The Pedagogical Power of Myth in Teacher Education

LISA S. GOLDSTEIN
University of Texas at Austin

ABSTRACT: The contributions of myth to human life have been immeasurable; bringing myth into the process of preservice teacher education provides our students access to humanity's most powerful ideas and ideals. In this article I share the results of a recent study of the ways in which the mythic theme of the hero's journey supported a cohort of preservice elementary school teachers during their first field placement experience. I explore the ways myth can be used to affirm preservice teachers' goals and purposes, to encourage their creativity and exploration, and to nurture their imaginations, passions, and personal and professional growth.

Résumé: Le mythe a pris des proportions difficilement mesurables dans la vie humaine. Le fait d'introduire la notion de mythe dans le système éducatif des nouveaux professeurs, permet aux étudiants d'accéder à des idées et idéaux les plus détonants. Dans cet article, je partage tout à fait les résultats d'une étude récente sur les directions vers lesquelles le thème mythique dans l'aventure du héros, a aidé toute une cohorte de nouveaux instituteurs pendant la première partie de la mise en place de leur expérience. J'explore ici les différents aspects du mythe que les nouveaux enseignants peuvent utiliser pour mener à bien leurs objectifs et buts, pour encourager leur créativité, leurs recherches et pour nourrir leur imagination, leurs passions et leur accomplissement personnel et professionnel.

Typically, teacher education programs in the United States reflect the educational values and long-standing practices of American public schools. Rooted in a technical-rational perspective, teacher education is presently designed to provide students a linear sequence of methods course-work and field experiences. Efficiency – transmission of the most knowledge and skills in the time allotted – and practical application are valued highly. At many institutions, teacher education programs are oriented toward preparing students to pass high-stakes teacher certification examinations. In programs like these, little attention can

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be paid to the moral and intellectual dimensions of teaching, to the profound life changes undergraduates experience during this period, to the reverence that is the foundation of compassionate, inspired, committed teaching, and to the humility required to serve children with love and attention.

Teaching is a profoundly human endeavor; prospective teachers need to be offered guidance and instruction that affirms their goals and purposes, encourages creativity and exploration, nurtures imagination and passion. In this article I explore one possibility – building on the power of myth as a pedagogical tool – for creating an approach to teacher education that departs from the mechanistic model and offers a more humane alternative. Joseph Campbell, the scholar most readily associated with modern interpretation of mythic themes, points out that while folk tales and fairy tales exist purely for entertainment, myth has always been intended for use as a source of instruction (1988, p. 71). If this is indeed the case, then myth has the potential to be a useful component of any educational program.

In a recent study with a cohort of undergraduate elementary education students, I examined myth's potential for expanding our repertoire of teacher education techniques. Specifically, I explored the educational potential of using the mythic theme of the heroic journey (Campbell, 1949) as a metaphor to support preservice teachers during their first field placement experience.

The parallels between the hero's journey and the process of becoming a teacher are strong. As Campbell (1949) and other scholars of myth have pointed out, hero's journey stories follow a cyclical pattern: first a call to awaken, followed by an initiation process (complete with dragons and allies), and finished with transformation and return. In a chain of events that follows these same contours, prospective teachers are called to awaken and commit to the course of study necessary to become a member of the teaching profession; they undergo a period of initiation, usually in the form of placements in the field, in which they rely on supportive allies and face a range of challenges; and finally they find that they have transformed themselves into teachers prepared to face their next heroic journey – the induction year.

Like the hero's journey, the process of becoming a teacher demands personal transformation; preservice teacher education students are required to leave behind their student selves and construct a professional identity. But facing the challenges of re-inventing themselves as they simultaneously deal with the practical and logistical

challenges of their first student teaching fieldwork placements can be daunting for many undergraduates (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981).

I believed that helping preservice teachers to see themselves as heroes facing challenges on a journey essential to a transformative process would ease the stress of their first field placement experiences -it is nicer to think of oneself as a hero on an epic journey than as an ordinary college student attempting to juggle the many demands of a busy semester. Because the hero's journey closely parallels the experience of becoming a teacher and because it presents an image of the process that is uplifting, encouraging, and positive, it seemed that the hero's journey could be a powerful metaphor to offer preservice teacher education students.

