motions, following a strict set of boundaries or constraints, or filling pages with whatever they think “the professor wants.” Indeed, anyone who has read a stack of student papers is likely familiar with the absent, impersonal voice, striving for some imagined formality (“In today’s society…” etc.). Using the device of the hero’s journey, Professor Burgess challenges students to select a topic that excites them and generates genuine curiosity or interest. He inspires them to come up with a research question that has personal significance and that requires them to go out into the world—the library, the Internet, books, podcasts, interviews—to seek answers. Emphasizing his ongoing presence as a mentor, Professor Burgess’s point is that “we” come up with questions that require a “journey,” that make the quest—for answers, reasons, explanations, interpretations, theories—necessary. In order to help students spark that excitement and imagination, Professor Burgess gives students a curiosity questionnaire (see appendix A).

With subjects/questions of curiosity in place, students are ready to cross the threshold into the unknown and embark on their research journeys. Professor Burgess, whom students now trust as advisor and teacher, serves as guide. He begins the first of two 75-minute library visits by introducing the librarians, Professors Helen Georgas and Mariana Regalado, and framing their role for the next phase of the journey as experts who, along with him, will be there to provide counsel as students face the challenges of research.

As with the familiar story of the hero’s journey, the librarians emphasize that students intuitively understand what research is, even if they’ve never called it such—they do it on a daily basis, every time they have a question or curiosity about something. The library curriculum, mirroring the beginning of the composition class, begins on the board with a single prompt: a drawing of a stick figure and a thought bubble with a question mark inside it. Students are given a sheet of paper—one side of which is blank, the other side of which has a series of squares printed on it in the style of comic book frames. Students are asked to use the stick figure as a prompt to draw themselves, the hero, as they pursue their own unique research process. By asking students to imagine themselves at the center of the process/drawing, the librarians mirror the frame of the class, with the hero/student
moving through a question/journey, from beginning to middle to end. Students are given about five minutes to complete their drawings, and the librarians repeatedly emphasize drawing and not using words, which many students have a tendency to rely on, because words are much more safe and familiar at this point.

Once the drawings are complete, the librarians mediate a 5–10 minute discussion based on student responses. Of course, students often (and only) draw the inevitable computer with Google emblazoned across it. Others directly reference the library, books, and articles. Some students might even use the term “scholarly” to describe these resources. More recently (Fall 2016) multiple students referred to podcasts as a source of information; many reference talking to their peers, siblings or parents for suggestions and advice. If none of the students have mentioned the emotional or affective component of doing research, the librarians ask what feelings do arise for them around the research process. Students commonly express anxiety, fear, and dread within their drawings and/or during discussion, as well as procrastination, feelings that reflect the hero’s “denial of call” and “fear of the unknown.”

At this point the librarians repeat the call to leave the familiar. Our student heroes must now venture beyond what they already know about doing research (Google), and transition to what for many is the unknown world of scholarly research. The librarians/guides/allies step in to suggest tools and talismans that will serve students on their journeys and help them explore their research questions. The first step on the “road of [research] trials” is a structured curriculum-integrated assignment (see appendix B). The assignment requires students to use four

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**FIGURE 2**  
Start of Semester Drawing of Research Process by Student A

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**FIGURE 3**  
Start of Semester Drawing of Research Process by Student B
different search tools to find four different kinds of information (resource types) related to their topic of interest. It is important to keep in mind that most of the students are freshmen or sophomores, so it’s still essential that they make direct connection and application between what they’re learning during the library visits and what is required of them at this point in the semester. This assignment is also part of the scaffolded course curriculum, with an initial annotated bibliography due immediately after the first library visit.

The librarians introduce the Library’s website; along with the four different kinds of search tools (Gale Virtual Reference Library, the library catalog, article databases, and the discovery tool) that it provides access to—tools that will aid them as they tackle the research challenges. Since many students have included Google (and the attendant first hit, Wikipedia) in their drawings, the librarians use this familiarity with a “reference” resource to introduce online reference works (via GVRL) as an authoritative alternative for beginning their expansion of knowledge. These reference works can also serve as a lens through which to view their question from new perspectives. For example, a psychologist looks at a particular question quite differently than a philosopher or historian. By reading different reference entries on the same topic, students may begin to develop a “way into” their question. As each subsequent tool is introduced (with students conducting their own searches at computers) the emphasis is that each will lead students to different resources, and therefore different types of information. The librarians, like Professor Burgess, also repeatedly stress that students investigate a question that is of deep personal interest, something they’re curious about and has meaning for them.

