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A Narrative Approach to Higher Education Course Design and Teacher Reflection

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Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to explore the potential of applying narrative theory to higher education (HE) course design. More specifically, it takes as its hypothesis the idea that the HE course itself could be viewed as a type of narrative and then considers the implications of such a view. The main research question driving this thesis, therefore, is: *What is the potential of narrative theory as an approach to inform HE course design and related teacher reflection?* In order to answer this question, I address three sub-research questions, as follows:

1. How can the HE course be viewed as a narrative from a narrative theory perspective?

    1a. What is a narrative?

    1b. In what ways does the HE course meet the definition of a narrative?
2. In what ways do specific narrative elements align with the HE course?
3. What are the implications of viewing the HE course through a narrative lens in relation to supporting teacher reflection and course design?

To answer the first sub-research question, I conducted a literature review as research method in order to analyze and synthesize the various definitions of narrative, resulting in a working definition, which I could then apply to what is commonly understood as an HE course. This led me to conclude that the HE course could indeed be considered a type of narrative and I specify the factors that contribute to its narrativity. To answer the second and third sub-research questions, I employ qualitative data collected in the form of lesson observations and teacher interviews, which is used in combination with mobilizing ideas from the literature. For the second sub-research question, I identify specific narrative elements, such as authorship and structure, with a specific focus on seriality, and how they align with the HE course, exemplified, when relevant, with quotes from teacher interviews and/or incidents from lesson observations. For the third sub-research question, I discuss the implications of having identified the feasibility of viewing the HE course through a

narrative lens in the specific fields of course design and teacher reflection on course design. To answer this, I again employ the collected empirical data to provide examples, as well as discuss what was learned as a result of having carried out my data collection. The results are presented as a set of suggestions that can be taken as a narrative-informed approach to course design and related teacher reflection. These suggestions include considering elements such as the protagonist and antagonist of the course, the use of suspense and surprise, and the importance of repetition.

This project contributes to knowledge in the field of HE by providing a starting point for interested HE course designers to view their courses through a narrative lens, which provides an established and rich set of components that can inform course design practice and reflection. As far as can be determined, such an approach has not previously been investigated in any detail, which positions this research as somewhat unordinary. This means that the possibilities of a narrative approach to HE course design are very much open to further exploration, guided perhaps by individual course designers' own particular interests in specific aspects of narrative theory.

Table of Contents

5

List of Tables

List of Figures

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Author's Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university, nor have any parts of it been published or in any way made available to the public. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration. Many of the ideas in this thesis were the product of discussion with my supervisor Dr Natasa Lackovic.

Signature ....

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Motivation

The initial motivation behind this study was an interest in applying narrative theory to the design of higher education (HE) courses. This came about due to my strong interest in narratives, initially as a hobby, then as a professional topic, and subsequently as an academic pursuit, along with a career as a university lecturer in which course design has been a constant preoccupation and source of both stress and occasional satisfaction. In seeking more effective ways to put together engaging and effective lessons and courses, while also increasingly adopting a narrative lens due to my personal interests, I arrived at the supposition that the university course itself could be viewed as a kind of story and, if it were, narrative theory might might be an appropriate tool for informing course design.

While no analogies to stories appear to exist in the literature specifically regarding course design, Kliebard (1991) describes three metaphors for curriculum that all bear some connection to the idea of course as narrative. The first is curriculum as production, in which "raw material" (the student) is made into a "useful product" by a "skilled technician" (the teacher) (p. 481). The focus here is on efficient design elements that all work towards a specific outcome. While it should be pointed out that Kliebard himself was critical of this "factory" view of education (Kliebard, 1982), from a design perspective, employing skilled technique to efficiently achieve a planned goal could be seen as not dissimilar to the role of the storyteller.

The second metaphor is curriculum as growth, in which the educational setting is a greenhouse where the teacher as gardener nurtures the students as plants, each based on their individual needs, to reach their full potential. Baptist (2002) expands on this analogy by pointing out that gardens can be either "rigorously planned" or "wild", provoke "delight" and "love" or "hatred" and "terror" (p. 20). These are all qualities shared by narratives, and the connection extends when we think of the storytelling device of character development and growth.

Finally, Kliebard (1991) discusses the 'curriculum as journey' metaphor:

> The curriculum is a route over which students will travel under the leadership
> of an experienced guide and companion. Each traveller will be affected
> differently by the journey since its effect is at least as much a function of the
> predilections, intelligence, interests, and intent of the traveller as it is of the
> contours of the route. This variability is not only inevitable, but wondrous and
> desirable. Therefore, no effort is made to anticipate the exact nature of the
> effect on the traveller; but a great effort is made to plot the route so that the
> journey will be as rich, as fascinating, and as memorable as possible. (p. 482)

It should first be acknowledged that the 'story as journey', and 'journey as story',
metaphors are well trodden ones (see Mikkonen, 2007 and Laing & Crouch, 2009,
respectively). The journey as an analogy for education has also been expanded upon,
not only for the student learning experience (Turner, 1998), but also for teacher
development and reflection (Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2010). It is therefore perhaps
unsurprising that several points of connection can be made in terms of the journey as
a narrativized educational experience. To begin with, Kliebard (1991) identifies not
only the student as traveler, but also the presence of a guide and companion. Although
he does not specify who this is, it may be presumed that it is the teacher. To connect
this to a narrative, the storyteller is clearly guiding the audience through the events of
the story. Furthermore, one useful way that the journey metaphor contributes to
making sense of the narrative metaphor is to explain the existence of multiple
protagonists. Typically, a story will feature only one or two main characters, whose
journey and growth are the central driving force behind the narrative events.
However, a teacher, for obvious reasons, cannot elevate only one or two students to
the status of protagonist while delegating all the others as supporting characters. As
Kliebard (1991) indicates though, the curriculum is a route that each student will
experience differently due to their individual characteristics. Therefore, the teacher as
storyteller/travel guide must, in his own words, "plot the route" (p. 482) (an
interestingly narrative-relevant phrase), but then let each student traverse it in their
own way. The flexibility and responsiveness required by teachers to do this may seem
incompatible with the common notion of a storyteller presenting a fully formed and

complete narrative to the world, but there is a long history of stories being shaped by audience reaction while they are being created (Goodwin, 1986). Finally, as Ibrahim (2016), commenting on Kliebard's metaphor, points out, travel is an activity that is both usually associated with enjoyment and typically volitional, which means that students can "enjoy contributing to its events" (p. 388) ("events" being another narrative-relevant concept). In other words, they may be not only protagonists but also co-authors of their course narrative in the ways that they choose to complete their journey, resulting in an experience that is potentially, in Kliebard's (1991) words, "as rich, as fascinating, and as memorable as possible" (p. 482).

While the 'curriculum as travel' metaphor may seem an adequate one, it is the position of this thesis that the 'course as story' has the potential to contribute more to educational practice; it both incorporates the useful concept of the guided journey and can draw on the immense wealth of discussion on narrative theory found in both academic literature and public discourse. Although some educators have experimented with applying specific narrative structures to lesson and course design (the hero's journey, for example), the current study looks to, rather than extend the 'course as narrative' analogy further, not treat it as a metaphor at all. In other words, I aim to propose that the HE course is in fact a narrative.

Perhaps the most immediately apparent connection between a university course and a narrative is that both have agents of some kind experiencing a beginning, an end, and a middle that connects the two. They are also bound by a form that is designed to have an intentional effect. This means that the creators of both make decisions regarding what is included and not included, and in what ways. Thus, it will be proposed that narrative design might be able to provide a set of principles that could help guide more effective course design, from the perspective of creating a dynamic, meaningful experience.

In order to juxtapose the design of university course with that of a narrative, the first step is to identify in what ways the two concepts already align. More specifically, if I want to apply narrative theory to course design, I have to determine in what ways an HE course can itself be considered a narrative. The starting point here is

defining what is meant by a narrative. Subsequently, it is essential to establish what elements of narrative theory can and cannot be applied to course design, and in what ways. Furthermore, I speculate that it is likely that many educators, especially those with a substantial amount of teaching experience, already incorporate narrative elements into their course design and delivery, even if this is not done explicitly or deliberately. Identifying those elements would potentially reveal connections between the two concepts that could be deepened and further developed. Finally, a framework for designing university courses could be created based on relevant aspects of narrative theory to help teachers structure an educational experience for their students that is engaging and meaningful and potentially more effective. In many cases, this would be re-framing practices that many educators already do through the lens of narrative design, which may have utility simply by providing a theoretical rationale for those practices, but which may also allow for different perspectives on them and therefore lead to progression of how we use them. In other cases, narrative design may reveal innovative or unconventional approaches that, if nothing else, may be worthy of experiment. In short, the basis for the interdisciplinary exploration described in this paper is that narratives are an engaging means of delivering ideas and therefore educators may gain something by borrowing from what stories have long done in both effective and sophisticated ways.

It should be mentioned, however, that this paper does not seek to provide a prescriptive "best practice" regarding university course design. Rather it aims to suggest an approach that may appeal to certain teachers. However, by viewing the whole process of course design through a narrative lens, the hope is that it provides a unified approach. In other words, by understanding the course as a specific type of discourse, in this case a narrative, course designers can link all aspects of what they do to the many and varied aspects of narrative theory. This is potentially also useful for problem-solving and, because the field of narrative theory is so wide-ranging and eclectic, it may lead to new insights (or experimentation) within the practice of course design.

To begin an investigation into the feasibility of this proposal, fundamental questions must be discussed regarding the components necessary to evaluate what

kind of text or discourse qualifies to be labeled a 'narrative', as well as the thorny issue of identifying key roles associated with stories such as author, audience, protagonist, and antagonist. In addition, there are many further elements of narrative theory, including setting, structure, and theme, that must be addressed if we are to accept the inclusion of the HE course into the taxonomy of narrative types. Once the relative strength of the hypothesis has been assessed and points of connection between narrative and the university course have been established, this paper will attempt to identify practical applications of these specific elements of narrative theory to HE teacher reflection and course design. As one of the suppositions of this study is that experienced teachers and course designers already include narrative elements in their practice, albeit implicitly and unintentionally, this will be done partly through analysis of data generated through teacher observations and interviews. It will also be done through theoretical considerations based on the relevant literature and my own experiences as a teacher and course designer.

1.2 Research Questions (RQs)

To address these issues and therefore investigate the potential applicability of narrative theory to language course design and teaching in higher education, the research questions of this study are as follows:

Main RQ: What is the potential of narrative theory as an approach to inform HE course design and related teacher reflection?

1. How can the HE course be viewed as a narrative from a narrative theory perspective?
   1a. What is a narrative?
   1b. In what ways does the HE course meet the definition of a narrative?
2. In what ways do specific narrative elements align with the HE course?
3. What are the implications of viewing the HE course through a narrative lens in relation to supporting teacher reflection and course design?

The research to answer the questions above was carried out in two main contexts. The first was the desk research that I conducted to identify definitions and

relevant elements of narrative theory that could be applied to university course design. This required first familiarizing myself with narrative theory broadly and then delving into more discrete and detailed aspects of it. The results of this research appear primarily in Chapter 2, which explains my engagement with the literature, and Chapter 4, which discusses my findings regarding RQ1 and RQ2.

The other research context was in-the-field data generation. Over the course of six months, I interviewed and in most cases observed 13 teachers working in higher education. This data generation was conducted with three of the possible research focuses identified by Tight (2019): teaching and learning, course design, and the student experience. The goal of the lesson observations was to collect real-world examples of narrative elements in university lessons. The goal of the interviews was to find examples of teachers applying narrative elements (not necessarily intentionally or consciously) to their course design principles. The observations and interviews were both semi-structured to reflect the exploratory and theoretical nature of this research; being a relative novice to the field of narrative theory and applying it to a context that has not received much attention from narratologists, I felt that it was important to be open to what the data might reveal. The results of this data generation appear first in Chapter 4, in which they exemplify some of the findings that my desk research uses to answer RQ2. They also appear in Chapter 5, illustrating some of the implications of a narrative theory approach to university course design.

1.3 My Positionality

It is somewhat trite to say that I like stories, in that it would be remarkable to find anyone who claimed that they did not. Stories are, and always have been a part of everyone's lives, and even people who are not one of the billions who regularly read books and watch movies and TV series know intimatelty many of the tales and myths of their culture. While I would not claim any exceptional connection to them, I have been from a young age what I consider an eager consumer of narratives, especially in their fictional and visual form, and across a range of genres. When given the opportunity to choose the content of a foundational academic skills course that I teach at my current institution of higher education, I opted to subtitle it "Visual Storytelling".

Like many in the field of applied linguistics, I began as an itinerant EFL (English as a foreign language) teacher before pursuing language education as a full-time career. I did this by first obtaining a Master's degree in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) and then securing my first position as a university lecturer. However, although my MA program had featured modules on lesson planning and course aims, I still felt badly unprepared for the task of designing a semester-long course of study. Doing so, to the extent that I am able to, has come about through trial and error, with the hope that reflection, training, and interactions with colleagues might help develop my skills.

Over time, I have identified certain aspects of course design that, to me, seem to be at the heart of what we as educators are aiming to do. Chief among these is the task of taking a wildly complicated and dynamic assortment of facts, theories, and perspectives, i.e. the topics that we teach, and turning them into a manageable set of ideas that would engage, challenge, and inspire our students. One impetus for the investigation described in this thesis, however, was my realization that I didn't know how this was done. In short, I became aware that, while I and my colleagues were designing hundreds of hours of educational experience for our students each semester, I did not really know what that meant from a 'design' point of view. Although I approached putting together my courses using the curriculum principles I had been taught in terms of identifying learning goals, choosing appropriate means of assessment, selecting relevant content, etc., I did not consider how the written curriculum translated into a spatially and temporally bound experience that my students would actually undergo. Of course, I knew that it did, and that I was making countless decisions along the way that helped it do so, but it felt like an ineffable, undefinable part of the process. Therefore, I looked for a comparable design practice that could inform how I might more intentionally curate what my students experience, activity to activity and lesson to lesson. The answer I found, the design of stories, i.e. narrative theory, was the second impetus for this study.

1.4 Thesis Layout

In order to answer my stated research questions, I investigated the specific aspects of narrative theory that can be applied to HE course design and then considered the theoretical implications of those potential applications. Juxtaposing the disparate theories of narrative design and educational course design poses challenges in terms of separately describing both and then identifying meaningful connections between them. Two of the key challenges are selecting a manageable number of appropriate elements from the seemingly never-ending inventories that each of them encompasses, and structuring sections so that discrete elements can be adequately described and then correlated from one field to the other. In an attempt to achieve this, the thesis is organized as follows.

In Chapter Two, I engage with the relevant literature, beginning with an overview of narrative theory, its aims, and how it has developed over the years. This includes a discussion of the description of a narrative, which in itself is a key topic among narrative theorists. The exploration of narrative continues with a look at how it is seen not only as a specific text type, but also as a cognitive instrument and a vehicle for cultural values and identity. It then reviews how elements of narrative theory have been applied to other disciplines. Following this, I turn to defining course design and the accompanying notions of curriculum and syllabus. This is done partly to establish what is currently known about good practice in course design, but also in part to identify a gap in the field in terms of how course structure can be intentionally designed to induce an educational experience. The chapter concludes by reviewing the literature that addresses ways in which the concept of narrative has already been applied to education and why narratives can be considered an effective educational tool.

In Chapter Three, I explain in detail the research design used to attempt to answer my research questions. This starts with an explanation of my research philosophy, including my ontological and epistemological positions, followed by my methodology. The latter features descriptions and justifications of the exploratory nature of the mixed methods approach taken for this study. I then explain the desk

research carried out to answer part of my first research question, which includes explaining the use of theoretical analysis to arrive at working hypotheses. This is followed by a detailed description of the empirical data generation portion of my study, consisting of the sampling of participants, a rationale for my insider status as a researcher, and the theoretical and practical issues around how I conducted lesson observations and teacher interviews.

In Chapter Four, I present the findings of the research described in Chapter Three. This begins by explaining how I reviewed different definitions of narrative in order to arrive at a working definition of the concept that can be mobilized to assess the narrativity of different discourse types, thus answering RQ1a. I then apply this working definition to the HE course, which provides an answer to RQ1b. In the second part of the chapter, I describe specific elements of narrative theory found in the literature which support and strengthen the working hypothesis that the HE course is a narrative. This section includes some of the data I generated through observations and interviews to exemplify these elements, where relevant, and provides the answer to RQ2.

Chapter Five discusses the implications of my findings. Specifically, it answers RQ3 by considering how a narrative theory perspective could inform teacher reflection on course design, before setting out a possible narrative approach to course design itself. These implications are informed by the elements of narrative theory previously discussed and are illustrated and supported by further references to my observation and interview data.

In Chapter Six I summarize the main conclusions of my research in terms of what was learnt and how it may be of value. I also acknowledge and address the limitations of my research design, identify some recommendations for future research, and finally reflect on the process as a whole.

Chapter 2. Literature Engagement

2.1 Introduction

In this section, I turn to the literature to establish the context of the research I carried out for this study. It begins with an overview of narrative theory, from both definitional and historical perspectives. As this thesis is in the field of higher education research, delving into narrative theory means providing an accessible entry point while establishing enough of an understanding to make sense of what follows. For further context, I also look at how narrative has been used in other disciplines to set up the way that I apply it to HE course design. Following that, I provide definitions for the educational concepts of a course, a curriculum, and a syllabus, and a brief discussion of how they are created. Finally, I look at reports of how other teacher researchers have already incorporated narratives into education in order to situate my own study within that practice.

2.2 The Ubiquity of Narratives and the Development of Narrative Theory

That the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences (Kreiswirth, 1992) took place in the same century as the accelerated development in media technology that led to us being endlessly surrounded by stories seems unlikely to be coincidental. From mass-produced paperbacks to cinema theatres in every town to television sets in every home, by the end of the 20th century, we had never had such easy access to such a volume of narratives. With the accompanying interest in analysing story structure and the role that stories play in our lives, it was unsurprising to see the subsequent formalization of the field of narratology that has led to the concept of the narrative being applied to a wide variety of academic disciplines (Fludernik, 2009). Moreover, the streaming services that currently put hundreds of hours of TV shows on our personal devices suggest that stories' prevalence is only growing, also evidenced by the ubiquitous identification of "narratives" in, for example, news cycles (see Lück et al., 2018) and sporting events (see Mauro, 2020).

However, while the sheer number of stories has undoubtedly exploded over the last hundred years or so, it is also true that all cultures at all periods of human

history have relied on stories for a multitude of purposes, many of immeasurable importance. From creation myths (von Franz, 1995) to explanations of natural phenomena to legends that perpetuate the history and values of a particular society (Propp, 1968), narratives have long been used, and recognized, as an integral component of the human experience. In addition, many narrative theorists detail how we cannot help but view our experiences of moving through the world from a narrative perspective (Bruner, 1991).

2.3 Defining Narrative Theory

It is, of course, well beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive review of narrative theory, spanning, as it does, millennia of human cultural history, including deep involvement in many of the defining concepts of both modernism and postmodernism (and post-postmodernism) that have shaped our current society. While it would, perhaps, be sufficient to consider only those aspects of narrative theory that pertain specifically and directly to its correspondence to course design, it would also be difficult to determine what those aspects are.

Therefore, this section outlines a brief history of the field, mainly important for the way it features the emergence of narratology and the concepts associated with it that make the interdisciplinary theoretical investigation at the heart of this thesis possible. This also provides context for the more detailed discussion of the defining features of narratives and how and why they are used that follows. Finally, it should be noted that, in order to avoid undue and excessive repetition, some aspects of narrative theory will be introduced in later sections, when they are discussed as being analogous or possibly applicable to specific components of HE course design and delivery.

2.3.1 Outlining Narrative Theory

Narrative theory is perhaps best seen as an umbrella term that incorporates such fields as genre theory, drama theory, literary theory, the study of story structure, and narratology. It is important to note that these fields are not distinct from each other and in fact interact in a variety of ways. Narrative theory is also informed by a number of other fields in the humanities, including semiotics, psychology, cultural

studies, and philosophy (Richardson, 2000). It can be broadly defined as the study of how and why we tell and interpret narratives.

The history of narrative theory follows a similar path to that of other theories based on the creative arts. That is to say, the foundational concepts that were established in the classical period (i.e. Greece in the 5th and 4th centuries BC) held influence for centuries, albeit refined, developed, and challenged along the way, until early Modernist thinkers introduced perspectives to the field that led to the radically new approaches of the 20th century. As with the studies of other fields, including other forms of communication, the development of theories about narratives can also be seen as broadly moving from the descriptive to the prescriptive, then to the interpretive and back to the descriptive.

2.3.2 Classical and Post-classical

Plato's *Republic* features perhaps the first extant discussion of the style of relating fictional events, in which he distinguishes between 'narration', where the poet speaks in his or her own voice, and 'imitation', where the poet speaks through the voice of a character (Onega & García Landa, 1996, p. 13). In *Poetics*, Aristotle (2013) puts emphasis on the 'mythos', or the plot of a tragedy, which he defines as "the representation of […] action" (p. 24) and goes on to clearly position it ahead of character in terms of importance to the narrative. Crucially, this also indicates a distinction between 'plot' and 'action', with the first being how the second is represented.

During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, theorists like Robortello and Castelvetro (Onega & García Landa, 1996, p. 15) built on Aristotle's ideas when applying them to the developing forms of literature such as romances, plays, and poetry. The emergence of the novel brought about further developments, due to a shift away from plot towards an emphasis on depictions of character and setting. This brought along with it a stronger awareness of theme as expressed through the inner lives of characters and how they interacted with their surroundings (Lytton, 1838). Henry James (1888) is seen as a bridge between Victorian realism and modernism, partly because of his discussion of the coming together of formal aspects with what

they are conveying in terms of how characters engage with the events of the story. The modernist novel, and concurrent analysis of it, could perhaps be identified by its focus on a writing style that favored a more self-aware and avant-garde approach.

2.3.3 The Emergence of Narratology: From Early Modern to Post-Structural and Beyond

The Russian Formalists contributed a significant advancement by separating narrative theory from the novel and focusing on the form of narrative itself. Important developments included Shklovsky's (1929/2021) identification of the 'fabula', i.e. the sequence of events in a story, as opposed to the 'sjuzhet', i.e. how those events are presented within a particular narrative. In addition, Tomashevskii (1928/2003) contributed the distinction between 'bound' and 'free' story events, i.e. those that are necessary to the plot versus those that are not, and Propp catalogued a limited set of specific 'functions' that, although combinable in myriad formations, are the building blocks of a single narrative structure.

Many of Propp's ideas, along with those of the other Russian Formalists, were instrumental in the development of structuralist narrative theory in the second half of the 20th century. More specifically, Todorov (1969) coined the term 'narratology' to identify a distinct field that aimed to treat the narrative as the object of scientific study, which was seen as an inevitable consequence of Saussure's analysis of the structure of language as a system of signs. This meant that there was a greater shift towards looking at the fundamental structure of narrative (as opposed to specific narratives) and to viewing narrative theory as a field concerned with semiotic activity.

Structuralist narratology contributed many concepts that remain key to current narrative studies, including contemporary understandings of character ('actants'), perspective ('focalization'), and structure. In addition, the recognition that a narrative is a thing that makes meaning through a set of specific signs frees narrative theory from focusing only on what were commonly perceived to be narratives, i.e. the types of stories found in novels, films, etc., and expands its applicability to a much wider range of texts and discourses. This, perhaps more than anything, is what led to the narrative turn in the humanities and has obvious relevance to the current study.

Finally, structuralist narratology is essentially descriptive in its aims, instead of interpretative. As Herman (2005) says, it is concerned with "not *what* narratively organized signs mean but rather with *how* they mean, and more specifically with how they mean *as* narratives" (p. 575). Moreover, and in common with structuralist linguistics, it does not attempt to be evaluative in terms of making decisions about certain narratives being better or worse than others, but instead focuses on determining the relative 'narrativity' of a piece of text or discourse as a means of exploring the effect and interplay of various narrative elements.

Although the initial concepts of narratology greatly expanded the understanding of the underlying structures of narratives, it was viewed by some as the continuation of a classical perspective of a story as a complete and coherent text. The poststructuralist approach therefore took Derrida's concept of deconstruction to unlock the narrative by exploring its open-ended and extra-textual nature. In other words, all narratives should be seen as being situated in, and interacting with, a much wider context than was previously considered. This meant looking at not only how narratives engage with other narratives, but also how understanding of the context and position of a narrative affects the way in which an audience (or more accurately, individual audience members) engages with it. As Barthes (1970/1974) initially put it, every reading has its own structure, which led him to the logical conclusion that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1968/1977, p. 148).

Broadly speaking, narratology can be seen as the field within narrative theory that began with structuralist approaches and continued with the poststructuralists and beyond. It has currently settled into its etymological definition, i.e. as the 'science of narrative', encompassing all aspects of the multi-disciplinary study of narratives and narrativity, from discrete elements within stories to epistemological considerations of narrative cognition. As Meister (2014) states, its numerous theories frame "the exploration and modeling of our ability to produce and process narratives in a multitude of forms, media, contexts, and communicative practices" (p. 623). One constant within all of these investigations, however, and part of what continues to

make narratology so widely applicable, is the ongoing discussions regarding both how to describe the concept of narrative and how to define it.

The descriptive approach can be viewed as an investigation into what narrative does for human society and culture. In other words, it considers the possible uses of narrative as a tool as compared with the defining approach, which seeks to explain the tool itself. Of course, at some point it becomes difficult to separate the form of the tool from its purpose, and this also raises an important teleological question, i.e. whether the tool was created first and then applied to different functions, or if it arose because of the human need to perform those functions. Based on the various purposes that have been cited, narratologists appear to favor the latter. Defining a narrative will be addressed in Chapter 4, while the following section will describe a use of narrative relevant to this thesis.

