

# The Hero's Journey in Higher Education: A Twelve Stage Narrative Approach to the Design of Active, Student-Centred University Modules

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## Abstract

*This paper outlines and makes the case for a new, twelve stage narrative approach to the design of university modules. The twelve stages in the narrative approach to module design mirror the twelve stages which comprise the hero's journey in myth and legend, as discussed in the work of Campbell (1993) and Vogler (1985). The purpose of designing a university module to mirror the stages of the hero's journey is twofold. Firstly, it is proposed that the use of a narratively-focused design will lead to a greater sense of satisfaction on the part of those taking the module, because the narrative approach considers, for example, the importance of beginnings and endings, as well as the emotional journey of the participants. Secondly, the narrative approach is constructed to create module designs which are active and student-centred, thus a very strong emphasis is placed on what the students will be doing in each of the stages. Throughout the paper each of the twelve stages is explained, and an example of what the teacher and students might do in each of the stages is given. This narrative approach to module design has been constructed primarily for teachers who would like to design their modules to be more active and student centred, but who are unsure how to go about this and would like a supportive framework within which the module can be designed.*

## Introduction

*"Is your course like a journey, a parable, a game, a museum, a romance, a concerto, an Aristotelian tragedy, an obstacle course, one or all or some of the above?" (Bain, 2004, p.186)*

The purpose of this paper is to outline and present the case for a new, twelve stage narrative approach to the design of university modules. In this paper a module refers to a "self-contained, formally structured unit of study, with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria" (QAA, 2015). The purpose of designing a university module to mirror the stages of the hero's journey is twofold. Firstly, the use of a narratively-focused design may lead to a greater sense of satisfaction on the part of those taking the module, because it takes into account the importance of carefully drawing in the students in at the beginning of the module, and the importance of finishing off the module at the end in order to create a sense of closure. Secondly, the narrative approach is designed to create module designs which are active, participative and student-centred, which is why there is a very strong emphasis placed on what the students will be doing at all stages of the design. Where the narrative approach to module design will have the greatest positive impact is with individuals and course teams who would like to design their modules to be more active and student centred, and who would like a supportive framework within which to design their modules. It is primarily for these teachers that this paper has been written, and it is hoped that they find it interesting, useful, and of value in their practice. Throughout the paper are many references to Bain's (2004) important study on the characteristics and practices of outstanding teachers. However, the narrative approach to module design should not be considered an attempt to create a 'Ken Bain by numbers' approach to module design - something that Bain (2004, p.15) would strongly disapprove of. While numbers, module design, and Bain are present in the paper, there is also considerable latitude for course teams to design modules in the ways that they want. Also, although there is a clear preference for active learning presented in this paper, it needs to be noted that Bain's conclusions about outstanding teaching

transcend much of the recent debate over traditional and innovative approaches to teaching, about passive or active learning, or about a 'sage on the stage' versus a 'guide by the side.' They help explain why some professors stimulate learning using what others would regard as outmoded pedagogies while others fail miserably with the latest rage, and still others do the opposite. They speak to a higher set of considerations that ask not whether one has used the latest technologies and methodologies but about the kind of sustained and substantial influence the teaching has on the way students think, act, or feel (Bain, 2004, p.192).

## Literature review

The hero's journey has been applied to education (and other fields, e.g., counselling (Halstead, 2000; Lawson 2005; Robertson and Lawrence, 2015), teacher-librarianship

(Holmes, 2007), personal development (Gilligan and Dilts, 2009)) many times before, and in various different ways. In education, Follo (2002) uses the hero's journey metaphor to describe female students' challenging experiences of studying on a forestry course in Norway (a traditionally masculine rural occupation), explaining that the metaphor "captures something essential both in the stories the girls narrated and in the way they narrated them" (Follo, 2002, p.303). O'Shea and Stone (2014) use the metaphor to understand the stories of women returning to education, showing how the metaphor can "[open] up the possibility for mature age students in particular to reconceptualise themselves as successful travellers rather than as individuals pummeled by forces beyond their control" (O'Shea and Stone, 2014, p.89). They go on to say that "Making the nature of this journey explicit to first year students may assist them to continue travelling rather than abandoning this journey"(O'Shea and Stone, 2014, p.89). This is an interesting point, and the decision to foreground the hero's journey in educational settings with students is discussed in three academic papers: Simpson and Coombes (2001); Seary and Willans (2004); Goldstein (2005).

Goldstein (2005) discusses a study in which preservice teachers learned about the hero's journey and used the metaphor to reflect on and understand their placement experiences. While Goldstein (2005, p.21) found that the metaphor was useful in helping students reflect on their experiences, what was noteworthy was the way in which the metaphor was more or less successful based on how easily the preservice teachers could identify themselves as heroes. As Goldstein explains, the metaphor "forced them into an inevitable relationship - comfortable or uncomfortable - with the term hero. ... For some students there was no distinction between being on a hero's journey and being a hero ... [while others] loved the hero's journey metaphor, but did not like to think of themselves as heroes" (Goldstein, 2005, p.15). The problems of identifying with the hero arose despite the fact that Goldstein (2005, p.12) explicitly tried to focus students' attention on the hero's journey, rather than on identification with the hero. Goldstein's students were all women, and in order to avoid the traditional male stereotyping associated with the hero myths, Goldstein did not use the work of Campbell (1993) or Vogler (1985: 1998), but focused instead on Noble's (1994) feminist reinterpretation of the hero's journey. Nevertheless, it was gender that often affected students' abilities to see themselves as heroes, and it seemed to be the case that "macho male heroism perpetuated by popular culture was robust and powerful in ... [the] students' thinking about the hero's journey" (Goldstein, 2005, p.19). This suggests that while it may be easier for those acquainted with the hero's journey to see the efforts of their students as heroic, students do not necessarily find it easy to see it that way themselves. This connects strongly with findings discussed later by Bain (2004, pp.26-28 and pp.68-97), who explains that it is hard for people to change their mental models, and that stereotypes, particularly negatives ones, are difficult to escape.