Using metaphor in teacher education has been shown to enhance the experience of many preservice teachers (Bullough, 1991; Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Carter, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Dickmeyer, 1989; Marshall, 1990; Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp & Cohn, 1989; Stofflett, 1996; among others). By allowing students to think about themselves and their experiences in non-literal ways, metaphor creates space for discovery and possibility (Carter, 1990; Eisner, 1982). Using the hero's journey as a metaphor builds on that promising foundation and offers preservice teachers access to the essential strength and timeless clarity embedded in myth. The contributions of myth to human life have been immeasurable; bringing myth into the process of teacher education provides our students access to humanity's most powerful ideas and ideals. Using myth could contribute to the reorientation of teacher education away from its current focus on practical training toward more meaningful ends and purposes.

Teacher Education, Metaphor, and Myth

I teach an Elementary Classroom Organization and Management course at a large research university in the Southwestern United States. This practicum course is a central requirement of our teacher education program's professional development sequence and provides students with their first long-term field placement, known as their internship.[1] In conjunction with this practicum course, which meets weekly and covers topics such as classroom environments, discipline, lesson and unit planning, professionalism, and so on, each cohort of students spends 20 hours per week as interns in elementary school classrooms (grades 1-5) in a socio-culturally diverse urban school district for a period of 10

weeks. Concurrent to this practicum and internship, the students are enrolled in four other methods courses.

This is a demanding and difficult semester for my students. My preservice teachers' experience reflects the same concerns found in the research literature on the challenges of field placements. Many preservice teachers have misconceptions about the work of teachers and teaching and feel disillusioned by the contrast between their idealized images and the realities of the profession (Cole & Knowles, 1993). The numerous stressors linked with student teaching – expectations, role clarification, conformity, time, evaluation, assignments, peer discussions, feedback (MacDonald, 1993) – contribute to making the experience demoralizing and overwhelming.

The research reveals that, in an effort to cope with the challenges before them, many preservice teachers capitulate to the prevailing norms and practices of public school classrooms. Preservice teachers have been found to develop increasingly conservative and traditional beliefs (Zeichner, 1980) or more bureaucratic and impersonal practices (Hoy & Rees, 1977). Hoy & Woolfolk (1990) found, for example, that preservice teachers became more custodial and controlling toward their students as a result of their student teaching experiences. Their message is disheartening: they write, "the ideal images of college preparation apparently give way to the instrumental necessities of maintaining order and running a smoothly functioning classroom" (p. 294).

Similarly, Zeichner (1980) describes some preservice teachers I abandoning a thoughtful and reflective teaching practice and adopting a more utilitarian approach: "as students spend time in the field, getting the class through the required lesson on time in a quiet and orderly manner becomes the major criterion for accepting or rejecting a teaching activity" (p. 49).

Using metaphor is one way to help preservice teacher education students reposition the challenges they face during their internship semester and develop a more positive perspective. Because metaphor impacts the way we perceive situations and events it can be used to redescribe reality (Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp & Cohn, 1989) and "to encourage reconceptualization of problem situations" (Marshall, 1990, p. 129) such as those encountered by my preservice teachers in their field placements.

The body of scholarship on the role of metaphor in teacher education indicates that metaphor can be a useful tool for supporting novice teachers. Metaphor is seen as "a means for assisting beginners to

articulate who they think they are as teachers" (Bullough & Stokes, 1994, p. 220) and as a way to help preservice teachers "grasp intellectually systems that operate in ways quite mysterious to [them]" (Dickmeyer, 1989, p. 152).