2.3.4 Narrative as Cognitive Instrument

Herman's (2002) "cognitive instrument" theory of narrative describes it as a "tool for thinking […] used as an organizational and problem-solving strategy" that "provides essential support for cognition" (Herman, 2005a, p. 349). This view explores the side of narrative theory less concerned with how we make sense of stories and more on how stories help us make sense of the world around us. This can be done, according to Mink (1978), when a narrative connects our abstract understanding of a phenomena with its actual occurrence, or as Danto (1982) describes it, bridges the gap between general understanding of the world and awareness of how that understanding plays out in reality (fictional or otherwise). Herman simply calls it "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (2009, p. 2), which is contrasted with the way that the hard sciences analyze the phenomena of the natural world; i.e., while science can explain technically why something happens, narrative can convey what it is like for us to experience it. In addition, while the scientific laws of physics and chemistry are always intended to be generally applicable, a key aspect of narrative is that it is represented by stories that are only situated in specific occasions. As Herman (2009) puts it, "the same story cannot be told twice, because the context in which the first telling takes place is irrevocably altered by that

initial narrational act" (p. 6). Bruner (1990) explains the difference between 'narrative' and 'scientific' thinking by identifying the former as a resource for "folk psychology", which he describes as the fundamental understanding that humans have of the way thinking works. This manifests itself in the motivations, intentions, and results of our actions, meaning narrative is the way that we explain these things. As he states, "when you encounter an exception to the ordinary, and ask somebody what is happening, the person you ask will virtually always tell a story that contains *reasons* (or some other specification of an intentional state)" (Bruner, 1990, p. 49). According to Bruner, the explicatory nature of narrative is inherent because its events deviate from what is common or expected.

One important context of narrative when viewed through a cognitive lens is that of conversational storytelling (Ochs & Capps, 2001), in which discourse is jointly constructed and the interaction among the different participants is a key feature of the sense-making activity. This discourse is a collaborative means of organizing the understanding of experiences, as it involves interactive elements such as comprehension checks, requests for clarification, and reformulations (all of which are common features of the classroom).

2.3.5 Applications of Narrative Theory in Other Disciplines

The growth of the field of narratology, which aims to investigate the structure, meaning, and reception of narratives from a scientific perspective, has led to an increase of interdisciplinary studies (Heinen, 2009). One prominent example of a discipline that has developed a sub-field based on applications of narrative theory is medicine (Charon, 2001). This focuses on three different uses of narratives in health care: stories by patients to communicate their illnesses and surrounding issues; stories by and for health professionals to communicate medical knowledge; and stories by doctors about their patients to explore diagnoses and potential treatments (Hydén, 2005). The field has been written about extensively, in both academic books (e.g. Marini, 2015; Charon et al., 2016) and articles (e.g. Hurwitz, 2000; Milota et al., 2019), and Columbia University currently offers a Master of Science degree course in Narrative Medicine.

Further disciplines that have incorporated narratology as a theoretical lens through which to gain new perspectives can be divided into several categories, including the arts, e.g. dance (Foster, 1998) and music (Maus, 1991); those with obviously inherent narratives, e.g. journalism (Aare, 2016), courtroom studies (Cammiss, 2006), prison studies (Fredriksson, 2019), and theology (Loughlin, 1999); those dealing directly with human cognition and thought, e.g. psychology (Hoshmand, 2005) and philosophy (Carrier, 1984); the hard sciences (Padian, 2018; Cortes Arevalo et al., 2020); and critical studies, e.g. feminism (Hemmings, 2005), race theory (Farley, 1997), and queer theory (Bradway, 2021). In addition, some newer fields have recognized narrative as an important theoretical tool almost from their inception. One example is Artificial Intelligence, which has viewed the tendency to organize experience as a narrative as a key human trait to imitate (Schank, 1995). Moreover, it has not only been that theorists and researchers in all of the fields mentioned above have turned to narrative as a theoretical lens; narratologists have also used these disciplines to further explore and push the boundaries of what they understand about narrative, for example Olson (2014) writing about the courtroom and Ryan (1991) applying ideas from the field of AI to the study of stories.

2.4 Defining 'Course', 'Curriculum', and 'Syllabus'

For purposes of clarity, I would like to briefly explain what is meant in the context of this thesis by course design. To begin, the course can be distinguished from the curriculum, a heavily disputed term (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006), but whose definition I take from Kelly (2009) as "the total programme of an educational institution" (p. 9). In other words, it outlines the rationale for whatever approach an institution chooses to take for the entirety of its individual subjects and courses. I also distinguish the course from the syllabus, a term equally divisive in its description (Sabbah, 2018) and sometimes used synonymously with curriculum (Burton & McDonald, 2001), but which I take to mean the actual document prepared by teachers and given to students (Bowers-Campbell, 2015) that explains the course content (Nation & Macalister, 2010) and structure (Brown, 1997). The course itself, however, I define as the actualization of that document, i.e. the learning experiences that students have in the classroom, lesson by lesson and activity by activity.

A field of obvious relevance to course design is curriculum studies, which is a well established discipline (Smith & Ewing, 2002) that incorporates sub-fields such as curriculum history and curriculum theory (Popkewitz, 2009), and addresses practical educational matters (Kelly, 1977), epistemological considerations (Clement & Lovat, 2012) and broader socio-political issues, including gender (Elwood, 2016) and race (McCarthy et al., 2009). However, as it generally deals with 'big picture' topics within education, it rarely touches on the details of teacher practice like individual lesson planning, classroom management, or the sequencing of content over the length of a semester. Syllabus design is more likely to address the latter. Best practice when writing a syllabus typically involves identifying course aims, often prescribed by the institutional curriculum and/or based on a needs analysis, creating appropriate assessment tools, selecting relevant course materials, and choosing an effective teaching methodology (see, for example, Brown, 1997; Graves, 2009; Nation & Macalister, 2010). All of these, to varying degrees of specificity, may be included in the syllabus document, which is typically structured chronologically by listing a sequence of dated lessons and what will be taught, 'covered', and/or assessed in each one. In terms of how to decide on the actual sequence of those lessons, suggestions include chronology and level of complexity (for example using Bloom's taxonomy)

Based on the above, course design would include the writing of the syllabus, influenced by the curriculum, but also the planning of individual lessons, and both the in-lesson and out-of-lesson decisions made by the teacher in order to be reactive to student response to the course material. To introduce an early example of the key proposal of this study, if we were to compare them to components of a novel, the curriculum would be the broader cultural context that influences the writing and thematic approach taken by the author, the syllabus would be the list of chapters, and the course would be the actual text of the story or, more accurately, the reading of that text. Course design, then, is crafting a sustained learning experience in the way that writing a novel is crafting a sustained narrative experience.

In addition, regardless of the subject or field, the course designer necessarily selects a manageable and appropriate amount of content to put in front of their students and attempts to craft its presentation in such a way that will increase its

chance of acquisition, in the form of information, skills, development of thought, etc. In other words, they design an experience with the intention of some kind of educational outcome (Goodyear, 2015). This experience can take place at the micro level of a single activity, at the meso level of a complete lesson, or at the macro level of a course of study. In any case, the educator's role is to distill an infinitely complex aspect of reality into a form that the student can feasibly perceive, explore, and comprehend.

2.5 Narrative in Education

An obvious starting point for thinking about the role that narrative plays in education is through the disciplines discussed in the section above (i.e. medicine, the arts, journalism, etc.); they are all taught in HE courses and therefore the applications already mentioned could also be ones engaged with in the classroom. More broadly, cognitive psychologists have described how human knowledge is generally created out of experiences that we put in the context of our own personal stories. As Schank and Abelson (1995) write,

> In the end, all we have are stories and methods of finding and using those stories. Knowledge, then, is experiences and stories. Intelligence is the apt use of experience, and the creation and telling of stories. Memory is memory for stories, and the major processes of memory are the creation, storage, and retrieval of stories. (p. 8)

Given this connection between stories, intelligence, and memory, it is perhaps predictable that stories would feature prominently in educators' considerations of how to best engage their students in the learning process. Indeed, storytelling's utility as a pedagogical tool has a long history; there is evidence to suggest both that the original function of stories was as an instrument of teaching, and that the original method of teaching was stories (Booker, 2004).

2.5.1 Stories in the Classroom

Beyond the obvious context of courses of study explicitly about stories, e.g. literature or cinema studies, there are several different ways that narratives, in the form of fictional novels or films, might feature in an educational setting. The first, and most direct, is to present course content, i.e. information and concepts, through a specifically chosen story. Landrum et al. (2019) suggest that this is done to "(a) create interest, (b) provide a structure for remembering course material, (c) share information in a more familiar and accessible form, and (d) create a more personal student-teacher connection" (p. 248). Research has been carried out on content delivered through stories, including Bower and Clark (1969), who measured memorization of serial lists, Graesser et al. (1980), who examined retention of texts, and Gunther (2011), who looked at exam results, with all of them reporting higher levels of effectiveness when narratives were used. These results support the idea that students are more likely to remember content when it is put in the context of a story.

Houska et al. (2015), writing about the teaching of psychology, also discuss the use of narratives as a way to deliver course content, but with a focus on analysis and engagement along with memorization. One example they cite is that of Stoddart and McKinley (2006), who describe a course in which the usual textbooks are abandoned completely in favor of literature and primary sources. Krukones (1989) explains an interdisciplanary course he co-designed in which students study political science through both written and filmed versions of stories that explore specific political situations, while Masters (2005) describes the effective use of popular cinema to teach mental illness concepts to nursing students. With an eye towards students' increasing engagement with digital media, Domyancich-Lee et al. (2022) explain their use of graphic novels as effective learning texts partly due to the way they combine images and words. It is perhaps to be expected that teachers of history have embraced a narrative approach to presenting course content. However, Butler et al. (2009), while advocating for the use of both literature and cinema as sources of history course material, warn that care must be taken, especially in the case of films, that historical inaccuracies are clearly signposted to students. Finally, in addition to the use of established and well-known stories in the form of published novels and popular films,

research has been carried out on the effectiveness of other forms of fiction in the classroom. Mutonyi (2015) reported on the use of what she calls "cultural tools" in the form of stories, proverbs and anecdotes, to help science students learn concepts by connecting them to their everyday lives.

A second approach to incorporating narratives into the classroom, as identified by Houska et al. (2015), is the use of personal or autobiographical stories. This can be done by the teacher, exemplified by Alsop et al.'s (2013) integration of oral narratives of experiences into university engineering lectures, or focus on students listening to others' personal stories as Keehn (2015) describes in the context of a diversity course. More commonly, activities have been designed in which students are asked to tell their own narratives as a means of exploring their own connections to the course material. Koening and Zorn (2002) explain how they carried this out with nursing students, while Harris (2007) describes the technique of learners "blending" their own narratives with specific social studies content. In the context of continuing higher education, Wiessner and Pfahl (2007) promote students telling their own stories as a form of knowledge construction. In many of these cases of sharing life narratives, there is a focus on reflection and self which, according to Landrum et al. (2019), "can assist students in developing an internalized, evolving, and integrated story of one's identity" (p. 251).

2.5.2 Storyfying the Classroom

Rather than introducing external stories into the classroom, another means of incorporating narrative into an educational experience, and the one that bears the closest resemblance to what I am aiming to achieve in this study, is to map commonly known story structures onto the course. One example that has appeared in the literature over the past few decades is that of the hero's journey, popularly understood as the sequence of events that a main character experiences on their way to self-discovery. This concept was popularized by Campbell (1949/2008), who described a kind of template, or 'monomyth', consisting of a number of stages, of both challenges and successes, that a protagonist must face before emerging transformed and free from the fear of death. This structure has been used both descriptively, for

example for literary criticism (Phillips, 1975), and prescriptively, as seen in the deliberate application of the monomyth to many popular Hollywood films (Vogler, 2017). In addition, practitioners in other disciplines, including clinical psychology (Williams, 2019), law (Robbins, 2005), futurology (Schultz et al., 2012), and tourism (Robledo and Batle, 2017), have suggested applying the hero's journey to one's life as a beneficial structuring force. It is therefore of little surprise that educational theorists have explored the hero's journey as a way to view, analyze, and design the learning experience.

Working in teacher education, Goldstein (2005) applied the metaphor of the hero's journey explicitly, by explaining and explicating the stages that the hero encounters through the *Star Wars* trilogy of films as a way to encourage her students to reflect on parallels they might find with their own learning journey. Although she reported that this was broadly successful in terms of supporting students as they dealt with various challenges, she also acknowledged that the "hero" metaphor made some participants uncomfortable, due to the implied connotations of being strong and confident and the accompanying pressures that these created. Warner and Long (2022) do not address this potential drawback of viewing students as heroes, although their application of the metaphor is not made explicit to their learners and is therefore perhaps less problematic. Instead, while acknowledging that students may experience some or all of the various stages of the monomyth, they focus more on analogising the teacher as the mentor/guide figure, thus creating a relationship "based on trust, a willingness to take measured risks together, and open minds that encourage exploration and discovery" (p. 22). Sheehan and Riddle (2021) use the hero's journey as a framework through which to better understand the experience of international secondary school students in Australia, leading them to identify three different "hero models" ("self-determined", "hesitant", and "wounded") (p. 5), that are potentially beneficial for informing support policies. O'Shea and Stone (2014) and Boklage et al. (2019) also analyse students' stories through a monomyth lens to better understand the educational transformations they undergo. Finally, Brown and Moffett (1999) describe in detail how concepts from the hero's journey can be used by all involved, including teachers, students, and administrators, to transform education through "the

identification of shared purpose, and a commitment to the urgency of action" (p. viii). While they have much practical advice about how to implement this, their use of the hero metaphor appears to be chiefly inspirational in tone and a very deliberate call to arms in what they perceive to be desperate times for schooling.

2.5.3 Narratives' Effectiveness as an Educational Tool

From the field of psychology, there come several explanations of why narratives engage us to the extent of supporting better memory. One is their basic structure, which typically begins by introducing a dramatic question that the rest of the story seeks to answer. Our basic curiosity means that we stay interested until the mystery is resolved (Landrum et al., 2019). According to Finkel (2000), another reason is that stories are inherently concrete, specific, and generally organized in a way that we are all familiar with. This is opposed to more abstract and less linear texts, which may require higher cognitive loads that take resources away from memory. In addition, Willingham (2009) points out that stories are "psychologically privileged" (p. 51) in the way that they engage our memory differently to how we might memorize a list of facts. This is because of the way that they appeal to our emotions and cause us to connect the experiences of the characters to our own; as a result, he says, "[s]omeone with a 'bad' memory can still remember a memorable story" (Willingham, 2009, p. 122).

Chapter 3. Research Design

3.1 Introduction

The starting point of my research was the notion, inspired by my own personal and professional interests but unsupported by any theory or research, that the university course could be viewed as a type of narrative. What developed from that was an exploration of the notion in terms of whether or not it holds any theoretical water and if so, what that might mean for course designers. This led to the choice to conduct qualitative research, which aligns with the exploratory approach I felt most appropriate for this topic.

The research design explained in this section refers to both the philosophical approach applied and the practical steps carried out to answer my main research question: ***What is the potential of narrative theory as an approach to inform HE course design and related teacher reflection?*** To elaborate on the exploration needed to answer this question, several sub-research questions were created. The research design described in this chapter explains what methods were carried out to explicitly attempt to answer these sub-questions.

As all of the research questions are exploratory in nature, they employ qualitative methodological approaches. More specifically, RQ1 (*Can the HE course be viewed as a narrative?*) uses analysis of relevant literature to create a theoretical synthesis and then applies that synthesis to the HE course in order to arrive at a working hypothesis. RQ2 (*In what ways do specific narrative elements align with the HE course?*) also uses a literature review to identify specific narrative elements that could be applicable to the HE course and then employs empirical evidence, in the form of data generated through observations and interviews, to further consider some of the potential applications of a narrative approach model. Finally, RQ3 (*What are the implications of viewing the HE course through a narrative lens in relation to supporting teacher reflection and course design?*) uses the narrative elements identified by RQ2 to take a theoretical approach, supported by the empirical data, to discuss potential implications. Taken together, three different qualitative research methods are employed, resulting in a type of mixed methods research. The first method is a

literature review, aimed at both synthesizing a definition of narrative and identifying discrete narrative elements. The second method is the development of a working hypothesis, while the third method is data generation in the form of teacher observations and interviews, which was carried out to find evidence of real-world applications of narrative theory in course design.

This section continues with an explanation of the research philosophy of the study, consisting of the ontological and epistemological positions I take based on applying my own personal philosophy to this piece of research. I then describe the methodological position, which includes a discussion of the theoretical aspects of what processes can be used to understand knowledge and therefore acts as a bridge between the epistemology and the more practical elements of the methods used in this study. More specifically, it features discussion of my study as a piece of exploratory research, and a backgrounding and description of a mixed methods approach using exclusively qualitative data. I then explain the choices to use a literature review, in aid of a theoretical synthesis and analysis, and to generate data through observations and interviews. Finally, details are given regarding the actual steps followed to carry out the research design, including descriptions of the context, participants, observation and interview instruments, and ethics procedure.

3.2 Research Philosophy

According to Daniel and Harland (2017), a research philosophy consists of both the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher, the former of which they claim to be "synonymous with our personal beliefs, views and values" about social reality and the latter being "about the procedures we use to come to know something" (p. 33). Per Grix (2002), an explanation of the specific methods used to conduct research comes only after questions have been answered regarding first the ontological, then the epistemological, and finally the methodological approaches taken by the researcher. This, he argues, forms a logical sequence, as the explanation of each will depend on what precedes it; as he puts it, we need to start with "what a researcher thinks can be researched (their ontological position), linking it to what we can know about it (their epistemological position) and how to go about acquiring it

(their methodological approach)" (Grix, 2002, p. 179). I therefore begin the description of my theoretical position with my ontological beliefs regarding conducting research in the social sciences in general and my research topic and questions in particular.

3.2.1 Ontological Position

While Blaikie (2000) specifies that ontological assumptions reveal our beliefs about what social reality consists of, Hay (2002), in a more practical sense, explains that they address "the question: what is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated?" (p. 63). One way to consider different answers to this is to think in terms of objective and subjective forms of knowledge of that reality. According to Bryman and Bell (2003), a position of objectivity would state that "[m]eaning exists independently of social actors" (p. 22), which potentially results in an understanding of that meaning that is consistent regardless of an observer's perspective of it. On the other hand, they describe a position of subjectivity as seeing meaning that is "continually being created and accomplished by social actors" (Bryman & Bell, 2003, p. 23); in other words, it only exists as a social creation and therefore its very nature is dynamic and dependent on the beliefs and values of those who observe it. For this reason, a focus on subjective forms of reality is also called social constructivism, which is the ontological position that I take in my research. In terms of Grix's (2002) notion of "what a researcher thinks can be researched" (p. 179) then, I aim only to uncover my own interpretation of the theory I have chosen to apply to my research and the values and beliefs of my participants with regards to their teaching practice.

With regards to research involving narrative theory, a constructivist position should be no surprise. Although there are strong claims by leading narratologists that humans are oriented to experience the world 'narratively' (Bruner, 1991), and such homogeneity of cognition, if true, could potentially be studied objectively, the notion of a piece of narrative text or discourse itself is clearly a social construct, and its application to human thought and experience could at most be seen as a framing device. In addition, the multitude of perspectives on how to define a narrative reveal its very subjective nature, which the theorists doing the defining often acknowledge themselves. In short, narrative theory can be seen as value-laden beliefs of a socially

created concept and therefore the claims I make regarding its application are strictly and explicitly non-objective. Any value found within those claims, therefore, will depend strongly on the reader's own perspective of the concepts explored in this study.

In terms of pedagogy, while I do believe that there are methods that can increase the efficacy of a course and the likelihood that course aims will be met, there are too many variables involved and therefore I am somewhat skeptical of any claims of 'best practice' in higher education research. Those variables include not only human agents (i.e. teacher and students) and their accompanying dynamic beliefs, experiences, and emotions, but also how they interact with each other, along with other contextual factors such as course setting and timing. Because of these, and because there is still much we do not know about the nature of both formal and informal learning, I would not feel valid in claiming that I have identified any kind of solution to consistently designing effective and engaging courses; my ontological position would be that such a solution does not exist. Rather, I hope to provide a holistic approach informed by my interpretation of theory that frames elements of course design that experienced teachers use and that I interpret as being beneficial. Again, it is at the reader's discretion whether or not they believe such an approach would suit their own teaching context.

3.2.2 Epistemological Position

Blaikie (2000) defines epistemology as "the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality […] In short, claims about how what is assumed to exist can be known" (p. 8). In other words, it considers the process of gathering and developing knowledge, and therefore, per Grix (2002), provides a bridge between a researcher's ontological and methodological positions. The two main contrasting approaches to epistemology are positivism and interpretivism, with the former typically aligned with an objective ontology more associated with research in the natural sciences, and the latter more compatible with a subjective ontology dealing with social action. As Gomm (2017) explains, a positivist orientation uses empirical data for hypothesis-testing in a value-neutral setting. Conversely, an interpretivist approach involves a researcher engaging

with theories and data using knowledge unique to them and therefore is likely to arrive at conclusions different from another researcher looking at the same theories and data (Scott, 2017). Educational research, not uniquely but nonetheless unmistakably, involves what Berliner (2002) identifies as "enormous complexity" (p. 20) due to the number of variables involved, including humans and their thoughts and feelings interacting in dynamic situations, which automatically puts limits on the kind of knowledge that can reasonably be expected to be gained from theory and research. Because the ontological position I have taken for this study focuses on socially constructed concepts and how they are subjectively understood, I adopt an interpretivist approach that I believe is appropriate for addressing my research questions. Specifically, I acknowledge that determining the ways in which a university course can be considered a narrative (RQ1b) depends on my interpretation of others' interpretations of narrative theory, and that identifying discrete elements of narrative theory that are, and can be, applied to course design (RQ2) is based on both my interpretations and those of other practising teachers.

3.3 Methodology

If epistemology considers the nature of how we can know about reality, methodology, according to Grix (2002), moves us closer to the practical side of research by asking what we can do to acquire that knowledge. As he puts it, methodology is about "the logic, potentialities and limitations of research methods" (Grix, 2002, p. 179), which will provide the theoretical support on which we justify the specific methods and data sources used to answer specific research questions. Because an interpretivist position acknowledges that subjective perspectives can still reveal informative knowledge about reality (however it is conceived), studies within this approach often use qualitative data, which is the methodology that I have chosen. In terms of the "logic, potentialities and limitations" of qualitative research, these can perhaps be summarized by Daniel and Harland (2017) when they state that "at every stage of the […] process, personal interpretation is required. […] every decision the researcher makes is based on his or her values" (p. 33). A potentiality then is that the juxtaposition of a researcher's individual beliefs with the concepts and data they are engaged with may lead to the development of new theories not otherwise accessible.

Limitations include the risk that key insights are overlooked and/or informed by misaligned values, and that others' values render their interpretation of the outcomes completely incompatible with those of the researcher.

3.3.1 Exploratory Research

The most important factor when creating a research design is that it aligns with the questions that the research seeks to answer (Alavi et al., 2018). As Gorard (2017) points out, strong alignment makes "analysis easier, the results safer, and the conclusions drawn from the research more trustworthy" (p. 203). Therefore, it is important when explaining the theoretical and practical aspects of my study to acknowledge the exploratory nature of my research questions. Exploration in research, according to Babbie (2020), "typically occurs when a researcher examines a new interest or when the subject of study itself is relatively new" (p. 91). As has been established, the attempt to apply a range of narrative elements to the guidelines for HE course design is novel and therefore requires preliminary exploration of the theories involved and then further investigation of how they might be juxtaposed with one another. Exploratory research of this type does not have a set of step-by-step guidelines to follow and in fact must draw on a range of approaches that are complementary in some ways yet contradictory in others. Each of these will be described in this section, along with any compromises that were necessary to negotiate.

Exploratory research, as a named approach, holds a somewhat slippery position in the field of methodology. This is because, according to Stebbins (2001), the idea of exploration is generally understood as comprising notions such as examination, analysis, investigation, and discovery, which are foundational concepts of research in general. Swedberg (2020) identifies the problem with this by pointing out that it makes the idea of exploratory research too broad and difficult to grasp. To narrow the definition, he claims that the most common goals of this approach take the following forms: "(1) a topic that has not been researched before is given a tentative analysis; and (2) an already existing topic is explored in order to produce new ideas and hypotheses, but without being able to properly verify these" (Swedberg, 2020, p. 18).

One way, therefore, to distinguish exploratory research from other study types is to look at the originality of the topic under consideration and/or the way that it is potentially being mobilised. Inherent in this is also the possibility that the exploration of the topic will lead to no significant discoveries; what Swedberg calls "high-risk ideas" (Swedberg, 2020, p. 18). I believe that the topic of this paper meets both descriptions of Swedberg's goals of exploratory research, in that the concept of treating the HE course as a narrative has not been researched before, and is given a tentative analysis (due to my novice status within narrative theory) before hypotheses are developed about it that are verified only preliminarily. It should be pointed out however that the "high-risk" nature of this project has been somewhat mitigated against. Undertaking a high-stakes piece of doctorate research, I could not take the risk of finding that there is no substance to my initial hypothesis. Therefore, for a module assignment in the first part of my PhD course, I researched for and wrote a paper which focused only on answering the question of if the HE course could be seen as a narrative (Schaefer, 2022b).[1] In short, I view this research as exploratory because it addresses a topic not previously examined and it aims to produce hypotheses that are tentative and will hopefully be furthered explored through incorporation of different theoretical elements and application of different perspectives and methodologies.

3.3.2 Qualitative Mixed Methods Research

Research in the social sciences is commonly divided into two paradigms, quantitative and qualitative, depending on the type of data being collected or generated and analyzed. The difference between the two is described at its most fundamental as being data that can be expressed in numerical form, i.e. the former, and data that can be expressed in words or other non-numerical media, i.e. the latter (Punch & Oancea, 2014). This typically leads to an understanding, as explained by McCusker and Gunyadin (2014), that quantitative data is intended to measure something with relative precision, whereas qualitative data is more focused on

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[1] Although the conclusions reached in this paper gave me confidence that my hypothesis was worth pursuing further, I conducted a new version of the literature review and theoretical synthesis for this thesis.

understanding experiences and attitudes, the nuances of which cannot be expressed in numbers. Tight (2012) elaborates that quantitative research aims for results that prioritize high validity in order to be more broadly applicable, while qualitative research investigates a specific phenomenon "in depth and in context" (p. 180) and therefore is less likely to make generalizable conclusions. Although the definitions of, and distinction between, the two approaches have been widely discussed (see for example Morgan, 2018 and Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2023), it is also acknowledged that the choice to focus on numerical or non-numerical data should be a direct result of the specific research questions that a study seeks to answer. As Punch and Oancea (2014) state, "qualitative questions require qualitative methods and data to answer them" (p. 4).