Like Goldstein, both Simpson and Coombes (2001) and Seary and Willans (2004) engaged students directly with the hero's journey metaphor on their pre--undergraduate bridging program for mature students; a course designed to build students' confidence and help

them overcome obstacles that may prevent them from succeeding at university. The hero's journey was used by Simpson and Coombes' students to structure their critical self-reflective journals, and most students "express[ed] surprise that their shared experiences follow a pattern" (Simpson and Coombes, 2001). As they explain, the effect is liberatory, as "those [students] who volunteer for the archetype workshop near the end of the program become aware of the plot lines they are living, and this insight ... can bring a sense of freedom" (Simpson and Coombes, 2001). Also in a similar vein to Goldstein's study is a paper by Randles (2012), who uses the metaphor to frame the journey of apprentice music teachers. Randles presents his paper as a guide for preservice music teachers, one that is designed to support them through the transition from their undergraduate studies and role of musician-as-performer, to their teaching apprenticeship and role as musician-as-teacher.

As well as various papers on the subject, there are also at least two books which bring the hero's journey into the field of education; Mayes (2010) and Brown and Moffett (1999). In their book, Brown and Moffett view educators as heroes, "immersed in a quest to help our schools and school systems respond to the increasingly complex demands of the world of the Information Age. ... The object of our quest ... [being] the capacity to initiate, support and sustain meaningful educational change" (Brown and Moffett, 1999, p.3). This view of the teacher-as-hero contrasts with the views of Goldstein's (2005) students, many of whom often found it difficult to view teaching as a heroic endeavour. Mayes (2010) brings the Jungian origins of the hero's journey to the fore, and, rather than bringing the hero's journey into education, Mayes would argue that one does not need to do anything of the sort because the hero's journey is, fundamentally, already an educational journey. As he explains, the hero's journey is not "just a charming and action-packed story ... Ultimately it is a symbol. What it symbolizes is the emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth of the individual as he or she goes beyond the narrow confines of the family and immediate environment in order to seek, find, and ultimately act on a new vision of self, society, world and cosmos" (Mayes, 2010, p.11). As will be seen in the forthcoming discussion section of this paper, Mayes' thoughts bear a striking resemblance to Bain's findings, especially the views that outstanding teachers understand education as being a process of helping students to develop new mental models of reality (Bain, 2004, pp.26-28), and that the best teachers had "a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel" (Bain, 2004, p.5). Education for both Bain and Mayes is about changing *how* students think, not just changing *what* they think, and is about changing the way they *act* in the world as much as it is about changing the way they *see* the world.

If the student is the hero on the hero's journey, the mentor may seem to be the most obvious role for the teacher; indeed, that is the role assigned to the teacher in this paper. However, it is not universally agreed that this is the only, or even the best, role for them. One of the more interesting applications of mythic structure to teaching and learning is from Parks (1996) and from Davis and Weeden (2009) who argue the case for considering the teacher as trickster. This can be a very attractive role for teachers, especially to those who are "open to improvising, to risking disorder, to threatening boundaries" (Parks, 1996).

While Parks presents the trickster as one of a number of possible roles for the teacher, Davis and Weeden (2009, p.79) go further and claim that, "teachers do not really have the choice whether to be tricksters or not." They go on to say that, "by acknowledging our inevitable trickster role, we (i) accept that we cause frustration, we (ii) take advantage of that frustration, and we (iii) gain the awareness that we can accomplish what tricksters do in stories: changing the world, making it a better place for humankind" (Davis and Weeden, 2009, p.79). As will be shown, Bain (2004) would not necessarily argue with the teacher-as-trickster approach, as creating problems for students to solve can be a highly effective way of teaching. As he says, "Human beings are curious animals. People learn naturally while trying to solve problems that concern them" (Bain, 2004, p.46).

In conclusion, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the archetypal hero's journey and the educational journey of students are highly compatible, and even that they are deeply interlinked and intertwined in many ways. As Mayes (2010, p.11) explains, "Looking at teaching and learning as an archetypal Hero's Journey is a good way of talking about education in its psychological and spiritual depths because the Hero's Journey is fundamentally an educative one." While this was revealed in various different ways in the literature, the general approach of the literature was to show that students' experiences could be (mostly) successfully understood in relation to the hero's journey metaphor. With the exception of Doig (2015) whose poster presentation initiated this paper (see acknowledgments), there was no research specifically about using the hero's journey to design a course of study, although Goldstein (2005, p.21) does make such a suggestion in conclusion of her paper. Therefore this paper will offer an addition to the current literature on the hero's journey in education, showing as it does that one can begin with the hero's journey, and consciously use the stages of the journey to create an overarching (or underlying) framework which could be used by different subjects and disciplines when designing modules. Care should be taken, however, to avoid any suggestion that students should try and identify with the hero, because this may mean that students who do not feel that they fit the traditional, stereotypical model of the hero will become easily disenfranchised. As Goldstein (2005) made clear, there are strong sexist undercurrents at work in the hero myth, and the hero's journey needs to be detached from shallow, individualistic notions of macho male heroism. Thus, a successful approach to module design will be one which focuses on the hero's journey, rather than on the hero, and one which emphasises the highly collaborative nature of the hero's journey and the various allies that provide vital support on that journey.

