This year-long project has been both exciting and frustrating for students and for me as we have grown as writers. Over the course of the 2016-16 school year, 102 different freshmen in my general education English classes at Yorktown High School participated in writing Hero’s Journey stories in a Writing Workshop model through funding provided by Ball State University’s Teachers College Innovative Education Grant. This is our journey.

Overview

Anticipating that funds would arrive soon, we began our exposure to The Hero’s Journey (THJ) in mid-August. We read Greek myths and King Arthur stories and identified elements of THJ in each.

Once students were comfortable with the twelve stages of THJ, they worked in writing groups of mixed gender and ability levels. When the funds arrived in mid-September, the classes watched an introductory video about Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). Then the groups worked together to create a set of “fate” resources (e.g. character traits, setting elements, conflicts) for dice play, based on the D&D game resources purchased from grant monies. Each student had a role in his group: Journey Master (like the D&D Dungeon Master), equipment manager, runner, timer or reporter. During first semester, groups met for five times per unit, with each unit consisting of three sequential segments of THJ. In second semester the groups met fewer times per unit.

Group members learned about archetypal literary and Role-Playing Game (RPG) characters, and each member chose an RPG archetypal character (wizard, warrior, cleric, rogue, or ranger) to depict in the story. Students developed their characters with a template that asked questions about their character’s physical description, background, enemies, best and worst traits, fears, motivations, special gifts and limitations. The groups worked together to develop their characters who would travel in an adventure together. The first task was to determine the setting in a three-part fate chart that included 20 possibilities for time, place and context. Each student contributed his or her best ideas to a group chart. Then the group rolled the die to determine what their setting would be. Most of the stories’ settings were centered around fantasy places and times, although a few were outliers, such as one set in outer space and another set in a sewer.
Then each group began to plan what would happen in the first stages of their journey, using the polyhedral dice and their corresponding fate charts. The students also used charts that prompted them through the events in the journey, with spaces to record how each of the characters in their groups would react. This idea is based on the collaborative storytelling of D&D and allowed students to not have to rely on their memories of group discussions. Once the planning of the first three stages of THJ was complete, each student began to write the story from his own character’s point of view using the chart as guidance. Students were required to use specific elements of narrative writing and specific devices somewhere in their stories. These devices were highlighted and labelled.

About this time, a parent emailed asking why her daughter was playing Dungeons and Dragons in class and not studying English. Once she was provided with an explanation of the methodology involved, she understood and was supportive.

For the second round, the class discussed iteration and how revising narrative is like learning the lessons in a video game when their character dies, only to rise and try again. Students were skeptical about that analogy. They continued writing. When their characters had begun experiencing conflicts in their stories, the students created masks that depicted their archetypal characters with funds from a Robert P. Bell grant. Students designed their character’s faces and then spent two partial blocks in the school’s makerspace using recycled and donated materials to embellish the masks with appropriate features. Because they were writing in first person, many of the students began to associate themselves with their characters and created archetypal masks that embodied great beauty or power. The students followed this creative project by writing an informative essay about the features of their masks.

As their characters began to encounter tests and challenges, some young writers were eager to kill off or remove some journey members from the adventuring party. The varied approaches gave rise to rich discussions about how some writers plan in detail, while others “fly by the seats of their pants” when crafting plots. Most students found that their approach was somewhere in between these two extremes. At this stage, mentor characters were also introduced to the stories with the characterization templates used once again. Students were encouraged to “know what is in the pocket or pouch of your characters.” Mini lessons moved toward how writers establish characterization through what the characters say, do, think and through what others say about them. Many individual student conferences stressed the old writer’s adage “show; don’t tell.” Another common issue was the lack of balance between narration and dialogue. Many students also confused argumentative writing formatting (five-paragraph essay models) with narrative writing formatting. “How many paragraphs does this have to be?” they often asked. A classroom mantra emerged: “You change the paragraph when the speaker or topic shifts.”
During the third and the last round of writing, the mentor text was *The Odyssey*. Students read about Odysseus’s return to Ithaca and used it as a mentor text for the third and fourth rounds of writing, which included the climactic scene and the return home. The class continued to discuss lessons learned that could be applied as they wrote another section or created a new iteration to move forward with the plot. By this time, students were ready to use their fate charts for conflicts and weapons and powers of their enemies. In this section, the male students became quite creative as they created potential weapon names with descriptions and the powers that the weapons possessed. Students were eager to share their writing during student/teacher conferences and with their peers, but many did not submit work to be graded.