Mixed methods research is often named as a "third way" methodology that sits between, or across, the two paradigms described above. However, although there is a presumption by some social researchers that mixed methods research inherently involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative data (e.g. Bryman, 2007), others acknowledge a variety of forms that can be utilised (Greene, 2008). Morse (2010), for example, explicitly argues for a mono-paradigmatic approach, in which different types of qualitative data are used, either simultaneously or sequentially, to explore an issue within a unified piece of research. More precisely, Morse and Niehaus (2009) define a mixed methods design as consisting of "a complete method (i.e., the core component), plus one (or more) incomplete method(s) (i.e., the supplementary component[s]) that cannot be published alone, within a single study" (p. 9), with the understanding that both the core and supplementary components can be exclusively quantitative or qualitative. The methods being mixed, therefore, refers to specific ways of answering research questions as opposed to paradigms distinguished only by the type of data they use.

Due to the nature of the research questions, my study takes a qualitative mixed methods approach. The choice to use exclusively qualitative data emerged from both my general ontological and epistemological beliefs regarding research in the social sciences and the exploratory nature of this particular study. Embarking and reporting on an exploration of my chosen topic aligns, serendipitously, with the concept of going

on a journey and telling its story; as Daniel and Harland (2017) put it, qualitative research "will always have an underlying narrative form because the content is constructed through the imagination of the researcher and carefully represented for the reader" (p. 33). Finally, while quantitative data could have been collected and analyzed to better illuminate the object of my investigation, the focus here is on developing the understanding of a particular theoretical construct (i.e. narrative) and its application to teaching.

With regards to the core and supplementary components labeled by Morse and Niehaus (2009) as applied to my study, I view the theoretical analysis of narrative elements applicable to HE course design as core and the observation and interview data as supplementary. This is chiefly because the latter is dependent on the former. In other words, it is necessary to first establish the course as a type of narrative and identify discrete elements that illustrate this connection before looking for examples in actual teachers' practice and principles. If the 'course as narrative' concept were already well established, research that focuses on examining and/or evaluating narrative course design, using qualitative or quantitative data, could easily be identified as a core component. However, I believe that the theoretical exploration is foundational here, with the empirical data additional; as Morse (2010) puts it, "[i]n mixed methods, the supplementary component provides explanation or insight within the context of the core component, but for some reason the supplementary component cannot be interpreted or utilized alone" (p. 484). In this case, the reason is that discussing narrative elements of a teacher's course design would make no sense without establishing the theoretical justification for why they are there in the first place. It should be mentioned, however, that I was very much open to the possibility that the observation and interview data would reveal narrative elements that I had not considered or found in my reading of the literature on narrative theory. The process of mixing methods therefore was concurrent rather than sequential as I returned to the literature to better understand some of what I had seen and heard in the empirical evidence, and vice versa, leading to an iterative analysis of both and resulting in a kind of triangulation common to mixed methods research (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015). In that

sense, the two components were in both hierarchical and dialogic relationships with each other. The following sections will discuss these components in more detail.

3.3.2.1 Theoretical Methods.

To answer RQ1 (*How can the HE course be viewed as a narrative from a narrative theory perspective?*), a sequence of sub-questions had to be answered in order. The first one, *What is a narrative?* (RQ1a), is of obvious importance as I needed to understand the supercategory into which I was trying to put the HE course. I therefore synthesized a working definition of a narrative through review of the relevant literature, which provided the answer to RQ1a. This definition, fuzzy though it is, was then used to answer the second sub-question, *In what ways does the HE course meet the definition of a narrative?* (RQ1b), by applying the criteria of a narrative to what would be recognized as a prototypical HE course and seeing which ones did or did not align. This led to the construction of a working hypothesis, which was used as the basis of answering RQ2 (*In what ways do specific narrative elements align with the HE course?*). RQ2, in fact, forms the majority of my findings as it integrates the further reading I conducted on more discrete aspects of narrative theory with the empirical data generation I conducted as the second part of my research process. The findings from RQ2 were used to inform further theorizing, based on my own inferences, assumptions, and experiences, that represent the bulk of the answers to RQ3 (*What are the implications of viewing the HE course through a narrative lens in relation to supporting teacher reflection and course design?*).

3.3.2.2 Empirical Methods.

Having identified narrative elements within HE course design through my answers to RQ2, I designed a method for conducting observations and interviews that would help me find examples of those elements in real-world course design practice. However, as I was still receptive to finding narrative elements in the empirical qualitative data that I had not yet seen in the literature, I left both, especially the observations, somewhat open as a continuation of the exploratory nature of this research so that I may find further answers to RQ2. In this way, there was a cyclical nature to the research, which is a common feature of exploratory studies. In addition,

the data generated from the empirical research was used to support and illustrate some of my answers to RQ3.

3.3.3 Literature Review as Research Method: Desk Research

The literature reviews I carried out both to synthesize a definition of narrative and to collect potentially relevant elements of narrative theory are difficult to classify according to the commonly accepted typologies of reviews (for example, Grant & Booth, 2009). As Snyder (2019) explains, "a literature review can broadly be described as a more or less systematic way of collecting and synthesizing previous research" (p. 333). However, the reviews I carried out did not, for the most part, include academic publications reporting on empirical research within the field of narrative studies or narratology. Rather, the literature reviewed was chiefly theoretical in nature and mainly focused on philosophical discussions of human and social topics such as cognition, experience, and language. Therefore, these reviews do not feature any analysis, assessment, or comparison of either quantitative or qualitative results. Furthermore, they are not aimed at describing or synthesizing policy in any field, or even at influencing practice; contemporary narrative theory tends to be descriptive in nature, albeit featuring descriptions coming from a purely theoretical perspective. In other words, it does not seek to describe a particular narrative or the elements that comprise it (which might more accurately be called a summary), but rather explores how we make sense of that story and how the story helps us make sense of the world. The procedure conducted to carry out the first piece of desk research, therefore, has a notable focus on the concept of narrative itself. In addition, as a result of the exploratory approach to this study, the procedures I followed for both reviews were on the 'less' side of Snyder's (2019) description of the "more or less systematic" nature of literature reviews, as is explained in the following section.

3.3.3.1 Finding Sources.

Grant and Booth's (2009) typology of 14 different types of reviews is a useful resource for identifying different ways that literature can be employed to inform one's study. And although they are focusing on evidence-based practice and therefore describe reviews of research papers, I began my engagement with the relevant

literature on narrative theory through a version of what they would call a scoping review, defined by them as "[p]reliminary assessment of potential size and scope of available […] literature [that] [a]ims to identify the nature and extent of […] evidence (usually including ongoing evidence)" (p. 95). Specifically, my initial aim was to gain a general understanding of the scope of literature on narrative theory, including the key academics in the field and any foundational and/or essential texts. As Tricco et al. (2016) acknowledge, there is little agreement in the terminology and methods regarding a scoping review, but they claim that a vital component is the use of some kind of reporting guideline in the form of a tool that is used to clearly communicate the findings of the research. For the current study, the starting point of reviewing the literature was to identify the various definitions of narrative put forward by different narrative theorists. This allowed me to begin to become aware of the prominent figures in the field, appreciate some of the qualitatively different conceptions of narrative, and develop an understanding of the historical progression of these ideas.

The search for literature regarding definitions of narrative was conducted through two main sources, Google Scholar and the *ProQuest Ebook Central* online resource available to me through my institution of study, the former of which gives results for both academic journals and books, with the latter only providing scholarly books. In both cases, I began with the search terms *narrative theory* and *narratology* and was provided with the names of some of the most prominent figures in the field and their key texts. Several of these texts led me to the *Project Narrative* website, and accompanying articles, podcast episodes, and books, produced by Ohio State University (OSU), which appears to be the foremost collection of narratologist texts, at least in the English language, and proved to be an immensely useful resource for familiarizing myself with the current state of narrative theory.

3.3.3.2 Literature Review for Theoretical Synthesis.

Once the texts containing definitions of narrative had been collected, the next step in my process was to synthesize the definitions in order to arrive at a singular concept, i.e. the answer to RQ1a, that could be used towards answering RQ1b, regarding the ways in which a university course could be considered a narrative. This

comprised undertaking a version of a concept synthesis, which Tricco et al. (2016a) categorize as a type of knowledge synthesis method and explain as "being used to identify concepts, viewpoints or ideas [and] [f]ocuses on identifying the defining attributes of the concepts and can be used to develop a synthesis model" (p. 322). Walker and Avant (2005), working in the field of nursing studies, provide a clear rationale and methodology for conducting a concept synthesis. Regarding the former, they state that careful definition of concepts used for development theory facilitates understanding within research. For the latter, they outline a series of steps, which includes identifying defining attributes, building a model case of the concept, and testing the model against borderline cases (p. 170). More specifically, I followed Iannotta et al.'s (2020) adaptation of the procedure, which was "to critically review the main sources of interest, to iteratively search for notions and meanings across documents, and to map the key concepts for inclusion in the analysis" (p. 3). I therefore looked at both the explicit definitions found in the relevant texts, but also at the discussion about those definitions that the authors of the texts engaged in to clarify what they meant.

3.3.3.3 Literature Review for Theoretical Analysis.

Once the search for literature defining narrative was complete, many of these texts led me to seek other articles and books that addressed discrete elements of narrative theory that I thought might be relevant to my study. This was done by conducting further online searches either of terms I came across or of specific texts in reference lists. The result of this entire online search was a collection of PDFs of articles sorted into digital folders on my institutional file hosting service, ebooks stored on a digital bookshelf, and hard copies of texts unavailable elsewhere.

3.3.4 Working Hypotheses

The intended outcome of the reviews I conducted were working hypotheses which could be used to direct the stage of my research based on empirical data. According to Casula et al. (2020) the working hypothesis is an active and dynamic statement of expectation used as a tool for further inquiry. Dewey (1938) defines it as a "provisional, working means of advancing investigation" (p. 142), which Taylor (2022)

echoes when he calls it "a means of furthering and expediting a mode of explanation or a given research paradigm" (p. 578). The 'working' aspect of working hypotheses indicates their provisional nature and that they are likely part of an exploratory approach to investigation. Taylor (2022) explains their practical element by stating that they "provide a starting point for explanations and […] prop-up the explanations formulated to explain the problems that they themselves have revealed" (p. 579). Although my study is not specifically problem-based, the working hypotheses that I arrived at were intended to both guide the next stage of my research and to pose questions regarding their implications, i.e. their potential use for course design practice. Finally, Casula et al. (2020) suggest that the use of working hypotheses is a way of combining inductive and deductive approaches to research. This means that there is an acknowledgment of a priori suppositions, necessary for sparking the research in the first place, that are then developed to a point where they can be formulated as statements that are sound enough, without any claims to truth, to be used as tools for further exploration. I readily admit to an initial "hunch" that the HE course could be considered a type of narrative; however, this would not be a strong enough basis for research without first reviewing the literature in order to systematically develop a working hypothesis that would guide subsequent inquiry.

3.4 Empirical Data Generation

This section will describe the data generation carried out in order to inform answers to RQ2 (*In what ways do specific narrative elements align with the HE course?*) and to support answers to RQ3 (*What are the implications of viewing the HE course through a narrative lens in relation to supporting teacher reflection and course design?*). To do this, I opted to conduct lesson observations and interviews of higher education teachers. The observations were done to see if it was possible to record actual instances of narrative elements present in classroom activity. The interviews were to determine if teachers' reported principles, in terms of teaching and designing courses, aligned with principles applied by storytellers when creating narratives. While it might be possible to determine links between storytelling and course design purely through the relevant literature on both, generating data that provides evidence of it

actually happening potentially strengthens the case that the course can be considered a type of narrative and that doing so may have pedagogical and reflective benefits.

I employ the term "data generation" here to distinguish the observation and interview data in this study from the literature I mobilized to conduct the reviews described in the previous section in terms of origin; i.e. the former would not have existed had I not created it (Collins, 2017), whereas the latter pre-existed my research. In addition, while the observations were records of events that occurred, I made decisions about what to record and what to omit, based on my particular perspective of those events, both physically, e.g. my location in the classroom, and theoretically, e.g. my focus on potentially narrative-related elements. The outcome of the interviews I conducted were dependent on both the questions I asked and the participants' engagement with those questions and the entire interview process. The following sections will explain the procedure of conducting this data generation, starting with the decisions taken with regards to sampling.

3.4.1 Sampling

Collins (2017) reminds us that the logic of sampling decisions taken by a researcher should be based on finding an adequate sample to answer the research question. The choice of the word 'adequate' reflects an acknowledgement that practical contextual issues will likely prevent the researcher from finding the optimal sample. At the same time, as Oppong (2013) states, "a sample can be viewed as adequate if and only if the sampling errors that result from the use of the stated sample size are so small as not to nullify conclusions reached by the researcher" (p. 202). Therefore, while compromises will inevitably have to be made due to situational factors, transparency of the process hopefully leads to a sampling design that is defensible and conclusions that are viewed as justified and relevant.

As previously established, RQ2 addresses the supplemental part of my research, which is intended to support and further investigate the core part that is answered through the literature review. As a result, the question is worded to reflect its supportive nature and therefore not lead to any strongly generalizable results. For example, I am not seeking to discover if *all* HE teachers include narrative elements in

their course design; rather, the aim is to see if examples of the narrative elements identified in the literature can be found in the kinds of lessons and courses that are recognizable as somewhat typical to fellow HE teachers. This leads to a form of naturalistic generalization (Stake, 2005), in which "[s]takeholders interpret the findings based on their own personal or vicarious experiences, and use these generalizations to determine the degree that the findings are generalized or applicable to other contexts" (Collins, 2017, p. 283). This factor played a significant role in my sampling decisions for this research.

As qualitative research involves an in-depth investigation of a particular focus, it generally uses purposive sampling, in which, per Creswell (2013), "researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (p. 228). As a result, the goal when selecting participants is to find ones who will provide cases that are "information-rich", which Patton (2002) defines as leading to deep and great learning and understanding about the subject of inquiry. Being qualitative, this is somewhat vague, albeit relative, so it is necessarily at the discretion of the researcher to decide whether or not a participant is seen as providing information strongly relevant to the research.

Within purposive sampling, there are still several options based on the timing and the goal of the data generation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As most of my sampling took place before I started conducting the observations and interviews and because the goal was ongoing exploration of a particular concept, I used theory sampling, which Creswell (2013) defines as "a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples individuals or sites because they can help the researcher generate or discover a theory or specific concepts within the theory" (p. 230). In my case, I was looking for participants who could help me understand the concept of the HE course as a narrative. Therefore, my main criteria for selecting participants was that they were currently designing and delivering HE courses of the type that I speculated my conception of a narrative approach could inform. I aimed for 10 to 15 participants, which I felt would be enough to provide me with an appropriate sample to uncover the presence of narrative elements, while also being a manageable amount in the time I had available. In answer to the question of how many interview participants should be

included in a qualitative study, Daniel and Harland (2017) suggest 10 to 20 to be sufficient.

In addition, I acknowledge that there was a strongly opportunistic factor to my sampling. Because the working hypothesis that directed this part of my research addresses student-centered HE courses in general and does not focus on the teaching of any particular subjects, I did not seek to include participants who represented a variety of university departments (e.g. history, chemistry, literature). In addition, working in Japanese higher education with Japanese language skills that would have compromised the quality of the interview data meant that I was limited in terms of including the majority of HE teachers readily accessible to me. I therefore contacted current and former colleagues of mine, so called "convenience samples", who met the criteria explained above and inquired about their willingness and availability to participate in my research. Other factors included suitable timing and the rules of teachers' institutions with regards to whether or not outside researchers were allowed to observe lessons of their students. This process led me to select seven participants who all were teaching at universities in Tokyo, including four who were teaching at the same university as me, of whom two were teaching in the same department as me. In addition, all seven participants have backgrounds in English language education, although not all of the courses of theirs that I observed were English language courses.

A further opportunistic element to my sampling was that I met a professor of film studies from a university in the US who was a visiting scholar at my institution. When asked, he consented to be an interview participant. He also invited me to visit his university in the US for a lesson observation, which I was able to do thanks to research funds from my own institution, and, while there, I conducted interviews and/or observations with four more teachers in the Film and TV Studies department. Additionally, in Tokyo I met a different film professor who works at a different university in the US who also consented to an interview. While all of these participants met my initial sampling criteria, the decision to include HE teachers who, because of the subjects they teach, already have an awareness and understanding of at least certain aspects of narrative theory, could be seen as compromising the sampling of my study. However, as the goal of this section was not to determine whether or not how

many HE teachers included narrative elements but rather to find specific examples of them, I felt that these participants might potentially be more likely to meet the criteria of being information-rich in terms of my stated research questions.

3.4.2 Participants

Appendix A provides information regarding the 13 participants (anonymized) who took part in my research. The data provided is intended to indicate their educational and professional backgrounds, as well as contextual information regarding the lesson observed and discussed. I have not included personal information about age, gender, or nationality as I do not consider these relevant for the current study and, considering the small sample size, could not in any case lead to justifiable generalizations on the basis of those identity markers.

3.4.3 Insider Research

Due to the inclusion of colleagues as participants and my own position as an HE course designer, this study qualifies in part as insider research, which Brannick and Coghlan (2007) define as "research by complete members of organizational systems and communities in and on their own organizations" (p. 59). Additionally, several of the other participants were former colleagues and fully half (seven out of thirteen) teach in the same field as I do, namely academic skills development and language education. Furthermore, I would describe four of these as friends, i.e. people I socialize with outside of a work setting, resulting in what Taylor (2011) calls "intimate insider research" (p. 9). Any disadvantages of such closeness to some of the participants in my research should be seen in terms of how they might compromise the quality of the data I generate. Quality in this case refers to the data's accuracy and validity for addressing my research questions. A potential risk, for example, could be that a participant plans a lesson untypical of what they usually teach, or is untruthful about their course design principles, in order to not lose face with a peer/friend. Although it is not possible to completely mitigate against this, I can only trust my choice of individuals based on my understanding of their characters and integrity as teachers. A benefit, identified by Taylor (2011), is a potential openness and resulting lack of tension of the type that some might feel when being observed and interviewed by a

relative stranger. In addition, as none of my intended data was in any way evaluative, which was clearly communicated to all participants, there was little or no pressure to meet any perceived standards.

A further advantage of being a peer of my participants, at least in terms of having experience of designing and delivering HE courses, was that I did not have to familiarize myself with common aspects of classroom culture, such as instruction giving, making decisions about timing, or other issues involving class management. At the same time, my awareness of these may have caused me to overlook or take for granted features of a lesson that may be of relevance but more noticeable to a researcher with a greater degree of outsider positionality (Chaevz, 2008). The most effective way to limit this effect is to be aware of it and, as with all aspects of the research process, keep a focus on what will ultimately best help address my research questions.

3.4.4 Research Context

The observations and interviews I conducted took place over five months in two separate periods corresponding to the two distinct locations of the data generation. The first was from May to July, which is during the spring semester that starts the Japanese academic year. The nine observations and interviews done during this period were at three different private universities in Tokyo. The second period was a week in September at the beginning of a new academic year at a private university in Los Angeles, USA. The number of students in the lessons observed ranged from 12 to 25 and included years from the first year of undergraduate to the second year of graduate studies.

3.5 Lesson Observations

3.5.1 Theoretical and Practical Background

Observation as a research method, defined by Creswell (2013) as "the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site" (p. 235), was chosen for my study as the most direct way to collect

examples of narrative theory in action in university lessons. However, conducting observations in an educational setting requires making multiple decisions about the type and procedure of the observations, as well as being aware of their advantages and, more importantly, disadvantages and how to mitigate them to the extent that it is possible to.

As Simpson and Tuson (2003) point out, formally observing something is very different from just looking at it. It involves systematically noticing specific people, events, behaviors, etc. and recognizing that what is noticed is filtered through the observer's own perspective, interpretation, and judgement (Daniel & Harland, 2017). This speaks to the epistemological limitations of observations as, per Cohen et al. (2017), "[w]hat counts as evidence immediately becomes cloudy in observation, because what we observe depends on when, where and for how long we look" (p. 542). The observer, therefore, has to prepare in order to know what they are going to look at and how they are going to look at it, as well as having the skill to execute this during the observation itself while dealing with the distractions inherent in being in a 'live' situation. There is, as well, the 'observer effect', which says that the presence of an observer inevitably affects how the participants being observed behave and therefore limits the reliability of any conclusions drawn (Wilson, 1977), although Monahan and Fisher (2010) argue that even 'performed' behavior can still yield valuable and valid data.

Furthermore, there are considerable practical and technical challenges associated with observations that affect both the planning and conducting stages. In terms of planning, the researcher must first negotiate the process of gaining permission to observe in a university classroom. While most universities have ethics committees that oversee applications to do so, the procedure is often lengthy and complex, understandably so given the various factors involved. Next, the researcher must coordinate a specific lesson that the participant is amenable to being observed teaching. This depends on many factors, including the number of students, the classroom, the type of lesson (which may be chosen based on the researcher's focus), where it falls in the semester calendar, etc. Additionally, they may be more comfortable being observed teaching a lesson that they have taught before and know

will 'work' rather than risk being seen by a peer teaching a new lesson that for myriad reasons may not be successful. During the observation itself, the observer must be well organized to make sure that they have brought all of the necessary equipment, located a suitable place from which to watch the lesson, and made efforts to put all members involved, i.e. the teacher and students, at ease despite the presence of a non-regular guest. Especially when conducting multiple observations in a short time period, they must maintain good concentration and avoid "observer drift" (Cooper & Schindler, 2001, p. 380), which can easily limit reliability.

Nevertheless, the unique strength of observations is their ability to provide highly authentic data, i.e. actual behavior occurring in real-life social situations, rather than second-hand reports (Creswell, 2013). As Clark et al. (2009) point out, it also allows access to contextual information that might otherwise be missed and aspects of human interaction and communication that are both verbal and non-verbal; Cooper and Schindler (2001) add that observations allow a fresh look at everyday behavior to reveal facets that might have been previously overlooked. Therefore, despite the technical challenges of conducting observations, and the acknowledgement that they are contextual, theory-laden, and limited to the observer's subjective perspective (Cohen et al., 2017), I felt that this was the only data generation method that could reliably provide me with genuine examples of narrative elements in teachers' lessons.

Once a researcher identifies lesson observations as an appropriate data generation method, several decisions must be made regarding the type of observations to conduct. These decisions relate to different dimensions (Cooper & Schindler, 2001; Flick, 1998) that are typically expressed as dichotomies. These dimensions are listed in Table 3.1, along with my choice in bold and reason for the choice in the second column.

Dimension	Reason
self-observation vs. **observation of others**	Self-observation poses practical challenges, primarily taking notes while teaching, that I did not feel equipped to meet without compromising both the lesson and the notes.

natural vs. artificial setting	My aim was to seek examples of narrative elements in actual lessons, i.e. ones that would take place regardless of whether or not I was observing them, and so it was unnecessary to manufacture laboratory-style conditions.
direct vs. indirect	I chose direct observations, which meant that I was observing the lessons first-hand, i.e. not via audio/video recordings as I could not rely on a camera to capture everything that was happening in the room and therefore risk missing potentially useful data.
overt vs. covert	This refers to whether or not my presence in the classroom was known to the participants involved, i.e. the teachers and students. My presence was overt for practical and moral reasons – I needed permission by the teachers to observe their lessons and any observer effect that may have influenced the data could not be justified by the ethical problems with observing students without their consent.
participant vs. **nonparticipant**	Although there are advantages to participating in the lesson, e.g. as a student or co-teacher, in terms of better understanding how activities are presented, structured, and received (Creswell, 2013), this would have severely limited my ability to record the field notes that formed the data I aimed to generate.
with intervention vs. **without intervention**	This refers to whether or not the researcher makes any kind of intervention to manipulate the situation or participants under observation, for example, by asking the teacher of a lesson to conduct certain types of activities (Adler & Adler, 1994). I made no such intervention and reminded some of the teachers pre-observation that I was only interested in seeing a typical lesson of theirs.

Table 3.1 Dimensions of observations, my chosen methods, and explanations of choices.

A further observation dimension, not included in 3.1, is how structured the observation is. I discuss it separately here as it is more closely tied to the detailed way in which an observation is carried out and connects to the essential element of utilizing an observation instrument to generate data. Heath et al. (2010) classify three levels of structuredness of observations, describing points on a spectrum. The researcher conducting a highly structured observation knows in advance what information they are looking for and has specific categories pre-written; the observations made are then slotted into these categories. The unstructured observation, on the other hand, while

still likely having some kind of focus, collects any data connected to that focus and assesses its significance afterwards. In other words, it is more useful for hypothesis-generating than hypothesis-testing. Inbetween is the semi-structured observation, which is how I classify what I conducted. According to Cohen et al. (2017), this type of observation has "an agenda of issues but will gather data to illuminate these issues in a […] less predetermined or systematic manner (e.g. responsive to what is observed)" (p. 543). I knew that I would be looking for examples of narrative elements in the lessons I observed, based on my understanding of narrative theory, but I did not have a list of these elements to assign to each behavior and activity I saw. Rather, I took notes on events and behaviors that I thought at the time might in some way be connected to the notion of a narrative. This was also because I was aware of the many gaps in my understanding of narrative theory and so I could subsequently analyze the data to make connections I had not previously considered. In this way, I was both hypothesis-testing and hypothesis-generating. Therefore, my observations were perhaps somewhere between the midpoint (i.e. semi-structured) and the unstructured end of the spectrum.