## **Method**

According to Bassey (1992; 1995) there are three realms of educational research: empirical, reflective; creative. This paper is an example of creative research, which Bassey (1992, p.5) describes as educational research focused on "the devising of new systems, the development of novel solutions, and the formulation of new ideas, by systematic and critical enquiry." Bassey goes on to say that creative research is not always able to be subjected to

rigorous empirical evaluation, and, perhaps for this reason alone, it is sometimes not seen as research. However, he argues that the creative approach can justly be considered research, provided that it has met the criteria of being carried out critically and systematically.

In order to meet Bassey's criteria of being critical and systematic, the following method will be used when devising of the narrative approach to module design. The research will begin by outlining the twelve stages of the hero's journey. This will be followed by a proposal, setting out the particular educational emphasis for each of the twelve stages. Each stage will, as far as is appropriate, contain suggestions for practice. However, rather than choosing or devising activities that conveniently fit into the structure, each activity chosen will be required to have been shown to be good educational practice. And to counter the argument that it would be possible to choose any activity that conveniently fits into the structure and then to find old or obscure research to support its use, the discussion following the proposal will justify each section in relation to a small number of recent, high quality publications on teaching and learning in higher education. In particular Bain (2004) will be heavily relied upon, but also included will be Biggs and Tang (2011), hooks (2003; 2010), and Race (2015). By ensuring the educational validity of each of the twelve stages, this will help to support the validity of the twelve stage approach itself.

### **Outline of the hero's journey**

The narrative approach to module design presented here has its roots in the work of Campbell (1993), and Vogler (1985; 1998). The purpose of Campbell's work was to show that myths, while being different in outward appearance, share a common underlying structural framework. Vogler's purpose was to promote Campbell's ideas to writers, particularly Hollywood scriptwriters, and to show them that understanding the underlying structure of the great myths and legends would improve their storytelling abilities. This underlying mythic structure is known as the monomyth, or the hero's journey. The hero's journey follows a twelve part structure in which the hero is taken from their ordinary world, through a special world, and back to their ordinary world again (see Figure 1). The hero encounters many obstacles on the journey, and returns to the ordinary world transformed, and often with some kind of magical boon. The hero is introduced to us in their ordinary, everyday world (stage i). A call to adventure is heard (stage ii), which is then refused (stage iii). The hero meets their mentor, who encourages them to accept the call to adventure (stage iv). The hero then crosses the threshold into the special world (stage v), where they find allies, encounter enemies and are tested in various ways (stage vi). They journey deep into the special world, eventually coming to the innermost cave (stage vii), where they endure the ordeal (stage viii). Having survived the ordeal, they are rewarded (stage ix) and start on the road back to the special world (stage x). On the road back the hero encounters the final and often most dangerous series of tests, often surviving a close encounter with death in which they are symbolically resurrected (stage xi).

Finally the hero returns to back to their ordinary world, transformed by their journey, usually bearing magical treasures (stage xii).