At the end of the semester as their final exam grade, students wrote an essay reflecting on their growth in eight areas of language arts, including narrative writing.

In second semester, the classes were able to build on the skills they had learned during Semester One with several changes. Each student wrote his own story, not one connected to others. They also were able to choose their own writing groups that gave them support and feedback when they were having difficulty. In addition, students were actively encouraged to choose a different setting from their previous one, and their choice of heroes was expanded to include everyman type heroes. A common reference point to THJ was popular, contemporary movies like the new *Star Wars* movie, where the hero is not necessarily a god or royal persona.

During Quarter Three, the mentor texts were sections of *Romeo and Juliet*, where students were able to easily see the character development, or lack of it, based on the character development they had created in their own narratives. The focus was on point of view for their new stories. Once again, the class connected essay writing to the narratives. With the help of a BSU pre-service teacher, the students planned and physically created books that their characters might have made. This activity became a lesson in the extreme value of books, as well as in patience, as students literally sewed pages into books. The time that it took for students to stitch the books and create covers precluded us from writing in them with the quills we had ordered, but these supplies were left in the makerspace for afterschool workshop participants to use. All but one student took home the book he had sewn. Afterward, students justified their choices in process-analysis essays.

In March, I visited with Indiana legislators in Washington D.C. as part of the National Writing Project’s Spring Meeting. I asked several students if I could share portions of their hero’s journey stories with the congress people and senators we visited. These students were thrilled to be recognized for their achievement in writing.

Students continued to write THJ stories in Quarter Four and finished the year by revising one segment of their previous work and resubmitting it for a larger point value. The iteration and game connection was completely abandoned, as students felt it was more a teacher gimmick to get them to write more. Once again, students identified and labeled the elements of THJ and the literary devices that they had used in their narrative writing. At the end of the year, students again wrote growth essays with one segment pertaining to narrative writing. Many recalled the challenges of writing THJ, some with pride, and other with some chagrin.
Lessons learned and reaffirmed

This project taught me many new lessons and reminded me of several principles and practices that I have known or used in the past and should have implemented.

1. **No matter what it was called or how I likened it to iterations in gaming, many students did not want to revise their work.** On the final assignment, 26% of the students did not revise or submit one segment of their previous writing, even though the revision was worth twice as many points as the original. Nonetheless, some students believed they had improved in their narrative writing as each segment progressed, as this male student wrote on his Semester One Growth Essay:

   When I first started this year with narrative writing I had a lot of trouble putting myself in the characters shoes making it hard for me to do things like the hero’s journey that we were writing. I can now write these stories if I want but I still have a bit of trouble with them. I grew in this skill considering at the start of the year I couldn’t even write in the characters shoes but now I can.

   Another student reflected on his growth after the two semesters:

   My narrative writing has defiantly improved a lot. I really think that my narrative skills have improved the most out of all the traits. And the reason is because I use it a lot and in English class I have gotten better grades on my narrative writing papers. And it has shown that I have improved tons. The evidence for this is because when we do those hero’s journey I have improved I stared at my grade as a 34% and then my last report I got was an 85% so I defiantly have improved on my narrative writing. And I have been writing on a story which has 4,568 words and at the beginning of 9th grade I wouldn’t have been able to write all of that and have good grammar or vocabulary. And when I showed Mrs. Miller she said that it was very well and she said that all I really need to do is shorten my paragraphs because when people see those paragraphs they think oh goodness I have to read all of that. So that’s some evidence for my narrative writing.