An important step in the preparation of conducting lesson observations is designing a system for recording notes. These are called fieldnotes and are the text recorded by the researcher (Creswell, 2013), although non-textual elements can also be generated. The nature of the fieldnotes, i.e. what information is recorded and how it is organized on the page, depends on the extent of structuredness of the observation. As I was conducting semi-structured observations, I used a very open format for my fieldnotes, with the only standardization being the meta-data recorded at the beginning, i.e. date, time, participant (teacher) name, and number of students, and the use of A5-size notebooks in which, for each individual note, I would handwrite the time elapsed since the start of the lessons and what happened. Handwriting on paper was chosen in preference over typing on a digital device because of the ability to use the page more creatively, for example by quickly underlining or crossing out words, drawing lines to show connections between ideas, or sketching diagrams of classroom layouts. An important decision regarding fieldnotes is whether to focus only on descriptive notes or to also include reflective notes, the former being statements of

what is seen and/or heard, and the latter being thoughts related to the researcher's "insights, hunches, or broad ideas of themes that emerge during the observation" (Creswell, 2013, p. 239). Due to the open and exploratory nature of my data generation, the chief aim was to collect as many samples of potentially narrative-related classroom events as possible. I therefore decided that I would focus on descriptive fieldnotes in order to maximize the writing time to achieve this goal. However, I did allow myself the possibility of including brief reflective notes, for example when there was a break in the lesson or if I had an idea mid-observation that I did not want to risk forgetting.

3.6 Teacher Interviews

3.6.1 Theoretical and Practical Background

Daniel and Harland (2017) suggest that interviews are one of the most common ways to generate data in higher education research and that this data can be "incredibly rich […] when done well" (p. 68). According to Kvale (1996), the increased popularity of the use of interviews signals a shift from viewing data as external to human participants to an understanding that knowledge can be co-constructed through interaction in the form of conversation. One key consideration for Daniel and Harland (2017) is that the interview should aim for a "process of mutual discovery and the testing of ideas and theories" (p. 68), while Cohen et al. (2017) add that interviews allow participants to discuss their interpretations and perspectives. Hothschild (2009) explains that interviews can lead to an in-depth exploration of where people's ideas come from and how they frame and connect "values, events, opinions, behaviours, etc." (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 506) in a way that a survey cannot.

As Marvasti and Freie (2017) define it, an interview is a social encounter and part of its success depends on the researcher being aware of what this entails. An appropriate interpersonal interaction depends not only on asking the right questions, but also establishing levels of mutual trust (Daniel & Harland, 2017), respecting social distance and issues related to power dynamics (Cohen et al., 2017), and acknowledging that effective communication relies on not only expression and interpretation, but also the negotiation of meaning in cases when two interlocutors

have different understandings of the same utterance (Savignon, 2018). Woods (1986) summarizes the three key attributes of the interviewer for qualitative research as curiosity, i.e. a genuine desire to understand others' thoughts and feelings, naturalness, which allows the researcher to be unobtrusive in order to clearly hear and see what the interviewee is telling them, and trust.

Disadvantages of the interview as a research method, per Creswell (2013), include those common to all means of qualitative data generation (e.g. the subjective and interpretive nature of what is generated) and those shared with observations, i.e. practical issues such as gaining access to participants and the use of recording equipment which is subject to technical challenges. In addition, being a social encounter means that some researchers may be less comfortable with the format of engaging in interpersonal dialogue, although this can be mitigated through the structure afforded by prepared statements and interview questions. Finally, conducting interviews, especially when less structured, requires several skills specific to the format that many have not had the opportunity to otherwise practice. These include knowing when to ask a question, to cut short an answer, or to clarify something, avoiding speaking too much oneself, and being aware of the time to ensure that the interview does not run long, all of which require in-the-moment decision-making and sensitivity to the participant.

Cohen et al. (2017) discuss several purposes of the interview for research. For the current study, I employed it both to test the working hypotheses developed out of my review of the literature on narrative theory and to develop new hypotheses; what they call "an exploratory device to help identify variables and relationships" (Cohen et al., 2017). The interview aligns with my epistemological stance that meaning can be co-constructed through interaction and that even the subjective reporting of actions and beliefs has value and can illuminate what we know about the world. Some of the difficulties associated with interviews are assuaged by my prior experience with the format; I have completed several research projects using this data generation method (see for example, Schaefer, 2022a) and I was for ten years the co-host of a podcast for language educators (Lowe et al., 2014-2024), during which time I conducted interviews with dozens of experts in the field that were later released as podcast episodes. These

projects gave me many hours of experience preparing for, conducting, and editing interviews and therefore allowed me to develop skills that, at a minimum, helped me avoid some of the basic pitfalls commonly associated with this research format.

As with lesson observations, there are several choices to be made regarding the type of teacher interview to be conducted. Cohen et al. (2017) compile from different sources a taxonomy of 14 interview types, although these are not wholly distinct and feature considerable crossover. From this collection, the interviews that I carried out could be classified as in-depth (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) and semi-structured (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Kvale (1996) adds that interview types lie on a variety of spectrums, on which I would place mine as balanced between exploratory and hypothesis-testing, between descriptive and interpretive, and closer to cognitive-focused than to emotion-focused.

Similar to observations, the degree of structuredness is identified by how much is set out in advance in terms of fitting the data generated into predetermined categories. In a fully structured interview (Wellington, 2015), the same set of prepared questions are asked in the same order to each participant, with no follow-up questions or deviations. In a completely unstructured interview, there are no prepared questions and the interviewer is reliant on the interviewee to dictate the direction of the discussion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The semi-structured interview lies somewhere between these extremes; the researcher will prepare questions and/or topics to prompt discussion, but they do not all need to be used, the wording and sequence may be individualized (Cohen et al., 2017), and respondents are encouraged to delve deeper into their answers through follow-up, clarification, and elaboration probes (Creswell, 2013). As Daniel and Harland (2017) explain, the semi-structured form "provide[s] the opportunity for both parties to explore questions and answers and develop new conversations around emergent ideas. Either party may return to an earlier question in the interview if something new occurs to them" (p. 70). Marvasti and Freie (2017) add that what they call the "in-depth" interview aspires to find the "inner truths" (p. 629) of respondents through the sharing of extended and detailed personal accounts. I chose the semi-structured form of interview because I believe it would best capture data to answer my research questions regarding the inclusion of

narrative elements in teachers' course design. As I was still exploring what these elements might be, I could prepare questions that were designed to elicit them in general, but while also being open to discovering ones that I had not previously considered or been aware of.

To plan my teacher interviews, I followed the initial stages laid out by Cohen et al. (2017). The first of these was *thematizing*, which is basically identifying the overall purpose, theoretical basis, and aims of the research and then developing specific objectives and research questions out of them. This step was in fact the starting point for the entire study and has been described in detail above. The second stage, *designing*, is translating those objectives and research questions into the specific types of information that the interviews will seek to elicit from the respondents. This eliciting of information can thus be converted into the general content of the questions or prompts to be used. To do this, I conceived the interview as comprising four sections, consisting of questions related to the observed lesson, the teacher's lesson planning principles and course design principles, and explicit probes about narrative elements. The next three stages all refer to the construction of the questions, including choices of question format (i.e. open, closed, multiple-choice, etc.) and response modes (e.g. descriptions, experiences, knowledge). The wording of the questions should also be given due consideration; Arksey and Knight (1999) suggest using simple vocabulary, avoiding ambiguity and imprecision, and ensuring that questions are not double-barreled, overly personal, or assumptive. These guidelines are beneficial even if, as in the case of semi-structured interviews, the precise wording of the questions is not used during the interview. This is because they potentially reduce the amount of clarification needed and remind the interviewer of good practice when asking questions. The questions that I constructed included two main response types: ones which asked interviewees to describe and analyze their actions and principles, and ones which asked them to speculate on the application of narrative elements to course design. In addition, I asked respondents to include a visual element to the answers to some of the questions. Specifically, I asked them to create a graphic representation of their lesson and course design, a use of the inquiry graphics approach (Lackovic, 2020) that externalizes the thinking process and therefore allows dialogic access to cognition

that might not otherwise be available to the interviewer. Once all of my interview questions had been written and edited, I arranged them in an interview guide (Patton, 2002) (see Appendix B), which acted as the research tool for this stage of data generation.

3.7 Ethics Procedure

As they involve human participants, both lesson observations and teacher interviews require the completion of an ethics procedure to ensure that all individuals are not treated in a way that could compromise their privacy or safety. As this research was completed as part of a PhD course, I first had to gain ethics approval through my institution of study, Lancaster University. This included submitting an Ethics Application Form (see Appendix C), which detailed my entire intended data generation process, the Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet (see Appendices D and E) given to participants prior to them deciding whether or not to take part, and my Interview Guide (see Appendix B). After receiving suggestions from my supervisor and making the required edits to these documents, I submitted them to the Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee and was subsequently provided with an approval document (see Appendix F).

When confirming the participants for my research, I asked each of them to provide me with the specific ethics procedure required for conducting observations at their teaching institutions. These varied considerably in terms of what was needed to gain permission, from the relatively lax, i.e. the participant only had to give verbal notification to a supervisor (or was the supervisor themself), to the more strict, i.e. requiring me to complete additional ethics forms and await approval from several rounds of committee meetings. In all cases, I followed the requested procedures and full consent was given by each institution at which I conducted my data generation.

The data itself was handled according to Lancaster University's requirements. This includes keeping hard copies in a secure place and digital data in password-protected and encrypted folders. In my case, I store all my notebooks with field and interview notes and the participants' graphic representations in a safe in my office, and the audio recordings, which exist as MP3 files, the digital transcriptions of the

audio, and the digital scans of the participants' graphic representations in secure folders on the Microsoft OneDrive account provided to me by Lancaster University.

3.8 Data Analysis

The first step in preparing and orgnizing qualitative data for analysis is to convert it into a format that renders it easy to read and locate specific content (Creswell, 2013). In the case of the observation fieldnotes, this meant typing up my handwritten notes into digital documents, while preserving the format and notations as faithfully as possible. Regarding the recordings of my interviews, I opted to have them transcribed as I felt that this would provide a more efficient means of analysis than listening and re-listening to the audio (Roulston, 2013). I also digitally scanned the graphic representations made by the participants during the interviews so that I could annotate them if necessary while preserving the originals.

To transcribe the interviews, I used MacWhisper, an application which uses AI-powered automatic speech recognition software. Because the data is not heard or seen by any human agents, there were no additional ethical considerations involved as a result of using this system. However, after having the application transcribe all of my interviews, I was aware that it did not achieve perfect accuracy. I therefore followed up by editing the transcriptions based on the recordings. Although this was primarily editing for accuracy, I also took this opportunity to edit for clarity and ease of comprehension, which meant removing false starts, repetitions, fillers, and instances where the interviewee or I clearly mis-spoke and self-corrected. This was done because the focus of the data was on the "substantive content" (Roulston, 2013) of what was said, rather than on how it was said; in other words, I had no intention to use the data for conversation or discourse analysis (see Liddicoat, 2021 and Trappes-Lomax, 2004, respectively). At the same time, as Cohen et al. (2017) point out, transcribing often involves "data loss, distortion, and the reduction in complexity" (p. 523) as a result of the translation from one format to another. I therefore made an effort to preserve the meaning and intent of what was said by, where relevant, noting features like intonation, pauses, and emphasis.

After all of the data had been appropriately prepared, the next part of the process was the analysis. When dealing with qualitative research, this analysis is typically interpretive (Cohen et al., 2017) or, as Daniel and Harland (2017) put it, a mix of deductive and inductive reasoning, with the former referring to the application of pre-established theoretical structures to the data, and the latter referring to the allowance of previously unconsidered theories to emerge from the data. Following Creswell's (2013) steps for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data, the first stage was to conduct a "preliminary exploratory analysis" (p. 267), which consisted of reading through all the fieldnotes and transcripts once to get a general sense of what was there, while adding notes regarding any ideas or concepts that came to me. After that I engaged in the coding process, which involved a more careful and focused reading of the data in order to identify codes that could connect elements of narrative theory that I had discovered in reading the literature, and perhaps ones that I had not, to what was either seen in the lesson observations or discussed in the interviews. I did not have any fixed number of codes to aim for, but rather let the data guide the extent to which narrative elements were or were not present.

The step after coding is to describe and develop themes, which, per Creswell (2013), are "similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database" (p. 272). This allows for easier reporting of the results through the building of a classification system. In my case, this was especially helpful in leading towards answers to RQ3 regarding implications of narrative elements within HE course design. Throughout the steps of coding and developing themes, I noted specific events from the observations and quotations from the interviews to illustrate them, as well as writing about the nature of the connections I was uncovering between narrative theory and university course design. This writing was chiefly done to help me develop my own understanding of what I was finding, but some of it has also found its way, in edited form, into the findings and implications sections of this paper.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will first report the findings that answer RQ1 (*How can the HE course be viewed as a narrative from a narrative theory perspective?*) by synthesizing a working definition of a narrative in order to answer RQ1a (*What is a narrative?*) and then applying that definition to the HE course in order to assess its narrativity and thereby answer RQ1b (*In what ways does the HE course meet the definition of a narrative?*). After that, I will identify in the literature specific elements that align with the HE course (RQ2) and support and illustrate these with examples from empirical data generated from the observations and interviews I carried out. Signifiant themes in this section include seriality, authorship, and structure.

4.2 Defining a Narrative

Identifying a definition of 'narrative' is, in fact, one of the main points of discussion within narrative theory. It is therefore not feasible here to discuss in full the history, development, and competing notions of what is and is not a narrative (see Hyvärinen, 2006, for a more comprehensive overview). However, as a key part of this thesis involves determining whether or not the university course can itself be considered a type of narrative, it is of obvious importance to arrive at some kind of working definition on which to base this determination. Therefore, this section will look at definitions provided by some of the key figures within narrative theory and narratology, discuss some of the tensions and contradictions between these definitions, and synthesize them in order to arrive at a way of assessing the degree of narrativity of the university course. The specific wording of "degree of narrativity" is intentional because, as we shall see, the concept of the narrative is a slippery one and, based on current narratological theory, a definition of one cannot always be applied in a 'yes' or 'no' fashion.

According to the Russian formalists, and later agreed upon by the structuralists, a narrative is composed of two parts: the *fabula* (or *histoire)* and the *sjuzhet* (or *discours*), respectively the story, which consists of content in the form of events,

characters, and settings, and the discourse, which is how the story is communicated. This structural description has held and is the basis for many narratologists' simple and direct definitions, as in the following examples:

Gérard Genette (1982): "one will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or sequence of events" (p. 127)

Gerald Prince (1982): "narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictive events in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" (p. 4)

H. Porter Abbott (2021): "Simply put, narrative is *the representation of an event or a series of events*." (p. 12)

These definitions use the term 'representation' to indicate the concept of *sjuzhet*, i.e. the events of a story only become a narrative when they are being represented in some way. Implied by this is the understanding that whatever medium is used has been selected (consciously or unconsciously) to present the events of the story in a specific way. In addition, this indicates that the story and its representation are distinct from one another and therefore the same story could, in theory, be (re)presented in infinite ways by the same or different narrators. As Onega and Landa (1996) put it, "[a]ny representation involves a point of view, a selection, a perspective on the represented objects, criteria of relevance, and, arguably, an implicit theory of reality" (p. 3). One notable contrast in the above definitions is the difference between allowing that a narrative can consist of only one event or if it requires, as Prince (1982) says, "at least two" (p. 4). Abbott (2021) acknowledges this and claims that a narrative does not rely on sequentiality, while stating that what he means by 'event' appears to involve some kind of change of state. By way of example, he explains that 'My dog has fleas' is not a narrative (only a description), whereas 'My dog was bitten by a flea' is, presumably because it communicates the idea that the dog's state has changed from unbitten to bitten.

Bal (2017) supports the idea of change when she writes in her definition of narrative that the content of a story "is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. [...] An *event* is the transition from

one state to another state. *Actors* are agents that perform actions." (p. 5). Schmid (2010) concurs: "The broader concept of narrative refers to representations that contain a change of state (or of situation). In the context of this definition, a state is to be understood as a set of properties pertaining to an agent or an external situation at a particular point in time" (p.2).

The issue of time is central to many definitions of story, including Prince's (1982) notion of "events in a time sequence" (p. 4), and Onega and Landa's (1996), which calls it "the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way" (p. 3). Although temporality appears inherent in the notion of an event, causality is an important addition as it provides logic to the "meaningfully connected" nature of the events that separate a narrative from a simple list of events.

One clear way of enforcing causality is the presence of actors or agents who cause and/or experience the events of a story (Abbott's dog and the flea, for example). As Fludernik (2009) explains,

> A narrative is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions. (p. 6)

The "protagonist" is itself a cause (or agent) of some kind of action (or event) and the "goal-directed" nature also implies a causal change that will potentially lead to the achievement of that goal. When not directly causing the events, as in Fludernik's definition, they are experiencing them, as in Bal's (2017).

While not all definitions of narrative include the concept of an actor or agent, several of the ones that do refer to not only the role they play in events, but their perception of those events. In other words, it is not only about what they experience, but how they experience. Schmid (2010) includes this in his elaboration of what is meant by the 'state' changed through the events of a story:

[A] state is to be understood as a set of properties pertaining to an agent or an external situation at a particular point in time. We can distinguish internal and external states on the basis of whether represented features are linked to the inner life of the agent or to elements of the external situation. (A state can, of course, be a combination of features of an external situation and internal properties of an agent.) (p. 2)

This "inner life" suggests that the cognition and emotion of the agent is at least implied through the discourse of a narrative. This is echoed by Herman (2009), who says that "[t]he representation […] conveys what it is like to live through this storyworld-in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousness undergoing the disruptive experience at issue" (p. 9).

Thus far, it would appear possible to identify certain elements that could constitute a workable definition of the story component of a narrative, including a series of connected events, the agent(s) involved in the events, the change(s) of state caused by the events, and how the agent(s) experiences the events. However, as narratologists point out, this may not be sufficient. A statement such as 'She wakes up every day at six and enjoys a cup of coffee', while containing the story elements listed above, would not be recognizable to most as a narrative. It is instead descriptive, i.e. it simply describes a morning routine, and with no indication of any deviation from that routine. For this reason, Herman (2009) includes in his definition that a narrative "focuses on a structured time-course of particularized events […] that […] introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld" (p. 9), the key words here being "particularized" and "disruption or disequilibrium". Therefore, if the above statement were followed by 'One day, she noticed that her coffee tasted strange'", it would now constitute part of a narrative.

However, if a statement can change its text type depending on the context, this raises the question of whether or not narrative does indeed exist as a category of discourse. This has led some narratologists to conceive it instead as a cognitive mode. In other words, narrative is a way of thinking about the world, or, as Bruner (1986) puts it, "of ordering experience, of constructing reality" (p. 11). Bruner further

contrasts narrative with a different "mode of cognitive functioning" (p. 11), called argumentative, which is scientific in nature and "deals in general causes", whereas narrative focuses on "human or human-like intentions and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course" (both quotes from p. 13). As a result, the two modes of thinking differ in terms of general versus particular and timeless versus temporal, recalling some of the more detailed aspects of defining what constitutes a narrative. This also means that narrative, beyond simply being a representation of events in the form of a novel or film, is about how a human mind (re)constructs a piece of discourse in order to make sense of it.

A logical progression of this cognitive view of narrative is that we tell stories (even if only to ourselves) every time we engage with the world. Turner (1996) believes that all human cognition goes beyond logical abstraction and narrativizes, i.e. engages in "narrative imagining" (p. 4), to make sense of everything, including both events and objects, by integrating them into a larger framework of cultural knowledge and embodied experiences. This goes beyond Bruner's cognitive view of narrative and more or less equates thinking with storytelling.

As often happens when attempting to define certain abstract concepts, we can reach a point where the definition becomes so broad as to become meaningless. The purpose of considering the narrative view of understanding cognition has been to appreciate the fact that narrative thinking is potentially applicable to as wide a range of human activity as imaginable. However, the aim of this paper is to not only view the university course as a narrative, but also to view its design as an intentional narrative act. Therefore, it is of benefit to return to definitions that consider what are more traditionally thought of as stories in order to gauge what aspects of them will inform this design. However, even with this narrower perception of narrative, as Ryan (2006) points out, some elements appear to be more integral to the type of discourse that we typically recognize as a story than others.

4.2.1 A Fuzzy Definition

While some contemporary narratologists have produced definitions that are vague enough to encompass the range of text and discourse types that may fit under

the narrative umbrella, others provide comprehensive definitions intended to include every aspect and element that one would expect to see in a representation of a story. However, both types allow for flexibility in terms of what might be termed "border cases", i.e. texts or discourses that are not easily identifiable as definitely, or definitely not, a narrative. Phelan (2017) gives an example of the vague or general type of definition when he states that a narrative is "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened" (p. ix) and then goes on to explain that this "describes a 'default' situation rather than prescribes what all narratives should do" (p.5). For instance, he clarifies that the "somebody else" includes a variety of audience types, including both real, flesh-and-blood readers and a hypothetical group of readers upon which the author "grounds his or her rhetorical choices" (p. 7). Therefore, while Phelan's definition captures the key elements of a person telling the story, a person receiving the story, a context and purpose for the story, and the story itself, all of these are somewhat flexible in how they may be interpreted.

Ryan (2007) argues the flexibility of the definition of narrative even further by claiming that narrativity should not be treated as an either/or quality of a text or discourse but should instead comprise a "fuzzy set allowing variable degrees of membership" (p. 28). According to this view, a set of narrative features can be identified but, like Phelan says, they do not have to explain what all narratives do. Rather, their presence or absence would indicate how close or far a text is from a central position representing prototypical examples of narratives, with marginal cases further from the center being seen as 'less narrative'. In Ryan's (2007) list of conditions for narrativity (see Appendix G), each one is designed to prevent certain types of representations from attaining a more central status of what might be recognizable as a story. It should be remembered, however, that Ryan's list refers specifically to the *story* components of narrative and not the discourse; it is taken as given within Ryan's list that all of these story elements are the content, but not the form, of the *representation* component. Therefore, when they are cited as being used to evaluate the degree of *narrativeness*, or narrativity, of a text or discourse, this might more accurately be described as the degree of *story-ness*.

Ryan (2007) ends her investigation into how to define narrative by highlighting the fact that most definitions appeal to fundamental questions we ask about a text or piece of discourse, including how events affect characters, what those characters' motivations are, etc. She goes on to says that "[i]f a text confronts us with such questions, and if we are able to answer them, we read the text as a story, or rather, we read the story told by the text, whether or not we are aware of what we are doing" (p. 33). While to a certain extent this could be interpreted as simply saying 'we know a story when we see one', this is not intended as a criticism. I think that we do know one when we see it and that we can also broadly agree in many cases when we confront something that could be described as *like* a story.

As I believe Ryan's list of "features of narrativity" clearly captures the various story elements identified in previously mentioned definitions, I will now turn to applying them to higher education. This is done to assess in what ways the university course may be described as a story. The thornier question of whether or not it can be identified as a representation will be addressed separately.

4.2.2 What is a University Course?

In order to assess its relative narrativity, it is important to begin by clarifying exactly what is meant in the context of this paper by a university course. One reason for this is that, as an aim of this paper is to provide practical guidelines for designers of such courses, it is important to address courses with features typical to most who might find these guidelines useful. The following definition will therefore act as a starting point from which to evaluate in what ways the university course can be considered a type of narrative:

a university course: A period of study lasting one term or academic year in which a group of students regularly meet in a location one or more times a week to take part together in activities created/selected/presented by a teacher with the ultimate goal of furthering their understanding and/or level of ability within a particular academic topic.

This definition is intended to be broad enough to encompass what most university teachers around the world would recognize as the kind of courses they conduct. However, it also functions as a somewhat fuzzy definition in that it indicates the presence of border cases. One example would be those courses of study, mainly postgraduate programs, that do not include regular class meetings or only feature a dyad of supervisor and student as participants. Another example would be courses in which students only listen to lectures and submit assignments without significant levels of interaction among themselves or with their teacher. As these cases are further from the prototypical courses more centrally described by the above definition, designers of such courses may view the findings of this study less applicable for their situations.

4.3 Assessing the Narrativity of a University Course.

As current narratological thought is based on a definition of narrative comprising the two parts of story (*fabula*) and discourse (*sjuzhet*), and as these two components present different challenges in terms of applying them to the university course as defined above, I will deal with them separately. In other words, I will first attempt to assess the story-ness of such a course, before investigating its potential discourse-ness, or to use the term used in most contemporary definitions, to what extent it can be seen as a *representation* of a story. The examination of these two components will then be juxtaposed to arrive at a final evaluation of the university course's degree of narrativity.

4.3.1 Is a University Course a Story?

In order to evaluate its story-ness, I will now examine how applicable each of the conditions for narrativity given by Ryan (2007, pp. 28-29) are to the university course. While some of the correspondences may seem overly obvious, it must be remembered that Ryan intends these as criteria that function to test the narrativity of a given text or discourse, i.e. to eliminate those that do not support narrativity, and therefore satisfying as many of these conditions as possible is crucial for determining the story-ness of a course. It should also be pointed out that some of the correspondences I find are based on what will later be argued is common practice

within course design and not necessarily what always actually happens within a course. This examination will first discuss direct and definitional correspondences (in Table 4.1) and certain points will later be elaborated on in more detail.