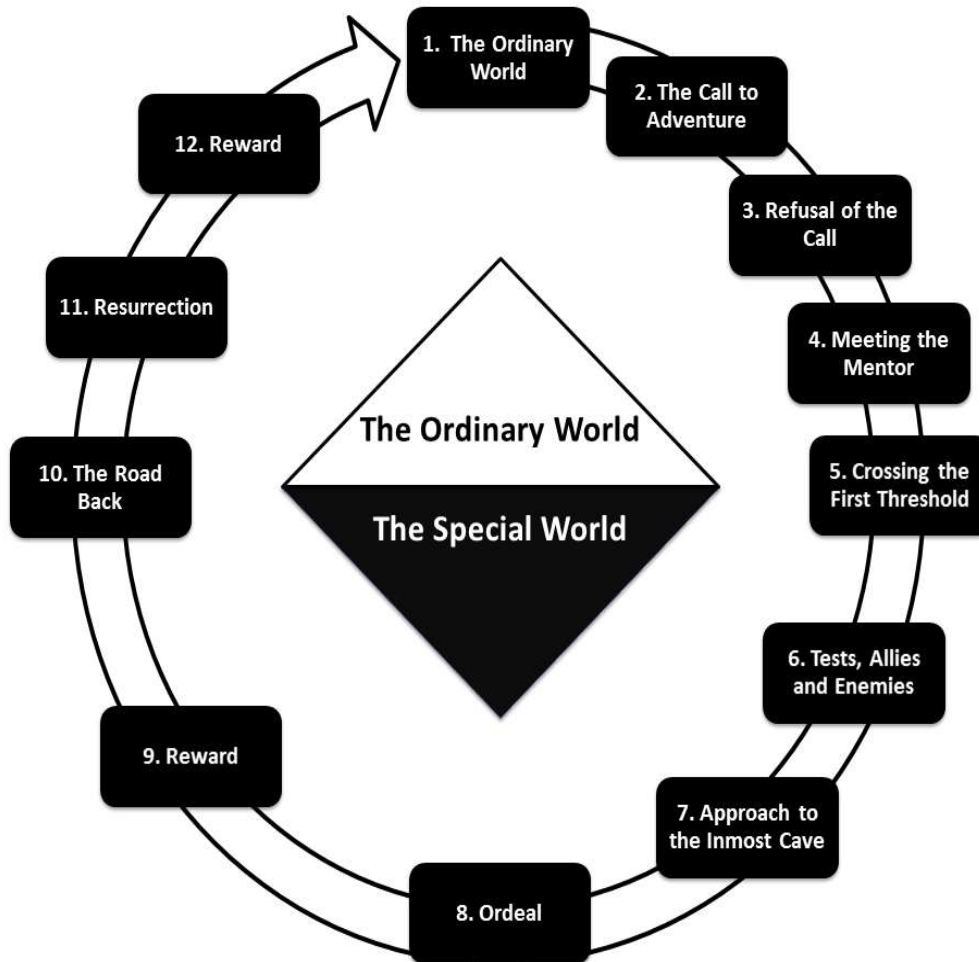


Figure 1: The hero's journey

### Proposal for the narrative approach to module design

<b><u>Stages of the Hero's Journey</u></b>	<b><u>Learning and Teaching Activities</u></b>
i) The hero is introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD	<b>Establishing</b> the foundations upon which a community of learning can be built. Getting to know one another. Creating a safe and supportive learning environment.
ii) The CALL TO ADVENTURE	<b>Inviting</b> students to study. 'Selling' the course and the way that it will be taught. Seeking commitments and explaining what is expected of students. Explaining the promise of the module, the aims and purpose of the module, what will be learned, how the module will be taught. Discussing the learning outcomes and module assessments.
iii) The hero is reluctant at first (REFUSAL OF THE CALL)	<b>Listening</b> to students' hopes and fears for the module. Encouraging students to ask questions and voice their concerns. Learning incomes.
iv) The hero is encouraged by the Wise Old Man or Woman (MEETING WITH THE MENTOR)	<b>Motivating</b> , reassuring and encouraging students by responding to their fears and concerns.
v) The hero passes the first threshold (CROSSING THE THRESHOLD)	<b>Beginning</b> the teaching and learning.
vi) The hero encounters tests and helpers (TESTS, ALLIES, ENEMIES)	<b>Introducing</b> students to the subject via a series of short, formative tasks, tests and rapid feedback. Challenging students' mental models of reality. Tutor and peer feedback. Group tasks and collective feedback. Self-assessment and self-evaluation. Introducing students to support services.
vii) The hero reaches the innermost cave (APPROACH TO THE INMOST CAVE)	<b>Preparing</b> students for the mid-module assessment.
viii) The hero endures the supreme ORDEAL	<b>Assessing</b> how well the students are doing. Assessment <i>of</i> learning and assessment <i>for</i> learning. Completing the mid-module assessment.
ix) The hero seizes the sword (SEIZING THE SWORD, REWARD)	<b>Engaging</b> students in tasks that require them to make use of the feedback and feed forward from the mid-module summative assessment.
x) THE ROAD BACK	<b>Developing</b> students' autonomy and independence. Teachers take a step back and devise activities that encourage students to be more autonomous. Preparing students for the final assessment. Students undertake the final assessment.



xi) RESURRECTION	<b>Completing</b> the teaching, learning and assessment and returning to the ordinary world.
xii) RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR	<b>Reflecting</b> and reviewing. Post-module discussion and review with students. Module evaluation. Personal development planning.

Table 1: Summary of the twelve stages in the narrative approach to module design

## Discussion of the narrative approach to module design

### ***i) The hero is introduced in her ORDINARY WORLD***

When students begin a university module they embark on a journey to a special world, a world that is not entirely familiar to them. They begin the module without the full range of words, concepts, knowledge, skills and abilities that they need to successfully navigate through this new terrain. From the teacher's perspective it is helpful to understand the students in their ordinary world, as they will bring their own experiences, abilities and attitudes to learning to the classroom. Practically speaking, this is the point in the module where the teacher and the students get to know one another, and which will involve various 'getting to know you' activities.

When she began teaching, hooks (2010, pp.19-22) explains that, like many teachers, her main concern was about covering the content. However, she noticed that when she did make time for everyone to get to know one another, "the classroom energy was more positive and more conducive to learning" (hooks, 2010, p.20). This process of getting acquainted eventually became the way she began all classes, and, as she explains, "after more than thirty years in classrooms, I do not begin to teach in any setting without first laying the foundation for building community in the classroom. To do this it is essential that teacher and students take the time to get to know one another" (hooks, 2010, p.20). Holmes (2013), a winner Goergen Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, also underlines the importance of establishing relationships with students. Discussing the transformation of his teaching practice he says that, "I began to appreciate something that Tolstoy said - that the key to education lies in the teacher's *relation* to the students. That relation involves an interaction. A connection has to be made" (Holmes, 2013, p.240). Getting to know their students is also something that many of Bain's outstanding teachers did. Bain records various examples of this (2004, pp.157-8), from teachers conducting exercises with students to find where their talents are, to getting students to rank their interest in the course questions, to informal discussions before and after class, to regularly going to lunch with students. There were many ways in which information about students was gathered, but as Bain (2004, p.158) makes clear, "the best teachers seemed to gather that information not to judge but to help."