Because metaphor allows preservice teachers to "create meaning in ambiguous, complex situations" such as those commonly found in classrooms (Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp & Cohn 1989, p. 52), the literature suggests that metaphor offers preservice teachers a powerful way to understand their experiences and to explore their roles in those experiences. In an attempt to support my preservice teachers during their challenging internship semester, I redesigned my Classroom Organization and Management class to take advantage of the power of metaphor by centering the course around the hero's journey figuration. I chose the hero's journey metaphor specifically because of the inherent power of the theme, because of its strong parallels to the process of becoming a teacher, and because using the hero's journey with preservice teachers would allow me to draw not only on the power of metaphor, but also on the broad and deep power of myth.

Joseph Campbell, the individual most readily associated with modem interpretation of mythic themes, crafted the scholarship upon which this study was built. Campbell (1988) points out that myths present human archetypes, basic truths that can help us to understand and contextualize our own experiences (p. 19). Further, myth allows us to encounter the offerings in ways that are aesthetically powerful and that remind us of our own human gift of creative thought and response (p. 27). As a result, myths can offer clues to the potentialities – spiritual, intellectual, emotional, personal, and I argue, professional – within us, providing insight into what we are capable of being, knowing, and experiencing (p. 5). Given that the driving purposes for revisioning this Classroom Organization and Management course was to reposition the field experience in ways that would combat negativism, provide inspiration and support, and enable the students to see themselves as successful student teachers, myth seemed like an ideal solution.

There are many recurring themes in Western mythology – the struggle between good and evil, the return of the prodigal son, and so on. However, because "the hero is a universal ideal that helps people think about their lives in a more profound and creative way" (Noble, 1992, p. 30) and because of its emphasis on transformation and growth, the hero's journey seemed like the most appropriate and potentially powerful mythic image for nascent teachers.

In the world of comic books and television shows, a hero is faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. In the world of teaching, the term *hero* is commonly used, particularly in films and in the popular press, to describe super-teachers who go above and beyond the normal expectations of their jobs, or to describe savior-teachers who rescue their students from administrative cruelty, gangs, poverty or ignorance. However, neither of the comic book definition nor the Hollywood definition is well-aligned with the mythic definition of hero that informs this study.

Mythic heroes stand in direct contrast to the super-hero model. The heroes of mythology are known:

> For their great capacity for life and for pursuing higher goals. They are expected to develop their resilience, autonomy and self-reliance, and to approach the challenges in their lives with intelligence and creativity, and to act with integrity in all endeavors. Their quests challenge them to roam in the inner or outer worlds in search of new knowledge and to use that knowledge to serve their fellow creatures. (Noble, 1992, p. 6)

Though not as flashy or high-profile as the implicit definition of hero generally associated with teacher-heroes, this definition sounds very much like what is expected of teachers and like what most teacher educators hope for their students' professional lives. It appears that the mythic hero is an image that must have some deep resonance for educators – Brown & Moffett (1999), for example, have recently applied the hero's journey theme to the process of school reform and transformation.

The hero's journey unfolds following a set pattern (Campbell, 1949, pp. 245-246). The hero is called to awaken and to begin her journey. She meets a helper who encourages her to go forth and who gives her tools and gifts to assist her on her journey. Then she proceeds to a threshold where she leaves behind her previous life and enters new realms of experience. At this point the hero meets a presence who guards the passage into the new realms; she must successfully negotiate with this gatekeeper in order to gain entry and continue on her journey.

Once she passes over the threshold, the hero enters a period of initiation where she meets unfamiliar forces, some of which threaten her and some of which offer magical aid. Successful negotiation of these trials leads our hero to personal transformation, growth, and

illumination. The hero then returns to the world to share what she has learned.

Even with this brief description, the parallels to the teacher education process are apparent. As the deadline for declaring the education major or applying to begin the professional development course sequence approaches and the hero responds to the call to awaken and embarks upon her journey to become a teacher. She begins her specialized methods course-work, where she meets helpful professors and teaching assistants who offer her encouragement, knowledge, teaching skills and other tools necessary for success in the field.

Next the hero proceeds to the threshold of her field placement classroom where she encounters her cooperating teacher, a presence who guards the passage; each hero must negotiate her relationship with the threshold guardian in order to gain entrance to this new realm of experience. The threshold guardian plays a crucial role in the journey: the hero cannot begin her initiation until she had crossed the threshold.

