Narrative Lesson Planning: Guidelines and Example for Teachers

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The basic idea

A narrative lesson plan (NLP) enables us to imagine a lesson holistically, with all the elements (students, activities, materials, spaces and time) considered together, rather than divided analytically into separate boxes. It helps us to see lessons as chapters in a story – the daily, weekly and monthly life of the class. However, unlike stories, which are either past or fictional events, lessons are real, and lesson plans are predictions of the future, which are always difficult to make.

In a narrative lesson plan, there are no boxes, just continuous, discursive prose that enables us to describe and discuss the complexity of a predicted future event with numerous participants. If written, it will likely be presented in paragraphs with headings (see example below). If spoken, it can be presented as an audio or video file (transcriptions are possible for record keeping), or even a recorded conversation (e.g., between a teacher and an observer or two colleagues who team-teach together). You can start planning at any point; for example, with the activities, as experienced expert teachers are often known to do (Anderson & Taner, 2023; Clarke & Peterson, 1986), and then move onto the other parts afterwards.

The following sections are suggested, and should be presented in continuous text, not boxes:

1. **People:** A brief description of the people in the class. Choose 3-5 key learners to describe in more detail. They should be varied in their attributes and can be the key focus of learning in the lesson.
2. **Background:** A description of what has happened with this class leading up to this lesson.
3. **Goals:** A sentence stating your aims, intentions or outcomes (whatever *your* preferred term is) for the lesson.
4. **Materials:** Anything you'll use in the lesson other than the basics of board, notebooks and devices.
5. **Activities:** Replaces the procedure as the main part of the lesson plan, but written as continuous text, with one or two paragraphs for each lesson phase.
6. **Post-lesson reflections:** Completed after the lesson and focusing your thoughts on how it went. These can be brief or more extensive, but you should focus on what you feel is important now and why, including what you learnt and what still puzzles you (if anything).
7. **Take aways:** Identifies what learning points you'll take away from the lesson, if any – something important and useful for the future.

Rationale

Writing a lesson plan in this way has a number of advantages over a tabular plan:

- it helps us link together the bits that are often separated into different boxes
- it mirrors how many of us typically plan our lessons – by "imagining the lesson before it happens" (Scrivener, 2005, p. 109).

- it helps us to link what we're doing to what our learners might be doing, our stage aims or intentions, the rationale behind these and our thoughts about other things that might happen, both good and not so good
- it provides opportunities for us to share not only the procedure and rationale for this, but also to explore our deeper thoughts and beliefs that underpin these – to make explicit some of the things that define us as teachers
- it allows for a stronger focus on relationships and continuity in the wider story than tabular lesson plans do (Doyle & Holme, 1998); in this sense it may be more appropriate for teachers with an interest in focusing on these elements than the technocratic delivery and achievement of aims of a typical lesson

As writers we each have different styles, and your NLP can reflect this. You might want to keep it informal, using a spoken register (you can audio record and auto-transcribe it if you like) or write in a more formal style. The basic idea is to imagine and summarise each stage as a future event.

You will probably write more words for your NLP than for a normal plan, but it won't necessarily take longer to complete (Doyle & Holme, 1998). This is because, when writing tabular plans, we need to think through the stages carefully first, and then complete the activities, aims, times, interactions, etc. afterwards (i.e., a tabular plan is a record – an abstraction - of prior thinking). Yet, with NLPs you can write as you think then edit if required, to provide a succinct summary of your intentions. In this sense, the NLP serves as a tool to help you to plan each stage effectively, rather than as a record of the planning you've already done. As one participant in Doyle and Holm's (1998) study put it, "I am able to organize my plan in the same manner that I actually think about it" (p. 79).

It should be possible to write a narrative lesson plan in 1000-2000 words.