## ***ii) The CALL TO ADVENTURE***

The students are presented with a problem, challenge or adventure. This is the new subject that they are required to understand, the new skills they have to master, and the new knowledge that they need to make sense of and incorporate into their existing knowledge structures. In practice, this point in the journey will be about presenting the module to the students – setting out the aims and purpose, what they will learn, how they will be taught, what is expected of them, the intended learning outcomes and the assessments. It may be about explaining the dangers and likely pitfalls that may crop up on the adventure, but there should be a strong focus on the rewards of the journey too. Bain (2004) stresses that the key thing to do at this point in the journey is to offer students an invitation to study, rather than to issue a set of commands. He tells us that the best teachers, "Invite, rather than command, and often display the attributes of someone inviting colleagues to dinner rather than the demeanour of a bailiff summoning someone to court ... Rather than laying out a set of requirements for students they usually talk about the promises of the [module]" (Bain, 2004, p.37). McCormick (cited in Bain, 2004, p.39) explains that "On the first day of all my courses ... I devote some time to the promised 'payoff', connecting the course themes or required skills to issues or interest likely to be on their minds." And Wiltshire (cited in Bain, 2004, p.79) says that she views her classes "like a great meal she had prepared, and she simply wished to invite her students to the dinner table." Ultimately, says Bain (2004, p79), "While others might confront students with the grit of a drill sergeant or as if they were challenging them to a duel, the best teachers offered biscuits and grits for every class." This inviting, friendly, non-authoritarian approach is also recommended by hooks (2003, pp.43) who reminds us that "authoritarianism in the classroom dehumanizes and this shuts down the 'magic' that is always present when individuals are active learners. It takes the 'fun out of study' and makes it repressive and oppressive."

An important consideration when inviting students to study is that it can also be useful to explain, and even to 'sell' the pedagogical strategies adopted for the module, especially where they might not be what the students are expecting. In higher education there is an increasing amount of evidence to suggest that lectures are ineffective, so much so that a study on the benefits of active learning by Freeman, et al (2014) led Mazur (cited in Bajak, 2014) to argue that it was "almost unethical to be lecturing." Given that students may be expecting a traditional lecture/seminar format, it can be helpful to 'sell' the benefits of the active learning strategies that Freeman, et al (2014) suggest, rather than to assume that students will adopt the view that 'teacher knows best.' For example, York Law School (n.d.) and Hull York Medical School (2012) both took this approach when adopting Problem-Based Learning (PBL), and provide their students with very comprehensive guides to PBL, which explain the process and its benefits of the approach. Similar ideas may be of benefit to teachers using other active approaches, such as Team-based Learning (Michaelsen, et al, 2004) and Peer Instruction (Mazur, 1996). In his discussion of student ratings of modules, Bain (2004, pp.165-166) discusses the problems that arise when there is a mismatch between what the students expect of the class and what the teachers have planned for the

class. With outstanding teachers, who tend to use active learning techniques, the problems occur when students are expecting a module in which learning is measured by the ability to memorise and recall. Excellent teachers, Bain tells us (2004, p.166) feel it is important to change such students ideas of what it means to learn. As one of Bain's outstanding teachers explains, "In the end, if they give me low marks [in the end-of-module survey] it's because I've failed to affect their concepts of what it means to learn my discipline" (Bain, 2004, p.166). In full fairness to Bain (2004, pp.98-99) it should be noted that while he is certainly in favour of active learning, he is not anti-lecture, and does provide examples of outstanding teaches using lectures very effectively, although he does state that "We found no great teachers who relied solely on lectures, not even highly gifted ones" (Bain, 2004, p.107).

In the final part of stage ii), it is important to seek commitments from students. Although students will have received a friendly invitation to study, taking up that invitation involves students making a serious commitment, and the nature of that commitment needs to be made clear. As Bain explains

Exceptional teachers ask their students for a commitment to the class and the learning. ... They ask students to decide if they really want to pursue the learning objectives in the manner described. Others spell out specific obligations they see as part of the decision to join the class. 'I tell my students the first day of class that the decision to take the class is the decision to attend the class every time it meets' ... 'I also tell them that my decision to teach the class includes the commitment to offer sessions worth attending, and I ask them to let me know if they think I'm not doing that'" (Bain, 2004, p113).

### ***iii) The hero is reluctant at first (REFUSAL OF THE CALL)***

Often at this point the students balk at the threshold of learning. They have been given an invitation, but one which requires a serious commitment. This stage in the module will follow on quickly from the previous stage, and can be initiated by discussing the module with students. Students are unlikely to explicitly refuse the call, but getting them to ask questions and discuss any concerns may help them to approach the journey with more confidence. Such activities are also useful in helping the teacher get to know the new students, and may help in making judgements about how to approach teaching the new cohort. If stage i) is about everybody getting to know one another as people, then stage iii) is about getting to know the students as students. As Race (2015, p.5) explains, "I like nowadays to think of 'learning incomes' as well as learning outcomes. The more we know about what our students can already do, where they've already been, their hopes, fears and hang-ups, the better we can help them to learn." What students bring to class can be a double-edged sword though. Bain (2004, pp.22-30) explains that the most successful teachers do not view themselves as depositing knowledge into students knowledge banks, rather they see themselves as assisting students to construct new mental models of reality. The problem is that building new mental models is both difficult and slow, and people are often unwilling to

give up their pre-existing mental models of reality without a struggle. As Billings (cited in Bain, 2004, p.27) explains "The trouble with people is not that they don't know but that they know so much that ain't so."