Ryan (2007, pp. 28-29)	University Course
(1) Narrative must be about a **world** populated by **individuated existents**.	The course is about a **world** in that it takes place in an identifiable space, either physical in the form of a classroom/classrooms and/or digital in the form of online platforms. The world can also include other locations such as the university library, the students' homes, or any other place where course activity might occur. The participants of the course, namely the students and teacher, are all **individuated existents** as they are individually identifiable physical beings.
(2) This world must be **situated in time** and undergo **significant transformations**.	The course has clear **temporal** parameters in terms of both calendar time (e.g. Spring 2024) and duration (e.g. 14 weeks). The participants within the world of the course undergo **transformations** as they develop their understanding of the course topic, of their own abilities, and of each other.
(3) The transformations must be caused by **non-habitual physical events**.	Course activities are **physical events** that cause transformations and are **non-habitual** in that they would not occur without the specific intentions of the participants.
(4) Some of the participants in the events must be **intelligent agents** who have a **mental life** and **react emotionally** to the states of the world.	The students and teacher are **intelligent agents**, i.e. display cognition and agency, whose **mental life** is (ideally) being engaged through course activities. The affective aspect of learning (and teaching) is well documented (Schutz & Zembylas, 2010) and relates directly to how participants **react emotionally** to each other and to course material.
(5) Some of the events must be **purposeful actions** by these agents.	The activities of a course are **actions** (not just mental activity) carried out by the students and teacher for the **purpose**, at least partly, of achieving the course aims.

(6) The sequence of events must form **a unified causal chain** and lead to **closure**.	The **chain** of activities and lessons that make up a course (ideally) are **unified** in that they all contribute to the same goal and **causal** in that the ideas, information, and/or skills that students learn build upon each other. An obvious form of **closure** in a course would be the final awarding of grades to students, but it could also be identified as students' reflections on what they have gained as a result of taking part in the course.
(7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as **fact for the storyworld**.	Ryan provides this condition in order to exclude texts such as recipes, hypotheses, and instructions. It should be self-evident, especially in a non-fictional series of events like a university course, that everything that happens is **fact for the storyworld**.
(8) The story must communicate **something meaningful to the audience**.	As Ryan admits, this condition is controversial as it introduces an element of evaluation in that it aims to eliminate 'bad stories', presumably with the understanding that 'meaningful' is a good property for stories to have. A university course is inherently intended to be **meaningful** due to its goals and content. However, an important complication is whether or not it has an **audience**. This will be addressed in more detail later.

Table 4.1 Points of alignment between Ryan's (2007) conditions for narrativity and a university course.

Based on the points of alignment in Table 4.1, I would posit that the university course supports a high level of story-ness. This is supported by elements of other narratologists' definitions of the story aspect of narrative, including Herman's (2009) description of a "a structured time-course of particularized events", which relates to aspects of (2) and (3), and "the *experience* of living through this storyworld-in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousnesses" (both quotes from p. xvi), which relates to (4). Furthermore, Chatman (1978) explains that "events in the narrative […] tend to be related or mutually entailing. […] Unlike a random agglomerate of events, they manifest a discernible organization" (p. 21), which agrees

with (6). Ultimately, I believe that this tallies with most people's common understanding of what a story is.

4.3.2 Is a University Course a Representation?

According to Herman (2009), a representation features "the same twofold structure that Saussure ([1916] 1954) identified in his discussion of the relationship between *signifier* and *signified*" (p. 17). In other words, it contains both semiotic cues and the things that the cues are representing. In the case of a narrative, the cues would be the text and the things they represent would be all the characters, settings, and events that make up the storyworld. At a macro level, a representation can be identified as the specific medium through which a text is communicated, e.g. a novel, film, news report, or spoken anecdote. In most cases, this representation will be received through one or more or a combination of the senses of sight, hearing, and touch, as when we watch and listen to a film, hear an anecdote from a friend, or read a novel in Braille. It would appear that a story as understood by Ryan's conditions could not currently be represented by smell or taste alone, although these may be incorporated, and play important roles, in a story told through the other senses. However, Herman also points out that it is possible to form a representation to oneself purely in the mind and therefore using only thought and not any of the senses directly. This recounting could nonetheless be considered a representation because it would evoke the use of certain senses and, as Herman (2009) puts it, exist "in a context structured by conventions" that have been "shaped by the broader sociocommunicative environment in which [it is] produced" (both quotes from p. 17). That is to say, a representation of a narrative is partly recognized as such, by those for whom it is intended, because of the situation in which it is told and the communicative customs that it follows.

A representation, then, can partly be described by the choices made by the person doing the representing. A narrative is a representation because its story events must be given form in order to be received by an audience and that form is crafted to have a specific effect on its audience (whether or not the intended effect is what is actually received). As Phelan (2017) says, it is the awareness of a reader upon which

the author "grounds his or her rhetorical choices" (p. 7). Identifying a representation as a text that is telling a story, with all the authorial decisions that implies, suggests that without a text, we are left with a formless set of events, the type of which are happening all the time but go un-narrativized because there is no occasion or purpose to do so. So, while a text about the events of a university course, which I have argued possess high levels of story-ness, could be written (or spoken, or acted out, or thought) and that text could easily be described as a representation, it is difficult to make the case that *the course itself* fits the definition. This conclusion would appear to argue against the overall narrativity of the HE course and indeed does so based on the 'story + representation' definition. However, in the next section, I will propose a refined definition of narrative that I believe suggests a closer alignment.

4.3.3 Narrative as Design

Bordwell, writing about filmic storytelling, does not focus on what makes up a story (perhaps working under the assumption that we all know one when we see it) but instead approaches defining narrative from the perspective of viewing it as an activity rather than a thing. As he puts it, "[w]e can […] study narrative as a *process*, the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on a perceiver" (Bordwell, 1985, p. xi). He does not attempt to define what is meant by "story material", but instead focuses on the connection between the storyteller and the audience ("perceiver"). This is perhaps because his interest lies in examining what it is the storyteller does (as a filmmaker in this case) to effect the experience of a story in someone else. This aligns with Phelan's (2017) assertion that "narrative is less about its materials (narrators, characters, events, techniques, and so on) than about how tellers use them to influence their audiences in particular ways" (p. ix). While we can look back to previous definitions for a better understanding of what is meant by "story", Bordwell's and Phelan's comments about narrative are remarkable in that they closely follow many of the elements present in current definitions of the concept of 'design'. For example, Ralph and Wand (2013), following a comprehensive review and analysis of relevant literature, provide the following definition of design: "a *specification* of an *object*, manifested by some *agent*, intended to accomplish *goals*, in a particular *environment*, using a set of

primitive components, satisfying a set of *requirements*, subject to some *constraints*" (p. 6). Table 4.2 details how Bordwell's definition of narrative aligns with specific aspects of Ralph and Wand's definition of design. In cases where there is no clear correlation, I have added what I believe to be elements implied by Bordwell.

Ralph and Wand (2013)	Bordwell (1985)
"*specification* of"	"selecting, arranging, and rendering"
"an *object*"	"story"
"manifested by some *agent*"	the storyteller (implied)
"intended to accomplish *goals*"	"in order to achieve […] effects"
"in a particular *environment*"	"on a perceiver"
"using a set of *primitive components*"	"material"
"satisfying a set of requirements, subject to some constraints"	"time-bound" (and other implied requirements and constraints inherent in "story material")

Table 4.2 Points of alignment between Ralph and Wand's (2013) definition of design and Bordwell's (1985) definition of narrative.

While Bordwell is focusing on the creation of a piece of cinema, he approaches it in a way that clearly aligns with design principles in that he views the activity of forming narrative as intending a specific effect on the perceiver. For him, this is done through "selecting, arranging, and rendering" material. In the case of a narrative, this material will be received as a story and the effects will be time-bound. Zooming out a bit and not specifying any requirements, Phelan (2018) explains the act of narrativizing in ways that clearly correspond to design when he describes it as "somebody using the resources of narrative in order to accomplish certain purposes in relation to certain audiences" (p. x).

Working from both Bordwell's (1985) and Phelan's (2018) descriptions of narrative, then, I would like to propose a definition that does not negate or contradict any of those by current narratologists but acknowledges the element of design as explained by Ralph and Wand (2013). This definition is as follows: **a narrative is a designed experience of a story**. The objective behind this definition is to incorporate the intentions of the designer (i.e. the storyteller) when assembling elements to be received by an audience as a story. I acknowledge that this definition relies on an

understanding of what is meant by "designed", "experience", and "story"; a fuller version of the definition would therefore have to include how I have already described them above. At the same time, I think that even the commonly understood meanings of these terms would lead to a sufficient comprehension of my definition. Crucially, though, this definition does not include the term 'representation', which I acknowledged was a difficult element of the currently accepted definition of narrative to apply to the HE course. The switch to 'design', however, allows for an easier fit, as can be seen when looking at how I previously defined the HE course, here in a form abridged to include only the relevant parts: 'A period of study in which a group of students meet to take part together in activities created/selected/presented by a teacher with the ultimate goal of furthering their understanding and/or level of ability within a particular academic topic'. The 'created/selected/presented' part can easily be seen as engaging in design, and therefore expanded to consider that the course designer is designing a narrative experience for the students/audience.

I acknowledge that answering RQ1b (*In what ways does the HE course meet the definition of a narrative?*) by coining my own definition of a narrative that makes it easier to link with the course can be seen as stacking the deck, i.e. ignoring contradictory evidence and creating affirmatory evidence. However, I genuinely believe that focusing on the design aspect of storytelling is a broader, more inclusive perspective that accommodates not only all of the forms of narratives that we traditionally think of when we think of stories (e.g. novels, mainstream films, TV series, etc.), but also other forms that many narratologists would accept as having significantly meaningful levels of narrativity.

4.3.4 Conclusion

This section has attempted to provide an overview and synthesis of the definitions of narrative to answer RQ1a (*What is a narrative?*), which in turn is intended to provide sufficient context to answer RQ1b (*In what ways does the HE course meet the definition of a narrative?*). I will repeat here that the above investigation has in truth only skimmed the surface of the wealth of theory and debate around how to define narrative. However, this section has aimed only to arrive at

enough of an understanding of what narrative is, based on a review of the key thinkers in the field of narratology, in order to have something with which to assess the university course's narrativity. My concluding answer to RQ1b (*In what ways does the HE course meet the definition of a narrative?*) is meant to be understood within the context that a narrative itself is a rhetorical action rather than a specific structure (Phelan, 2017), and therefore viewing the HE course in this way is a perspective rather than an objective reality. The hope attached to the analysis in this section is that the argument for this perspective is strong enough that further investigation into what this might mean for course design is justified.

4.4 Specific Narrative Elements Alignment with the HE Course

One of the first considerations when attempting to answer RQ2 (*In what ways do specific narrative elements align with the HE course?*) is to decide what type of narrative will be used as the primary model. There are many options. However, although the novel, with its clear division into chapters, and the feature-length film, with its combining of images and sound, are both viable, I have identified the contemporary TV series as the most apt.

In this section, therefore, I will begin by defining the TV series, starting with a discussion of the concept of seriality, and thereby explain why I feel it is the most appropriate narrative model. Then, different elements of narrative theory will be explored in turn, both in terms of how they relate to the modern TV serial, and other forms of narratives where applicable, and how they align with university course design. I will also incorporate data from my observations and interviews to exemplify when relevant.

4.4.1 The Television Series

Much has been written about television as a medium and the fictional television series as a format. This output has chiefly been made up of non-academic texts in the form of magazine and website articles, e.g. Entertainment Weekly (https://ew.com) and The A.V. Club (https://www.avclub.com), and spoken texts in videos from YouTube channels, e.g. *ScreenCrush* (n.d.) and *New Rockstars* (n.d.), but

also includes a wealth of writing in academic publications; television studies is a recognized sub-field within media studies but with strong ties to narrative studies as well (Bignell & Woods, 2022).[2] However, the field of television studies has experienced a massive growth in the past two decades as a result of the recognition of what has come to be considered a new "Golden Age" of television (Leopold, 2013; Carr, 2014).[3] This era is considered to have begun in 1999 with *The Sopranos* (Chase et al., 1999-2007) and, while some consider it to now be over (Berman, 2021; Lyons, 2022), its effects are still very much felt (Rose, 2024) and it is widely considered to have improved the overall quality of storytelling in the television medium.

The impetus for the identification of this golden age of television is almost exclusively the contemporary TV serial, which, Mittell (2015) explains, "creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time" (p. 10), which could easily describe an HE course, and which Schlütz (2016) defines as

> a segmented sequence of confined but linked (fictional) films. By interlacing individual episodes in terms of form (time slot, opening credits, and theme), content (cast, plot, and setting), and structure (composition of story lines) a continuous narrative with an open structure is formed. (p. 96).

Beyond these basic definitions, however, is what became known variously as the "peak" (Weeks, 2024), "prestige" (Friedman & Keeler, 2022), "quality" (Logan, 2016), or "complex" (Mittell, 2015) TV series. Notable examples include *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David et al., 1999-2024), *The Wire* (Simon et al., 2002-2008), *Lost* (Abrams et al., 2004-2010), *The Office* (Silverman et al., 2005-2013), *Mad Men* (Weiner et al., 2007-2015), *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan et al., 2008-2013), and *Game of Thrones* (Benioff et al., 2011-

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[2] It should be mentioned, however, that a considerable amount of the non-academic writing on television studies features a sophisticated understanding of narrative theory and the field of television studies; perhaps unsurprising given that some of the writers of these texts also produce academic output; see, for example, Kathryn VanArendonk's articles for vulture.com and academic pieces such as VanArendonk (2019).

[3] The original "Golden Age" of television was in the 1950s.

2019). The aforementioned *The Sopranos* is often considered the first complex TV series[4] and this status is conferred not only because of its content, but also because of its release format. As O'Sullivan (2010) explains:

> In January 1999 HBO aired the first season of a new series, called *The Sopranos*, an event that generated a well-documented tsunami. What has been relatively unremarked upon is the watershed created by the specific form of that season: thirteen episodes, aired in consecutive weeks, with no interrupting reruns. […] …before *The Sopranos*, those first thirteen episodes had not been envisioned or consumed as a self-contained narrative cluster. The thirteen-episode uninterrupted complete season provided, for the first time in American television history, a distinct narrative form, one that was large enough to occupy significant time and space, but not so large as to turn into vague sprawl. (pp. 67-68)

Specifically, this format differed from the episodic series that, over 22 episodes, told 22 distinct stories that had no connective tissue other than the characters and setting. The unbroken, consecutive nature of *The Sopranos*' release format was necessitated by the fact that the whole season told one overarching story, in addition to individual stories within each episode.

This mode of storytelling soon became the norm.[5] However, while the serial nature of complex TV is perhaps its most defining feature, it has also been distinguished in other ways. Mittell (2015) describes how complex television uses techniques that specifically rely on seriality to create its storyworlds, including "playing with temporality, constructing ongoing characters, and incorporating transmedia" (p. 10). Moreover, as Schlütz (2016) explains, it is "complex in terms of storytelling, cast,

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[4] Of the aforementioned terms for this type of TV series, I have chosen to use "complex" for two reasons: first, unlike the others, it does not denote any value judgment; second, it is the term preferred by Mittell (2015) in what I consider to be the definitive text on the subject.

[5] It should be acknowledged that there were in fact TV series that included season-long arcs before *The Sopranos*, but its release format emphasized this aspect and influenced TV enough to make this feature ubiquitous; thus, its position as the inciting event of the new golden age of TV.

narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality. Due to realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters, quality series appear authentic." (p. 101). The qualities identified here – complexity/ambiguity, temporality, transmedia/intertextuality, realism/authenticity – all have implications for how I intend to use the contemporary TV series as a narrative model for the HE course. To do this, it is important to discuss the concept of seriality and how it applies to both storytelling, particularly in television, and learning.

4.4.2 Seriality

Seriality, which simply refers to the quality of featuring a series of items, events, or episodes, has clearly long been a defining feature of storytelling. At a very fundamental level, every narrative consists of multiple connected events, which by definition creates a series. Similarly, any learning experience contains serial properties, even if it consists only of linking the states of unknowing and knowing. Of course, many narratives and learning experiences, such as the television series or HE course, consist not only of the broad events of beginning, middle, and end, but also are broken down into individual scenes/activities, episodes/lessons, and seasons/semesters. The seriality of both, therefore, works at multiple levels and can be examined as such.

Although all narratives possess seriality by nature, at least at the level of the event, O'Sullivan (2019) defines the TV serial as "a continuing narrative distributed in installments over time" (p. 50), which distinguishes it from the feature-length film or the novel. In addition, the segmented narrative is maybe the only way to tell the kind of extended and complex story that TV serials specialize in. As the showrunner Lev Grossman puts it,

> the kind of attention span you can command with a serial story is unlike anything in storytelling anywhere. You could never present the public with a thirteen-hour movie […], but you have ready access to a thirteen-hour attention span if you chop it up in that way (Grossman et al., 2019, p. 111)

VanArendonk (2019), considering the relationship between the individual episode and the whole series, argues that, because of the length of the TV series, its collaborative

authorship, and the fact that each part is self-contained and individual, "television seriality does not work like seriality anywhere else – in this sense, for this form, the whole is something less than the sum of its parts" (p. 74). While I concur with her assessment of the TV series, I would disagree that it is unique in this aspect and argue that the HE course can function in the same way.

O'Sullivan (2019), using seriality as the binding principle, analogizes the TV serial to poetry and identifies "segmentivity" as the fundamental element of seriality; as he explains it:

> the juxtaposition of distinct installments is constitutive to serial meaning making, just as the juxtaposition of segments of language is constitutive to the designs of poetry. Segments by necessity imply gaps – and gaps of information within a narrative, and the gap-filling that an audience must provide, have long preoccupied examinations of fictional texts. (p. 51)

In other words, it is not only the duration of a TV series, or HE course, that defines its particular type of seriality, it is also the gap between episodes/lessons that create a vital part of how it is received by the audience/students. This gap has important implications for how the format of the series/course affects memory, engagement, and comprehension.

4.4.2.1 Episodic vs. Continuous Serials.

Although all TV series are serial in the strict definitional sense, the terminology surrounding the different types of TV shows, in terms of how the connections between episodes affect their narrative structure, requires some untangling. As Schlütz (2016) explains, the key distinction in formats is between episodic and continuous series. An *episodic* series is one in which, although all episodes feature the same characters and settings, each installment has a self-contained narrative arc, there is little to no character development, and the events of one episode do not in any way affect those of another. As Newman (2006) puts it, "viewers of episodic shows need no memory of the previous episodes to understand and appreciate the present one. Episodes may be seen in any order and may be skipped without compromising future comprehension

and engagement" (p. 23). Examples of episodic series include co-called crime procedurals like *Law & Order* (Wolf et al., 1990-present) or animated shows like *The Simpsons* (Brooks et al., 1989-present). VanArendonk (2019) highlights the odd nature of a series in which everything is "reset" every time a new episode begins, and that the viewer accepts returning each week to characters whose circumstances will never change (p. 69). At the same time, she acknowledges the dual work that an individual episode is doing in terms of telling a complete story while giving the viewer a sense that they are taking part in something larger. As she points out, "every episode is equally responsible for carrying the burden of the show's identity. Like a cell that carries a complete DNA sequence, each typical episode […] contains the raw information necessary to reconstruct the entire series." (p. 70).

Continuous series, on the other hand, have much more explicit, and vital, connections between installments. They tell an ongoing story, with a narrative arc that spans the entire season, which means that, in theory, all episodes must be watched in the correct order to get the full effect intended by the storytellers. Hayward (1997), focusing on the theoretically perpetual continuous form of the soap opera, explains how "each serial episode means little in isolation from its […] contextualizing narrative flow; each modifies the previous installment while simultaneously tilting forward to the next, reaching out of the last frame to grab a hint of the one to come" (p. 136). In order to maintain a narrative across the many episodes that make up a television season, "at any given time, old and new story lines are interwoven to keep the narrative running" (Schlütz, 2016, p. 97). Newman (2006) adds that the continuous series "makes significant demands on the audience, which it rewards with a much fuller experience of character" (p. 23). Character development is often a key aspect of complex television, with an exemplar like *Breaking Bad* making the moral degradation of its main character over not only one season but the whole series its defining feature (and the meaning of its title). In its purest form, a continuous series could be considered one long story that has been divided into its constituent parts; an apposite example might be the US thriller *24* (Surnow, 2001-2014), in which the action of every episode begins at the precise moment that the previous one ended.

Complex television series are rarely, if ever, purely episodic in format; nor are they typically purely continuous. The distinction is important to establish as most will exist somewhere on a spectrum between the two. As VanArendonk (2019) puts it, "[m]any series fall in something like an interim space, with some episodes operating as extremely plot-bounded stories and others relying more on linear storytelling across installments" (p. 72). This is what Schlütz (2016) calls a "hybrid form" and Nelson (2007) terms a "flexi-narrative", in which, depending on where they lie on the spectrum, a series might have more stand-alone episodes (that do little to advance the overall story arc) or more linear episodes (that are vital for an appreciation of the overall story arc).

VanArendonk (2019), while defending the need for both types of episodes within a flexi-narrative, pleads the case that each has to fulfill its roles as simultaneously both a "self-contained unit" and "a subordinate piece of a longer work" (p. 74). The danger, she warns, of the individual installment that carries no (or very little) connection to what came before or what comes after, is that it is no longer an "episode" in terms of playing its role as part of a greater whole. She does go on to say, however, that the connection does not necessarily have to be at the level of plot but could instead be at the level of theme and character; or, as she puts it, "spins its characters around episodic axes of thematic boundaries" (p. 73). However, the episode that does not connect at a larger story level, can be problematic if it "becomes more like a gesture, a pause – a convention fulfilled" or "a way of perpetually kicking the narrative can down the episodic road", both of which may result in "looser, emptier storytelling" (p. 75). Conversely, the episode that acts only as a delivery device for events with meaning for the season-long arc, without functioning as its own complete narrative, is not respecting the format of the episodic serial, which distinguishes itself from the feature-length film or novel by deliberately crafting itself as a series of individual, but linked, segments. The gaps between episodes that O'Sullivan (2019) identifies as the defining feature of a serial become meaningless if they are seen as arbitrary. From the genre of non-academic TV criticism, Sepinwall (2017), St. James (2016), and VanArendonk (2016) all bemoan the trend in TV serials of featuring individual episodes that do not function as self-contained narratives. First of all, there

is the feeling of reaching the end of what is identified, at least in terms of temporal boundedness, as a complete episode without the satisfaction of having experienced a complete narrative. Secondly, the reflection between episodes consists mostly of anticipating what happens immediately next, rather than considering how the preceding episode as a whole fits into the larger story.

The analogy of the episodic/continuous TV series spectrum with the HE course speaks to the individual lesson and its place, and role, within the entire course. To examine this analogy, I will first hypothesize what different versions of courses that lie on various points of the spectrum look like, before reporting on the actual types of courses described by my observation/interview participants.

It would perhaps be highly unusual for a course to be purely episodic, i.e. one in which each lesson was completely self-contained with no connective tissue between any two or more lessons in terms of the content that students were expected to learn and/or the skills they were expected to develop. Such a course, if it were to follow common pedagogical principles, would have to feature individual lessons that were assessed in isolation, without any end-of-semester exam or final project. In other words, students would not be expected to further demonstrate any mastery of the content or skills acquired in a lesson once it was finished. It should be pointed out that I do not intend to completely dismiss this type of course at this point as lacking in educational value. Most traditionally structured courses do not include any follow-up assessment of students once they have finished the final exam, so it is not obvious that a purely episodic course, if taught well, could not achieve effective student outcomes. In addition, as VanArendonk (2019) points out, an episodic series, while not featuring an ongoing narrative thread, could still have thematic links between its installments, which would almost surely be the case in such an HE course (e.g. the theme as described by the course title). Thus, even if there is no explicit intention for students to make connections among the various lessons, other than seeing them all as items within the same set, they may still develop an accumulative understanding of the course theme as a result of having attended multiple lessons. This understanding might come about, in part at least, because of the reflection that happens between lessons, i.e. because of the gaps that O'Sullivan identifies as the defining feature of

serials. Finally, an episodic series has an in-built quality of accessibility. There are two reasons for this. First, if a student misses a lesson, it has little to no impact on their ability to comprehend the subsequent lesson (just as the viewer of the episodic TV series would not need to be caught up on an episode that they missed to understand any later episodes). Second, episodic series are by nature highly formulaic, per VanArendonk's (2019) concept of each installment carrying the DNA necessary to recreate the basic structure of the series. Therefore, students attending a lesson in an episodic course know, at a structural level, what to expect each time and can therefore focus their cognitive effort on whatever content the teacher has chosen to highlight.

At the other end of the spectrum, one can imagine a course that is purely continuous; in other words, there is no clear delineation of lessons as individual units other than the temporal gap between them. This would mean, for example, that an activity could be abruptly interrupted by the bell at the end of a lesson, only to be continued the following week at the start of the subsequent lesson. The gap in this case is potentially arbitrary, except that it is probable that at least some of the students will spend part of it reflecting on the first part of the activity and this reflection may affect how they complete it. In fact, this reflection could be intentional on the part of the teacher, especially if the timing of the interruption is planned. It could even be made explicit if assigned as homework. At the same time, the interruption could be detrimental to successful completion of a lesson activity if, for example, no reflection takes place in the gap, or the length of the gap means vital aspects of the activity have been forgotten. However, it should also be mentioned that a continuous serial course may be unavoidable for the HE course designer who envisions one extended learning experience for their students; it would be highly impractical to conduct a 14-hour course (to cite a minimum likely length), let alone a 46.5-hour one (the length of the current HE courses I teach) without any breaks. Moreover, if students are made aware of the structure of a course as one continual learning experience, they could adjust their week-to-week expectations accordingly.

The course designers that I interviewed reported that none of their courses were fully continuous or episodic. When posed with an explicit question about this, prefaced with an explanation of the TV series analogy, all ten participants asked

responded that their courses featured both an overall arc, in terms of how students would develop their knowledge and/or skills between the first and last lessons, as well as individual lessons that had their own self-contained goals and structure. However, there was some variety in terms of where their courses lay on the episodic/continuous spectrum.