Unlike the ever-helpful ally or the always-dangerous dragon, the threshold guardian is generally a complex character with motivations and behaviors that are often unclear and unstable. For preservice teachers the cooperating teacher can appear both as friend and foe, be supportive or intimidating, easy to approach or challenging, and often takes on all these personas (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Graham, 1999).

Once she has crossed the threshold, the hero begins her initiation period. In her placement classroom the hero encounters unfamiliar forces of all kinds; she must find new allies, face a range of trials, and call on her inner resources and her untapped strengths in order to be successful. The close connections between student teaching and the hero's initiation period are explored in great depth in literature focused on student teaching as a rite of passage (Berman, 1994; Eddy, 1969; White, 1989).

For student teachers, there are many potential allies on this journey: other student teachers, the children in the class, the children's parents, the cooperating teacher or other teachers on the faculty, the principal, the fieldwork supervisor. However, these people also have the potential to be dragons, testing and challenging the heroic preservice teacher. And, as is the case for all heroes, often the fiercest dragons will be found within the hero herself.

Facing dragons – external and internal – is the heart of the journey. Successfully battling the dragons and enduring the trials are the source of the transformation that is the reward of the hero's journey: our hero

begins as a college student and ends as a novice teacher, ready to go out into the world and share what she has learned.

I felt that using the hero's journey as a metaphor for the internship semester would offer students an alternative way of thinking about their experience, perhaps providing a more positive perspective. This study was designed to allow me to determine if using the mythic hero's journey as an educational tool could help reposition the challenges of the fieldwork experience and serve as a source of support and encouragement to my students during this difficult yet essential professional transformation.

Study Procedures

The general content and topics of the Classroom Organization and Management course at my institution are predetermined by the material covered in the statewide licensure examination. However, each course instructor has a fair amount of leeway for creativity and individualization of the syllabus and of instruction within that framework. In the Spring on 1999, motivated by my commitment to supporting my students through the hero's journey myth, I revisioned this class in ways deliberately designed to nest the mandated subject matter within an explicit focus on maintaining connection to the creative spirit and the power embedded in myth. As I taught lesson planning, discipline strategies, and other required topics, I used the hero'sjourney to communicate to my students a view of teaching and teachers that highlighted the energy and imagination, the passion and purpose, the creativity and flexibility, and the limitless possibilities inherent in working with children.

Although the hero's journey is a well-known mythic theme, I feared that if I asked students to find themselves and their teacher education experiences within Joseph Campbell's landmark book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), much of the potential power of the hero's journey metaphor would be lost in the dense, difficult, theoretical text. To prevent confusion, I felt it necessary to discuss the hero's journey in the context of a familiar story. I opted to use the *Star Wars* trilogy of films – *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977); *The Empire Strikes Back* (Lucas, Brackett & Kasdan, 1980); and *The Return of the Jedi* (Lucas & Kasdan, 1983) – as a mediating force to help the students see and forge the connections between the mythic hero's journey cycle and their nascent teaching lives.

I chose *Star Wars* for many reasons. George Lucas, creator of the *Star Wars* galaxy, very deliberately crafted the trilogy using the standard mythic figures and themes of the hero's journey: he stated,"I wanted to take all the old myths and put them into a new format that young people could relate to" (Lucas, cited in Bouzereau, 1997, p. 27). Joseph Campbell buttresses Lucas's claim, stating "*Star Wars* is a very old story in a very new costume" (Campbell, 1988, p. 179). *Star Wars,* familiar and easily accessible, formed a natural bridge between the ancient hero's journey cycle and the contemporary culture in which my students' teaching experiences take place.

In addition, *Star Wars* offers a hero more aligned with the mythic definition of the term than with the popular culture definition. One of the enduring beauties of the *Star Wars* trilogy is the particularly flawed and imperfect character of its central hero. Luke Skywalker – impatient, impetuous, immature – is a hero, yet still he makes mistakes, gets scared, and needs help as he journeys toward his future. It was this particular spirit of the heroic that I hoped would sustain and support the students in the cohort as they began their professional lives. Like Luke, they would make mistakes, get scared, and need help on their journeys toward their future careers and, also like Luke, they would succeed despite their apparent weaknesses.