#### ***iv) The hero is encouraged by the Wise Old Man or Woman (MEETING WITH THE MENTOR)***

By this time the students will have met their mentor, in this case their teacher (cf. Parks, 1996; Davis and Weeden, 2009) The mentor can only accompany the students for part of their journey, and eventually the students will have to stand on their own and demonstrate understanding by themselves. The teacher cannot make the students learn, and ultimately the students must accept the challenge of education themselves. Nevertheless, the mentor plays an important role in encouraging, advising, guiding and supporting their students in the early stages of their journey. On a practical level, this point in the module will be the teacher's responses to the discussion with students initiated in the previous stage; explaining, reassuring, and preparing the students to cross the threshold into the special world. In essence, stage iv) is about motivation, and it is helpful here to bear in mind the two most important factors that are likely to motivate the students to want to learn: (1) that what is to be learned is valuable or important; and (2) that they stand a very good chance of being able to learn it. "Both the high value and the expectancy of success need to be present; if either one is zero then no motivated activity occurs" (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p.35). Bain (2004, pp.32-42) also offers useful advice about motivation, and cautions against the use of extrinsic rewards as motivators, arguing that when the extrinsic rewards are removed, as ultimately they must be, those students will end up using "use less logical and efficient procedures than will students who never had the external incentive" (2004, p.34). As he explains, it has been "consistently found that most extrinsic motivators damage intrinsic motivation" (Bain, 2004, p.33).

#### ***v) The hero passes the first threshold (CROSSING THE THRESHOLD)***

The students' journey across the threshold into the special world happens fairly quickly. In practical terms the crossing of the threshold is in part a matter of university regulations which stipulate the latest point at which a student may enter or leave a module. For the sake of both the teacher and the students this needs to be a short enough time to minimise any disruption to the formation of the learning community. But the threshold can be considered more importantly as a psychological gateway, the crossing of which happens when the actual teaching and learning activities begin. While in some cases teachers may prefer simply get on with things, to maximise the time required to 'cover the content' and to begin the module and the teaching simultaneously, the narrative approach to module design recommends laying the foundations first, by completing stages i) through iv) prior to beginning the teaching of the actual subject.

### ***vi) The hero encounters tests and helpers (TESTS, ALLIES, ENEMIES)***

The students will make allies and find enemies in the special world, and will need to encounter tests and challenges in stage vi) that will prepare them for the rest of the journey. They will encounter difficult theoretical ideas that they need to process, difficult skills that they need to master, and will need to deal with threshold concepts the understanding of which is crucial for them to progress. The tests they meet along the way will take various forms: they may be the activities devised by the teacher to help break down difficult concepts or demystify skills; they may be the problems that the teachers devise which require them to call into question their existing mental models. What those tests shouldn't do, according to Bain (2004, p.41), is encourage a 'bulimic' approach to education, where students are force-fed an excessive number of facts to be memorised and recalled on demand; facts which are then 'purged' after the final module assessment.

Students' allies may be classmates who are all having similar experiences and who can learn from each other. But their allies will also be their personal academic tutors and the various support staff who work at the university - the academic librarians, learning technologists, learning developers and study skills experts, etc. This early part of the journey is the ideal place in which to introduce students to the wide range of support services available to them, and here the module may be designed in such a way as to bring students and support staff together. The students have many allies to help them on their journey and they both need to understand this. As Noble explains, while we may grow up with the idea that heroes have only themselves to rely on, the truth of the matter is that "heroes are aided by allies at critical junctures all along the way and that without such help their quests could not possibly succeed" (Noble, 1994, p.109).

Finally, and while it may sound trite, the students' enemies may be themselves; or, at least, negative conceptions or stereotypes of themselves. In his study, Bain (2004, 68-97) gives compelling evidence as to the power of negative stereotypes to adversely impact the ability of students to be successful learners. Students who are the victims of negative stereotypes (i.e. the misguided beliefs that one's ethnicity or gender determines one's ability to be successful in certain academic and other areas of life) were negatively affected by that stereotype, even when they were aware of the stereotype and were consciously resisting it. As Bain explains, when facing a difficult task "the negative stereotype adds a level of anxiety that others do not face, and the resulting stress slows and harms performance, which in turn produces even more anguish, causing additional reminders, and so forth" (Bain, 2004, p.69).

