

STEPS: SUCCESSFUL PATHWAYS, PARTNERS, AND PEDAGOGIES

Geoff Danaher, Julie Willans, Lyn Forbes-Smith, and Muriel Strahm
Central Queensland University

ABSTRACT

The authors, lecturers within the STEPS bridging program for adult learners at Central Queensland University, reflect upon the pedagogical styles, different forms of partnership, and pathways that shape their students in becoming successful undergraduates. We draw upon multiple theories of learning and student voices to explore the steps they make.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to invoke the conference themes of pathways, partners, and pedagogies to explore the lifelong learning attributes fostered within the STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) preparatory program at Central Queensland University (CQU). Concepts associated with pathways, partners, and pedagogies are deployed both as organizing principles and rich metaphors to make sense of the learning journeys of these adult learners. In engaging with the conference themes in these ways, we aim to show that the STEPS program provides a vision of transformative learning theory being put into practice.

Briefly, transformative learning occurs when an individual has reflected on longheld assumptions or expectations, has found these assumptions to be faulty or questionable, and has revised them (Cranton, 1996, p. 2). So the focus is on personal reflection on taken-for-granted premises about education that leads to transformations in meaning perspectives and ways of seeing the world, freeing a person of the forces that have limited his or her options. Through reflective practices such as journaling and story-telling, and engaging with Jungian archetypes that enable them to connect their personal experiences with universal themes, many STEPS students are able to overcome negative perceptions of learning and to transform the value they place on education and their place within it.

This paper begins with some contextual information about the program, followed by a discussion of the transformative learning practices underpinning the pedagogy. We then consider the role that generating productive partnerships plays in the program, leading to a discussion of how the compilation of the "Hero's Journey" narratives helps students develop a self-reflexive approach to learning.

CONTEXT

STEPS is a fully funded academic program that was initiated by the Commonwealth government. There is no cost to the students enrolled in the program, and it has been operating at CQU since 1986. Designed originally to provide some form of equity for socially and economically disadvantaged groups within the Central Queensland region, today it is offered as a preparatory program for undergraduate university education. STEPS provides courses in academic writing, mathematics, computer skills, and tertiary preparatory studies. Most of the adult learners who engage in the program failed to complete secondary schooling to Year 12, and, in general, their perception of their school experience is negative. Many tended to feel alienated from the values, protocols, and procedures of formal schooling, and previously showed little interest in post-compulsory education. They opted for a trade, job, parenthood, or unemployment as soon as possible upon leaving school. Their return to an educational environment might have been provoked by a variety of factors including unemployment, family breakdown, or a renewed interest in formal learning.

The purpose of the STEPS program is to assist adult learners in developing the academic skills, attitudes, and values required to enhance their chances of becoming successful undergraduates. The program operates over a twelve week (full-time) or twenty-four week (part-time) period. Yearly, the program reaches over 400 internal students on the domestic CQU campuses of Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone, Mackay, and Rockhampton, as well as catering for external learners. Such a program is particularly important in the context of the Central Queensland region, given that the region has a proportionately low level of adults in possession of tertiary qualifications. While figures from the 1996 census show that the regional higher education graduate rate stood at 4.8% for the

Fitzroy Statistical Division, which covers much of Central Queensland, this was significantly lower than the national average of 8.2%, as measured by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in 2001 (McConachie and Simpson, 2003).

PEDAGOGIES

The tenets of transformative learning inform the pedagogy in the STEPS program. Coupled with the principles of adult learning theory, as espoused by Knowles (1998) (Foley (2000), Cranton (1998), Mezirow (2000), and Merriam & Cafarella (1999), the “Language and Learning” curriculum actively encourages students to question previously held perspectives about various contemporary societal issues and other issues, and to consider new perspectives or ways of theorising about these issues. Caine, Caine, and Crowells’ (1996) principles of brain-based learning underpin many learning strategies suggested to the students and, similarly, whole-brain thinking activities such as mind mapping, fast writes, and clustering (Rico, 1983) are frequent practices used to promote a broader perspective for learning. From the outset of the program, students are encouraged to write from within, a challenge for many as it has been a considerable time since penning thoughts was practised. Prior negative learning experiences often impede this process, but through encouragement and largely non-judgmental feedback, many students find their inner voice and the writing process is able to flourish. This new or renewed confidence in many ways paves the way for the more academic writing that follows.