2. **Group work had its positives and negatives, depending on the dynamics of each class.** As I suspected it might, group work scaffolded the needier students until they were eager to work on their own. Having a story created and outlined by the entire group helped those students who were not confident writers, but it also stifled more competent writers. I needed to be flexible to allow space for those writers who were ready to peel off in their own direction, so they would remain interested in the project. Group work was also a problem at times. Listening was difficult for many students, especially if they were already seated in their groups with friends. Some of their conversations were productive, but at other times, they simply were off topic when I was circulating or conferring with other groups. Because many of these students did not have strong reading skills, my having them refer back to the written instructions was frustrating for them as well.

   One class of 28 with only three girls accomplished very little in the first days of the project and was not permitted to work in groups. Each student created his own story after the initial segment had begun. On some days while working as a class for the mini lesson and then individually on their writing, this class accomplished more than the writing groups in other classes.

On 10-27, I wrote the following in my journal:

Fourth period did a better job today of finishing the task, even though they are not- or because they are not?-working in groups. This class finished the entire second installment on their G.O’s (graphic organizers). Maybe I should try finishing this story as individual writers first. An article I read yesterday suggests that
brainstorming in groups yields fewer genuine, varied and good ideas than does individual work, that good ideas are exhausted in the first five minutes.

After that observation and reflection, students had their choice to abandon the adventurers in their groups or stick with them. Many abandoned them and continued the story with their own character.

One boy, a reluctant reader, wrote the following excerpt on his final growth essay from Semester One:

Narrative writing is something that I love. I am currently writing a narrative story. At the beginning of the year I wrote a story about a warrior in the medieval times. The story was a good 9 pages. This semester I wrote a story based on the Hero's journey called "The past finds you" it was about a man named Jack who had to go back to the town he was from to keep a promise he made to a man. This story was 26 pages long. In this story I have much more detail and I used a lot of rhetorical devices. And my character development is a lot better. I'm also better at writing essays.

3. Keeping parents in the loop is critical.

Sending home a newsletter at the beginning of the project would have eliminated concerns from parents and perhaps engaged them in the process as well. I send parental emails after the first inquiry and had no other questions or input from parents.

4. Modeling is valuable, but giving students choice can be even better. Some students were happy to stick to the fantasy setting, but others more eager to branch out into different places and times. By second semester, most writers had switched to a contemporary setting and were using topics, characters and situations that they knew about to make their writing more believable. Several boys wrote about athletes being drafted by colleges and professional sports teams. One boy explains his situation below:

At the beginning of the semester, I had trouble with narrative writing, and it seemed like I was never able to write a good story. Whenever I tried to write a story, it would only be about half a page long. The topic that we had to write about, and how interested I was in the topic, or how much I knew about the topic beforehand, determined how long my writing was. Topics that I was interested in were much easier to write about. For example, the writing warm up on the different learning styles was difficult since I could not remember much about the topic from the previous class. But the writing warmup that was done at the start of the Hero's Journey was much easier because I could write about a Hero's journey 1. My growth has shown some improvement over the semester. My Hero's Journey 2 was the worst grade with a 57% because I forgot to identify what literary devices I used. Also on my Hero's Journey 2, Mrs. Miller said that the dialogue when my warriors were in the village helped characterize the villagers and set up the conflict. But when I did my Hero's Journey 3, I went up to an 82%! I felt so accomplished, but I knew I could do better. When my Hero's Journey 4 came around, I was amazed to see I got a 91%. It was a miracle to see I did so well! I don't really know how or why my grade in narrative writing went up. It might be because I had some freedom to determine what happened in the story, and how the different characters reacted to what was going on. I was never good at writing about a specific topic. But I'm better at writing about something if I have some freedom to determine what goes on in the story.