Four participants reported that their courses were fairly balanced, with Participant F answering:

> *I would put it in the middle, because [...] if you happen to come in late, you can still get access to these earlier concepts that are coming in. But if you were there from the beginning, I think you'll have an easier time with those concepts.*

Participant N saw the two types of series existing side by side when they reported that *"there's two threads, and one thread is definitely [continuous] and the other thread is episodic"*. Participant H viewed their course similarly but highlighted the tensions between the two: *"I [...] want to put it in the middle [of the spectrum] and put some kind of fight going on there. There's a real push and pull."*

Four other participants felt that their courses were closer to the continuous end of the spectrum. Participant D, for example, said: *"I always try to connect everything as much as possible. I don't like going off and doing something completely different. So it is quite linked. I do like one lesson to link to another to link to another."* while Participant M reported: *"I would say [...] normally [continuous], where there really is a clear link in progression in a narrative, if you will, of where we started to where we're ending."* Participant B cited the use of explicit connections to support their course's place on the spectrum:

> *It's probably more towards [the continuous] end in that there are references; like I often find myself putting links to previous lessons in the [course website], you know 'If you missed this one, click here, because now we're building on something that we learned in lesson seven'.*

Participant G concurred that their course was *"very much on the [continuous] end of things"* and at first felt that it was more similar to a film or novel, with each lesson being like a scene or chapter, respectively. However, they also accepted the television series analogy by acknowledging the existence of certain lessons that functioned as a 'detour' episode, albeit *"a detour there for a reason"*; this was then likened to the 'bottle episode'[6], which is a recognized feature of certain television series.

Finally, two participants placed their courses further towards the episodic end of the spectrum, but both with important caveats. First, Participant L explained that

> *Yeah, this [course] is very much 'episodic television'. It doesn't matter how you switch the chronological order of the lessons. With the exception of the first four weeks. The first four weeks is [continuous] in that the lecture and demonstration material build from basic fundamentals up to [something] more complex. So I would say the first four weeks would be [continuous], and then from week 5 on, it's very episodic and you could just shuffle those [lessons] around and it wouldn't matter.*

In other words, once the basics in terms of what the students are expected to do have been established, the course switches to an episodic format. Participant J, meanwhile, said that their course was *"more towards the [episodic] side because the characters remain the same and [...] the only thing that connects is the building of skills"*. However, they go on to say that, if they had more autonomy to design the course as they liked, they would prefer it to be continuous because they like the idea of having it "flow".

All of the participants' comments on the episodic/continuous spectrum with regards to their courses are clearly analogous to the TV series, with various points on the spectrum being represented and advantages and disadvantages being expressed. Consideration of where to put a series on this spectrum is clearly an important one

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[6] The bottle episode is typically defined as one in which the usual characters are limited to one location in one time-frame and, while it usually does little to advance a series' overall narrative, it does important work in terms of character development (Engley, 2023).

and has considerable consequences for how a show or a course is received by its viewers or students.

4.4.2.2 Serial Memory.

Understanding, and therefore appreciation, of any narrative clearly relies on memory; the connections between events that are the basic building blocks of any story require the audience to remember each of the central events to comprehend the overall narrative. It follows that the longer the story, the more events there are and the longer the gaps between events become. As Mittell (2015) describes, the two-hour feature-length film generally calls on short-term memory, while the novel is designed to be received at the reader's own pace, with "on-demand" access to previous pages when needed (p. 180). On the other hand, a season of a TV series, even one consisting of eight to twelve episodes (the current standard minimum), is spread out over multiple months and is likely to feature various settings, numerous characters, and a high number of events, both central and not, all of which will put a burden on the audiences' medium-to-long-term memory. With the probable exception of the settings, this could be considered also true for the HE course. Most TV viewers have had the experience of watching a show and struggling to remember, for example, who certain characters were, what other characters' motivations were, or even how the previous episode ended, perhaps in the same way that students may forget a classmate's name, be unsure of the aims of a project, or not remember the previous lesson's homework assignment.

Compounding the challenge to serial storytellers crafting extended and complex narratives is the differences in how audiences consume them. Mittell (2015) explains that

> any viewer's memory of previous episodes is quite variable, with a significant number of viewers having missed numerous episodes altogether. […] Viewers also vary as to what paratextual expansions they explore […] while others may not think at all about a program until the next episode airs. Thus the long arcs of complex television must balance the memory demands of a wide range of viewers and reception contexts. (p. 181)

89

The same can be said for the HE course; experienced teachers become highly attuned to the various ways that different students "receive" the course in terms of being aware of content, assignments, deadlines, etc. Mittell (2015) goes on to discuss some of the techniques used by effective serial storytellers to aid viewers' memories regarding important story and character details. These include what he calls "minor redundancies", but what we could refer to as repetitions, for example establishing shots of a scene's location or dialogue that repeats characters' names and backgrounds, as well as recaps at the beginning of each episode, and the use of paratexts, such as viewer-led online forums or official websites created by the TV series' production companies. Repetitions, of which there are two varieties, and recaps, will be discussed in the following sections, including examples of course design versions of each.

4.4.2.3 *"Hello, Don." "Hello, Peggy."*

It is unsurprising that repetition features as a key technique for aiding narrative memory as it is a device that we commonly associate with memory in general; in other words, it is generally accepted that the more times we encounter something, the more likely we are to remember it. This, in fact, is perhaps one of the more obvious connections between narrative design and educational design. Newman (2006) points out the common trope of "the perpetual naming of characters: in every beat [scene], characters address each other by name, often several times in a two-minute segment" (p. 18). It is as if the writers of TV series are aware of research from second language acquisition studies that suggests that students need, on average, ten exposures to new pieces of vocabulary before it is remembered (Uchihara et al., 2019). However, research also suggests that rote repetition may not be effective as a memory-building technique; it must also be meaningful, i.e. attached to something of semantic importance, and spaced, i.e. ten repetitions of a name in a row will not be as memorable as if those repetitions occur over an extended period of time (Ellis, 2002; Schmitt, 2019). As an example, in Participant N's lesson, I observed, first, an ice-breaker activity in which each student spoke and began by saying their names, and then throughout the lesson, the teacher said the student's name each time they called on one of them to answer a question. In the interview, they confirmed that this was

done because they place importance on all members of the class knowing each other's name and that this was done as a way to aid memorization.

In addition to helping audiences remember fundamental details like names, repetition can also be used to ensure important information is known by all (or at least most) viewers. This can be done through expository dialogue (i.e. utterances that are purely informational) that will catch up audience members who are unable to watch the entire series. As Newman (2006) puts it, "[t]he repetitiveness of [serial television] mak[es] the narrative easily comprehended even by viewers who watch sporadically, who pay only partial attention, or who miss part of an episode when the phone rings or the baby cries" (p. 19). One can easily equate this to the student who, for example, misses part of a lesson because they missed the bus or when they excuse themselves to use the restroom. At the same time, repetitions likely benefit every viewer and student, regardless of their level of engagement, due, if nothing else, to the fact that they are likely consuming other shows/courses and therefore have a lot of demands on their short-, medium-, and long-term memory. Newman (2006) explains that

> we can always use a bit of reminding when it comes to the most important things to know. In serialized narratives [repetition] is especially important because of the large quantity of data about the story world that forms the background of any new developments (p. 18)

In my observations, I noted multiple instances of teachers using repetition to highlight what was potentially considered relevant information. This repetition could be opportunistic, as when Participant H, while explaining a possible danger of student autonomy to a class of trainee teachers, said *"There's a risk, like Student 1 said earlier, that you are forcing autonomy on students"*. This was in reference to something that Student 1 had said roughly 26 minutes prior, so it is possible that some in the class had either forgotten it or simply not heard it. By repeating it, Participant H was highlighting it as a piece of content that they wanted all the students to remember. In other cases, the repetition may be prearranged, or even part of the lesson plan. For example, when setting up an activity targeted at developing IELTS speaking skills, Participant J told their students *"So, remember, as always, that quality is more important than quantity"*

and later confirmed to me that this is something they announce in most lessons. Although there is a danger that repetition can lead to a kind of over-familiarity that might diminish the impact of something, like any skill, it depends on how it is done. As Newman states, "[o]ur interest and engagement can be increased when the narrative makes its most important elements clear and relevant, artfully underlining what we should pay most attention to and care most about" (p. 20).

4.4.2.4 *"The Name's Bond."*

Repetition can also play a narrative role beyond reminding viewers of vital information. It can promote engagement through what O'Sullivan (2019) describes as the power of the familiar, i.e. the pleasing effect on the audience of recognizing repeated elements, which acts as a counter to all of the new, and potentially distancing, elements that are an inevitable part of any story. When James Bond delivers his iconic line, it is not to remind audiences of who he is, but rather because it is expected and because it instantly forms a connection with every previous (and subsequent) film in the series. These repetitions carry less narrative weight, but still perform an important function in terms of making audiences feel comfortable within the storyworld and the viewing experience. Examples include settings, such as the specific layout of a main character's living room that audiences get to know well through its repeated use in different episodes, pieces of dialogue, for example the "I've got a bad feeling about this" line used in every film in the *Star Wars* franchise, or even meta-narrative elements such as the opening credits. These may not ultimately play an important role in terms of understanding the story (although they may), but they still increase engagement. As Mittel (2015) describes, "viewers who have been paying attention can get a brief frisson of pleasure upon recognizing the repetition" (p. 79). O'Sullivan (2010), using an analogy with the sonnet, describes how TV series employ anaphora to both spin and drive an episode forward. Anaphora is a rhetorical device, most commonly found in poetry or speeches, in which the same word or set of words is used at the beginning of a series of clauses to lend them emphasis.[7] For

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[7] An example would be Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, in which the phrase "I have a dream" is used to start eight successive lines.

O'Sullivan (2010), the opening credits is the repeated phrase, the "spin", while the actual start of the story is the "drive", i.e. the new information. Referencing the familiar repetition of the James Bond opening sequence, in which Bond walks right to left across the screen before turning to shoot straight at the camera, O'Sullivan (2010) explains that this "not only brings us back to the diegesis [i.e. the storyworld] of James Bond; it brings us back to the memory and experience of watching every other James Bond film we have watched" (p. 54). This "portal" into a story is a technique that has been used by serial stories for centuries, from the green covers of Dickens' serialized novels to *The Simpsons*' opening credits to the familiar logo at the beginning of every film in the Marvel movie franchise.

Looking for use of this type of repetition in my observation data, I first considered how teachers began their lessons. About half did so without anything that could be recognized as a repeated element, instead starting with a quick greeting (e.g. "*Hello everyone*") and then going straight into explaining the first activity. However, others opened with what they later confirmed were routinized beginnings. These included Participant A, whose students first pick up their individual name card from a table at the front of the classroom before sitting down, and Participant D, whose students find their own name card on their pre-assigned desk. Participants C and F both begin with a list of the stages of the lesson written on the board, similar to the way that the *Mission: Impossible* (Geller, 1966-1973) TV series' title sequence was made up of clips from the upcoming episode. Participant E has a quote boarded, different each week, that goes uncommented on but is thematically linked to the lesson, in a way similar to the opening of every episode of the TV series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (Lucas et al., 2008-2020). Participant N always starts with the same activity that is not explicitly connected to the class, called a "check-in", in which each student repeats their name and how they are feeling on a scale of one to ten. Finally, Participant J uses what might be considered the closest to a TV series title screen. Before the start of each lesson, an artfully designed PowerPoint slide is projected onto a large screen featuring the title of the course; once the lesson starts, the slide changes to one that announces the lesson number and title (in the class I observed, this was 'Lesson 25: Sustainability & Development'). It is notable that in all of these

cases, the opening has elements of both repetition and iteration, i.e. the basic premise is always the same, but each lesson is a different version of that premise. This is reflective of O'Sullivan's (2010) notion of "spin" and "drive" – combining the familiar with the new – and is not uncommon in narrative openings, such as *The Simpsons*' couch gag or the regular updates to the characters that appear in Marvel's drifting logo.

4.4.2.5 *"Previously on…"*

Another prominent narrative tool to aid serial memory is the recap. Also known as the 'Previously on…' segment, these have become almost obligatory for TV serials, especially those at the more continuous end of the spectrum. They feature moments or events from previous installments that are specifically chosen for their relevance to the current episode's narrative. In other words, they usually do not recap the series' overall story arc in general (though they may) but rather are priming the audience for what is immediately to come. This refreshes ongoing viewers' memories while allowing new viewers to join in the middle and can play a significant role in the way an episode is comprehended. Mittell (2015) explains how these recaps can manage, and even manipulate, what viewers remember by "activating the most crucial bits of narrative into working memory while allowing other moments that will not become relevant in the upcoming episode to remain in the archives of long-term memory" (p. 189). They can thus trigger the dormant memories when required or, to use a term from the field of education, at the "point of need" (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2005). Moreover, some parts of a recap may be from episodes that were shown many weeks, or even seasons, previously and are included to remind viewers of important narrative information that will not be connected to in that particular episode but are there so that viewers do not forget them when they do eventually become relevant again. However, serial narrative designers can also withhold reminders of important events to effect what Mittell (2015) calls "*surprise memory*, or the moment of being surprised by story information that you already know but do not have within working memory" (p. 191). This carries risks, i.e. the intended surprise may not land if the viewer does not access the necessary long-term memory to appreciate it, but the reward is a highly effective and memorable emotional reaction. A balance can therefore be struck in terms of using a

recap to hint at the required memory of a long-ago event without completely giving it away. Recaps of the "Previously on…" variety are generally short montages placed at the very beginning of an episode (even before the title sequence). However, other forms can also occur mid-episode, typically as expository dialogue.

In the lessons I observed, there were multiple instances of teachers voicing to their students explicit ways in which activities they were doing connected to activities they had done in previous lessons. On one occasion this took the form of something approximating the TV serial's "previously on" segment, when Participant H began the lesson by saying *"Today's topic is autonomy in language learning. This is the third in a trilogy of topics that are the backbone of this course. So, who can remember the other two?"* In this case, the key events that had happened weeks prior to this lesson (learning about motivation and authenticity) were elicited from the students, but the effect is the same, i.e. reminding them of important information that they needed to know to successfully navigate the current lesson. Indeed, throughout the lesson, the topic of autonomy was often discussed in relation to motivation and authenticity, so it would have been a bigger challenge for students if they had not received the reminder. In most other cases, the recap referred to the homework assignment that students had completed between the previous lesson and the current one, such as when Participant D began with *"Thank you very much for posting your survey questions on Moodle. Before we work on them, let's review: what is a good survey question?"* Again, the recap is done interactively with the students, but the goal is still to make sure that they all bring the important ideas they learned the week prior into what they would be working on next. Towards the end of the same lesson, Participant D used a kind of mid-episode recap when they said, *"Let's remember what a main body paragraph looks like"*, referring to content from a lesson several weeks before, and then gave students an activity designed to refresh their memories. It was later confirmed that this was in preparation for the first activity intended for the subsequent lesson. Finally, Participant E provided a further example when, during a lesson from a graduate course on directing actors in short films, they announced explicitly *"We're going to do a little recap now – what is the role of a director?"* After eliciting the five roles, each of which had been addressed in different lessons

throughout the semester, these were not immediately made relevant to what the students were doing. However, the teacher later told me that this was done to keep these points in the students' long-term memory as they could subconsciously affect everything about the way they approached the course. Overall, teachers demonstrated an awareness of the importance of helping students recall pertinent information and ideas from previous lessons and did so either through direct reminders or elicitation.

4.4.3 Audience Involvement: Ergodicity & Interactivity

Although I have identified the contemporary TV series as the most apt narrative model when discussing the HE course, especially when considering its serial nature, there are some very significant differences that should be addressed. One is the issue of authorship, in the sense that, while the course designer can be said to be the principle author of the course, there are other parties involved, including both the institution and the students, who may be heavily involved in affecting what direction the story takes. The other issue is that of the student as both audience of, and character within, the narrative of the course, which bears little resemblance to most forms of fictional storytelling, including the TV serial, beyond any feelings of relatability that the viewer might have with a character. To address this incongruity, I turn to Aarseth's (1997) concept of the ergodic narrative.

The term *ergodic* derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, which mean 'work' and 'path' respectively, and describes a text that "produces a semiotic sequence which may differ from reading to reading" (Aarseth, 2005, p. 141). In other words, every receiver of an ergodic narrative, which Aarseth (1997) calls a *cybertext*, will experience it differently, chiefly because they are intimately involved in shaping the path it takes. This is intended to go beyond reader-response theory, which acknowledges that all readers will bring their own interpretation to a text independent of the author's intention (Scott, 1994). Rather, the consumer, or user, of a cybertext, as Aarseth (1997) explains, is integrated to the level of performance and therefore "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (p. 1), with this effort reflecting an acknowledgment of not only interpretation but also intervention.

As a result, engaging with a cybertext involves an element of risk, since the open-ended nature of ergodic literature means that the reader's decisions can lead to failure. As he explains:

> when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed. (Aarseth, 1997, p. 3)

The other side of risk, however, is reward, which in an ergodic narrative comes about through successful navigation through the story. 'Success' in this case does not necessarily mean finding the treasure or killing the monster but could refer to the gains made in terms of self-awareness and/or knowledge development. Moreover, Aarseth (1997) argues that this is made more personally meaningful when it is the result of individual choices; the cybertext user claims "'I want this text to tell *my* story; the story that *could not be* without me'" (p. 4, italics in the original).

Examples of ergodic literature include the classic Chinese text the *I Ching*, and Queneau's (1961) *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes*, both are which are intended to be consumed by having the reader choose the order in which sections are read (Aarseth, 1997). More recently, "choose your own adventure" books similarly rely on reader decisions for different paths to be taken. Narrative games, such as table-top role-playing games (RPGs) are, I would suggest, ergodic by definition, even if they are not literature in terms of being written texts. They clearly have a narrative, outlined and overseen by a "game master", but depend entirely on the participants, or players, to make choices that dictate the direction of the story (Cover, 2014). One could argue that all story-based games, including electronic video games, are to an extent ergodic; even when the overall story arc is unchangeable, the details of how it is completed are based on how the player plays it.

While ergodic literature does not have to be narrative in structure, when it is, the user of it typically makes decisions on behalf of a character within the story. This detail notwithstanding, the ergodic nature of students taking part in an HE course

should be clear. If the HE course constitutes a narrative in that it is a designed experience of a story, the students are the participants who experience the story, i.e. they make up the audience. However, they are evidently more involved in this story than, say, the reader of a novel or the viewer of a TV series is. As Aaarseth (1997) puts it, "[l]ike a spectator at a soccer game, he [sic] may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player. He cannot have the player's influence: 'Let's see what happens when I do *this*'" (p. 4). The HE student, on the other hand, does have the player's influence and can see what happens when they make autonomous choices. Of course, these choices are largely made within the context created by the teacher (equivalent of an RPG game master), but they can still strongly affect the shape of the narrative. These effects include the timing of events, e.g. how long it takes to complete an activity, the content of specific assignments, e.g. by choosing a topic for an essay or presentation, and interaction with other participants, e.g. by self-selecting groups for a project. The overall goal or motivation of this narrative (e.g. passing the course) may not change, but the steps taken between the beginning and the end will likely depend greatly on decisions, conscious or not, taken by the students.

A narrative notion closely connected to that of ergodicity is interactivity, which Herman et al. (2005a) define as

> [a] feed-back loop through which user input affects the behaviour of a text, especially regarding the choice of information to be displayed. [...] interactivity may be either selective (clicking on links) or productive (contributing text, performing actions), and it may result in the real-time creation of a story (p. 250)

The difference is perhaps the degree of involvement; whereas a consumer of an ergodic text is making decisions that fundamentally guide the course of the narrative, an interactive one involves more interplay between author and audience, with the latter influencing, rather than driving, how the former shapes the story. According to Abbott (2005), this could be seen as an extension of the postmodern idea of inviting "the reader to participate actively in the world-making process of narration" (p. 343). However, with regards to contemporary TV serials, these are narratives created in a

context dominated by hyper- and para-textuality mainly via the internet. As previously mentioned, most successful TV shows and movie series are flanked by an assortment of websites, both professional and amateur, featuring summaries, recaps, and critiques of each episode, not to mention the growing industry of podcasts and YouTube channels, some of which are officially affiliated with the parent product. As a result, there have been some well documented cases of storytellers being influenced by their audiences in terms of how their narratives are shaped. One example comes from Vince Gilligan, the creator and showrunner of *Breaking Bad*, who explained how audience speculation on the unclear fate of a character at the end of season 3 led him to rethink how to begin season 4 (Poniewozik, 2011).[8] In other words, viewers do not need to be in the writers room to influence the story or discourse of a narrative that they are consuming. It is enough for the nominal writer(s) to be aware of specific audience reactions for these to help shape the story. A clear analogy can be drawn to how student reactions and/or suggestions may alter how a course is designed and delivered.

Naturally, the degree of how ergodic or interactive any cybertext is can vary, just as it can with an HE course, reflected chiefly in the amount of autonomy the reader/viewer/student is allowed. Therefore, the issue of ergodicity when applied to course design could be seen as the amount of flexibility the teacher allows in terms of giving students choices (ranging from, for example, where to sit in the classroom to what grade to self-assign themselves), making changes to pre-made plans based on student actions, and/or leaving parts of the course open-ended. The participants in my data generation reported a range of flexibility with regards to these, suggesting that the degree of ergodicity is a choice that reflects course design principles. However, this decision should be made with the understanding that the narrative of every course is ergodic to some extent, since students can always make choices about, for example, at what time to arrive to a particular lesson, how much effort to put into a particular

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[8] More specifically, what Gilligan thought was presented in season 3 as an unambiguous character death was interpreted by viewers as a cliffhanger; knowing this, he realized that he had the opportunity to begin season 4 by paying off the perceived cliffhanger.

assignment, or whether or not to cooperate with a project partner. These decisions, within the context of the parameters provided by the course designer, may also answer the question of what grade the student ultimately receives (if grades are part of the course). A course at the more extreme ergodic and interactive end of the spectrum might look like a "negotiated syllabus" (Clarke, 1991), which comes from the field of language education and whose key feature is that "[l]earners […] involve themselves in fundamental decisions concerning content, materials, methodology, testing, and evaluation (both of their own performance and of the evolving syllabus)" (p. 14). In other words, course designers plan almost none of the course before the first lesson and then work with students to negotiate all the aspects that constitute a syllabus. There is, of course, one aspect of the course that is not negotiated, i.e. the subject, but other than that, the specific goals and how they are to be achieved is co-designed. Breen and Littlejohn (2000) suggest that the negotiation should be ongoing and cyclical so that, after the initial design has been established, it is then implemented, followed by evaluation to determine its effectiveness, resulting in further negotiated design.[9] While it is hard to imagine a TV or film series that fully implements this type of interaction with its viewers (because the initial story is likely to be the work of only the nominal storytellers), the practice of test screenings (Griff, 2012), in which audiences view a 'draft' of a movie and give feedback that then leads to changes, can be seen as a form of negotiation.

Within the lessons I observed, I noted various examples of ergodicity and interactivity reflected in teacher flexibility, both in terms of allowing student autonomy and a willingness to make changes to the prepared lesson or course plan based on student actions/reactions. These were often supported by the course design principles reported by participants in their interviews. One of the most common areas in which students were given freedom in terms of how they navigated through the lesson was timing. Many teachers reported that they had in mind how long a particular

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[9] A strictly non-ergodic course would be one in which every activity in every lesson is executed and performed exactly how the course designer has planned them to be – a near impossibility given the variability caused by multiple human agents working within a complex system.

activity would take, but they then adjusted this timing depending on whether students appeared to have finished early or if it seemed clear that they needed more time to meaningfully complete it. Participant A, for example, when asked about in-class decisions to finish one activity and move on to the next, said "when I sense that the discussions are ending, that's when I wrap things up […] or if I see that a lot of people are still in the middle of typing their answers, I might just turn off the timer so it doesn't ring and give them a bit more time." Another common way that students were allowed to express their autonomy was through asking questions. These could be clarification questions, i.e. when a student does not understand instructions or content and would like the teacher to either repeat or recast an explanation. Teacher responses to these kinds of questions varied, from Participant C, who told a student who did not understand how to complete an activity to ask a classmate, to Participant H who, when asked to elaborate on the Dogme approach to language education, gave a further five-minute explanation and brought up Google search results to check if they had overlooked any important points. In general, teachers allowed students autonomy with regards to choosing the focus of their own term projects, although there were often parameters that they had to respect. Participant D, for example, let students choose the topic of their final research paper, but instructed that it had to be within the field of "the university student experience" and any that did not fit were rejected or, with the student's input, adjusted appropriately.

All of these instances of student autonomy leading to improvised changes by teachers can also be viewed as forms of interactivity, with the students influencing the shape of the narrative, even if they are not explicitly invited to co-design the course as in a negotiated syllabus. One example that mirrors Vince Gilligan's adjustment in storytelling between seasons of *Breaking Bad* as a result of viewer reaction came from my interview with Participant A. They reported how, in the previous year of teaching their course, *"there was a student who said, 'Oh, it would have been nicer if different groups can work on different topics.' So, this year I'm planning to make it open."* Participant A in general showed a strong openness to hearing student feedback and acting on it. They explained how they get student feedback not only at the end of the course, but also in the middle, by asking questions like 'What do you like about the

course? What should I keep doing? What do you not like about the course? How can I improve the course?', which allows them to implement changes that hopefully benefit current students.

At the same time, several of my participants reported that they make very few changes to their courses once it has started – it is mostly planned out from the beginning and they rarely if ever deviate from it. As Participant F explained, *"I have it about 90% very mapped out, my lesson plans are all ready to go"*. However, they clarified that this was a result of having taught the course before and that they review each lesson after it is completed to assess whether any changes need to be made to it the next time they teach it; in other words, they iterate the course year on year based on student response:

> *Odds are I leave some kind of little notes for the following year; sometimes it's really big, like 'this lesson did not go well', whether the main task didn't work, or the lecture was confusing, and sometimes it's a small thing like, 'change alternative question two for the warm-down activity'. And when I come back and teach it the next year, I'll make those tweaks.*

Participants E and M both also reported that they have the whole course planned out in advance, but each acknowledged that they had to be flexible with regards to unforeseen events. Participant E said that changes happen if some students start to miss deadlines on the way to completing their final project, which means that in lessons that are intended for students to report on what they've been doing, if they are not ready, a back-up lesson plan must be ready to go. When asked about making adjustments to their prepared course outline, Participant M answered *"Only if something's gone wrong, like multiple students having scheduling conflicts. Something definitely needs to go wrong for me to change that schedule. So, the vast majority of time it never changes."*

The variations in the amount of ergodicity and interactivity that course designers feature in their courses is certainly analogous to those of television showrunners or producers overseeing a film franchise. The choices involved will likely depend on teachers' beliefs regarding what kind of educational experience they want

their students to have and ultimately, the best way to achieve the ultimate goals of the course.

