

The Narrative Learning Path – a Dynamic Learning Experience for Students and Teacher Alike

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Abstract

Compulsory assignments in university courses often present challenges for both students and teachers. Students frequently view these tasks as necessary evils that are hastily completed just before deadlines, while teachers may find the repetitive nature of feedback uninspiring. Traditional assignments, such as academic papers or essays, fail to motivate either party effectively. This paper explores the implementation of narrative-based learning paths as an alternative to conventional compulsory assignments. By incorporating various modalities - such as playlists, oral recordings, co-writing, discussions, and quizzes - these learning paths engage multiple intelligences as promoted by American psychologist Howard Gardner.[1] Students follow a narrative-driven path, segmented into smaller, relatable tasks that connect to their lives beyond the classroom, thus fostering in-depth learning. The advantages of narrative-based learning paths allow students to focus intensively on smaller segments of theory and corresponding tasks, distribute their workload over time, and collaborate with peers. This collaborative approach includes peer feedback, discussions, and co-writing, with the teacher following the same learning path and participating alongside the students. This method transforms assessment of compulsory assignments into a continuous, formative process rather than a summative one. Feedback from students confirm that such learning paths that require contributions and reflections tied to real-world experiences enhance mutual understanding and create a more supportive learning environment. The multi-modality of the narrative-based learning path, with many similarities to storyline, promotes engagement and student centred learning. Based on action research in teacher training, this paper shows that personalized narrative learning paths not only improve motivation and learning outcomes, but also foster a more dynamic and inclusive educational experience for students and teachers alike.

Keywords: Learning path, in-depth learning, student active, assessment, motivation

Compulsory assignments are a staple in university curricula, intended to ensure consistent student effort and achieve learning outcomes. However, these tasks can sometimes seem more like bureaucratic requirements than academically significant endeavors. From the teacher's point of view this is manifested already in the development of the curriculum by a required number of compulsory assignments for a so-and-so many ECTS course. The administration, at least at Norwegian universities, and presumably elsewhere, requires that the compulsory assignments for a course are provided in detail in the curriculum, thus locking the teacher and students into a format that becomes an extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivational factor for learning. Many students regard these assignments as burdensome, often rushing to complete them just before the deadline. The burden becomes more acute when deadlines typically overlap with those of other courses. This hurried approach undermines the potential learning benefits of these tasks. The learning value and degree of goal attainment for the course when a compulsory assignment is hastily put together close to the deadline may naturally be debated, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

For language instructors, giving feedback on grammar and vocabulary can often be monotonous and time-consuming. Artificial intelligence (AI) can simplify this task by providing feedback much more quickly than traditional methods. This efficiency allows dedicated teachers to use the saved time to offer more personalized feedback tailored to each student's needs, alongside the AI-generated comments. However, regardless of method of feedback, one might question how the students benefit. From personal experience, many students view compulsory assignments as merely a hurdle to be cleared to qualify for exams, thus aiming only to meet the course requirements. While this approach to compulsory assignments may see corners cut saving time and effort, it does not necessarily foster a conducive learning environment where the teacher plays an integral role. The course this paper refers to is a 15 ECTS course in English methodology and part of a five-year Norwegian teacher training

program. The course is taught in the second year and is gathering-based where the students come to campus three times per semester for teaching. With half of the teaching and most of the students' work conducted online, it has been crucial to establish routines for a flipped classroom, as on-campus time is highly valuable. During these campus sessions, the focus is on student-centered activities that enhance methodological competence through hands-on practice of various teaching methods. To address the challenges faced by both students and teachers with traditional submissions, I have developed a new format for compulsory assignments. This format aims to: 1) transform the last-minute rush into a continuous learning process, and 2) integrate the teacher's feedback into the students' learning process. Over the past few years, I have gained substantial experience in creating narrative-based learning paths for my students, which have been a key component of the flipped classroom approach. Positive feedback from students has encouraged me to further explore the use of the narrative-based learning paths, and this time as alternative compulsory assignments. These paths are designed to be so comprehensive that students would find it too challenging to start and complete them at the last minute. The learning paths combine background information/theory with a variety of smaller tasks and are posted three to four weeks before the deadline on Canvas, the digital platform used by Nord University. This allows students to work on their assignments at their convenience, and the multiple smaller tasks ensure they can focus fully on each task and take breaks without losing track of their progress.

The traditional learning path in academia, as experienced following internal courses at the home institution, has a theoretical and impersonal structure. Meaning that there is a heavy focus on theory and linear progression from one point to the next; typically reading a text and/or watching a video before turning to the next page. This is quite like reading a textbook where one chapter of content follows the next, though with a possible multimodal dimension of embedded videos and the option to post one's own reflections and respond to integrated tasks. Depending on the topic, such a learning path is by many seen as a necessity to complete to attain required formal proficiency, and does to a lesser extent take the mixed user group into account. Nor is such a learning path personally engaging. The end objective being confirmation that a course has been completed for a specific reason shows parallels to how students experience and view compulsory assignments, and in my search to change this and create a more motivational learning path, I landed on the narrative-based learning path.