A female writer explains how important choice has impacted her attitude about writing:

Over the summer of 2015, I started to write more than I usually did. I became intrigued by writing and I wanted to create my own stories and worlds. Of course I've always wrote little stories here and there but I've never actually created a large story. In the 7th grade, my language arts teacher made us write all the time. I
loved it when we could free write but I hated doing the task when we’d have to write a persuasive prompt or anything else of the sort. I liked to be creative, not drag on and on about why you should or shouldn’t buy this product. Those weren’t ideal for me. However, in this class, we wrote. Even though I couldn’t chose the plot or the setting, I loved it. I got to be creative with the story. I added magic to it which obviously isn’t typical to medieval times. I had fun writing the chapters because they weren’t a task to me. I actually liked doing homework for once!

5. **Boys will often be boys, and girls will often be girls in writing.** I was reminded about the topics that make boy writers so interesting. Violence and power struggles in their stories reflected much of the video game world that my male students occupy. My challenge was to help them think outside of RPG tropes. Conversely, girls often injected romance into their stories. During first semester, the variety of characters was fairly traditional- princesses in castles, rogue bands of adventurers; rat king and his henchmen. During second semester as students gained confidence, their characters and topics expanded and included high school basketball and football players being drafted by colleges and professional sports teams; murder; dysfunctional contemporary families; revenge; and world travel. Their settings ranged from outer space to the Olympic Trials to medieval Europe. One girl chose to write in the voice of male protagonist, which was exciting. Several girls chose traditionally male RPG characters or topics when encouraged, as the female writer below expresses:

Narrative writing has been a new experience for me, especially in this class. I had never really done much narrative writing other than a few paragraphs here and there. But I’ve come to actually really enjoy it. We mostly just did the hero’s journey with narrative. Hero’s Journey I think has been my favorite part of class this year especially when we worked Greek mythology into it. I think it’s really cool how you can sometimes just lose yourself in a narrative writing piece because it just takes you to a different world.

One boy who was part of a cohort with several girls who were writing about a ball put his own masculine twist on the narrative:

It was a blood freezing New Year’s Eve night in the town of Mastersville. Everyone was gathering in the ball room for the New Year’s Dance. Music was playing loudly and the roar of the crowd was so loud you couldn’t hear your own thoughts. Jack was enjoying a glass of punch with his girl when a masked man approached him and told him his parents were in danger. At first Jack thought it was a joke, until it was too late to do anything about it. It was 11:58 P.M. when the gunshots rang out in the ball house. Everyone stopped what they were doing and the music dropped, then Jack knew that it was real. He darted to the master room as fast as his legs would take him, knocking down everyone in his path, He shoved and pushed everyone until he had a clear view of what had happened, his parents were murdered.

6. **Good writing takes TIME, and lots of it.** Most of my students will not do homework outside of class. This was also true when students were writing segments of THJ. I was frustrated that no matter how much time I allotted, students seemed to use it all and need more. This project could have been our exclusive task… and perhaps should have been. On September 23, 2015, I wrote in my journal, “Some students are struggling with time management. I announce time remaining and offer alternate strategies to complete the tasks. No matter how much time given… there is always a sense of urgency to finish in groups.”

Knowing that most students would not write at home, I wonder if my expectations were too high for the time allotted. If I were to do this project again, I would plan more in-class writing time with smaller benchmarks, so students could feel more successful and get higher grades.

One boy with below-level ELA skills wrote the following reflection about his work on THJ:
Most of the narrative writing I did this year was the hero’s Journey. I wrote 4 parts to the story. I would have done so much better, if I had more time to work and plan for each part. The first grade I got wasn’t too bad. It was a C- (71.4%). It all went downhill from there. The grades I received for parts 2 through 4 were terrible. For part 2, I got an F (37.1%). I was ashamed of myself because I really enjoyed working on the hero’s journey but not enough to work on it outside of school. I could have wrote at least 2 or 3 pages for every part of the hero’s journey but I decided to do other things instead of working on it at home. Every part after part 1, I did not finish so I had to turn them in incomplete. I was trying my best, but around the same time we started the hero’s journey, my mom kept having this pain and I was very worried about her. As of right now I’m still worried and I’m having trouble concentrating because I recently found out that that pain she was having was cancer. All of that had an impact on my grade and how well I could perform in school. For hero’s journey 3 I received another F (54.2%). I haven’t got a grade for part 4 yet because I turned it in late and again, it was incomplete. Over all I could have done so much better on the hero’s journey. Even though, I didn’t do that good on the hero’s journey, I still feel like I’m a lot better at narrative writing than I was when I first walked into the class.