4.4.4 Author(ship) & Audience

The issues of ergodicity and interactivity are clearly closely aligned with that of authorship, questioning, as they do, the role that the audience plays in shaping the narrative. However, I would like to take a step back and consider the concept of authorship in general and how we define an author, especially in terms of serial narratives.

4.4.4.1 What is an Author?

My working definition of a narrative as a designed experience of a story clearly and strongly implies the presence of an agentive being who carries out the act of designing. This would be who is commonly identified as the author of the narrative. However, although there is, practically speaking, a physical human or multiple physical humans who are the flesh-and-blood authors of a text, the author is also a concept used to explore issues around creativity and textuality (Jannidis, 2005). These include the identification of a specific style attributed to a specific author, including the evolution of that style, and how the author incorporates and acknowledges their texts within the historical development of their narrative type.

Authors have historically been most commonly associated with the creators of novels, for which they are typically given sole credit. However, even in this case, there are editors, proof-readers, 'first readers', etc. that contribute to the final version. This understanding is perhaps what contributed to the term (or its French equivalent, *auteur*) being used in cinema to describe the individual who has the strongest artistic/stylistic stamp on a film, despite the fact that there might be someone else who has written the actual story and dialogue, plus many more contributors; the "final cut" belongs to the director, who decides what to include and what to omit. In truth, however, this is not usually the case – the movie studio that provides the considerable amount of money to make a film often has plenty of input.

Contemporary TV shows, especially complex serials that often require large budgets, work similarly to feature-length films, with the role of showrunner providing the overall vision created by a multitude of contributors within the context of making a product for a production company (Navar-Gill, 2018). Jensen (2017) makes a case for the showrunner-as-auteur, which also speaks to the celebrity status that some of them have attained, Vince Gilligan being one example (and a parallel can be seen with the professor whose courses have consistently full enrollment). Higueras-Ruiz et al. (2021), however, remind us that one of the skills that successful showrunners develop is dealing with the studios and networks that employ them. According to one of the interviewees in their study, "part of your job [as showrunner] is to navigate, negotiate, and work with those entities: your benefactors, in a word" (p. 196). This refers not only to the amount of freedom that a showrunner has in terms of creating the show, but also the existential threat of whether or not they are allowed to make a show at all. As another of their interviewees puts it, the network executives "have the ultimate power. They can fire you. They can tell you at any moment *you cannot do your show anymore, you cannot do that*" (p. 197). At the same time, some showrunners achieve a status through success that allows them more freedom; another interviewee explains that "when you are a very successful showrunner, […] the network's executives do not give you a lot of notes, they don't make a lot of changes" (p. 197).

If the TV serial is the closest narrative analogy I have identified to the HE course, it follows that the showrunner is analogous to the HE course designer. Like a showrunner, the HE course designer works within an institution, or even a series of embedded institutions (faculty, department, college, etc.), which creates a series of authorial input, e.g. course descriptions, learning targets, textbooks, mission statements, etc. Another clear connection is the fact that both are most directly and explicitly responsible for the overall shape of the series they oversee, even with the acknowledgement that they are not solely responsible. The script produced by a show's screenwriters can be seen as the university textbook – both may be used as starting points for the creation of the story, but many adaptations, edits, and omissions can occur along the way.

One question I asked in my interviews with HE course designers was concerned with the issue of authorship. Specifically, I asked them who they considered to be the author of their course. I did not provide any definition of the concept of author, mainly to avoid causing any confusion and to allow for the respondents to interpret the term in the way that made most sense to them. Half of the twelve interviewees identified themselves as the sole author, with Participant B explaining that only they *"have that awareness of why things are happening and how things are happening and what's going to happen in the next 'chapter'"* and Participant K affirming that *"I'm trying to bring this experience to them [i.e. the students]"*. Participant H claimed, *"I'm definitely the author of the narrative because I basically have full autonomy over what I do in that class, even down to how I asses the students and whether to give them an essay"*, which was their way of explaining that they are not subject to interference from their institution, perhaps reflecting their status as a tenured and respected professor analogous to the successful showrunner who is free from studio intervention.

Three of the participants mentioned both themselves and their students as authors of the course, in recognition of the amount of ergodicity and interactivity they allow. Participant D said that *"it's loosely me, but the students are choosing the topics for their assignments and presentation; so, they've got quite a lot of freedom, but I will set the basic framework."* Participant E saw a balance: *"It's the group, not just the professor [...] Ultimately, all I'm doing is trying to set up an environment each week where the students can come in and it's really up to them to fill that vacuum with meaning"*. Participant M echoed this with *"I feel like the whole reason why I put so much time and effort into creating so much structure is comprehension for the student. [...] Because they're producing work, I'm watching their narrative in terms of their growth. And so, to me, I feel like I'm tracking their story as authors, even though I am the logical architect of the class."* In these last two cases, the teacher is almost abdicating authorship to the students but acknowledges their important role in creating the frame in which the narrative has to take shape.

The final three interviewees discussed their role as authors within the contextual constraints of their institutions. For Participant C, their program implements a collective course design for a required course taught by multiple

teachers. They view this as problematic because *"an issue that we have is who is the author and who has control over the narrative development of the course. […] I am perfectly capable, I think, of creating my own courses and my own lesson plans. […] I think probably the criticisms that people have about materials written by committee is that there's no clear vision."* There is clear frustration here at not having more autonomy over their own course. Similarly, Participant F feels the pressures of institutional interference, adopting the novel writing metaphor: *"I feel like I'm the author, but I think that I'm the author working within constraints given to me by a publishing contract […] I definitely feel like I have authorship here, but I teach compulsory courses and the department says that these are the aims, you must hit these marks."* Participant L, although one of the original co-designers of their course, is also aware of the need to meet certain institutional standards. As they explained, *"we created a master syllabus for this course that is used in all of the sections of the course that are taught […] The learning outcomes for the course and the objective and goals of the course are the same for all 13 sections. And we designed this in a way that we thought would achieve a consistency for all our entering students."* Unsurprisingly, all the teachers who described outside influence on their course design were discussing compulsory courses taught by multiple teachers. This type of standardization is appreciated by some (e.g. Participant L), but not by others (e.g. Participant C). The analogy with the TV serial may be to the type of formulaic show intended to appeal to a wide audience. Working within this format may appeal to some more than others, though it should be remembered that critical acclaim and originality can still be achieved in spite of (or perhaps because of) certain restraints.

The issue of style also came up in some of my interviews, with participants differing in terms of how much they felt they were expressing an individuality through their course design. Participant J, for example, claimed that *"I don't have full control of the course, but I do think I teach it differently than anybody else. And I think the way I approach it is my own way."* which speaks to the course designer as auteur metaphor. On the other hand, Participant F told me *"I don't think my course is remarkably personal […] If you found somebody with a similar profile to me, like academically, professionally, and gave them the same book and said 'teach this book', I think it'd*

probably look pretty similar. I don't think my course is like an original work of art or anything. [...] I just try and follow good teaching practices that I have learned in my development as a teacher." While I appreciate this honest reflection on their straightforward approach, I also think that the nature of course design, especially in terms of how the course is delivered in class, means that teachers cannot help but bring an original 'telling' to the narratives of their lessons. This may be more at the level of discourse (i.e. how it is taught) rather than content (i.e. what is taught). During my observations, I saw great variations in terms of teaching style, including differences in levels of formality, humor, interaction, and control, among others. At the same time, I would consider all of the lessons I saw as 'good' lessons with regards to students being engaged in the learning process. Although Participant F may not consider their course a work of art, I would argue that there is still art in its active design.

4.4.5 Structure

When narratologists talk about a "complete" narrative, such as VanArendonk's call for each individual episode of a serial to feature a full, self-contained story, the next question to ask is what is meant by completeness in this case. We can begin by turning to Aristotle (2013):

> A whole is something that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is an item that does not follow necessarily upon something else, but which has some second item following necessarily upon it. Conversely, an end is an item that naturally follows, either necessarily or commonly, upon something, but has nothing following it. A middle is an item that both follows upon a preceding item and has another item following upon itself. (p. 26)

Although this may seem self-evident, it is worth repeating for the considerable implications it has for how storytellers think about constructing their narratives. The most obvious of these is to divide a story into the three parts of beginning, middle, and end, which has led to what is known as the three-act structure.

4.4.5.1 3 Acts.

According to Mamet (1998), the three act structure is the most natural way to present new ideas. As he says,

> [d]ramatic structure is not an arbitrary – or even a conscious – invention. It is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; act one, act two, act three. (p. 73)

Yorke (2014) adds an education-based version when he explains it as, "Students encounter something of which they're unaware, explore and assimilate it, and by merging it with their pre-existing knowledge, grow." (p. 27). Much of the writing on story structure comes from screenwriting guides, by authors who have carefully analyzed the frameworks of successful films and TV shows and explain clearly how to use them. Syd Field (1979) is considered one of the first to apply the three-act structure to Hollywood films, identifying them as "set-up", "confrontation", and "resolution", with important turning points happening at the end of acts one and two to propel the story forward.

The first of these turning points is called the inciting incident, which Lubet (2006) defines as "the central moment of change or conflict around which the entire story revolves" (p. 57). This comes at the end of the first act set-up, whose goal, according to Parker (2000), is "to establish the parameters of the narrative" (p. 70). This is done by answering questions about the context of the story, i.e. about who the main characters are, where and when the story takes place, and what the tone is. The inciting incident provides for the audience, who now know who and what they are dealing with, the main dramatic question of the narrative, i.e. the thing that is motivating the main character and the answer to which will bring a satisfying conclusion to the story. The second act, which tends to be the longest, develops the story by throwing obstacles in the way of the main character and increasing the level of confrontation. Halfway through this act, and therefore about halfway through the whole story, is what Yorke (2014) identifies as the "midpoint", when "something profoundly significant occurs" (p. 37) and when the protagonist "embraces for the first

time the quality they will need to become complete and finish their story" (p. 70). If the main character thus far has been moving steadily towards achieving their goal, the midpoint throws up a new obstacle that informs them more definitively of the scale of their challenge, but also the answer to how to meet that challenge. This spurs the second part of act two, which ends with the second turning point – the moment of ultimate crisis, i.e. when the main character is faced with the possibility of success or failure in whatever they are trying to achieve. Finally, the third act answers the main dramatic question in the climax, before we see what changes have occurred or what was learnt as a result, also called the denouement.

This, of course, is a very simplistic explanation, and many narratives will subvert the structure in a variety of ways. For example, a story could begin with the inciting incident with no set-up and then ask the audience to catch up on the context as they go. Or they could end without answering the main dramatic question. However, these uncommon exceptions notwithstanding, most narratives will follow some version of the three acts. The structure is often shown in visual form, such as this from Wikipedia (2024):

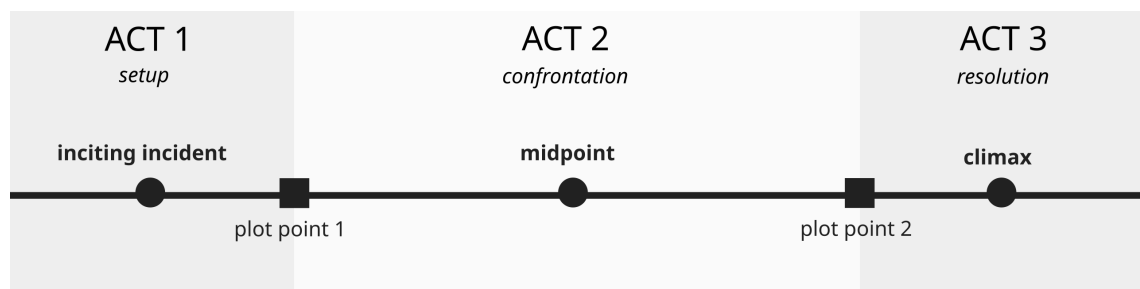| ACT 1 | ACT 2 | ACT 3 |
setup	confrontation	resolution
inciting incident	midpoint	climax
plot point 1		plot point 2

Figure 4.1 A visual representation of the three-act structure as described by Syd Field in his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*

However, it is more commonly shown as a kind of line graph; for example, this figure retrieved from van der Hoeven (n.d.):
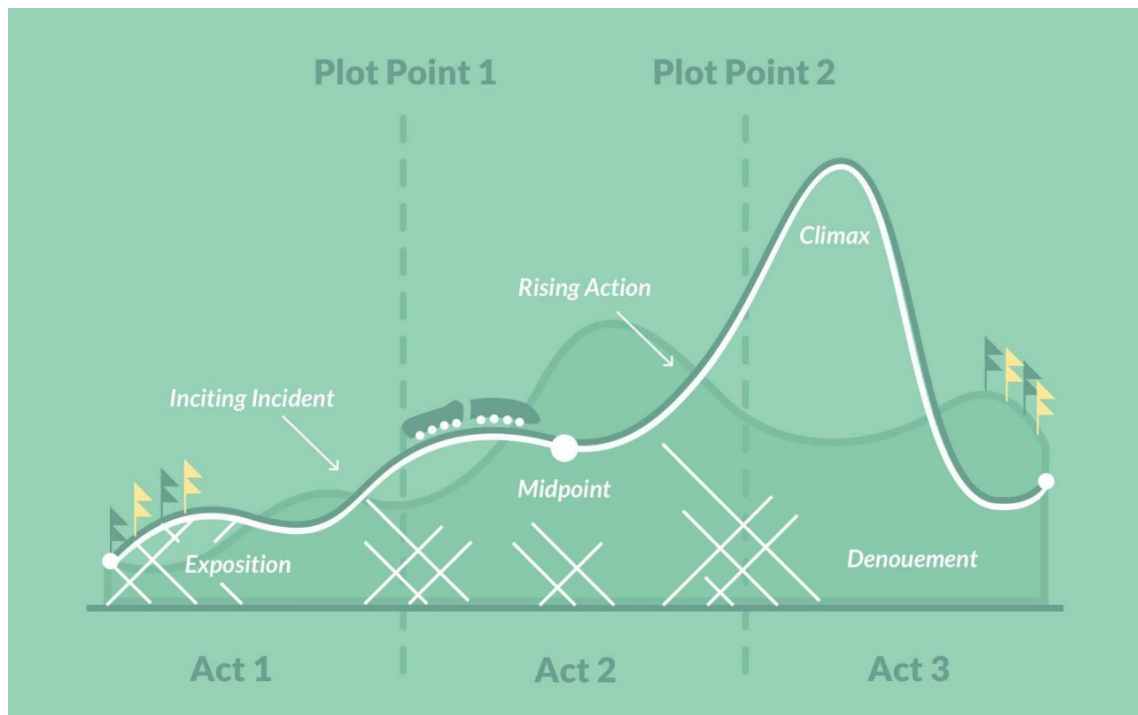
Figure 4.2 Three-Act Structure

In this type of graphic representation, the bottom line (x-axis) is almost certainly meant to represent time. However, the meaning of the vertical line (y-axis) is rarely specified; my assumption is that it represents dramatic tension for the audience or some kind of motivation or action for the main character. The dip in act 1, for example, is likely due to the exposition phase, i.e. characters explaining things, which is generally considered to be lacking in excitement.

Although the three-act structure is meant to represent the shape of an overall story, it is also understood that in extended narratives, for example a feature-length film or a novel, there is also what Yorke (2014) calls a "fractal structure". This refers to the fact that each of the three acts will itself be a self-contained story, which means that it will also feature its own version of acts one, two, and three. It goes further down, as Yorke explains that "[s]cenes, like acts and like stories, have their own three-act structure, and mimic exactly an archetypal story shape" (p. 91). In terms of a complex TV serial, the implication is clear: as Newman (2006) puts, it, "we may consider it to have three storytelling levels for analysis: a micro level of the scene or 'beat', a middle level of the episode, and a macro level of greater than one episode, such as a multi-episode arc" (p. 17). To the last of these, I would include, as Newman

does later, "definable arcs that stretch across a whole season" (p. 21). The inclusion of the meso level of the episode would correspond to VanArendonk's (2019) call for a complete narrative in each installment. And when Newman (2006) cites "levels for analysis", this can presumably include the application of the three-act structure.

For higher education, there seems a clear correspondence between a TV series' levels of scene, episode, and season and the educational experience's levels of activity, lesson, and course. At the macro end, act one (set-up) is about first familiarizing students with their classmates and setting, before making clear what they are expected to do to pass the course (inciting incident). Act two (confrontation) is gaining the knowledge and skills to pass the course, perhaps with a growing sense of their challenge and a mid-term test (midpoint) that reveals the scale of their challenge. Finally act three (resolution) features a final project or exam that requires use of everything they have learned and then the reveal of whether or not they have ultimately succeeded in passing. At the meso and micro levels of the individual lesson and lesson activity, respectively, this might look similar in terms of the introduction of a challenge (e.g. developing understanding of a new concept), going through the steps to meet that challenge, and finally some of kind of assessment to see if the challenge has been met. As we go down the levels, the set-up may become shorter and the final act resolution may hold lower stakes, but the overall structure is the same, and the serial nature of the course means that all three levels are (ideally) connected.

When asked to explain their course design principles with accompanying graphic representations, several of my interviewees explained the overall journey that they intended students to go on. For example, Participant A, whose course focused on user design, explained that *"what I imagine my course to be is at first, they feel very confused, they don't know how to look at a picture and figure out what's wrong with it, to the 'aha' moment where they can look at something and say, 'oh, something's wrong'"* They expressed this through a drawing (Figure 4.3) that showed a student starting at confusion and ending at realization, using the metaphor of the iceberg to demonstrate a development of understanding. (The tip of the iceberg in the ocean is on the left of the image under the confused student, while the iceberg with the submerged part visible is on the right under the star-eyed student.)
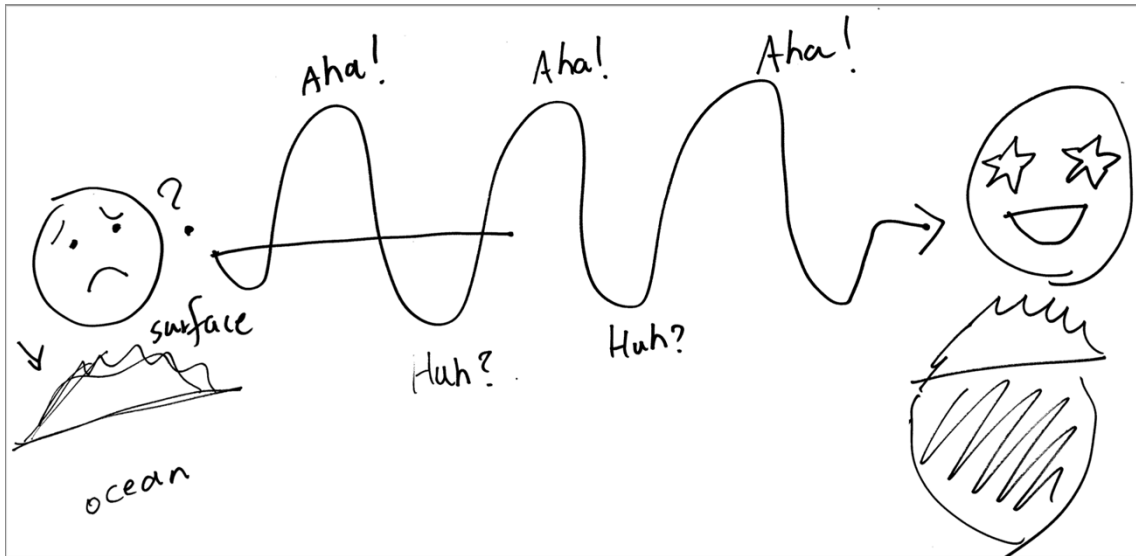
Figure 4.3 Participant A's Graphic Representation of their Course Design

As they explained, *"maybe in the beginning, they [the students] only see the surface, but by the end of the course, they see below the iceberg."* When I asked why the line connecting the two ends was wavy and not a straight progression from confusion to non-confusion, they answered,

> *I think this can't be a straight line. That would be too boring. It has to be an up and down where they think they've got something, but then they have these new questions that challenge this previous understanding. And then they repeat the process. A book I read made the point about 'aha!' moments that the 'aha!' moment is a lot more rewarding when it's preceded by a 'huh?' moment.*

This corresponds generally to a three-act structure in which students are presented with a challenge, i.e. seeing below the ocean, (act one), going through various challenges to help them (act two), and finally seeing the whole iceberg (act three). In addition, it recognizes the meso level of individual installments that feature their own transition from 'huh?' to 'aha!'.

A further example comes from Participant K, who used the x-axis and y-axis to represent how the levels of intensity change throughout the different stages of an individual lesson in their film studies course on cinematography.
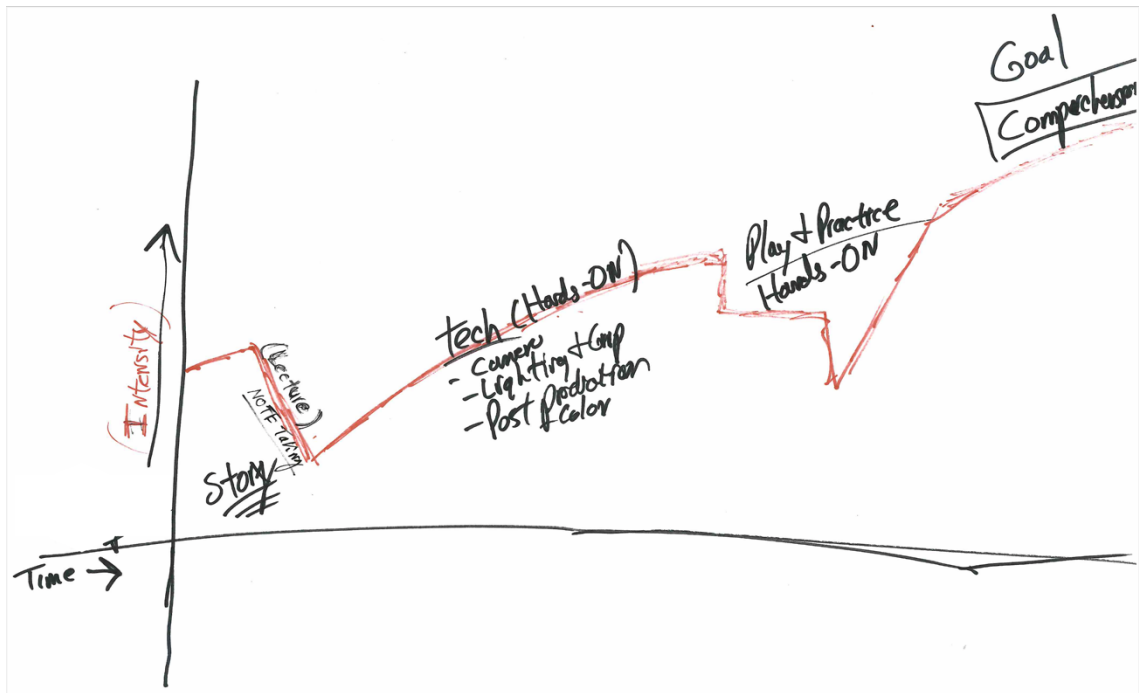
Figure 4.4 Participant K's Graphic Representation of their Lesson Design

As in van der Hoeven's (n.d.) model (see Figure 4.2), there is an overall upward trend, with some dips. The dip early on, presumably in act one of the lesson, is during the lecture portion of the class, which could be analogous to exposition, i.e. a character explaining through dialogue. The intensity then increases when students move on to 'tech', which is when they are given a chance to start learning how to use the equipment they are introduced to, and dips and levels out when they play and practice with it on their own. As Participant K explains, *"The lectures kind of take it down. And then in the tech, I'm trying to shoot the intensity up. And in the play period, sometimes it takes a plateau because they're not so confident about it."* As with Participant A's chart, the lesson ends with the goal of comprehension.

Although several of the participants drew similar time charts, none of them matched the van der Hoeven model (Figure 4.2) exactly, especially in the post-climax part of act three, i.e. the denouement where we the audience, and perhaps the protagonist, are made aware of how things have changed and what was learnt. In the context of an HE course, I would imagine that this could include teacher feedback and student reflection. In fact, Participants C and E both had small dips in intensity/energy

after the final projects of their course, an interview and a short film screening, respectively, which could represent a kind of denouement (see Figure 4.5).
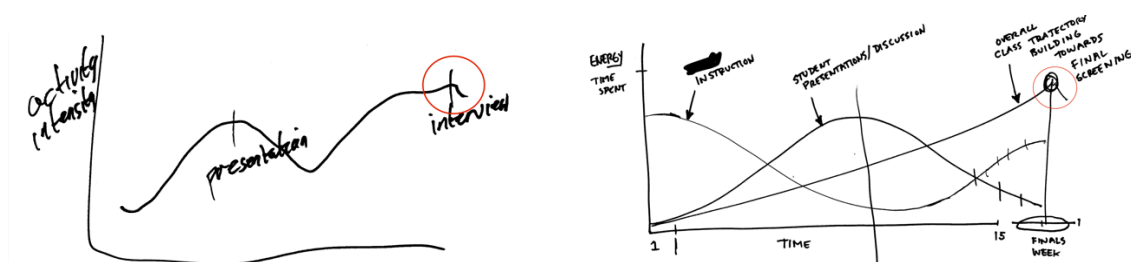
Figure 4.5 Participant C and E's Graphic Representations of their Course Design with Act 3 Denouement Circled in Red

However, Participant E lamented that this was not longer and blamed their institution's increasing of student numbers as the cause:

> *As they pack more and more students in our school, what's gone down is the amount of feedback time. This is their final capstone project and I remember sitting there, it felt terrible. These students have worked four years to get to this moment, and all we can give them is four minutes?*

This reflects a desire to include a complete third act in the course that has been hampered due to institutional constraints. The frustration felt by Participant E is clear and one could imagine a showrunner feeling similarly disgruntled if a studio truncated their final season due to budget cuts, meaning they had to rush to the conclusion of their series.

