

## **Student as Hero: Reflecting on the Study Abroad Transformation**

### **Abstract**

Reflection is a taken-for-granted step in transformational learning. The Hero's Journey framework turns a student reflection of their study abroad trip into a dynamic narration of the experience, with the student a central and active character rather than a participant observer. It walks the actor through decisions and consequences, making it a practical way to interpret and share various transformational experiences. Session participants will craft their own stories while learning to apply the framework.

**Keywords:** Storytelling, Study Abroad, Reflection

**Introduction.**

International travel should be a life-changing experience for students. Students that are exposed to these experiences are more open to future international experiences and employers value the experiences (Orahood, Kruze & Pearson, 2004). However, recognizing new cross skills and how the change came about does not happen automatically nor does being able to tell more than the “fun” parts of the trip. Reflection is a key part of the learning process (Bandura, 1977). Students, faculty, and universities spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours preparing for the trip and during the travel. How much time is spent on the debrief when students return home? Are we helping them craft a story they can share during job interviews? This activity ensures a back-end process is in place to allow the students to understand and share the implications of the experience and how it can impact future choices.

The Hero's Journey (Campbell 1968) activity enables students to put themselves at the center of the experience and reflect on who they were initially, what happened to them along the way, and what they have discovered about themselves upon return. Seeing themselves as the "hero" in their journey encourages reflection about how they overcame challenges and obstacles and gained new skills. Additionally, they learn about crafting stories. The ability to tell stories is a valuable skill for effective leadership (Aidman & Long, 2017; Cleverley-Thompson, 2018; Deming, 2011; Grisham, 2006)

Appropriate for late undergraduate and graduate students, the activity has relevance beyond the study abroad experience. It provides a way for students to review any transformational event. It works for upper-level students to reflect on their college careers and international students during their current stay. It is incredibly impactful for students to hear the journey of their international classmates.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications.**

Reflecting on the study abroad experience allows students to process their transformation and share it with others. Storytelling is a way to enhance learning and make sense of situations (Tyler, 2007). This activity does both those things, requiring a period of reflection and then framing the experience. For example, students often share that the things they dislike at the beginning of the experience, like shops closing in the afternoon for US students, are what they want to practice at home by the trip end. The Hero's Journey allows them to see how they are being changed along the way as they respond to the opportunities and challenges.

James Campbell, an American professor of mythology, outlined some typical stages seen in myths and other folklore (Campbell, 1968). His work has been attributed to helping modern storytellers, authors, and scriptwriters shape their plots. The framework (Campbell, 1968) has three main themes: departure, journey transformation, and return, with substages in each. Osland (2000) adapted this to a seven-step framework to help expatriates debrief from their time abroad. While expatriate experiences last longer, the transformation significant, and the return traumatic, I've found that students can identify going through the same steps in a shorter study abroad experience.

This session describes how to use the framework for the student study abroad experiences ranging from a semester-long experience to a few weeks.

**Learning Objectives.**

- Understand how attitudes changed as they experienced new situations.
- Embrace the confidence gained from accepting new challenges and overcoming obstacles.
- Practice reflection as a tool for learning and growth.

- Practice storytelling for leadership development.

### **Exercise Overview.**

The activity involves students breaking their study abroad experience into stages and steps, reflecting on the beginning, journey, and return. It works well as a follow-up to a study abroad class but is beneficial in other settings where many students have studied abroad. I used it at a university with a study abroad requirement where most of the students in a senior-level international business class had studied abroad. It could work in various class sizes and in either virtual or in-person.

Since the exercise is about new experiences and transformation, it can work for other activities besides studying abroad. Other options can be provided in a class where not all students have studied abroad. Using the framework to describe their own transformational experience (choices included entering college or moving to a new town) or interviewing someone who had traveled and telling their story. Very inspirational stories came from seniors telling about their journey through college. International students also shared moving stories they were currently living. It allowed them to think through the changes they were experiencing and enlightened the other students about how they felt at various stages, generating many conversations for everyone. Surprisingly, we may not allow students enough time to share their stories with each other.

**Activity.** In class or through virtual methods, the faculty introduces Campell's (Campbell, 1968) theory of the Hero's Journey as a technique used to write myths and stories and Osland's (Osland, 2000) framework. Popular action movies like Star Wars, Heros of the Galaxy, and numerous others can provide examples of a story traveling through the various stages. The instructor can gather pictures of their favorite movie to illustrate. Additionally, it is helpful for the instructor to share their own Hero's Journey. If not an international experience, another new

setting – school, teaching the first class, etc. This sets the stage for how the students will perform and the amount of detail and self-reflection they share.