Narrative-based learning paths, as opposed to the more clinical and theoretically structured learning paths, are grounded in the concept of using storytelling as an educational tool, a practice dating back to ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle who acknowledged the power of narratives in learning, where Aristotle in *Poetics* claims that "narrative is the imitation (mimesis) of action" [2]. Narratives providing education and wisdom are also firmly rooted in folklore and fairy tales. Significant advancements in the 20th century, particularly by American cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, who states "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative" [3], highlight the crucial role of narratives in cognitive development and education. This aligns with the broader field of narratology, which studies narrative structures and their impact on human cognition and communication. Seeking to blend traditional learning with a digital platform, the narrative-based learning path is an interesting path (no pun intended) to follow.

A typical narrative-based learning path starts with a presentation of goals and objectives before contextualizing the path. American social anthropologist Jean Lave and Swiss educational theorist Etienne Wenger's concept of situated learning supports the idea that learning occurs best in context, making narrative-based learning paths particularly effective [4]. The path used to illustrate this paper is a journey into working with interculturality through children's and young people's literature, with a main focus on *Azzi in between* [5] and *Planet Omar: Accidental trouble Magnet* [6]. The narrative aspect involves presenting the learning path as a story, in this case the story of a journey, starting with a contextualization or an invitation to join the learning path. Here the scene is set at a kitchen window, where we watch the postman struggle through a snowstorm to deliver a letter. An illustration of the letter and its contents is provided, along with a packing list, accompanied by an image of a rucksack or backpack. The objectives of the learning path are outlined separately prior to the contextualization. The journey's stages along the path are richly illustrated with AI-generated images, tailored to the situation and avoiding copyright issues. The narrative is personalized, using the personal pronouns "we" and "you" throughout. This is done to enhance the sensation of participation and personal involvement, rather than the more distancing approach of the traditional textbook.

The narrative-based learning path presented to the students in January starts as follows:

It is January and still dark outside most of the day. The snowstorms have been raging for days, and it is not very tempting getting up early to pull on winter clothing to go outside to



battle the elements by shoveling snow - and certainly not a day for a laborious journey to a campus gathering at Nesna. You decide that enough is enough and settle for clearing the way to the post box. Sitting by the kitchen window sipping a cocoa from one of those delightfully thick china mugs, you see the postman struggle up to the post box with a delivery. Thank goodness there are no bills today, just a nice-looking envelope...



Fig. 1 The postman arrives



Fig. 2 An invitation to a learning path

The content of the hand-written letter is shown by a photo of the letter, and a packing list for the journey in a warmer place is also included. Among the items are writing utensils, mobile phone, a thermos flask with a hot drink, water, and snacks - along with the books on the reading list for the course, a dose of reflective competence, and both an open and a critical mind. In other words, what one may realistically pack for a real hike. The narrative continues:

You have arrived at the start of the trail, and find a nice place to park your bikes. Pinned to the tree you find a question that you need to answer before preceeding along the path, which incidentally is to the right of the tree/behind the bikes.



Fig. 3 The journey begins



Fig. 4 Solving tasks in the narrative

The quotes above serve to illustrate the style of the narrative-based learning path and its explorers. The term explorers is used for students and teacher following the learning path and is purposefully selected in order to show that for students and teacher alike, education is a journey of exploration and discovery. For each new topic the explorers are presented with information and/or fun facts. The background information supplied is largely provided and exposed through events and findings along the path, which is for every step/Canvas page richly illustrated to create the sensation of following a real path; from lush green forests to following a river, and from a winding mountain path to revealing spectacular views of the valley below. The students may find information in a forgotten book, a note on

an old bulletin board along the path, or from the lonely hiker who shares his wisdom over a hot mug of cocoa in a clearing in the forest.



Fig. 5 Finding information along the path



Fig. 6 Encounters along the way

Narrative-based learning paths and storyline approaches share several similarities and parallels. Both methods harness the power of storytelling to create an engaging framework for learning. By embedding educational content within a narrative, it provides a rich context that enhances students' understanding and retention of information. The narrative element in both approaches captures students' attention and keeps them engaged, adding an emotional and imaginative dimension to the learning experience. Additionally, both narrative-based learning paths and storyline approaches utilize various modalities, such as text, images, audio, and video to cater to different learning styles and intelligences. They encourage collaboration among students through group activities, discussions, and peer feedback, fostering a sense of community and shared learning. American psychologist David Ausubel's theory of meaningful learning [7] emphasizes the importance of connecting new information to existing knowledge, which is facilitated through the narrative-based learning path. By integrating ongoing feedback and reflection, these methods support continuous learning and formative assessment, helping students to continuously improve and deepen their understanding. Moreover, both approaches can be personalized to fit the needs and interests of individual students, creating a more meaningful learning experience. In both methods, the teacher plays an active role in guiding the narrative, participating in activities, and providing feedback, thereby creating a dynamic and interactive learning environment.