Participation in this study was open to all students enrolled in the Elementary Classroom Organization and Management class I taught in the Spring of 1999. Data for this study comprised several of the papers and activities assigned as course requirements.[2] All of the students in the cohort – 14 anglo females in their early to mid-20s – elected to participate in the study and had their papers and evaluative materials considered as data for this project.[3]

As an initial assignment in the course, students watched the *Star Wars* trilogy films using a guided viewing packet I developed for this study in order to help them attend carefully to Luke Skywalker's hero-journey. The packet was organized around the stages of the hero's journey. Each section – call to awaken, initiation, allies/helpers, trials/dragons, and transformation and return had space for note-taking, a set of questions designed to focus their thinking about the details of the films in specific relation to Luke's hero's journey, and a set of questions designed to structure students' reflections on their own lives as aspiring teachers. My intent was that thinking about Luke's experiences would become a springboard for examination and reflection

of the students' lived experiences and would therefore shed light on their own hero-journeys.

The students wrote two papers for the course that were linked to the hero's journey theme. One paper focused on their call to awaken; in this assignment students were asked to reflect on and discuss their decision to become a teacher. The other hero's journey paper was centered around the students' initiation process; intended as an opportunity for the students to consider and begin to interpret their experiences over the semester, this paper required students to discuss the various allies and dragons they encountered, to detail the trials they weathered, and to describe any transformations that may have occurred.

In addition, data were drawn from one free-write done in class intended for formative evaluation of the course and of the study, and the students' comments on an informal summative evaluation tool which covered the course as a whole. Finally, students were given the option of participating in focus group discussions held six months after the completion of the course: at this point in time the students had almost finished their student teaching placements and were able to look back on the ways that the hero's journey metaphor contributed to their professional experiences after the study ended. Nine students participated in these focus group discussions. To accommodate their schedules, I held three different focus group sessions, each of which covered the same topics and issues.

Manual and computer-assisted data analysis strategies were employed to examine and code all of the student writings. The main question that guided my data analysis was simple: In what ways did the preservice teachers perceive the mythic theme of the hero's journey to be a beneficial part of their experience? I was also looking for insight into the ways in which the hero's journey metaphor fell short or limited the preservice teachers' perceptions. In addition, I attended to the ways in which the preservice teachers ignored or avoided or resisted the hero's journey myth.

I analyzed the complete data set in two different ways: focusing on each data source/assignment and focusing on each participant. First, I read and coded all students' responses to each assignment in the order in which they were completed – I read all the viewing guides, all the call to awaken papers, all the freewrites, then all the initiation papers and informal course evaluations. My goal here was to develop an overall sense of the progression of the class's experiences, attitudes, and

perceptions over the duration of their field placement and to reveal general themes common to all the participants.

Next I looked at each individual, reading the complete portfolio of data written by each participant. This analysis strategy revealed the development of each preservice teacher's thoughts, concerns, and attitudes over the course of the field placement period and enabled me to engage in case and cross-case analysis.

The same questions and issues that guided my data analysis formed the central questions posed to the focus groups. Focus group discussions were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed in relation to the data gathered during the course of the semester. Data from all sources will be discussed and interpreted below.

The Pedagogical Powers of Myth

The unusual approach to teacher education taken in our Classroom Organization and Management course – a syllabus driven by the hero's journey rather than by the nuts and bolts practical matters – made the course appealing to students. This unexpected focus, plus the inclusion of the *Star Wars* movies as part of the course content, piqued the students' curiosity.