To begin the activity the steps(Osland, 2000) are outlined and described for the students. (See Appendix A for how Guardian of the Galaxy can provide an example.) Below the stages are described with questions for students to consider as they work through their story (Osland, 2000).

- Call to action: The hero/student is faced with an opportunity, often a journey or a task.
  - Why even consider this step out of your everyday life?
  - What was important to you about this experience?
  - What did you hope the outcome would be?
  - Where you hesitant, excited, or anxious?
- Crossing the first threshold: Action is taken to move forward, and the journey begins often a feeling of not being able to turn back.
  - What event signified this journey was really going to happen?
  - How were you feeling?
  - Did you do it willingly?
- In the Belly of the Whale: A struggle between the past and the future, with some change in perspective happening during this time.
  - Describe a struggle that you had along the way?
  - Did you resist? How long?
  - How and why did you adapt or change?
  - What would have happened if you refused to change?
- Magical Friend: Someone who provides information and support on the journey.

- Who helped you on the trip? How did you find them?
- What are some examples of how they helped?
- What would the experience have been without your magical friend?
- Road of Trials: Every journey encounters difficulties. These often show our true character.
  - What trials did you encounter?
  - How did you respond?
  - Did you respond differently to trials early in the trip compared to later?
- The Ultimate Boon: The goal is successfully achieved.
  - What were your accomplishments?
  - How did you feel as the trip ended?
  - What skills, abilities, and/or competencies did you gain (e.g., increased self-confidence, technical skills, communication abilities, or connection with others)?
- The Return Home: Traveler arrives home with new knowledge and abilities.
  - Do you feel different?
  - Do you look at things differently?
  - How will you use these newfound abilities?
  - How can you move forward from here?
  - Will you take another journey?

After discussing each of the steps, students are given the assignment to tell their own journey using these steps and then present the story to classmates. Most students have lots of pictures of any transformational journey. The requirement for the assignment should require a visual representation of each of the steps. There are a variety of options that can be used. A more

traditional approach would have them prepare it on something that could be printed. Other options include PowerPoint or Prezi. I had a student do an outstanding presentation with a Prezi. He had the map of the place he went and then zoomed in to show the various relevant places and pictures. This activity could also include a video. These presentations can be shared with the class.

After the presentations, discussions with the students can continue. Some questions that could be used:

- What did you learn from thinking about your trip as a Hero's Journey?
- What is something new that you learned on your Journey?
- What was the most difficult step?
- How did you find your magical friend?
- What would you do differently next time you go on a journey? How will you recognize it?
- How did you fit in when you came back? How have you changed since you first came back?

### **Session Description.**

The participants will work on their Hero's Journey story using Osland's (2000) framework in the session. Each step will be explained using a current movie or story example. Along the way, participants will reflect on their own stories. Using a game-based learning application, we will collect responses to each stage. Results will be shared as word clouds, charts, or other visualization options. Each participant can share parts of their own story as we work through the process.

After going through the stages, there will be a discussion on how to improve the activity.

Topics include.

- Movies or stories that fit the framework and be more relevant to students.
- Other transformational experiences that students could describe.
- Identify additional management and organizational behavior theories related to the topic.

Participants will leave the session with the details for the learning experience, including examples.

Reflecting on transformational experiences is key to processing the change. This activity moves beyond the reliable but standard reflection paper and builds story-building skills. It is a practical and useful tool for students and provides them with a lasting story of their experience and change and provides some concrete examples they can share during job interviews.



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## Appendix A

Example using Guardians of the Galaxy 2014 movie (*Gunn, 2014*).

- Call to action: Peter Quill decides that he must resist Ronan.
- Crossing the first threshold: Peter steals the Orb and keeps it from Ronan.
- In the Belly of the Whale: Peter ends up in Kryn prison with the people trying to capture him, the assassin Gamora, the bounty hunters Rocket the Raccoon and Groot, a treelike character, and Drax the Destroyer. They work together to escape the prison and save the universe
- Magical Friend: Gamora, Rocket, Groot, and Drax.
- Road of Trials: Many examples of trials exist.
  - Quill and Gamora captured, with the others rescuing them.
  - Groot's sacrifice to save the others.
- The Ultimate Boon: Outwitting Ronan, keeping the Orb, and saving the world.
- The Return Home: With their criminal records expunged, a refit ship, and a new mission, the group goes from criminals to the Guardians of the Galaxy.

Pictures and additional descriptions will be supplied as part of the session.