There are important distinctions between storyline approaches and narrative-based learning paths, though. Narrative-based learning paths offer greater flexibility and incorporate a variety of tasks and modalities to cater to different learning styles and intelligences. [1] These paths are designed to be comprehensive and segmented into smaller, manageable tasks that students can complete at their own pace, often posted on digital platforms like Canvas. In a narrative-based learning path, the teacher actively participates in the same tasks as students, fostering a collaborative and supportive learning environment. This approach breaks down traditional hierarchies and encourages mutual respect and engagement. Feedback is continuous and formative, often provided through ongoing dialogue, allowing for real-time (relatively speaking) engagement and improvement. Additionally, these paths may be personalized to fit the needs and interests of individual students, making the learning experience more meaningful and engaging. In contrast, storyline approaches typically involve the teacher guiding the narrative without participating in the same tasks as students. The teacher's role is more focused on facilitating and directing the learning process. Feedback in storyline approaches is often more summative, provided at the end of the narrative or at specific checkpoints, which can limit opportunities for continuous improvement and real-time engagement. While storyline approaches also encourage collaboration among students, the fixed narrative framework may restrict flexibility and personalization compared to narrative-based learning paths.

The types of tasks provided in the bespoke narrative-based learning path are purposefully varied and selected to trigger and accommodate a range of learning styles and intelligences, providing something for everyone in the sense that one may see this as a facilitation of adapted learning. The tasks are



multi-modal and range from reflection over previous experiences and challenges with the academic topic of the learning path, summaries of texts, creating play lists that are applicable to topic, oral presentations through submitting video recordings, haiku poems, the use of AI, a quiz, to setting up Padlet pages. The tasks are communicated to the explorers via a note pinned to a tree, a scrap of paper littering the path, a notice on a bulletin board, by a simulated SMS/MMS, or voicemail (real audio files). The early tasks along the learning path will typically start with creating a playlist for the hike and sharing experiences with literature from our own childhood. If not familiar with Padlet, this is a multi-modal educational tool used to upload, organize, and share comments, images, audio/video files, and documents [8]. The tasks are designed to combine the life experience of the students and their world outside the classroom with the goals and objectives of the course, thus also addressing one of the pedagogical buzz words of the time: in-depth learning. By tapping into the students' memory and subconsciousness by reflection and requiring them to respond to tasks based on activities also beyond the classroom walls, the explorers will create their own mental and physical bridges between their own world and the course material; thus, contributing to in-depth learning. The students are unison in their feedback: the narrative-based learning path is an interesting, fun, and motivational way to work, and they do not see the learning path as a burden. They report that it is, as was the intention, easier to focus 100% on shorter tasks, and to be able to spend time on their work at leisure. The narrative also includes taking time for a rest and some snacks, triggering and playing on the senses and emotions of the explorer, thus contributing to making the learning path a realistic and personal experience. Another aspect highlighted by the students is that, unlike traditional compulsory assignments where one typically works alone, exploring the learning path together offers a fresh approach. In this setting, students share their work, engage in discussions, provide feedback to each other, and collaborate on writing. This collaborative process allows them to share their ongoing work and receive peer feedback while working on their compulsory assignment, which is something they have not experienced before. Russian and Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky's theories on social constructivism underscore the importance of this social interaction and cultural context in learning, which narrative-based learning paths naturally provide [9].



Fig. 7 Time for a coffee break



Fig. 8 Arriving at the forgotten cinema

Unlike traditional academic paths, the approach of the narrative-based learning path involves the teacher as an active participant in the journey. The use of the pronouns 'we' and 'you' in the narrative fosters a bond between students and the teacher, who completes the same tasks as the students. Student feedback further highlights the motivational impact of the teacher's active participation in narrative-based learning paths. Here the teacher is a fellow explorer taking part in and completing all the tasks along the path. This fosters a collaborative and supportive learning environment, and student feedback indicates that the teacher's role in narrative-based learning is both refreshing and motivating. Feedback is provided through ongoing dialogue, enhancing the formative assessment process. The teacher can provide advice and ask further questions about the students' work and process through designated discussion forums where responses to tasks are posted. This method of giving feedback is formative rather than summative. Although I always conclude my feedback with an invitation for students to reach out if they have any questions, no one ever does. This raises the question of whether my feedback is flawless or simply irrelevant once their assignment is accepted as part of the



course requirements. However, by participating in the learning path and offering feedback in a dialogic form, students do respond to my comments, seeking clarification and elaboration. This dialogue allows for a creative process where feedback becomes an integral part of the ongoing learning experience, provided in real-time along the learning path, albeit asynchronously. In addition to formative, dialogue-based feedback, the teacher responding to the same tasks as the students opens for *students* being able to give the teacher feedback and ask for clarifying and/or substantiating information.