Complementing the Language and Learning curriculum is the “Tertiary Preparatory Skills” (TPS) course in which one of the first activities the students engage in is the discovery of learning styles and temperament types. For many, this new knowledge can be quite liberating in that strategies to address shortcomings, coupled with the knowledge of how to capitalise on strengths, can provide the missing key to more effective learning. Pedagogically, this knowledge provides a firm basis on which teachers can focus their teaching to ensure all learning styles are catered for, and to encourage students to become independent, self-directed learners who take increasing levels of responsibility for their learning. In addition, the students’ myriad life experiences and prior learning are valued and built upon. Transformations occur in terms of how students perceive themselves as learners, for they come

to understand that the perspectives they previously held, often no longer apply. As their self-assurance increases throughout the program, many students become empowered and more confident. This is often reflected in their written work and oral communication. Furthermore, this process of empowerment is greatly enhanced by the partnerships students develop during the program.

PARTNERS

In their quest for facilitating the development of independent, lifelong learners, the authors believe that learning communities (Cohen, 1986; Johnson and Johnson, 1994; Kagan, 1994; Sharan and Sharan, 1992, Tinto, 1975) and reflection about learning (Bellanca, 1992; Cohen, 1986; Hubert and Eppler, 1990; Kagan, 1994) influence student progress. In a cooperative learning environment, people learn together – both with and from each other. In other words, individual students, their peers, and their lecturers all become learning partners.

Both the content and pedagogy of the STEPS program facilitate the development of learning partners. Knowledge and understanding of learning styles and temperaments acquired in their TPS class allow students to learn about their role as their very own learning partner. Hence, they become more understanding, more accepting of themselves as learners, and more resourceful. The self-management skills learnt, such as time-management, goal setting, and evaluating, also promote success – not only at the individual but also at the group level.

STEPS focuses on learning groups and interaction. To this end, students’ knowledge of learning styles and temperaments can be transferred from the self to the group. For example, students are in a better position to understand their own needs and the needs of others. Recent studies (Strahm, 2000) uncovered that STEPS students’ needs for acceptance, self-worth, and belonging are high. Further, the development of interaction and organizational skills seems to precede the development of conceptual understanding. In other words, social integration precedes intellectual integration. Hence, the development of social skills is a vital element of effective learning communities, even at pre-university level.

Relatives and friends are also learning partners as their level of support can either promote or hinder progress. STEPS students learn to include such partners in their learning journeys.

For example, students' management skills can ensure quality time with family members who otherwise might feel threatened by the social and domestic changes associated with studying. Indeed, there have been cases in which, having witnessed the positive change and development STEPS students have made, other family members such as mothers and partners have elected to enrol in the program. In transforming themselves, then, STEPS students might also transform the values and attitudes about education held by those closest to them.

In a cooperative learning environment lecturers not only facilitate students' learning journeys, they also learn from students. For example, students are involved in the assessment process whereby they can contribute to its improvement. Students' perceptions and contributions are an essential component of learning communities. They empower students and allow lecturers to become learning partners. Papers such as this are a manifestation of the reflection on this partnership between lecturers and students.

The following extracts from a focus group interview indicate that cooperative learning (including reflection) appears to influence the development of learning communities.

In the group, I wasn't even aware that I wasn't listening until someone pointed that out [during reflection].... And so I was then able, the next time in the same group, to sit back and listen and wait until everybody else had had their say before I put my piece. And that's helpful to me because I really needed to practise that [Now] we are all relating much better and we are all able to express our opinions better.

[With reflection] you become more aware of, not only your own value but everybody else's value ... that's like ah, yes, OK, I'm getting there, I'm getting better and my value is increasing to the team and so is theirs Because you feel valuable, if you like, it increases that sense of belonging to that team, or that group.

[During reflection] you do hear other people's viewpoints, and also, hmm, sometimes it is the way they have gone about it; you can learn from the way they have done the task. (Focus group participants)

These extracts are a good reminder that learning partnerships can transform lives and open new pathways.

PATHWAYS

When STEPS students graduate from CQU, they will be distinguished by the characteristics of being able to monitor their environment,

capitalise on change, inquire, solve problems, and communicate effectively. They will be expected to be critical, creative, and strategic thinkers who are willing to challenge current knowledge and thinking. Both personally and professionally, they will build regional, national, and global communities. They will be reflective, and committed to lifelong learning (Central Queensland University, 2005, p.6). This will require an education unlike any they have experienced before.