7. **Expect more; gain more- even if it doesn’t always show in grades.** The average writing grade during first semester was 65.55%. In second semester, the course average was 61.975%, although this includes twenty students who were not present in first semester and omits many who transferred out at semester. Despite many students having low scores, they did learn new skills from their experiences with THJ. One benefit was their improved critical thinking. By having to identify the devices they used in their writing, they were more purposeful about using them and also recognized them in other writing. In addition, during the Romeo and Juliet unit, the students had little interest in the title characters, seeing them both as flat, with little growth and change. Most of the argumentative essays about character development on the Romeo and Juliet test discussed how little growth and depth the characters displayed. I was pleased with the students’ abilities to support their analyses.

The following student sums up his narrative writing growth:

This year I strongly believe that I have grown substantially in narrative skills. Last year I couldn’t write a powerful well-structured story. I now have written and am currently writing a good story. I now can write about a good main character and can make good background information for my fictional characters. And I believe it is very important to have well-structured character’s. I mean you can’t write a good story without a good strong character, can you?

Another student shares her self-assessment of her skills:

I’ve grown in narrative writing a lot, in 8th and 7th grade, my grades on writing prompts were at a high C. My narrative writing grades in English 9 haven’t really changed. On the second installment of the Heroes Journey, I got a bad grade of 68.5. This is a D+. However, Mrs. Miller put comments on my writing, one says, “Very nice lede! Intriguing and good characterizatio” and “You have story telling talent…” My grades may not show that I’m doing well at writing but Mrs. Miller’s comments make me think otherwise.

8. **Teachers will never be able to motivate all students all the time.** Some students just simply didn’t care about the project, even with the weapons, dice play, and group work perks. One strong male writer reflects on his experience with THJ:

The hardest thing about writing in English is trying to write something appealing to you and the teacher. This is because if you’re writing something that you really think is interesting then it’s going to be fun for you. But then you have to incorporate your teacher’s values, and what impresses he/her. Which really drains all of the fun out of writing, well that’s at least what happened to me on the Heroes Journey.
Another boy who paid little attention during class while not working on THJ composed the following fiction filled with strong diction, voice and action. Below, he also identifies some of the required elements in his writing:

“Ugh, I hate having to patrol the village limit everyday” (dialogue) I mumble to myself. At the corner of my eye I see the strangest being, a goblin riding on a hog at high speeds. I spot more of them rushing this way, so I activate the village alarm and warn everyone in the limits with the blaring sirens. A few hours later after the raid, me and my team stood shocked at all of the wreckage and debris. Buildings demolished, the aged streets cracked and destroyed, and the lush green trees have lost their green (description). The others and I investigated and salvaged all we could from what is left of the village

9. **Balancing realistic expectations of freshmen and the sense of urgency in the classroom is critical for success.**

All freshmen must make adjustments coming from the relative ease of middle school academics to the high stakes GPA world of high school. It just takes time for students to become accustomed to managing homework, extracurricular activities, and social life. That inexperience with the increased rigor of Indiana Academic Standards has resulted in a classroom sense of urgency about accomplishing all of my daily goals. Often that means we change activities frequently, and that tends to keep students engaged. In some cases, perhaps that urgency and those high expectations created unrealistic goals for students to accomplish. In my journal on 10-27-15, I wrote, “The groups did not get fin[ished] today in installment 2. Some have trouble getting people to listen; others have trouble knowing what to do- even though instructions are printed clearly in steps. Duh, Barb! These kids don’t read well and don’t listen well.” I had to slow down our process and not assume that students could simply refer to my written instructions in the Canvas module either at home or with their groups when they were confused.