In her focus group, Amber recalled that when she learned the initial assignment in the course was to watch the *Star Wars* trilogy, she immediately sought connections between the films and the course content:

> *[The Star Wars assignment] was intriguing because [I wondered] how on earth is thing going to tie in? It was clear this was a cool as shit assignment, but wait a minute, you know? There had to be more going on there.*

In a different focus group conversation, Micki revealed another way the atypical course format appealed to the students. She told me:

> *The hero's myth and Star Wars and all that ... gave us the impression that you really wanted to make the class fun and enjoyable. And not just 'Okay, I am going to spit some theories at you and I am going to give you some graduate level reading.'*

According to Micki, in most teacher education classes professors "spit [some] theories" at students and require undergraduates to struggle with graduate level materials; in our class, though, the professor told you to watch *Star Wars* movies and pretend to be a Jedi when things get tough in your placement classroom.

Micki's comments highlight an important point. In their previous courses my students were expected to learn how to be a teacher through theoretical constructs and abstract ideas; in this course they were learning how to be a teacher in a very different manner. Micki made it clear that this hero's journey-informed Classroom Organization and Management course appealed to the students because learning to become a teacher in this context involved interacting not only with perspectives and strategies that emerged from the world of academic theory but also from other realms of experience.

Micki and her classmates desired rich and meaningful educational experiences. They wanted to confront uncertainty, to wrestle with intellectual challenges, to reach their own conclusions. Formulas for lesson plans, lectures about cooperative learning, assignments detached from the students' lives or the lives of the children they teach paled next to the timeless, open-ended power of myth.

The participants' comments indicate that the inherent power of the hero's journey myth was enhanced by my decision to use *Star Wars* as a teaching tool. For example, Rose confessed that "*every time something does not go as planned or I feel I don't have control, I think about Luke and what he went through to get to be a Jedi.*" Luke Skywalker and the other *Star Wars* characters gave faces to the myth and made it more easily accessible.

On the final course evaluation I asked the students if they felt I should use *Star Wars* again the next time I teach the course. A sampling of their anonymous responses reveals the strong sentiment of the group:

> *Definitely! I absolutely love the trilogy! It is a fun way to start the semester. The hero's journey that the characters go on is so similar to ours. It is a fun and exciting way to look at this process.*
>
> *Yes, it is a fun but meaningful way to help students cope with the pressures of the [professional development sequence course] block. You should continue to use it.*
>
> *Yes, I think the connection is helpful to many people. I think it is so unique and I really felt like you shared so much of yourself with us.*
>
> *Yes – it applies well to the journey of becoming a teacher.*

Yes, because it was helpful for me to view my last year of school as a journey. It made me realize that I am learning things all the time and not to get too frustrated when I'm not perfect.

Yes, I liked watching Star Wars.

The students' love of *Star Wars* is certainly linked to the overall pleasure they derived from participation in a teacher education course that allowed room for transcendence and personal growth. However, I think that the appeal of *Star Wars* also sheds light on the power of the arts as a teaching tool.

As Maxine Greene asserts, the arts allow us to "break through the frames of custom and to touch the consciousness of those we teach" (1995, p. 56). Educational activities steeped in the arts create cognitive opportunities unavailable through expository text and teacher lectures. Film, for example, is a powerful and vibrant form of representation that speaks deeply to its audience and offers access to information, ideas, and experiences not possible through other means (Eisner, 1982).

Engaging with the arts teaches preservice teachers many valuable lessons. As Eisner argues:

> One of the important lessons the arts teach is that solutions to problems can take many forms. This lesson from the arts would not be so important were it not for the fact that so much of what is taught in school teaches just the opposite lesson ... [the arts] celebrate imagination, multiple perspectives, and the importance of personal interpretation. (1998, p. 82)

Aesthetic experiences are not a typical aspect of teacher education. But, as Greene points out:

> Imagination is as important in the lives of teachers as it is in the lives of their students, in part because teachers incapable of thinking imaginatively or of releasing students to encounter works of literature and other forms of art are probably also unable to communicate to the young what the use of imagination signifies. (1995, p. 36)

Connecting preservice teachers to myth using the arts allows them to tap easily into two powerful sources of wisdom and knowledge

Asking participants to write about their calls to awaken and their initiation experiences as part of the course led to reflection, clarity, and discovery. For example, Jane said:

