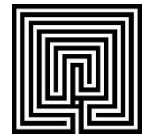


# Exploring Labyrinths in Classrooms

Ronald J. Nelson



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Chancing on Carol Shields' novel *Larry's Party* was one of the luckiest events of my life, for it opened me to the allure of the labyrinth. Her book tells the story of an ordinary man at the end of the millennium, building to the central question that is explicitly stated in the final chapter but implied throughout: "What's it like being a man these days? ... In the last days of the twentieth century?"<sup>1</sup> As an ordinary man myself, I was intrigued by Shields' protagonist, Larry Weller, who chances to go to the Hampton Court maze on his honeymoon with his first wife and finds the experience of treading the maze by himself exhilarating. As the novel spins out, Weller is able to transform his fascination with labyrinths and mazes from an avocation into a lucrative vocation.

When I was assigned the task of teaching a general humanities course, Great Works, at James Madison University, I was informed that I needed an overriding theme for the course. The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that the labyrinth<sup>2</sup> was the theme to use. Here was a perfect vehicle for the journey of life, what with its exploration of entrances, exits, centers or goals, paths, right and wrong decisions, obstacles, tests, dead ends, clues, frustrations, bewilderment, intricacies, beauties, and joys. And here were students having entered the labyrinth of college life with the same challenging combination of positive and negative forces at work. In essence, each course is a labyrinth with difficulties to be dealt with and problems to be solved by students as they go down one or more paths toward the center, fulfilling the objectives of the course and presumably their own objectives. Indeed, a college career often involves navigating murky and choppy waters in course after course, problem after problem, before arriving at the shore of graduation. And here was a chance for me to delve into a captivating subject to my heart's content, while offering students an original way to think and feel about a college course and, in the process, about the various aspects of their lives.

Although I teach Great Works out of the English Department, virtually any course at any level in any department could be organized equally well around the analogy of the labyrinth. The common denominator of such courses is this challenge: "Let's delve into this labyrinth, find our way to the center, and then make our exit, the richer for the experience." Every course has a distinct entrance and exit: the start and end of the term. These outer limits, however, are assumed and arbitrary, hence uninteresting. What happens *within* the framework of the labyrinth – the work of art or artifice therein, the process of transformation that transpires – is what counts. This point is consistent with Doob's emphasis on *labor intus* as the most compelling derivation of the word: "Etymologically speaking... the labyrinth is a process involving internal difficulty (or error, or artistry, or fatiguing effort); and what happens inside is more important than whether it is hard to get in or out" (p.97). As with life (the outer limits of which are birth and death), how we get through the business of living, how we behave in our individual labyrinths is vitally important. And what we try to accomplish within a college course, the approach we take, can be a microcosm for life.

## Planning

The planning of such a course with its objectives (center) and projects (paths) for students to complete – each project tantamount to a new labyrinth with a fresh solution at its core and new ways or skills to get there – can be richly fulfilling for the maze-maker (teacher) in that he or she is creating an exciting potential to be realized by the maze-treader (student). The effective teacher actually assumes a triple role in the process: planner, guide or mentor who supplies clues or help, and companion to the traveler. Mircea Eliade's

stance on this last point is eloquent in its simplicity: “I feel that I am not even a guide, only a companion – a companion slightly further along the road, a companion to those who travel with me” (p.188). A bond may well develop from this interaction, based on the shared immersion in an abstract, complex concept and its ubiquitous concrete applications. General and specific points come to have direct and indirect relevance to immediate, short-term, and long-term situations for those involved. Indeed, valuable insights on life and its various aspects often emerge.

As with Daedalus, the builder of the Cretan labyrinth, the teacher who would make of his or her class a labyrinth must have considerable creativity and skill, as well as dedication to prepare extensively. As with Shakespeare’s protagonist in *Hamlet*, “The readiness is all” (V. ii. 211). Once the teacher lays the foundation for the course by planning it carefully and erects the intricate edifice, she or he is ready to actualize the plan for having students wend their way through their new, elaborate dwelling for the semester. In general, the better the blueprint and structure, the better the learning experience.