A strong creative writer explains her varying grades in narrative assignments on her growth essay:

The way Mrs. Miller explained the steps necessary to take when writing a narrative essay gave me room to let my creative thoughts run ramped in my mind. On the first hero’s journey submission I didn’t receive a score. I did not manage my time wisely therefore I did not get it done. The hero’s journey round one second chance I scored a 65.7%. I did not completely finish that essay because that week I had four clubs that were starting up and I needed to study for a math test. So again I did not have time to finish this essay therefore I got a bad grade. On the hero’s journey 1:2 I received 77.1% which is not an auspicious grade but still an improvement. On hero’s journey 1:3 I took my time and really gave it my all. I received a 94.2% Mrs. Miller wrote “Love it!” on my paper. I took my time working on this paper therefore I received a good grade. I am not proud of my last paper. I got an 82% which is not bad but I waited to the absolute last minute. The day before it was due I was sitting in my living room watching Fargo with my dad when suddenly it hit me. I forgot to write my narrative writing. I stayed up until one in the morning finishing it. Why didn’t I manage my time? I don’t know.

Missing work also became a problem beginning with the second installment, which was due right before fall break. I had to extend the assignment due date to allow submissions with no penalty in order for the majority of the class not to fail. A student reflects on her missing work and its causes below:

The reason I have pretty bad grades on my writing is because I turn the papers in late, I wait last minute to write them, and I get writers block. I don’t know which direction to take to story. There are so many possibilities of what could happen and I just can’t chose! The writing is sloppy but I know I can do better if I had more time. One the third installment I got a slightly better grade of 71.4 which is a C-. I remember putting more work into this chapter, trying to make sure it was prepared for the next chapter. Again, I did it last minute so the writing was still rushed and sloppy.
Where do I go from here?

The next time that I attempt to use THJ Collaborative Storytelling with my students, I will make a few changes to my process and expectations.

- I will consider limiting the project to one semester, as it seemed to swallow up time that I felt was taken from other ELA topics, but include more time to write in class.
- I also will attempt to model the writing of a story for students, at least in the beginning for those who needed clarification about the process of collaborative writing and using the fate sheets and dice. This writing could be a shorter genre using THJ, such as a picture book, to save time.
- I will also expect students to work more interactively after they have written, perhaps by having others in their groups identify the devices that their cohort members used, rather than requiring students to identify their own as they write. This might result in more engagement in the revision process. After all, it’s always more fun to clean someone else’s house.
- In addition, by asking students to reflect more frequently on what they are learning and having them submit these reflections on Canvas, rather than keeping them in their writers’ notebooks, I could better understand their needs and accomplishments and be able to track them.
- Finally, I would try to make the iteration concept clearer, perhaps by having students bring in an RPG game that they could project and play for the class as a hook to the project. The class could look for archetypal elements of THJ, as well as discuss what they learn about the game at each level of play and how it informs their future play. To integrate more motivation and career awareness into the unit, I might even be able to locate an RPG designer who could Skype with the class about the elements of THJ that he or she uses and how important revision is in the design process.

Concluding thoughts

This year-long project, although at times frustrating, was overall a delightful adventure in making narrative writing more exciting and real for students and for me. Presenting work as play has an appeal to most people, and this project was no exception, at least initially. When the hard work of writing became more obvious, some students were motivated enough to soar with their ideas as their sails. Others became discouraged by the amount of work and creativity required and fell back to earth with flimsy wings not strong enough to support the weight of the tasks. At the end of the year, all students learned something, whether it was about THJ, narrative writing, literary devices, or time management and the consequences of not completing work in a high school course. For me, overhearing students talk about their characters as themselves and mentioning various elements of THJ that they noticed in movies on the weekend was proof that they were learning and retaining higher level thinking skills, and was incredibly rewarding. Having the chance to explore narrative writing with this grant was in whole a joy and blessing that has made me a better and more reflective teacher. I am grateful for this opportunity.