The reading of reference entries, abstracts of articles and/or books, along with the sources themselves, also help students refine and redirect their journey/question. The research process is not linear, just as the “road of trials” is not a direct sequence of clearly defined obstacles. There are stops and starts and redirects, moving two steps forward and then possibly circling back, or spending time headed down one path that turns out to be a dead end. Research and reading and doing more research and investigation are not distractions from the journey, the librarians stress, but rather necessary elements of the journey itself.

The second 75-minute library session a few weeks later in the semester is much more student-hero-focused, self-directed, and exploratory. It thus allows students time to build upon the knowledge they have acquired, and to develop and expand both their questions and working bibliographies in consultation with Professor Burgess and both librarians. All three mentors/allies move around the classroom allowing for in-depth one-on-one consultations with each student, asking them more focused questions about what their real curiosity is, helping them construct effective searches, come up with additional language and terminology, and suggesting databases that might be more specifically suited to exploring their questions. Because Professor Burgess and the librarians have been collaborating for several years now, there is a mutual understanding of research principles. After the second library session, Professor Burgess structures various in- and out-of-class activities to keep students on track, such as draft deadlines and peer workshops, as students move towards the “supreme ordeal” of completing their research papers.

While some stories might roll the credits with the “happily ever after” once the final paper is turned in, the journey cycle actually continues. The “return” back to the known world reveals the ultimate purpose of the journey: to experience a “transformation of consciousness” and then to transform the known world by sharing one’s experience—what has been learned, the “answer” to the question that initiated the research journey. The returned hero becomes an author and storyteller who “transforms the wasteland,” changing the hearts and minds of others, through telling the story. Thus, at the end of the semester, in addition to turning in the final paper, students have two final steps in their journey.

First, students showcase their research via capstone presentations, which everyone, including both librarians, attends. These presentations form the culmination of the journey. Professor Burgess and the librarians
want the students to have the experience of raising a genuine question, moving into the unknown in pursuit of possible answers, interacting with others to discuss and test their ideas and to communicate a strong and clear argument. Through the process of creating this argument, students should come to understand their subject in depth and arrive at “answers” that feel compelling and somehow “true.” This argument should also engage and inform their readers: it should name the question, articulate a thesis, and offer illuminating reasons and evidence that offer readers some new insights or experience. That is why Professor Burgess repeatedly emphasizes the importance of “audience” to the students, and why he tells them that “we” are the research community. Write for everyone in the classroom—we are each other’s readers.

In fact, the presentations are so essential to the overall purpose of the research journey that the three final class periods are set aside for them. Ideally, the students experience themselves as both researchers and authors—and yes, as “heroes”—returning from the quest(ion) with something to share, relate and communicate. In summary, both Professor Burgess and the librarians share three main goals for student learning that they look for in the presentations. Most importantly, they want students to have experienced the research process as personally meaningful, invested with genuine questions, curiosity and intellectual inquiry. As well, they want to see that students have gone “out” into the world of information—beyond what is already “known” (Google) and learned, how to find useful information, how to distinguish between credible and flawed sources, how to discover new sources of information and to use them effectively (and when). In sum, students will have learned that the research process is iterative and part of the journey itself. Finally, they want to see that students have developed an understanding that writing is a tool that allows them to explore their ideas, to extend and clarify them, and that research is the evidence that will support those ideas, enabling students to communicate them clearly and strongly to others.

The librarians close the capstone presentations by asking students for a follow-up drawing of the research process. This drawing is intended to help students, instructor and librarians alike to see how each student’s
research journey, and their student-hero role within it, has evolved over the course of the semester. Indeed the drawings tend to show not only more detailed research processes but also to reflect the emotional investment in student topics and in the process itself.

In the second and final challenge of the return, Professor Burgess asks students to write reflection papers about their journeys and the knowledge or insight they have gained. Students often discuss their experience in the language of the hero’s journey. Without explicit instruction to do so, students often reflect on the library/librarians’ roles within their hero journeys, as these examples show.
“Going to the library undoubtedly played the role of the supernatural aide for me. With the tools I learned there, I was ready to actually dive into this essay. Beforehand I was lost but the research I was able to find in the databases acted as the compass that would guide me in the right path into the unknown. I had received the magical sword in which I would use to slay the evil research paper or “resistance” that made me falsely believe the research paper was evil.”