For most tasks given, the explorers need to respond to the postings of their peers, as well as reasoning for their choices. This will at an early stage require dialogue and communication between explorers, where the teacher as fellow explorer becomes involved in the learning process of the students by contributing to discussions. As the teacher is part of the group of explorers, the traditional hierarchy of professor-student relationships is broken down, and students are at liberty to also ask the teacher for clarification and to substantiate postings – liberties that are enjoyed freely. It is important to note that the teacher is not the first to respond, but rather one of the last explorers to do so. This is in order not to inadvertently set a standard or create expectations of the fellow explorers. The lack of hierarchy creates bonding based on a learning process, which has shown to be carried through to physical gatherings and on-campus teaching. There are colleagues who might be a little skeptical about what might happen to the traditionally expected, or even demanded, respect for the teacher or professor. Breaking down the hierarchy between professors and students by working together under the same premises has in my experience seen an increased mutual respect. Through reflection tasks and tasks demanding personal choices and sharing interests, the teacher gets to know the students on a different level and in a different manner than in the classroom. Undeniably, the teacher may converse with the students also off topic in the classroom, but the roles within the classroom walls are by the physical layout of the room still clearly defined.

Feedback in this approach to learning paths begins in dialog form, with students receiving feedback early in their work. They also have the opportunity to view and comment on each other's work, which is less common in traditional submissions. This means that both students and teachers can provide feedback and collaboratively develop the compulsory submission. Students perceive this as an enjoyable learning process integrated into regular teaching, rather than a mere submission. This process functions like an asynchronous seminar. Additionally, there are few right or wrong responses in these types of responses. While language issues should be addressed during the process, rather than pointing out language issues in ongoing discussion and thus creating a barrier to communication, the students may be contacted in person outside the learning path. There has not been a back-to-back comparison of time spent on giving feedback between the traditional essay and the narrative-based learning path, though time spent on giving feedback has neither been perceived as tedious nor a burden. Although one might question the extra workload, responding to the sheer number of tasks created along the learning path, having created the tasks this is not an issue. Engaging with all the tasks has several benefits, including providing effective feedback on the compulsory assignment and fostering a safer and more supportive learning environment. In addition, the progress of the explorers is visible on Canvas, and may thus be followed up if lagging behind and in danger of getting lost.

Adapted learning is a topic and concern for teacher training students and teachers in the field, though not so much spoken about for students in higher education. In addition to the narrative-based learning path and its activities catering for a range of intelligences and learning styles, this learning path also gives the explorers options of choosing paths taking them on a journey through books of their choice. The format of the narrative-based learning path, where the teacher is a co-explorer lends itself to not just adapted learning, but also to adapted feedback, where time, space and context become important elements



Fig. 9 Finding info and tasks along the path



Fig. 10 Individual choices

The implementation of narrative-based learning paths in university courses represents a transformative approach to compulsory assignments. By triggering multiple intelligences and fostering a collaborative learning environment, these paths address the intrinsic motivational needs of students and teachers alike. The narrative-driven tasks, segmented into smaller, relatable units, not only enhance student engagement but also promote in-depth learning and continuous formative assessment. Feedback from students has consistently highlighted the positive impact of narrative-based learning paths on their motivation and learning outcomes. The active participation of teachers in these paths further strengthens the bond between students and educators, creating a supportive and dynamic educational experience. This approach aligns with the principles of in-depth learning, emphasizing the importance of connecting academic content to real-world experiences.

Offering conclusive comments, narrative-based learning paths have shown to present a highly effective alternative to conventional compulsory assignments. These paths not only enhance the overall quality of learning but also create a more inclusive and engaging educational atmosphere. As universities strive to innovate and improve student learning experiences, particularly in finding assignment formats less susceptible to AI manipulation, the integration of narrative-based learning paths shows significant potential for the future of education. This approach aligns with Jerome Bruner's emphasis on the importance of narrative in cognitive development [3], Lev Vygotsky's theories on social constructivism [9], and Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences [1], all of which support the effectiveness of narrative-based learning in fostering deeper understanding and engagement.



Fig. 11 Meeting up with the others



Fig. 12 Ending on a personal note



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