Guidelines for writing a narrative lesson plan

The following may be helpful to bear in mind as you work on your NLP:

1. No tables, no boxes, no bullet points. Only continuous text, spoken or written (a lesson plan can be an audio narrative and transcribed if necessary).
2. Situate the lesson as a chapter in a longer story – the story of your class.
3. Start wherever you like and however you like; visualising and building the activities first or moving back and forth between goals and activities or even with the people and background if you prefer.
4. For each lesson activity, describe what you plan to do and provide reasons. Also discuss possible occurrences (good and not so good) and probable responses.
5. Make reference to the people in your class whenever required; introduce and discuss the learners (or at least some of the key ones in a large class) and their relationships to each other and you.
6. Tangents are OK – explore the thoughts and beliefs around your choices, especially if someone else may need to understand them as part of who you are as a teacher.
7. Where relevant, mention whether you may change the order of activities (sometimes called 'flexistages'), or leave some out. Don't forget to say why you might do this.

8. It's OK to say 'maybe', 'might' or 'possibly' – these are essential when we are trying to predict the future.

9. If possible avoid positing behavioural objectives or outcomes – no-one can accurately predict future behaviour nor individual learning. Instead, be honest about your intentions and goals and recognise that movement towards these may vary among learners (Anderson, 2015). Learning is frequently non-linear, teaching is not always successful, and, providing we notice this, it is not failure, just a normal part of classroom life.

10. Don't kill the lesson by over-planning. Leaving some things unplanned is part of good planning.

Possible sentence frames to use when writing your NLP

People

This class is…   Some of the students are/like to/have…

I've found this class to be…   One issue I've had with them is…

The focal students for this lesson are X, Y and Z. I chose X because…

One thing I like about…

Background

I've had this class since…   When the term/year started, I felt/found/thought…

Since then,…   So recently, I…

I've noticed that…

Goals

The main goal of this lesson for the students will be to… My broad intention is to…

Additional aims include…   From a personal perspective I want to…

Activities – describing order, content, time sequencing and practical matters

I will start the lesson with…   During the activity, I'll…   After 5 minutes, I'll…

I'll then get them to…   They will work alone/in pairs…   I'll probably use…

If some of them … , I'll do…   I'll try to avoid…, unless …

Activities – giving reasons or personal justifications…

This is useful because…   To make it interesting/challenging, I'll…

I like this activity because…   I sometimes think that…I'm careful not to…

I'm always conscious of the need to…   I feel it's better to…

Reflections

This lesson went very/quite well/not so well…

I think it (didn't) achieve(d) some/most/all of my aims/intentions…

I felt it was important to … because…   I felt this was a good decision because…

I had problems with … because…

The one disappointing/puzzling/annoying thing that happened was …

I could've spent more/less time on…

This is not the first time…   I often seem to…

I was surprised by…   I'm not sure why…

I guess they/I should've…   Maybe I (didn't)…

Take aways

3

I guess I'll be taking away…	Don't (forget to)…
In future, I think I'll…	Maybe I need to rethink how…
I'm starting to think that…	I've proven to myself that…
I'm going to do that more often.	

References

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Example Narrative Lesson Plan

People

This is a lively class of 12 teenagers (15-16) studying in a private institution, all of whom are going through the typical challenges of teenage life. In terms of ability, most are B1, although a few are a bit weaker (strong A2 level). They naturally translanguage in the classroom (all speak Italian, alongside a few other languages). Several of them are very attached to their cell phones, which I try to use as positive resources to help them learn rather than banning them. Three focal students for this lesson will be Gabriella, Luca and Chiara. Gabriella is a good student, who works well in pairs and groups but is constantly distracted by her cell phone, and I've had a word with her a few times about this so we don't have the best rapport but I'm trying to get her back onside. Luca is one of the weakest in the class and he often comes to lessons looking rather tired and demotivated. He's a good focal student, because if he likes the lesson, it means it's interesting and the others usually do too. He's popular among his peers and he likes to have a good joke when he's in a good mood. Chiara is one of the strongest students in the class, and she is generally very mature and hard-working. However, she doesn't like working with other students so much, and can sometimes complain or get into arguments. So I'm always careful about who I group her with.

