

## **The Journey of Matriculation: A Tool for Developing Learning through Reflection**

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### **Abstract:**

*Reflection is critical to the learning process. The concept of a learner on a journey is a powerful, reflection- evoking experience often captured by study abroad programs. While studying abroad may never be a viable option for all students, the power of the journey and the reflection it evokes are available to every college student: all college students are on the journey of matriculation. We present a flexible methodology for implementing guided reflections into freshman orientation classes to enhance reflection and metacognitive skills in matriculating students. The framework is adapted from Linda Chisholm's *Charting a Hero's Journey*—a series of guided readings and journaling exercises designed to evoke reflection in study abroad students. In addition to fostering reflection, reflective exercises can help students develop writing skills, provide a form of social support, and contribute to reduced attrition rates.*

### **Key Words:**

reflection, metacognition, matriculation, journey, journaling.

## Introduction

Reflection is critical to the learning process. Guided-reflection exercises provide insight into students' perceptions of *what* they are learning, *how* they are learning it, *how well* they understand it, and *how to direct* their own learning processes (see King & Kitchener, 1994). Unfortunately, meaningful reflection can be difficult to achieve because many college students have an unrealistic view of knowledge as a set of static, context-independent facts. When asked to reflect on their learning processes, these students often struggle to produce much more than a summary of content. Additionally, many students respond to reflective exercises with frustration because they assume that if a question has no singular definite answer, then all answers are equally valid and consequently lack value (Perry, 1970). Until students learn to reflect upon the entire learning process (i.e. develop metacognitive skills, or "thinking about one's own thinking"), and to incorporate these experiences into functional working knowledge, our greater goal as educators remains unaccomplished. So the question remains: how can we help students to value the reflection brought on by meaningful, complex, often open-ended questions, over the simplistic responses to questions that can be answered quickly and correctly?

Quality learning experiences help students develop tools to channel uncertainty and reflect on the whole learning process; study abroad programs are a time-tested tool for doing just that. Most students who study abroad have experiences that awaken them to the diversity of beliefs among world cultures, as well as to the assumptions and norms of their own culture. These experiences have the power to alter and shape the way students see the world and their role therein (albeit not always in a positive way), bringing to life the complexity of what knowledge *really is*. Study abroad programs foster deep and meaningful learning experience because they represent an age-old learning process: a journey. The concept of a journey—of a traveler who gains great insight by striking out alone into uncharted territory—is culturally universal. Analogous tales of epic journeys are found throughout history and rooted in cultures across the world, from the classical (e.g., *Ballad of Hua Mulan*, *Sinbad the Sailor*, and *The Odyssey*) to the contemporary (e.g., *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*). Journeys are often spurred by different goals. For example, Sojourner Truth embarked on a journey for freedom from slavery, Amelia Earhart undertook her round-the-world flight for adventure and fame, and Charles Darwin voyaged to the Galapagos for newfound knowledge. Regardless of the goal, journeys almost always confer deeper understanding to both the traveler and his/her culture.

Unfortunately studying abroad is inaccessible to many students due to its expense, or because it is under-valued in the student's field of study. However, the power of the journey and the reflection it evokes are available to every college student: *all college students are on the journey of matriculation*. As incoming freshmen, many students leave behind family and friends to form views of oneself, the world, and one's place therein. Similar to journeys abroad, incoming freshmen often experience first encounters with new cultures, challenges, and schools of thought. Freshman seminar/orientation courses have a unique opportunity to apply the concept of a universal journey to the matriculation process to harness the transformative potential of

the experience, thereby starting students on a path of higher-order critical thinking and reflection at the beginning of their academic career.

Existing tools from study abroad programs, such as *Charting a Hero's Journey* by Linda A. Chisholm (2000), can be easily adapted as a component of freshman orientation courses to incite meaningful reflection (Goldstein, 2003; Simpson & Coombes, 2001). *Charting a Hero's Journey* provides educators and students a framework for using the experience of journeys to foster the development of metacognitive skills through a series of guided readings coupled with reflective questions and journaling exercises. These exercises are based on key progressive stages of a universal journey (e.g., deciding to leave, taking up challenges, seeking help, etc...). In each exercise, students read passages from journals of famous and obscure travelers alike, and then write short essays in response to reflective questions. Questions guide students in evaluating how their journey began, connecting common threads between their journey and humanity, and searching for deeper meaning in their experiences. This process helps students analyze what they learn socially, academically, and professionally, and to document and direct the changes within themselves—this is the very essence of metacognition.

Classroom implementation of *Charting a Hero's Journey* should be tailored to fit the needs of individual freshman seminar courses. For example, many of the readings and journaling prompts could be retained, but some may need to be modified to reflect unique aspects of the journey of matriculation. Depending on classroom dynamics, journaling exercises could be implemented as public blog posts, anonymously peer reviewed, viewed only by instructors, or some combination. Instructors may need to assign graded points to exercises to incentivize students who are resistant to journaling. Instruction should also depend on the specific skills, ideas, or processes students set forth in course goals. For example, instructors can include mini-lessons or supplementary instructional materials (e.g. materials on how to effectively journal, write blog posts, etc.) on structure and content if the course is to satisfy writing curriculum requirements. Although this model can be implemented in multiple ways, the main requirement is that students understand the concept of a universal journey, and that they indeed are on a universal journey. Instructors then derive writing prompts from this central theme. Writing prompts should focus on the major stages of a universal journey, and should be ordered sequentially as in *Charting a Hero's Journey*. For example, Chisholm provides prompts for major points on a universal journey such as “hearing the call”, “departing and separating”, “taking up the challenges”, and “recognizing guides and guardian spirits”. Respective analogous prompts in our model could focus on making the decision to go to a particular institution, last goodbyes on move-in day, the pressures of collegiate life, and seeking help from peers and mentors. Prompts should also engage students in reflective thought about their professional, personal, long- and short-term goals, as well as plans for achieving those goals.

Implementing *Charting a Hero's Journey* in freshman seminar courses can provide benefits additional to developing students' reflective and metacognitive skills. For example, writing assignments evoking common personal themes encourage students to compare and contrast one another's experiences. This can provide a targeted form of social support by facilitating open discussion on adjustment to college life, and by

helping students to identify support resources (i.e. counseling resources, empathetic peers, etc.). This social support may improve retention rates, as the drastic lifestyle changes experienced by college freshmen can contribute to students' decisions to drop out or remain enrolled in college (Fidler, 1991; Porter & Swing, 2006).

By taking advantage of the journey of matriculation as an opportunity to develop metacognition in students, educators can not only help students to succeed in that journey, but can facilitate a more complex understanding of knowledge and the critical skills needed to put it to effective use.

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