Writing the papers on why I decided to become a teacher and on the dragons and allies really was very helpful because I had

> *never thought about any of that before I couldn't believe that I had gotten that far without thinking about why I wanted to be a teacher. I mean, I never ever thought about it. And that was really beneficial to me.*

Many of the participants expressed similar sentiments, grateful both for the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and for the structure offered by the hero's journey framework. In her initiation paper handed in at the end of the semester, Ashley wrote the following:

> *As the semester comes to a close, it is nice to reflect back on what transformations I have made. [In my viewing guide] I wrote about Luke, 'After his Jedi training he had discipline, faith, deeper understanding, dedication, and powers of mind control. He had a noble purpose.' Likewise I feel my training and quest has instilled in me stronger discipline, faith, understanding, and dedication.*

The hero's journey allowed the preservice teachers to see their own lives from a different angle and to make new connections.

In her focus group meeting, Amber described the ways that the hero's journey focus opened creative pathways for new ideas, experiences, and forms of expression. She said, "*I'm thinking about all the different activities that we did centered around [the hero'sjourney]. That aspect of the class was very powerful to me It was a way of learning to express yourself that most of us don't think about.*"

Rose responded to Amber's comments, asserting that the hero's journey focus also helped students identify their core beliefs and values. The following excerpt from the focus group session reveals Rose's perspective on the value of this non-traditional approach to teacher education:

> *Rose:* *When I got in [to our class] I was like philosophy, oh crap. Education philosophy? I have no clue, you know? Like last semester I was all duuuuh and now I can totally think it through. And I think [the hero's journey activities] really helped. I didn't realize that I was learning what I really thought by doing all that, but I was.*
>
> *Me:* *So it helped you clarify...*

> *Rose:* *What I think and what I believe in instead of what they tell you ... you know, to believe in Madeline Hunter and all that way of teaching. [The hero's journey focus] makes you think about how you want to teach.*

Rose derided prescriptive teacher education pedagogy that spoon-fed preservice teachers ideas and practices; that approach left her clueless. Engaging with myth in personal and creative ways, on the other hand, helped her define herself as a teacher.

Some of the participants interpreted the hero's journey theme very literally, drawing on the image of the hero as a source of support and strength. Christy reported to her focus group that she had been nervous before an interview for a teaching position; in order to calm down she recalled telling herself *"I am a hero and I can do this. I need to go in there and be confident and be a hero."* Alexis also found strength in her image of herself as a hero. In recalling her experience receiving pointed critical feedback from her cooperating teacher, Alexis wrote, *"I appreciated her for that because, after all, I am a hero. I believe my ability to handle this type of feedback made me feel more heroic."*

Amber used the hero metaphor to put her classroom struggles into perspective. She wrote:

> *My last observation time was very chaotic and stressful for me. I thought to myself how horrible it was going and then HERO popped into my mind and I smiled. Suddenly it seemed not so stressful and almost laughable. I like thinking of myself as a hero on a journey; it gives meaning, purpose, and humor to my life.*

Other students used the image of the hero in figurative ways, as a source of *"inspiration and momentum"* (Alexis), as a way to *"get my thoughts and emotions back on track"* (Erin), or as a reminder that *"I am learning things all the time and not to get too frustrated when I'm not perfect"* (anonymous course evaluation).

For some participants, using the hero's journey as a metaphor for their teacher education experience led to powerful personal insights. Thanks to the hero's journey, Micki wrote, *"I have found strengths in myself that I never knew existed and weaknesses that aren't as weak as I had perceived them to be."* Amber, too, had a new understanding of herself at the end of the semester. Considering the contributions made by the hero's journey metaphor, she explained:

> *The true purpose and gift of this process [has been] to really look at myself as a person and as a teacher. I questioned every aspect of my life Viewing this venture as a heroic journey has enabled me to work for what I want and what I believe in ... At the beginning I didn't even know I was on a journey. Through this process I have come to learn that my greatest ally is my own zeal for teaching and my greatest dragon is my own self-doubt. I had no idea that these two parts had been at work all along. This has not only been a journey to teaching, but more importantly, a journey to myself.*

Amber herself, not the power of myth, is responsible for the remarkable growth and transformation she experienced. However, as she stated in the excerpt quoted above, the hero's journey was a major catalyst in the change process.

