

Building resilience into the classroom

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Emerging research suggests that for students to fare better, they need to fail better. How students respond to failure is a strong predictor of future success, and the notion of resilience is increasingly prevalent in conversations about higher education. Resilience has a number of characteristics, including levels of persistence, effort, positive mindset, motivation and self-regulation.

So how do we build resilience into our classrooms? Are there ways to embed resilience into the content we deliver? As a literature professor, I have recently reimagined my medieval romance course as a learning journey about resilience. My premise: chivalric quests can provide a valuable lens to understand the process of transformative learning and provide us with models for normalizing failure as a necessary condition of success.

Quests usually follow a pattern: during a communal event, usually a feast, a knight is presented with a quest. The knight embarks on a confusing and sometimes circuitous journey and must learn something essential about himself before succeeding and returning home to share his knowledge, forged through experience, with his community. This pattern also applies to teaching and learning, where we often begin conversations in the communal space of a classroom, send students off on curiosity-driven assignments, and then ask them to share their findings at the end of term.

When Edmund Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene* in the 16th century, he used a chivalric quest to frame his educational self-help book. The protagonist, Redcrosse Knight, begins his quest as many of our students begin their undergraduate careers: inexperienced, uncertain about the journey ahead, but armed with a dash of bravado and a sense of adventure. Although Redcrosse eventually slays the dragon, frees a kingdom from tyranny and marries a beautiful princess, he makes an astounding number of mistakes along the way. He stumbles upon error, abandons truth, loses his way, grapples with despair and contemplates suicide. In order to fulfill his quest, our errant knight must embrace humility, enter a kind of existential rehab facility (the House of Holiness) and accept guidance from a series of mentors (including truth, patience, hope, and a cameo appearance by King Arthur).

This allegorical journey – of initially high expectations, inevitable failure, learned humility, renewed purpose and eventual success – animates almost every learning journey I have ever had.

What we learn from Redcrosse, and chivalric quests more generally, is that a successful quest is not about avoiding failure: almost every knight – regardless of his or her strength, bravery and virtue – fails at some point in their journey (and often with spectacular frequency). However, knights usually find shelter, counsel, or solace when they are most in need: aid comes from a trusty dwarf, a retired knight-turned-hermit, or a fairy queen. A savvy knight-errant accepts help and advice, applies it to his or her context, and sets off with a renewed sense of purpose. This is the essence of medieval resilience.

As professors, we have the privilege – and deep responsibility – to act as wise hermits and trusty dwarves to help students build their capacities for resilience. Ideally, we equip our students (and colleagues) with the resources to undertake learning journeys, support them when they stumble upon the cave of error, encourage them as they grapple with despair, and celebrate when they return victorious from their diverse quests.

We benefit from an Arthurian model of governance when members of a community are united through a shared vision and encouraged to undertake quests together and individually. There are many similarities between Arthurian literature and higher education: victories are often achieved through local action and a series of small quests, not in large-scale warfare; we must tackle seemingly insurmountable obstacles with creativity and agility; we undertake, as a fundamental principle, to defend the rights of the defenseless, marginalized and voiceless; and we are committed

to the pursuit of truth and freedom in its many forms.

At the end of *The Faerie Queene*, when Redcrosse prepares to battle the dragon, Una, his beloved exclaims, “The sparke of noble courage now awake,/ And strive your excellent selfe to excel” (I. xi. 15-16). Redcrosse Knight teaches us a valuable lesson in resilience: we excel when we integrate, and even celebrate, our failures. The spark that ignites Redcrosse is the alchemical moment when knowledge collides with experience, when the fear of failure disappears, and when we harness courage to reach our best capacities and become our excellent selves.