### **Gathering Materials**

Gathering appropriate materials (some of which would depend upon the type of course, some of which would be common to any course) and presenting them in an effective sequence is essential to the success of the course. The materials in my course include required reading for the students: novels, short stories, poems, plays, and essays (some of which could be put on reserve in the library, some of which could be distributed in handouts). The teacher must also gather scholarly and lay materials for his or her own background reading and for interweaving strategically throughout the semester. Visuals in the form of diagrams, pictures, photographs, and videos that can bring home the subject convincingly must also be collected and organized. Music that would be appropriate for labyrinth-walking can also be garnered to give students a feel for the potency of music to evoke the appropriate atmosphere.<sup>3</sup>

Although there are probably as many sequences in which to present the materials as there are teachers, I start with an extensive introduction on labyrinths and mazes to familiarize students with the subject. That introduction takes several class periods. Only after spending a considerable amount of time on fundamentals related to labyrinths and mazes, with which they are probably minimally acquainted, will students be prepared to benefit from the required reading. The introductory materials will inform students on some of the history of labyrinths and mazes, what the words mean (as much as is known, the origins being elusive), what terminology is commonly associated with labyrinths and mazes, what kinds of labyrinths and mazes there are, what materials can be used to make them, where they are located, and what they look like.

### **The First Day**

For the first day, I come to class wearing one of my maze T-shirts and my two-sided labyrinth pendant (Cretan on one side, Chartres on the other), drinking coffee out of my maze mug. The extensive introduction itself can be a blend of information and activities to get students involved in the theme. I start with a simple, “Welcome to the labyrinth!” After the pregnant pause, in which students are prone to wonder if they’ve taken a wrong turn onto Mars, I try to lighten the mood with some attempts at humor, like “You’re going to be amazed by this course” or “If you go through a maize maze, you might get cornfused.” (I regard each groan as a minor step on the road to winning them over to the subject.) I then try to reassure them that they have embarked on a worthwhile course of action by saying something like, “I am your guide. Please feel free to ask as many questions as you like. I may well be able to provide clues, although I don’t promise to have conclusive answers. Also, I may not answer some questions, opting to have you attempt the answer on your own. What I can say is, I’ve been through mazes many times and can probably help you in some way on your journey.”

I reinforce my seriousness about it all by reminding students that, when they get right down to it, life is a labyrinth: we enter it when we are born; we exit it when we die. There is a center somewhere in the middle, to which we may (if we are wise or lucky) arrive after following various paths and encountering various obstacles. To illustrate the point, I quote Carol Shields' epigraph to *Larry's Party*: "What is this mighty labyrinth – the earth, /But a wild maze the moment of our birth?" (from "Reflections on Walking in the Maze at Hampton Court", *British Magazine*, 1747). Then I explain that the words "labyrinth" and "maze" are generally used interchangeably but that certain traits are often connected to labyrinths (like unicursal) and maze (multicursal, right and wrong turns or decisions, frustrations), respectively. I indicate that today we'll 1) focus on certain key words connected with labyrinths and mazes – like entrance, exit, center, path, and obstacles – by writing a bit on them, and 2) try a couple of quick exercises. That is about what can be accomplished in one class period of 50 minutes.

To begin with, I offer some synonyms (or near-synonyms)<sup>4</sup> for "center," like "goal," "objective," and "destination." I then ask that students write a short paragraph on what the center of their life is and why. When they've completed that task, I have them write a brief paragraph on what they regard as the center for this course – what they think their goal is for this particular course, what they hope to derive from it, and why. That writing activity should get them thinking about what they really want to achieve in the course, even though it may not be clearly articulated at this point. Even if they answer only, "an A+," they must do some thinking in order to explain the center or objective they have stated. Why, specifically, is the goal an A+ for you? Then I suggest some synonyms or near-synonyms for "path" and ask for a list of paths or skills or kinds of activities they think will enable them to reach their goal for the course. Finally, I ask for a short list of obstacles they foresee in reaching their goals. Then I say something to the effect that "I'd like to help you devise a strategy to help you to overcome these obstacles. Let's think about it, and we'll talk further about that strategy in conference. I want to assist you as you go through the labyrinth."

The brief exercises that we do are first to draw a Classical Cretan labyrinth freehand or with graph paper<sup>5</sup> and so give students an immediate feel for the shape and essence of the labyrinth, as well as a bit of confidence that they can plunge right into the idea of labyrinths. As Melissa West puts it, "... if you take the time to learn how a labyrinth is constructed, your understanding of it will be broadened and deepened" (p.47). Citing Sig Lonegren, she notes the distinction between "knowing" and "gnowing" ("derived from *gnosis*, the intuitive, nonrational faculties"). She also mentions that, with your own labyrinth, even a paper one, it is there to use at any time (p.48).