Stage vi) of the journey will comprise the largest part of the first half of the module. This part of the journey is about the students getting to grips with the new subject and learning the skills, theories and ideas that they will start to weave together later on in the module. As well as learning who their allies and enemies are, the hero normally encounters a series of short tests during this stage of the journey. These are designed to allow the hero to become

familiar with the rules of the special world, and to build confidence for the next stage. In terms of practical teaching and learning activities this stage will be about a series of short, formative tasks, tests and rapid feedback. Formative assessment of learning is vital at this stage, but it should not entirely comprise teacher feedback. Peer review, feedback, and self-assessment will all be useful here. Encouraging students to self-assess is important because "If the teacher always assesses how well the student is doing and never allows the student to self-assess, the student lets it go at that and consequently doesn't see the need for, or acquire the skills of, reflection" (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p.61). When preparing for this part of the module, some of the questions that teachers may ask are, "Can I arrange for students to provide meaningful feedback to each other? ... Can I arrange for other people (for example, graduate students or people who took the class last year) to provide feedback? Can I use class time for students to work on problems in groups and then offer them collective feedback?" (Bain, 2004, p.58).

Because stages vi) and x) comprise the substantial teaching sections of the journey, it is important to avoid two situations which could occur. The first is to cover half of the content in stage vi) and the other half in stage x). The second is to deliver the knowledge in stage vi) and then use stage x) to apply that knowledge. According to Bain it would be a mistake to use either of these approaches. The first situation is problematic because teachers who conceptualised teaching along the lines of the banking model, "to put it gently, had difficulty fostering learning" (Bain, 2004, p.29). However, the second situation does seem to make sense: surely it is sensible to assume that students cannot put knowledge to work before they are in possession of that knowledge? Apparently not. The outstanding teachers in Bain's study believed "that students must learn the facts *while* learning to use them to make decisions about what they understand or what they should do. ... So they teach the 'facts' in a rich context of problems, issues, and questions" (Bain, 2004, p.29).

### ***vii) The hero reaches the innermost cave (APPROACH TO THE INMOST CAVE)***

The students come at last to the place where the object of their quest is hidden. This point in the journey is not the point of final assessment though, nor is it the most difficult part of the module, rather it is the lead up to the first major assessment. In terms of teaching and learning, this stage of the journey will be fairly short, and primarily focused on ensuring that the students are sufficiently prepared and motivated for their first major assessment.

### ***viii) The hero endures the supreme ORDEAL***

This is the moment at which the students reach their lowest point in the journey, and is where they face their first major assessment. While there is not the space here to go into assessment in depth, it is worth noting some key issues about what makes an effective assessment. Bain (2004, pp.151-163) discusses the issue of assessment at some length, and

explains two broad approaches; the performance approach, and the learning-centred approach. The former approach is primarily about separating “the sheep from the goats” ... [it is] “a way to certify, to pick the best and brightest” (Bain, 2004, pp.152). However, the outstanding teachers who use the learning-centred approach conceptualised assessment as a way to measure learning, rather than as a way to judge performance. While this may seem to be a rather fine-grained distinction, it is most readily apparent in teachers’ attitudes to grading, in their use of feedback, and in the way they deal with late submissions. Many of Bain’s outstanding teachers took time to explain to students “the kind of thinking expected for each letter grade ... What kind of abstract reasoning abilities must students develop? What must they come to understand? How must they apply that understanding?” (Bain, 2004, p.155 and p.160). Students were thus graded according to the quality of their thinking, rather than on what and how much they could remember. Bain’s outstanding teachers also “tended to have a strong sense of humility when it came to grades” (Bain, 2004, p.162), and many appeared to have a sense of fallibility when it came to grading. Additionally, while constructive feedback was lacking with teachers who saw grading simply as a matter of judging performance, this was not the case with outstanding teachers, as they were creating a system where students “can try, come up short, receive feedback on their efforts, and try again on a subsequent examination” (Bain, 2004, p.161). And, finally, while teachers who were judging performance viewed penalties for late submission as another way of ‘separating the sheep from the goats’, outstanding teachers were considerably less keen to penalise students for making late submissions, on the grounds that they were assessing students’ abilities to think, not to submit work to deadlines.

### ***ix) The hero seizes the sword (SEIZING THE SWORD, REWARD)***

Having survived the ordeal, the students now take possession of the treasure – in this case it is to be hoped that the treasure that they have won is a pass in their first assessment, but the more valuable treasure is the feedback and feed forward (Ferrell and Gray, 2016) that will assist them during the next, and most difficult, stage of the module - the road back. At this point in the journey hopefully the students are enjoying a sense of accomplishment, and are prepared to begin their journey out of the special world. Nevertheless, regardless of whether they have passed or failed the assessment, all students will need the feedback and feed forward from the ‘ordeal’ assessment to help them find their way out of the special world. Ideally this assessment will be designed so that personal feedback, feed forward and grades can be returned quickly to the students, in order that they may be of maximum benefit to them in the later stages of the module. In many ways the personal feedback and feed forward from the ‘ordeal’ assessment is more important than the feedback from the end of module assessment, because it is here, just after the ordeal, where it can be immediately acted on and where students who are straying off track can be assisted. On a practical level, one of the most valuable activities that can be undertaken here is to devise an activity that requires students to engage with and make use of the summative feedback and feed forward that they have received.

### ***x) THE ROAD BACK***

The students are not out of the woods yet. The road back is the most difficult and perilous part of the hero's journey, and here students must fully demonstrate their abilities to meet the learning objectives that precipitated their journey into the special world. On the road back they will meet the final exams, or the major essay, or project upon which their mettle will be tested. Just as stage vi) comprised the major part of the first half of the students' journey, stage x) will take up the majority of the second half of the journey. Conceptually, the difference between stage vi) (the first major teaching block) and stage x) (the second major teaching block) is as follows. Stage vi) of the hero's journey is about the hero learning skills usually in isolation and under the close watch of the mentor. The tests are often safe and staged, and the mentor is close at hand to offer advice. Stage x) of the hero's journey is more often about students using all the skills together in an authentic context - using them in the real world where the mentor is less able to step in and pull the hero out of danger.