The STEPS course is a transformative journey that seriously challenges and shifts students' mindsets and belief systems about their learning experiences to date, and about learning itself. In order to guide students along the different pathways composing their learning journeys, the curriculum is underpinned by Joseph Campbell's (1993) Hero's Journey, a theory based on Jungian ideas and universal themes that assist students to understand change. The 12 stages of the Hero's Journey provide a map for understanding our pathways, and act as useful metaphors for our passage through life and for traversing the STEPS experience. Furthermore, students can draw on the six heroic archetypes defined by psychologist Carol Pearson (1998): the Innocent, the Orphan, the Wanderer, the Warrior, the Altruist, and the Magician. These archetypes help students to critically self reflect on their lives, the lives of others, and their learning, and allow them to celebrate the different pathways and journeys that converge in STEPS. This understanding about themselves gives students the freedom to more bravely venture into circles of concern that connect them with their community, their country, and their planet, thereby positioning them well for the thinking and learning required to engage in the undergraduate experience.

An intention of STEPS is to promote the principles of interconnectivity and interdependence, and Robert Theobald's (1999) The fourth story underpins the students' journeys into systems thinking. This type of thinking recognises that the whole is understood to be more than the sum of its parts, and that when any element of a system changes, that system must reconfigure itself. The resulting metamorphosis has the potential to transform not only self, but other social systems such as family, community, and society to which we are inextricably linked. This learning pathway has proved to be truly transformational for STEPS students as they prepare to cross the border into university.

As Pearson (1998) identified in *The hero within*: six archetypes we live by, heroes in myths and legends, in literature, and in everyday life take journeys. They respond to the call to adventure, crossing the threshold from ordinary lives; they slay dragons, discover treasure, and return to make their kingdom a better place. They may feel very alone in their quest, but "...the need to take a journey is innate in the species" (p.3). The lifelong learning journey mimics the classical hero myth. The STEPS experience is a hero's journey. Students enter into the program as Wanderers responding to the call of the quest for satisfaction and adventure, looking to find themselves and to seek fortune. Many have recently left the Orphan state, learning realism from their adversity. STEPS is a journey of discovery where students, the Warriors, must prove their worth as they encounter uncertainty, confusion, challenge, and elation. Many students exit transformed by the learning experience. Excerpts from students' reflections best tell their stories:

...there has been a burning desire inside me to reach beyond the mediocrity of life and do something of extraordinary importance...this was to be a journey of discovery...this journey was my own and yet I found that I was not alone...the journey led to unknown realms and every ounce of inner strength was mustered...the celebrations, long awaited and welcomed are somehow clouded by the realisation that life will be forever changed...longing to return to families left behind, but reluctant to depart my newfound paradise of the academic mind.... (Leanne, in 2005)

Before this course, I saw a path of burning bridges; now I'm overwhelmed by the amount [sic] of bridges I would like to cross. (Brian, in 2005)

The journey, wow, what a trip this has been. At the beginning not knowing where I was going. I now have a voice...I am not alone in my thinking about the importance of unity, compassion and genuine caring for the world; believing that this is the only way we can move forward into a future that is fair for everyone. (Michelle, in 2005)

I would say that I have lived most of my life by Third Story thinking, believed in it, yet was very unsatisfied and felt like there had to be a better way of doing things. (Wendy, in 2005)

Sometimes I have to kick myself, and wonder what I am doing here...I am intelligent enough, but I am 1 of 4 brothers who all have mechanical fitting trades that pay big money...I do not know exactly what the future holds for me, what I am sure of is I was not put on this earth to be rich, or a highly strung professional,

I believe I am here to help others. (Michael, in 2005)

I really didn't have any concept of what I was letting myself in for but this is probably just as well; however the satisfaction in the achievements is tempered by the realisation of how much more I need to learn...I still don't know where I'm going but I know I can't go back. (Dianne, in 2005)

To me it was like getting to know myself all over again. As a learner, I was given a second chance to do it my way. (Kristina, in 2005)

CONCLUSIONS

These student voices bear eloquent testimony to the profound transformations they undergo during their pathway along the STEPS program. Entering the program with considerable baggage weighed down with memories of negative school experiences, many emerge with considerable confidence and self-belief, and a set of attitudes and attributes that should carry them over into successful undergraduate study. Inevitably, not all students who enrol successfully make it through the program; some because they find that they are still not suited to an academic environment, and others due to personal or family circumstances. Most, however, are still marked by the STEPS experience in a deep way.

The STEPS program concludes not with a formal graduation of the sort normally associated with university, where the students assemble in their academic gowns and listen to speeches by the 'great and the good', but, rather, with a 'Celebration of Learning' ceremony. In this ceremony, the STEPS graduates become a central part of the show, acting out a performance piece they have composed which reflects both movingly and amusingly on the journeys they have made, the partnerships (some new, some enduring) that have carried them through, and the pedagogical experiences that have shaped them as transformed learners. It is an opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate the ways in which a positive educational environment, informed with the principles of transformative learning, creates the basis for a pathway that leads students from negative perceptions of formal learning to an engaged understanding of the richness of the lifelong learning experience.

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