Secondly, I provide students with two tools of invention that will serve them well in various contexts, not just with labyrinths and mazes. The first is the journalist's questions: who, what, why, where, when, how, and how many. Next, I have them apply these questions to a valuable technique of invention: clustering. So, they put the word "labyrinth" in the middle of a sheet of paper and circle it. Then, with lines spoking out for "who," etc., they can ask such questions as, "Who would build a labyrinth," "Why would a person build one?" and "What would a labyrinth cost?"

### **After the First Day**

Other aspects of the subject can be dealt with early in the course as preparation, including units or modules on (1) terminology, (2) brief readings on general or specific angles on the subject, (3) arrangement of field trips, (4) relevance of the subject to their major fields of study, (5) visuals, (6) the spiritual dimension to labyrinths, and (7) the logical dimension to mazes.

## Terminology

In addition to the general terms associated with labyrinths (like “center” and “path”), there are many highly specialized words that could be put into a glossary and distributed. Students can readily become acquainted with the rich vocabulary associated with labyrinths and mazes, using such a glossary. Words like “labrys” (double-headed axe – OED), “Apopathic path” (“The path through silence” – Artress 25), “Kathopathic path” (“uses the imaginative process as a guide to the Light within” – Artress 26), “lunations” (“the outer ring of partial circles that completes the outside circle of the [Chartres] labyrinth” – Artress 60-61), “cusps” and “foils” (peaks and valleys around the perimeter – Artress 61), “aporia” (the “unpassable path,’ self-contradiction, paradox” – Doob 9), “ambages” (“a roundabout or circuitous path, course, etc., meanderings, twists and turns” – *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, cited by Doob 53), “errores” (“structural windings” and “misjudgments and deceptions” that can develop – Doob 7, 71), “labor intus” (“the idea that there is toil – moral, physical, artistic – within, especially when one lacks a privileged overview” – Doob 332), “domus daedali” (stressing Daedalus’ house as a brilliant construction – Doob 97), “lusus Troiae” or “Trojan Ride” (“complex equestrian ballet-tournaments” enjoyed by the Romans – Doob 26-30) become fascinating in their intricacies.

## Readings

Short readings like those found in the special issue of *Parabola* (17.2 [Summer 1992]) devoted to labyrinths give students a wonderful introduction to the history, the mythological aspects, the metaphoric connections, the pleasures and frustrations associated with labyrinths and mazes, and other engaging dimensions to the subject. Especially important are the summaries of the Cretan labyrinth story, which can be found, for example, in Doob 11-13 and many other sources. Some of the gripping, short fiction of Jorge Luis Borges can generate fascinating discussions, like “The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths” and “The House of Asterion” (the Cretan story told from the point of view of the Minotaur). Other of Borges stories provide a plethora of slants on the labyrinth: “The Garden of Forking Paths,” “Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth,” “The Circular Ruins,” and “Death and the Compass.”

## Field Trips

There is no substitute for actual field trips to labyrinths and mazes, so I require a labyrinth walk and a field trip report based on it. When possible, I also require a walk through a maze to enable students to get both experiences. Sometimes I give extra credit for the latter.

## Major Fields of Study

Labyrinths and mazes become all the more relevant if students can see the connection to their major field of study, so I encourage them to think of the problems to be solved (i.e., the centers to be reached) in their fields, the possible paths toward solutions, the obstacles or drawbacks to certain courses of actions, dead ends, ways to guide or provide assistance to those fellow travelers in need of help in the field, and the like. In art or architecture, how would you construct a labyrinth? What would go into the planning? In medicine, how would you treat a person with a kidney stone? Would you use the path of lithotripsy, surgery, or do nothing? What are the drawbacks or obstacles that emerge for any of these courses of action? In choreography, how would you arrange a dance through a labyrinth? In sociology or psychology, would such an event have therapeutic value to residents of a nursing home or prisoners or pupils? Such linking of the labyrinth with students’ majors is a fine way to bring focus to and appreciation of the value of one’s major because it encourages a concentration on realistic goals, alternative courses of action, impediments to success, ways to assist those in one’s care, and other important matters.

## Visuals

In addition to the wonderful diagrams and photographs that can be found in Fisher and Gerster, Kern, Matthews, Doob, Field, and many other books, I use at least one of the following three videos, as well as the fourth video near the start of the course to bring home the beauty, intricacy, history, and feel of labyrinths and mazes: *Labyrinth: The History of the Maze* (1996; New River Media, 1219 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20036) features Adrian Fisher and Lauren Artress; *Labyrinths: Their Mystery and Magic* (1997; Penny Price Media, 355C Lake Pleasant Drive, Staatsburg, NY 12580) features Richard Feather Anderson, Robert Ferré and Jeff Seward; *Building Labyrinths on the Earth for Spiritual and Physical Well Being* (1995; Park Street Studio, 55 Park Street, Newport, NH 03773) features Marty Cain, Sig Lonegren, and Wayne London. Finally, I show the widely-available David Bowie / Jim Henson movie *Labyrinth* (1986), which delightfully incorporates many of the conventions of the maze.