By this stage of the journey the hero has usually become more resilient and is consequently less reliant on the mentor. Therefore the design of this stage of the module can work by putting the students more in charge of their own learning than they were during stage vi). In first-year undergraduate modules, perhaps the teacher will act as more of a sage prior to the ordeal, but will be more of a guide afterwards. In the following years they may begin as a guide, but then become more of a trickster later in the year. Such designs will involve the mentor moving from guiding students towards knowledge, to problematising knowledge. Alternatively, before the ordeal the teacher may focus on what they think it is important to learn, whereas after the ordeal it may be up to the students what is learned (and, maybe, how it is learned). There might be a move from the didactic to the Socratic, or even a complete rejection of teacher-centred content after the ordeal. Nevertheless, and regardless of how it is conceptualised, what is important in this stage of the design of the module is increasing the students' autonomy and the complexity of the tasks. The students begin the road back with feedback and feed forward from the ordeal, and with increasing self-reliance when it comes to their learning. They are then well placed to take on the final tests, exams, projects, etc., the completion of which will allow them back into the ordinary world.

### ***xi) RESURRECTION***

The students complete their final assessment, and resurrection is the point immediately after completion where they emerge from the special world, transformed by their experiences. They emerge anew, and can begin to view a world that is different, one which appears more subtle and more complex than it once did. It may be thought that because stage xi) marks the end of teaching that this stage also marks the end of the module. However, just as the narrative approach to module design requires completing stages i) through iv) prior to the commencement of teaching, so it also recommends stage xii) to be completed after the teaching.



## ***xii) RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR***

This final part of the journey will be about review and reflection, and it is an important part of the cycle for both students and teacher. For students, they may require some support to make the most of their educational experiences, and they may benefit from taking part in a process of review and reflection as part of an institutional Personal Development Planning (PDP) process (QAA, 2009). One of the key aims of PDP is to make learners more aware of their own abilities to grow and develop as learners and to dispel any ideas that one's ability to learn is innate or fixed. On this subject, Bain, when discussing the work of Carol Dweck, explains that "people who believe intelligence is fixed often develop a sense of helplessness, while those who believe that it is expandable with hard work are more likely to succeed" (Bain, 2004, p.174). PDP exists to help students achieve greater mastery of the learning process by making the processes by which they learn more transparent. PDP often takes the form of a series of structured activities (often structured around a model such as Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle) which encourage students to gather evidence about their abilities and their learning experiences, to reflect on such evidence, to set goals and create action plans, and to monitor one's own progress. Such processes can "enhance the capacity of learners to reflect, plan and take responsibility for their own learning and to understand what and how they learn" (QAA, 2009, p.5). An end-of-module self assessment is something than many of Bain's outstanding teachers did. As he explains, "One frequently used model requests that they [students] provide evidence and conclusion about the nature of their learning. At the end of the semester, they write an argument of 750 to 1,500 words demonstrating how well they can measure the reasoning in process and recognize where it is strong and where it needs improvement" (Bain, 2004, p.163).

## **Conclusion**

The idea that one might apply the hero's journey in an educational context is not new. This is not surprising given that education and the hero's journey are both transformative experiences, and that learning, knowledge and experience are all examples of elixirs that heroes bring back from their journey. While learning nothing from the journey can and does happen, Vogler (1985) suggests that this is usually one of the tropes of comedy, where the "foolish character refuses to learn his lesson and embarks on the same folly that got him in trouble in the first place." Putting grades and the passing or failing of modules to one side for a moment, it may be said that the only real educational failure is not to have learned something when the opportunity to do so was available.

What is new and distinctive about the narrative approach to module design presented in this paper is that it shows that it is possible to design a university module using the twelve stages of the hero's journey to frame the design. The narrative approach as described above strongly supports the idea that learning is not simply a process of dispassionately acquiring and filing away discrete packets of knowledge, but is a process by which characters are formed and in which individuals come to gain greater understanding of their subject and themselves on the journey. It shows how journeying through a university module is a rich

and multi-layered where mental models of reality are challenged and changed, and where new ways of thinking become new ways of acting and and new ways of being.

Finally, and to return to Bassey (1992; 1995), he explains that the main problem with creative research is that it is not usually able to be subjected to rigorous empirical evaluation, and this is certainly the case here. Creative research may be considered research if it has been carried out systematically and critically, and hopefully readers will feel that this has been the case. However, the main test of the ideas contained in this paper will be whether anyone finds them helpful and useful in the design of actual university modules. If they do, or if they do not, they are warmly invited to get in touch with the author.

### **Acknowledgements**

Very special thanks are due to Andrew Doig, whose work (Doig, 2015) enabled me to write this paper, as it was Andrew who first suggested that it might be possible to apply the hero's journey to module design. Although I was involved in module design, and was familiar with the work of both Campbell and Vogler, it had never occurred to me to put the two things together before. Andrew has been extremely supportive and encouraging about this paper.

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