In deciding to restructure my course around the metaphor of the hero's journey, I had concerns about the typical portrayal of the hero as an independent, solitary figure. This vision of the hero might communicate to students an image of the teacher as an isolated individual, someone who closes her classroom door and works alone in an insular setting. To attempt to undercut that image, I drew upon Kathleen Noble's (1994) feminist reinterpretation of the mythic hero when teaching my introductory lessons about the hero's journey.

Rather than presenting heroes as isolated individuals, Noble's view highlights the crucial importance of allies on a hero's journey. She writes:

> Many of us grow up believing that heroes must accomplish their goals by relying solely upon their own wits. But a careful reading of these tales reveals 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)

The students connected strongly with the idea of the hero as part of a community, linked closely to network of allies. In this way, the hero's journey metaphor served to bind the cohort together.

Candy, a focus group participant, stated that thinking of themselves as a group of heroes *"always cheered everybody up"* and allowed each student to offer and request support as needed. Amber also discussed the power of the community: *"We'd meet in class every week and it was like empowerment shots ... I go in and get all psyched up and confident about everything and excited and then I go back out for a week. I depended a whole lot on that."*

Further, Christy reported that the hero's journey metaphor offered a form of shorthand communication among the group: *"We all had this same knowledge base and started at square one so it was really easy to describe how you were feeling."* Polster (1992) argues that women's heroism often takes the form of collective action; using Noble's feminist definition of hero allowed for the development of a heroic learning community.

In typical teacher education programs preservice teachers often spend more time learning when to give a time out and when to move a student's clip on the discipline chart than exploring less concrete but more fundamental matters like learning how to say yes to children and learning and imagination as often as possible. Integrating mythic themes into my Classroom Organization and Management course allowed me to offer my preservice teachers a humane and meaningful educational experience within a business-as-usual teacher education program.

As we continue to seek innovative strategies for supporting students during this their professional preparation for classroom teaching, myth offers promise and possibility. Amber summed up her impressions of the value of her myth-based teacher education experience, writing, *"The bottom line for me of the true essence of the course was ... encouraging [you] to be unique, to use, to find your strengths, to find your gifts, to find what areas it is that you need to work on, to find your goals, and to become a confident person in this occupation that you've chosen."* Mythic modes of teacher education – and of education in general – are rooted in an image of teaching that celebrates creative and passionate learning, acknowledges the limitless nature of human potentiality, appreciates personal investment in teaching-learning interactions, allows for transcendent experiences, and validates efforts to grow and change.

Amber concluded her reflections about our class by saying, it was *"less about teaching as just an occupation and more about learning about myself and what's important to me."* Thanks to the hero's journey, our course was not only a course about how to be a teacher, but about how to be.

NOTES

1. In the semester following their internship students engage in their formal student teaching placement. For that field experience students are in their placement classrooms 40 hours per week for a ten week period;

generally they are placed at a school site different from the one at which they did their internship placements.

2. In addition to the assignments specifically linked to the hero's journey theme, students also wrote a paper analyzing a failed lesson, created a detailed child case study, kept a handbook of reflections and ideas for their student teaching semester, and developed a teaching portfolio representing their experiences, philosophy, goals, sample lesson plans, and so on.

3. As required by our university Institutional Review Board, students were assured that their decision to participate or to abstain from participation in this study would not affect their workload for the course, their grade, my evaluation of their work, or their future relationships with the university. The study was carried out with the endorsement of the Department Review Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, and all of the data are presented here with the participants' permission.

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Lisa S. Goldstein is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Texas at Austin where she teaches in the Early Childhood Education and Curriculum Studies programs. She has published widely on the topic of caring in teaching, teacher education, and research on teaching. She can be reached at goldstein@mail.utexas.edu.