## The Spiritual Dimension to Labyrinths

Melissa Gayle West's *Exploring the Labyrinth: A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth* and Lauren Artress' *Walking a Sacred Path* are especially helpful to assist students to understand feelingly the power of the labyrinth to touch what Joseph Conrad referred to as "the secret spring of responsive emotions." The impact of the labyrinth on a person's psyche can be, I believe, profoundly enriching.

As Artress puts it, "To walk a sacred path is to discover our inner sacred space: that core of feeling that is waiting to have life breathed back into it through symbols, archetypal forms like the labyrinth, rituals, stories and myths. Understanding the invisible world, the world of patterns and process, opens us up to the movement of the Spirit" (p.15). In the hectic world of today, people need to re-connect with spirituality, and the labyrinth provides one of the surest means of accessing that dimension of our lives.

## The Logical Dimension to Mazes

As people can get in touch with spirituality by walking labyrinths, so too can they develop their logical faculties by immersing themselves in mazes. To read the clues provided, to be required to make decisions, to experience the consequences of wrong decisions, to reach occasional dead ends, to savor the victory of finally emerging from the maze after frustration and confusion – these experiences build character.

In *The Divine Comedy* Dante tried abortively to walk straight to Paradise after finding himself alone and lost in a dark wood. He was driven back by a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf so that he would have to traverse the perils of the Inferno to get to know himself fully. Only then could he go through Purgatorio, eventually to make his way to Paradiso – all with the help of his guides, Virgil and Beatrice. We too must get to know all sides of ourselves: the logical, emotional, and spiritual. Only then can we attain fullness as persons.

## Conclusion

I believe that what I have suggested above forms a solid foundation for launching the adventure of the labyrinth in the college classroom. It has in mine, at least. The analogy works well in exploring such labyrinthine stories – although there need be no actual, physical labyrinths in them – as Carol Shields's *Larry's Party* (the magnum opus in the field, in my opinion), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist*, Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Richard Yates's *Doctor Jack-o'-lantern*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, John Updike's *The Christian Roommate*, Gogol's *The Overcoat*, Jack London's *To Build a Fire*, Melville's *Bartleby*, Valdemar Karklins' *The Tunnel*, Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and countless others.

The concepts that define, describe, and relate to the labyrinth and maze apply equally well to innumerable aspects of the human condition. For that reason alone, this approach to teaching has immeasurable value. If we are fortunate as teachers, we will have conveyed something of the charm and power of this age-old phenomenon to our students, who will then pass on to others what they have learned in a course informed by the splendid and challenging analogy of the labyrinth and maze.

Ronald J. Nelson, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, USA; August 2001

#### Notes:

1. Shields, Carol. *Larry's Party*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997, p. 315.
2. A distinction can be made between the two words "labyrinth" and "maze." The former is unicursal and involves the traveler's following the tortuous path toward the center and then exiting via the same route; the latter is multicursal and involves correct and incorrect decisions, frustration, dead ends, and the like. Yet, the two words are as often used interchangeably. I shall follow that practice for the most part. Indeed, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "labyrinth" as "a structure consisting of a number of intercommunicating passages arranged in bewildering complexity, through which it is difficult or impossible to find one's way without guidance; a maze." And Doob says, "Ancient and medieval labyrinths or mazes (the words have different etymologies but mean the same thing) are characteristically double" (p.1).
3. Appropriate labyrinth-walking music can be purchased from Veriditas, website: [www.veriditas.org](http://www.veriditas.org) Also *Remembering the Way*, music by Joan McMillan of Menlo Park, CA – cited in Artress 2000.
4. Donald Hall, in *Writing Well*, notes that "The writer must be able to feel words intimately, one at a time" (p.25). He goes on to say, "...the writer and the reader must first realize that there are no synonyms. Some words are close to each other in meaning, close enough to reveal that they are not the same... [the writer] must know the insides of words..." (p.26-27).
5. For basic instructions on free-handing a labyrinth, see Curry p.107-111 (both left- and right-handed) or Fisher & Gerster p.60-61. For instructions on using graph paper to accomplish a neater drawing of the seed pattern, see Field p.7, Curry p.112-118, or West p.49-53.

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