Background

This is quite a new class for me. I started with them just four weeks ago. We are using a new textbook, [anonymised]. Initially, we made good progress with the curriculum and the textbook units, although there were some tensions between the students, and I started to see them breaking into two groups and not working very well together between these groups. Several of them also complained that they found the textbook a bit boring, and two of them, Chiara and Ahmed, also complained in their tutorials that it was too easy for them and they wanted more challenging activities. Some of their parents also said likewise, wanting to see evidence of more traditional grammar and vocabulary teaching rather than the skills practice that I focus on. So recently, I've taken to ensuring that they all take notes on the vocabulary and grammar we learn each lesson, which is useful for both noticing and consolidation purposes.

Goals

The main aim of this lesson for the students will be to improve their vocabulary around the topic of travel, and provide some practice talking about travel (dos and don'ts in different countries, and favourite places to visit). Additional aims include work on reading sub-skills (scanning and skimming) and keeping the learners engaged throughout. Some of them can be a bit distracted by social media on their devices. From a personal perspective I want to make sure that I get them to notice the new language that they are learning, and also to avoid too much individual correction, which I think some students found demotivating last lesson.

Materials

[Anonymised]. Pre-prepared Padlet (link here [link removed]). Students may also make use of their own devices, especially for online dictionaries and websites for the Warmer task.

Activities

Warmer: 5 places (15 minutes)

After greeting the students and taking the class register, I will start the lesson with a warmer activity to engage them and get them focused on the topic of the lesson. This is useful because some of them (especially Luca and Sara) are often worried about other things, and others (usually Gabriella) are often paying more attention to their phones than the lesson! They will work in pairs for 5 minutes to write a list of 5 places they want to visit over the next 5 years of their lives (a bit like a bucket list). To make it interesting and challenging, I'll get them to try to agree on this list and allow them to use their devices, but only to show each other relevant pictures and websites related to their 5 places. During the activity, I'll monitor to listen for any vocabulary that they need and keep a

note of this so I can go through it afterwards. There will be some translanguaging, which is fine and may help them to stay on task. After 5 minutes, I'll get each pair to tell the class the first place on their list and why they chose it. I'll then go through some of the vocabulary they had difficulties with, as well as some key words they may need during the lesson. As usual I'll keep a note of all the new vocabulary in a 'parking lot' on the side of the board. I'm using this activity instead of the textbook introduction to the unit on p. 16, which looks a bit dull (I think it can really kill a lesson if you start with textbook exercises). Hopefully, they'll all be focused and ready for the reading after this!

Reading activity 1 (10 minutes)

At this stage I'll be a little bit more strict with the students, telling them to put away all personal devices to help them concentrate – what I call my 'softly, softly' approach to focusing the class. I'll get the students to open their textbooks on p. 17 and look at the title of the text. I'll ask them about the difference between the two words 'travel' and 'tourism', and find out what they already know. I'll hold back from explaining the answer myself, as it's provided in the first paragraph of the text. I'll then get them to do exercise 5a - choosing a heading for each paragraph. The text is quite short and not too difficult so I'll get them to do this alone and then compare answers in pairs, before whole class feedback. While there are answers in the teacher's book, I will also be flexible here and find out reasons for differences of opinion. Finally, I'll ask them if there are any words or phrases that made it particularly difficult for them to understand the text, and clarify these as required. I'll probably use translation to keep it quick, but I'll add the vocabulary to the parking lot.

Reading activity 2 (10 minutes)

I'll probably put them in pairs to do exercise 5b in the textbook. This should be quite quick, as we've already discussed the first question. They can find the answers to the remainder of the questions by scanning; I'll encourage them to take notes so I can read and see what they are thinking and provide individual support to any pairs that are struggling as I monitor the pairwork. For feedback, I'll nominate specific pairs who I know have got correct answers just to boost their confidence a little bit. And I'll keep the pace fast, so their minds don't start wandering!