“When we were first in the library I drew out the research process as: “Sit down at my clean desk with water, a snack, and a candle and begin searching. Write the paper using the 45/15 method. Talk to others about my topic.” But I like my second drawing better because it is more honest and realistic about how the process actually goes: “Researched using databases, spent a long time thinking about my topic, and talked to others about my possible thesis. I felt intrigued, worried, and kindled all at once. Some days I watched too much Netflix and had to yell at myself but that is ok. I read my book on the train and took notes on my book in the park. Rewrote and rewrote.”

“Now that I had a research question, which I found myself always coming back to and tweaking, I had to find actual research material that I could use. This turned out to be very difficult, even though all of us in the class had the advantage of having a research database with tens of thousands of entries that we could locate just by using a spider search. The problem was that I didn’t know what sort of spider to send out to hunt for my raw materials. I tried different combinations of keywords to no avail. Just as I was about to give up and start thinking about a different topic, Professor Burgess came over to my computer station. Sitting side by side and focused, we brainstormed different ideas about what to put into the search bar to get the “Hit” that I wanted. Patiently and steadily, we kept at it until we finally put in the magic words that connected me to the data that I had been seeking.”

“It was at the library that I felt I found my calling, the “this is it” epiphany. I had gotten two of Susan Linn’s books, and another book that I found while searching for Linn’s. I then decided to go and get the creativity book I had seen before. After finding the book, I was compelled to look through the rest of the books on that area. The bookshelves just looked so pretty and tempting and they called for me to pry through the books. I ended up finding another helpful book. There were a couple of other books that were there, but I decided to abstain from getting them because there would be too much to go through. Needless to say, I found magic hidden in the library. This part of the process was possibly the most helpful and exciting part. The books I had checked out were filled with so much information that I was completely astounded and excited. My mind was singing “YES, THIS IS IT. YES.””

In these reflections, students recall and appreciate many elements of the hero’s journey from the perspective of achievement and experience: overcoming fear of the unknown; understanding and seeing themselves within the research process; recognizing library research methods and tools as powerful allies in journey; learning the pleasures of the library/research and writing; understanding the importance of having a compelling topic. For the librarians, who usually teach one-shot instruction sessions and rarely see the fruit of their work with students, seeing these reflection papers is both highly informative and fulfilling.
Admittedly, this collaboration, now in effect for several years, is an in-depth and time-consuming approach to research on both ideological and practical levels. However, it’s a useful method of investigation and assessment for librarians to apply to a single class periodically, and overall can help them (re)conceive the student experience (and subsequent library instruction) at their institution. Librarians, even within one session, can introduce the students as heroes on a journey, with a quick overview of the journey structure. This can help students re-frame the research process with themselves at the center of it—bringing what they already know, learning something new, re-directing it and shaping it throughout their journey, with librarians as mentors who will introduce them to tools they can use during the process.

In addition to the drawings, there are other quick, qualitative exercises that can help students reflect actively on the research process and give librarians feedback that can inform future library research instruction sessions (see appendix C). With any of these qualitative exercises, even spending five minutes on it in class, with thirty students in the classroom, will result a rich array of responses.

In conclusion, librarians can apply the student-as-hero metaphor for the research process and use quick, qualitative exercises, even if they only see students for a single-shot session. The main goal of all of these exercises, as with the hero’s journey composition class, is to encourage communication by students about their research (what they already know, what they’ve learned, what they would impart to others) and the research process. The overarching aim is for students to carry this research experience forward beyond the boundaries of this particular composition class/journey, and use it as a frame with which to approach any research paper/journey they undertake as students at Brooklyn College and beyond.
Appendix A. Curiosity Questionnaire

Curiosity Questionnaire

“The pursuit of knowing was freedom to me, the right to declare your own curiosities and follow them through all manner of books. I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail of other people’s interests. The library was open, unending, free.”

~Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me

1. What do you think you MAJOR will be? Your MINOR?
2. If “money” was not an issue, would your MAJOR or MINOR be different? If so, what course of study might you prefer to pursue?
3. What would be your dream internship? What would be your dream career?
4. If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?
5. If you could “time travel” to any period in history, what would it be? Where would it be?
6. What is your favorite TV show? Movie? Musician?
7. Review the list below and circle THREE that interest you:
   - education
   - race relations
   - the environment
   - child psychology
   - NYC
   - history
   - gender studies
   - African American history
   - sexuality
   - astronomy
   - art history
   - cultural studies
   - literature
   - graphic novels
   - Native American cultures
   - creativity studies
   - hip-hop
   - space travel
   - history of the automobile
   - virtual reality
   - food/nutrition
   - climate change
   - movies/cinema
   - same-sex marriage
   - arranged marriage
   - Greek mythology
   - computer technology
   - world religions
   - Occupy Wall Street
   - politics
   - the 1960s
   - Beat poetry
   - the Harlem Renaissance
   - Puerto Rico

8. Now, make a list of at least THREE topics that you would like to see added to this list:
9. Choose one “category” or “topic” from the previous page and write it here: _____________________
10. Now, free-write some questions about this topic. Don’t overthink it; just write anything that comes to mind. You may find it helpful to use words such as WHY, HOW, WHEN, WHO, WHAT, etc.
11. Choose one more and write it here: _____________________
12. Repeat the process; free-write a few questions about this second topic without overthinking it.
13. Imagine, in ten years, that you are a graduate student assigned to teach a section of English 1012. What topic or theme might YOU choose as your focus?
14. What makes you really happy?
15. What makes you really frustrated or spikes your sense of injustice?
16. What is a complicated “problem” that you wish you could solve?
17. Imagine that you walk into an independent bookstore attached to a cozy café with great chairs and excellent coffee. All of the books have been hand-selected by smart, interesting people who share your range of interests. You are invited to pick out a few books, sit down, and browse them while sipping a beverage of your choice. Which section or sections in the bookstore would you gravitate towards?
Appendix B. Structured Curriculum-Integrated Assignment, Created by Professor Burgess in Collaboration with Librarians

Library Assignment

1. Using the Brooklyn College catalogue, locate a book that might be helpful with your research topic. List the author, title, call number and date of publication here. (For future reference, note that you can send a text message to yourself with this info enclosed.)

2. Using the “Reference” tab on the library search page, find an encyclopedia entry for one or more central terms to your research subject. Skim the article during the library session and then, using the functions along the top of the page, e-mail the documents to yourself. (Be sure to check the box for MLA Bibliographic Citation.) For homework, print, read, annotate, and staple at least one of these documents to the back of this sheet.

3. Using the “Articles and Databases” tab, locate a scholarly article about your research topic. Try to find at least full text article that was published after 2005. Find the “Tools” column at the right hand side of the page, click “Cite” and then copy/paste the MLA citation into the space below:

4. Using the BC Library web page, locate a New York Times article about your research topic. Don’t grab the first one that you see; instead, review the titles and abstracts and try to find one that most closely pertains to your subject. Print, read, and annotate, looking for quotes that might be useful to include in your paper.
Appendix C. Quick In-Class Qualitative Exercises for Student Reflection

Cognitive Maps
In addition to asking students to map out their research process, ask students to respond with words or drawings to questions such as these: Where are the places you do research? Read? Write? Study? What else is happening in those places (distractions, help, etc.)? What are the supports you take advantage of (writing center, reference desk, peers)? How do you think the internet or databases work?

Photo Diaries
Ask students to take photos of their research process during the library session and send them to the librarian with comments. If students don’t have a cellphone, ask them to take screenshots. Students can be asked to do this before a library session as well.

Observation
Ask students to save their search history while searching one of the databases or the discovery tool. They can then print it out or take a screenshot and reflect on it.

Reflection
Reflection at the beginning of the library session might include asking students questions such: What is a tool do you normally use for research? Or what worries you about research? Reflection after the library session might ask questions such as: What is one comment or reflection about the research process for you (what you least understood from the session)? What is one important difference between a Google search and a database search? Reflection essays can also be encouraged as part of the in-class process if librarians are willing to ask composition instructors (and other faculty they work with) to include such an exercise at the end of the semester.

Notes


10. Brooklyn College is a baccalaureate college within the City University of New York, a majority-minority serving institution that is the largest public urban university in the United States. In the Fall of 2014 the college enrolled 14,000 undergraduate students and 3000 graduate students with a student body that reflects the astounding diversity of New York City. A few statistics from the Brooklyn College Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment 2014 Student Profile (http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/offices/avpbandp/ipra/enrollment/brooklyncollege2014studentprofile.pdf) illustrate this: 28% White, 19% Hispanic, 19% Black and 16% Asian; 30% of students over age 25; 32% are first generation college students; 58% come from families with an annual household income of less than $40,000 and 32% less than $20,000.