Booster activity: Quickfire vocabulary test (5 minutes - optional)

If some of them look tired or lose interest, I'll do a quick 'booster' activity at this stage. I'll get them to all stand-up and mingle around the class, taking their textbooks with them. When they meet another student, they should point out one word in the text. The other student has to translate that word into Italian, using a translation that is appropriate for the word in context. If they get it right, the other student can give them a point. I'll tell them the person with the most points wins, which will increase motivation, I hope! It'll probably get a bit raucous – especially Gabriella, Luca and Ahmed can get a bit excited when we do any competitive games. If so, I'll just take any overly excited students to one side and calm them down a bit. If time is tight, I'll leave out this stage and just do a little more vocabulary revision in the final stage.

Groupwork task (15 minutes)

At this stage I'll put the students into new groups of 3 to 4, and get them to sit down together. We'll quickly go through exercise 7 (a gap-fill that will probably be a bit too easy for them, especially Chiara and Giovanni) as a whole class - I'll just elicit answers, confirm, and translate any words that cause problems, also writing them in the parking lot. This will take just a couple of minutes and leave plenty of time for the main task which is summarised in exercise 8, although I'll adapt it somewhat. Working in groups (rather than pairs), I'll get them to think of a list of travel tips – dos and don'ts for tourists visiting their country. One member of each group will be a secretary, taking notes on a device so they can transfer it to a Padlet quickly once they've finished. As three of the students are international students, I'll make sure that they are in different groups. I'll give them 10 minutes for this activity, as it's the main speaking task of the lesson. The majority of help and support I give during this stage will be during the activity, dealing with emergent language (e.g., upgrading vocabulary and ideas if appropriate, and reformulating any unclear phrases in the travel tips they

write) – I've just read a book on this topic so I'm experimenting a lot with it at the moment! When they've got a couple of minutes left, I'll ask them to transfer their notes to a Padlet I've prepared, so that each group can see what the other groups have done.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

I'll finish the lesson by praising all their work, and then getting them to copy the new vocabulary from the parking lot into their notebooks. I'll then give them a little bit of homework, to do exercises 1A and 3A on page 16, which we skipped at the start of the lesson and give them a preview of the next lesson as a motivation.

Post-lesson Reflections

This lesson went well and I think it achieved most of its goals, especially keeping the learners engaged. As always, I had problems with timings, but for good reasons, because they really got into two of the activities (the 5 places activity and the groupwork task) and enjoyed them. To be honest, I could've spent most of the lesson on the warmer – not the first time this has happened! – but I felt it was important to keep them busy and productive, and also ensure there was plenty of evidence of new learning, so I shortened the feedback and asked them to email me their lists so I could give meaningful feedback to each group separately. Instead of doing the booster activity, I just got them to test their partner on the new vocab. at the end of the lesson. I did manage to leave about 18 minutes for the groupwork task, and we actually took 20, so the lesson ran over a bit, which no one seemed to mind. The one annoying thing (I mean, I was annoyed with myself) was some of my vocab. teaching, especially when I tried to clarify the difference between travel and tourism. I got a bit confused by the difference myself, and we ended up checking it online (which was actually clearer) and translating the terms as a class.

Take-aways

I guess I'll be taking away two things from this lesson:

1. Don't be scared to explain something deductively. I think the reason we got confused over the vocab. was because I tried to elicit it from the learners through questioning, and some of them got muddled, so I got muddled and everyone was confused! If we'd started with the dictionary definitions first – just reading these out – this wouldn't have happened and then I could've checked understanding. There's a place for deductive explanations.
2. I'm starting to think that it's more the type of activity than the pace that keeps this class working well. There was some inappropriate use of cell phones from the usual suspects, especially between activities, but once they got into it, even the reading activity, they all engaged. As long as it is either creatively engaging or challenging (competitive even), nearly all of them get into the zone and start focusing on the relevant content or activity.