4.4.5.2 Beginnings.

While acts one and three (the beginning and the end) are typically shorter than act two, they still clearly play important structural roles in a narrative – the event-packed middle could not, by definition, exist without them. In this section, I will discuss the purpose of the beginning of a story and then look at how the participants in my data generation view the goals of the first lesson.

As we saw from the three-act model, the beginning performs the important task of setting up the context of the narrative. As Carroll (2007) points out, the audience enters a story with a natural curiosity about the storyworld and so

> the beginning is supplying us, usually unobtrusively, with the answers we expect to the standing questions that we bring to a description of any situation: where is it situated and when, who is involved, who are they, what are they doing, why, and so on. (p. 10)

It also establishes the tone of the story, so the audience should know whether to expect something light, something heavy, or something in between. Referring to novels, Lodge (2011) explains that the beginning "is a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined. It should therefore, as the phrase goes, 'draw us in'" (p. 5); the idea here being that if the reader does not fully commit to the storyworld, they are unlikely to fully engage with the narrative taking place within it.

The beginning of a TV serial must meet the demands of any narrative beginning. However, as it is also preparing the viewer to a potentially long-term commitment to a complicated story, in some ways it has extra work to do. The first episode of a TV series can generally be considered its first act (at least of the first season) and even has its own term: the *pilot*. Because of the financial factors involved with producing a TV serial, it is important that it gains viewers as quickly as possible. It therefore wants to present an accurate reflection of the type of show it is. According to Mittell (2015), "[a] pilot presents an encapsulation of what a series might be like on an ongoing basis, while providing an exceptional degree of narrative exposition to orient viewers within an often complex storyworld." (p. 56). As a result, much of the pilot is taken up with introducing the characters, setting, and tone, with relatively little devoted to the actual story, especially that of the whole series' narrative arc. At the same time, enough seeds must be planted that what comes later feels like a cohesive match to the pilot and the viewer is adequately prepared for the journey they are about to take. As Mittell (2015) explains, ""…the chief function of a television pilot is to teach us how to watch the series and, in doing so, to make us want to keep watching –

thus successful pilots are simultaneously *educational* and *inspirational*" (p. 56). However, one final aspect of the pilot should be mentioned, which is how it ends. As we have seen, the first act of a narrative concludes with the inciting incident, i.e. the event that kickstarts the main thrust of the story in terms of the protagonist's goals and motivations. The serial pilot is no different. Although a complete story should have been told over the course of the episode, it will often end with an action or reveal that lets the audience know, or at least surmise, what the whole series will be about, both thematically and narratively. Nash (2021) calls this the "Let the games begin!" moment as it has primed us to anticipate, and be excited about, what is to come.

The pilot is easily analogous to the first lesson of an HE course. Students enter, crossing the threshold of the classroom door into a new world of which they potentially know very little (beyond what was written in the course description). They likely have several questions in mind regarding, for example, who their classmates are, how strict the professor is, what tasks they will need to complete. By the end of the lesson, these questions will have been answered to some extent, while new ones will have been posed. Ideally, they understand, in general, the 'world' of the course and are motivated and engaged to carry on.

None of the lessons that I observed were first lessons. However, in interviews, I asked my participants what they saw as the purpose of the opening lesson of their course. Their answers generally fell into two main categories: communicating information about the content of the course and breaking the ice in terms of students getting to know each other and the teacher. With regards to the former, Participant F stated, *"One aim is to introduce the students to the content and specifically the scope of the course"*, while Participant L said, *"I share the basic course materials. We go over the syllabus, we go over the expectations for the semester."* Participant B, however, reported that they no longer include an explanation of the content in the first lesson. As they explained, *"I used to do lots of presentation about 'these are the course aims and this is how you are going to be assessed on this course'. And I don't do that anymore because it's just like an information overload. I think they get that from so many courses in that week, you end up having to repeat all of that anyway."* This corresponds to the relative lack of narrative content in the typical pilot episode,

although none of my participants reported ending the first lesson with a "Let the games begin!" moment.

The second aim, helping students get to know each other and the teacher, was more commonly reported by the interviewees. For example, Participant E said, *"certainly there's some icebreaker kind of activity"* and explained that this was done because of the creative work that was a part of the course: *"We have to start right out of the gate, letting people know that this is a safe place where you can be vulnerable and talk about the kinds of things that you're making films about"*. In other words, they are getting to know each other not only for purely affective reasons, but because of the way that it will help them achieve the course goals. Participant L stated explicitly that *"there are exercises I do on the very first night to try to establish that bond among students […], it's mostly about trying to get them to know each other and appreciate each other and how dependent they're going to be upon each other."*

Finally, just as a pilot episode has to make an attempt to appeal to audiences in order to build up a viewership, Participant F explained that one of the aims of lesson one is

> *to get students excited about taking the course and motivated to learn what they can learn. It's an elective course and I know that students are shopping around. So, I want to give them a clear picture of what the course is and also try to sell it to them.*

This connects the TV serial to the HE course in financial terms – both are aware that they need to attract viewers/students if they are to be given the opportunity to continue telling their narrative.

4.4.6 Connecting Narrative Events

Having considered structure at the meta level of acts, I now turn to the more granular level of how individual moments and events within a narrative connect to each other. That a connection exists at all is perhaps a defining feature of narrative. Yorke (2014) reminds us that what in real life is commonly recognized as a logical

fallacy, i.e. that just because one event follows another event, it does not mean that it was caused by that event, is a necessary tool for shaping a story. As he puts it, "Narrative *is* cause and effect, linked into a chain; 'Post hoc ergo propter hoc' *is* storytelling" (p. 215). However, creating an engaging and compelling story is perhaps not as straightforward as simply describing an event, followed by the event it caused, followed by the event that that event caused, and so on. Lodge (2011) suggests that two additional factors are needed: surprise and suspense. The former can be done by making either the cause or effect unusual and unexpected by the audience, while the former achieves its power by delaying the result of the cause. These work best, though, when the reader or viewer is more actively engaged with, and therefore curious about, knowing what the effect of a particular cause will be. It is for this reason that Carroll (1984), among others, prefers to describe the connected events in terms of questions and answers, or what he terms an *erotetic* view of narrative.

4.4.6.1 Erotetic Narratives.

A clear example of the erotetic narrative is the narrative maxim known as Chekhov's Gun, in which "a gun placed on the wall during the first act of a play must be used by the third" (Delaney, 1990). Although originally intended by Chekhov as advice to fellow playwrights, it is now perhaps better known to audiences steeped in story consumption as a reminder that every element in a narrative has relevance. However, when we see a gun placed on the wall in the first act, we do not simply wait to discover its effect; rather, we ask ourselves a series of questions about who, when, where, how, and why. Erotetic narrative, therefore, views a story as a series of questions and answers, but these are not necessarily expressed in a sequential chain. As Carroll (2007) explains,

> [s]ome scenes or sequences evoke questions; others answer said questions directly. Still other scenes or sequences *sustain* earlier questions [...] Sometimes our questions are incompletely answered [...] One question may be answered in a way that introduces a new question or set of questions" (p. 5)

Furthermore, Carroll points out that not all questions and answers are equal in terms of the narrative weight they carry. Just as three-act structures can span the length of the entire story or complete within one scene, *"[s]ome questions orchestrate our attention to the emerging story from one end to the other; others organize large parts of the tale, but not the tale in its entirety, and others are of a smaller gauge"* (p. 5)*.* Waiting for the answers to all of these questions, not knowing how and when they will be answered, plays a large part in what makes a story engaging; conversely, we may lose interest quickly if the answer is not satisfactory or the question was never clear to begin with.

4.4.6.2 Plants and Payoffs.

Another set of terminology used to address the connections between events in a narrative is *plants* and *payoffs* (Berliner, 2017). Instead of viewing the events as simply causes and effects, they are more precisely explained as predictions or justifications. The plant is defined by Berliner (2020) as "a preparatory narrational device that creates an expectation – however weak, misleading, or unconscious – of a future plot outcome or the memory of which somehow warrants the outcome in retrospect" (p. 175), while the payoff resolves the plant or "draws on planted information to fulfill a narrative pattern" (p. 175). One difference with Carroll's notion of an erotetic narrative is that a plant, while usually overt, can also be hidden or misleading, which is less possible for a question. In addition, Berliner (2020) does not claim that every event in a narrative is either a plant or a payoff; some events can contribute key story or character information without having been predicted by, or justifying, another event.

However, like a question/answer approach to narrative design and interpretation, plants and payoffs can be used aesthetically to interest the audience. These are connected to the aforementioned surprise and suspense, but Berliner (2020) identifies specific cognitive effects to explain why they are effective tools for audience engagement. The first of these, focused attention, refers to plants and claims that they give "our minds something limited to focus on, reducing noise and distraction in the diegesis [storyworld]" (p. 183). In other words, they encourage us to pay attention to,

and shape the meaning of, the specific information we need to understand the payoff when it arrives. The second effect, hypothesis formation, is related to the first in that it defines the activity we are focusing our attention on. As Berliner explains, "[a] plant is by definition an incomplete stimulus: It promises understanding but holds back information that would allow us to complete the input" (p. 184). Therefore, it presents us with a cognitive challenge that we try to meet in the hope that it will be rewarded with increased comprehension.

The next effects refer to the payoff, starting with release from tension, which satisfies the efforts we put into hypothesizing about the plant. Berliner (2020) turns to psychology research to find evidence that there is a Goldilocks zone in terms of how long a story waits to provide the payoff: if it is too soon, there has not been enough time for the tension to build or for a well-formed hypothesis to be made; if it is too late, interest has waned. The ideal length of time will depend on many factors, including the narrative importance of the plant and the contextual information provided. The next effect, interconnection, refers to how the plant-and-payoff device gives a feeling of cohesion and unity to the narrative, which likely creates a more aesthetically pleasing experience than one would have with a story that felt disjointed and disparate. A third payoff effect is successful prediction, which is simply the pleasure that comes along with realizing that the hypothesis we have created is correct, while the fourth, incongruity resolution, happens when our hypothesis is wrong. This can still work as an aesthetic cognitive effect, however, because of the idea that disrupting expectations also carries benefits such as increasing attention and interest. In addition, Berliner (2020) points out that "[i]ncongruity prevents a narrative from becoming too orderly and straightforward. […] Incongruities exercise our cognitive ability and creative problem-solving capacities, adding richness and variety to a plot that might otherwise come off as dull and predictable." (p. 190).

4.4.7 Connecting Educational Events

I believe that both the concept of erotetic narrative and the plant-and-payoff device are useful and accurate ways to talk about the connections between events in a story. That these connections exist is clear, so the more aware that story designers are

of linking the events in ways that are not only meaningful but have a strong cognitive and aesthetic effect on the audience, the more engaging they can make their narratives. Questions and answers are of course a key aspect of education in general, used as they are as a way to test or check understanding of what is being learnt. At the same time, plants and payoffs can also be a part of the narratively designed educational experience, i.e. questions and answers referring to what is going to happen rather than to testing knowledge. However, relative to the other narrative elements I have looked at, there were fewer examples of this one found in my observation data. Those instances I did find are described as follows.

In some cases, teachers left very explicit plants when they explained that they would be returning to specific topics later in the lesson. For example, early in Participant H's lesson, there was an activity consisting of a discussion on autonomy in language education; during this activity, the teacher announced that in a subsequent activity they would look at how authenticity connected to the issue of autonomy that they were currently discussing. Although students could simply wait for that activity, the fact that the teacher let them know that this connection would be addressed potentially focused their attention on the aspects of autonomy that could connect to authenticity and began them forming hypotheses about what those connections might be. When the slide finally did appear, there was likely a release of tension for the students because they knew the connections would be revealed and a feeling of satisfaction for those whose hypotheses turned out to be correct. Interestingly, before revealing the connections, the teacher asked the students for their hypotheses and then commented on them – a type of interactivity not possible for TV or cinema audiences.

In other cases, the plants were less explicit. One example was Participant F's lesson on inclusive education that focused on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Before the class started, the teacher wrote at the top of the whiteboard: "Oppression is historical, ideological, institutional, and cultural." This was left on the whiteboard during the whole lesson, but never directly commented on. However, it is probable that most, if not all, the students noticed it and began to form hypotheses about what it meant or how it connected to other content throughout the lesson. As

Participant F explained to me, *"I don't typically board something that's up there for the whole lesson, but for this particular lesson I knew that I was going to want to refer to that point multiple times."* In fact, the various lesson activities did touch on historical, ideological, institutional, and cultural forms of oppression, so that each time one came up, students could mentally cross it off the list and anticipate what would come next. This also potentially produced a strong feeling of interconnection within the students, who could see how all the lesson activities were connected in a cohesive whole.

A final example comes from Participant A's lesson. The aim of this academic writing class was to help students understand the importance of citing references when using sources to support their ideas in an essay. To begin the lesson, the teacher showed students two images: one a photo of a young person in fashionable clothes, standing and looking at the camera, of the type seen on Instagram when someone is displaying their outfit; the other a short paragraph from an academic essay (which crucially featured no citations). The teacher then asked the students to find the key similarity between the two images, and then rejected all the various answers they came up with (while acknowledging their creativity). This was a plant, i.e. students assumed that there was a correct answer to the question, but it was also made clear that they would not be given it immediately, which caused them to continue their hypothesis formation and build tension towards the eventual payoff. However, it was not until near the end of the lesson that the teacher returned to the two images and again asked the students for their ideas about the key similarity. Although by this point they had done several activities on the topic of avoiding plagiarism and correct citation practice, some students struggled to find the correct answer, although many did. When it was finally revealed to them – that in both pictures, the sources, i.e. where the clothes came from in the fashion photo and where the ideas came from in the academic paragraph, were not included – there was a clear moment of realization (i.e. one of Participant A's 'aha!' moments; see Figure 4.3). This is an example of a delayed payoff that released tension and also featured incongruity resolution for those students who had not predicted the correct answer. Applying Berliner's (2020) analysis of cognitive effects, this may well result in students increasing their levels of

concentration and attention in future lessons, having now been made aware that the payoffs are not always predictable.

4.4.8 Conclusion

The specific narrative elements discussed in this section, and exemplified through empirical data, have hopefully strengthened the case for viewing the HE course as a narrative. Having established this premise, the next section will consider some of the implications of such a view.

Chapter 5: Implications

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will answer RQ3, which asks about the implications of approaching the HE course through a narrative lens. I have identified two broad areas for these implications. The first of these will consider support for teacher development that could be explored using elements of narrative theory as a reflective tool. The second will outline a potential 'narrative approach' to HE course design. These implications are informed by the findings regarding specific narrative elements present in HE course design, as reported in the previous chapter, and/or by the observations and interviews carried out as my empirical data generation. This chapter will begin with an overview of teacher reflection research, continue with implications of narrative elements for teacher reflection, and end with a proposal for guidelines of a narrative approach to HE course design.

5.2 Research into Teacher Reflection

Teacher reflection has been recognized as an important component of ongoing professional development, meaning that it has the purpose of leading to changes in one's beliefs and practice as a result of thinking about those beliefs and practice. Dewey (1933) pointed out that reflective thought was necessary for teachers to avoid routinizing their actions by asking them to consider what they did, why they did it, and what effects it had. Schön (1983) contributed the idea that teachers could reflect not only on things they had already done but could also develop the skill to reflect on actions they were currently doing and therefore make in-action decisions to correct a problematic activity or lesson.

Teacher reflection can take many forms. At one level, it could be said that teachers are always engaged in informal reflective practice in the way that they instinctively think about what went well or, perhaps more commonly, what went poorly and, consciously or subconsciously, adjust accordingly for the future. More formal forms of reflection include action research, which involves a cycle of reflection, hypothesis forming, planning, action, and so on (McNiff, 2013), and autoethnography,

which features a researcher placing themselves, their personal context and practice, as the central site of inquiry (Chang, 2008). Finally, a duoethnography consists of two researchers entering into dialogue to juxtapose their beliefs, experience, and practice with one another (Sawyer & Norris, 2012). Although this may not lead directly to explicit 'action points' in terms of iterating one's teaching, it is intended to raise awareness of one's own practice and principles in the context of someone else's. In addition to reflective practice conducted by experienced teachers, reflection is also an important part of teacher education (Ottesen, 2007) in the way that it helps new teachers find and understand the educational principles that they feel will best guide their future practice. Clarà et al. (2019) call for support for collaborative reflection in teacher education in order to guide those who are still developing as reflective practitioners. It should be pointed out that, although examples of teacher reflection will be provided in this section, the reflection itself will not be analyzed in any depth. Rather, the purpose here is to indicate the possibility of using a narrative lens to conduct teacher reflection.

5.3 Implications for Teacher Reflection

Although the goal of my interviews was not to have my participants engage in reflective practice about their course design, it was evident that this is what they were doing when I asked them to describe and explain various aspects of their teaching beliefs and practice. Of particular interest were the reflections that came about in their answers to questions specifically based on the notion of the HE course as a narrative. As mentioned, I explained my hypothesis to the interviewers as a way to contextualize these questions, so they responded with this notion in mind. I have already discussed the answers to some of the narratively focused questions in the previous section, specifically the ones about authorship, beginnings, and the episodic/continuous spectrum of serials. In all of these cases, the variety of answers demonstrated a range and depth of reflections that perhaps would not have been elicited without the context of the TV series analogy. For further evidence, I will provide one more example.

An aspect of narrative theory not discussed in depth in the section above on narrative elements aligned with the HE course is that of protagonist and antagonist. In my interviews I posed questions about these, specifically asking about their equivalents in the HE course. Briefly, the protagonist is the main character of the story, i.e. the one who's journey we follow most closely and the one whose challenge or goal is the main driving force of the plot (O'Neill, 2005). Protagonists do not always have to develop over the course of a story, but they typically do, having been changed by their experiences and the lessons they have learned. As may be expected, the majority of my interviewees (eight of the eleven asked) identified the students as the protagonist of their course. As Participant D put it, *"[t]hey're the ones that will achieve something in this course. They have to conquer their demons or slay a dragon."* Among these respondents, however, there was some disagreement over whether the protagonist was an individual student (e.g. Participant G), the students as a collective (e.g. Participant B), or what Participant F described as *"the conceptual student"*, i.e. not an actual person, but a theoretical student that the teacher creates the course for. Participant L explained that their protagonist changed each week depending on who was leading that lesson's main project, while Participant M said that *"it's the topic [of the course] and whether or not that subject is being communicated properly, whether it's being replicated properly, analyzed properly."* Finally, Participant H was quick to answer who the protagonist of their course was: *"Me. I mean, the students are important, but they're not going to survive into the next season. I will. I'm the star."* I believe that these answers reflect important distinctions in beliefs about the nature of an HE course. A more thorough piece of research using this form of teacher reflection could potentially uncover these distinctions.

A question that led to a similar, if not wider, range of responses concerned the antagonist of the course. The antagonizing forces of a narrative are, according to Yorke (2014), "the sum total of all the obstacles that obstruct a character [the protagonist] in the pursuit of their desires" (p. 7). These forces of antagonism are typically embodied in the form of a "bad guy", but they do not have to be. One maxim of successful storytelling, however, is that an effective antagonist is essential for a satisfying story; as Alfred Hitchcock put it, "the more successful the villain, the more successful the

picture" (Truffaut, 2015, p. 153). Yorke echoes this by claiming that the antagonist is the thing that animates the protagonist and spurs them into action. Therefore, a teacher identifying what they feel to be the antagonizing forces in their course would appear to be an effective way of revealing what they feel are the forces that both challenge and motivate their students (or whatever they believe their protagonist to be). Participant E identified the antagonist as time, while Participant D said it was the students' poor grammar and limited vocabulary (for a course in which students were studying in a second language). Participant F felt it was the power imbalance between students and teachers, and students and educational systems, whereas Protagonist H thought it was the setting (i.e. the institution) that was imposing constraints. Protagonist G embraced the role of the antagonist to activate protagonist students by identifying it as the curriculum: *"their goal is to pass and to learn the topic, so I set up the curriculum in such a way that the topic continually challenges them in what they think it is and in how easy it is to master."* Two interviewees said that the students were both protagonists and antagonists; as Participant J said, *"A student can control whether the class flows well and is successful, but they can also be the people who break the class depending on their attitude and their motivation"* and Participant N added, with a revealing final comment:

> *Oh, definitely the students. Yeah, their own brain growth, hormonal growth, I would say their developmental stage of their life is their own antagonist, and also whatever beliefs that they have about themselves, and their abilities, I definitely think that's a big piece that holds them back. So, that question is actually easy to answer, that they're their own worst enemy, usually. I mean, I hope it's not, yeah, I don't think it's me.*

Participant M echoed this last point when, after identifying various antagonizing forces, including lack of attention, distracting technology, time, and over-enrollment, concluded with: *"To me, the antagonist is everything, including potentially myself, that's getting in the way of the subject!"*

It is hoped that the variety of answers reported here provides evidence that framing reflection in narrative elements has sufficient potential to aid teacher

reflection. This could be informal or formal, involving, for example, teaching journals (Farrell, 2007), critical friends (Swaffield, 2004), or peer observations (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). The key point is that whoever is carrying out the reflection has a strong awareness of the HE course-as-narrative concept. With this understanding, the following questions can be used to guide the research/reflection:

- Who is the author of the course?
- Who or what is the protagonist of the course?
- Who or what is the antagonist of the course?
- Where does the course lie on the episodic/continuous spectrum of a serial?
- Does the course design follow the three-act structure at the level of the course? Of the lesson? Of the activity?
- Does the course design include plants and payoffs at the level of the course? Of the lesson? Of the activity?
- Does the course design include elements of surprise and suspense?
- Does the course effectively incorporate repetition and recaps?
- To what extent do students actively shape the direction of the course?

This is, of course, only a sample of narratively informed questions that could be used to aid better understanding of teacher beliefs and practice. Creative teachers and those with a strong comprehension of various elements of narrative theory could, without doubt, devise many more.

5.4 Implications for the practice of HE course design

Although I have acknowledged that much more research must be done into the concept of the HE course-as-narrative, I believe that the initial investigation that is the subject of this thesis has already suggested some implications for informing HE course design. However, it must be repeated that any suggestions made here are not intended to propose a 'best practices' approach. This is partly because of the lack of research in the topic, reflecting its exploratory nature, but also because it is unlikely that such an approach exists when it comes to designing HE courses. The variables that exist across subjects, institutions, and cultures make this unlikely. However, the

biggest factor is that teachers have very individual and personal approaches to their practice. Therefore, any recommendations are intended only for those whose perspective accords with the narrative view. Moreover, even for those teachers who do subscribe to viewing the course as a narrative, I accept that there are different possible ways of applying it. What follows is the suggestion of a narrative approach based only on my interpretation. Finally, it is acknowledged that the elements of this approach are not wholly novel or practices that many course designers do not already practice. The narrative perspective on them is simply intended as a way to put these practices under one umbrella and provide a reference point to help understand them. It may also provide a means of troubleshooting them when they are not working as intended by returning to how the wealth and depth of narrative theory may inform them.

5.4.1 A Narrative Approach to HE Course Design

1. Place your course in the middle of the continuous/episodic serial spectrum. This does not mean a compromise between the two, but an acknowledgement that every episode must stand on its own as a complete narrative, while also contributing in some way to the larger narrative of the course. Too far to the episodic end may result in some lessons that feel unconnected and disjointed from the course as a whole, whereas too far to the continuous end may lead to some lessons that feel like they are spinning wheels waiting for the next lesson and whose immediate purpose may be unclear. One implication of situating your course at the center of the spectrum is that the course as a whole has to have an overall shape to it, especially with regards to the final task, be it an exam or a project. This does not mean the end of the course has to be completely decided before it starts (not all showrunners know what will happen in the final episode when they start the season), but the course designer should have some idea of it in mind in order to make sure that each lesson is moving towards it. Another implication is that each lesson plan should include an explanation, explicit or not, of how, beyond just connecting to the previous and subsequent lessons, it fits into the overall narrative of the course.

2. <u>Design individual lessons and the entire course using the three-act structure.</u> This is connected to the previous point as knowing (at least roughly) the end of your course relies on structuring it as the third act, and having an episodic aspect to each lesson means that it also features all three acts. Using the three-act structure at both levels requires understanding the purpose of each act, including the function of the inciting incident, the midpoint, the climax, and the denouement. The inciting incident should make clear to students the main goal of the lesson/course, whereas the midpoint should clarify the scale of the challenge it presents. The climax should represent a moment where they have to ultimately demonstrate their ability to meet the main challenge. And the denouement, a stage often neglected, should allow space for reflection and an appreciation for what was achieved (or renewed determination to do better next time). Lesson and course design with the three-act structure requires treating both as a cohesive whole (a beginning, middle, and end) rather than a series of installments that happens to stop when the period or semester ends. This also means that care should be taken to ensure that the climax and denouement are included and neither are omitted due to timing issues. This could involve making improvised cuts to the second act, which is preferable to leaving students with a sudden and unsatisfactory ending.

3. <u>Design an opening lesson that answers the students' initial questions and previews the rest of the course.</u> Although the opening lesson typically constitutes act one of the course, I believe it is worthy of its own item on this list. By initial questions, I mean the concerns that students might have and the information they might want. The former probably includes who their classmates are and what the classroom is like. Therefore, give them opportunities to get to know each other (e.g. through ice-breaker activities) and to be aware of their site of study, e.g. use of specific technology, seating arrangements, etc. Familiarizing themselves with the characters with whom they will share their narrative and the setting in which it will take place may allow students to better focus and contextualize the events that make up their narrative. Previewing the course means letting them know what to expect (without giving too much away). This refers to both the themes and main

tasks of the course, but also its culture and tone. For example, if small group discussions will be a common feature throughout the course, include one in the first lesson, or encourage open communication with you through an activity designed to do so if it will be important that they feel comfortable communicating with you in the weeks to come.

4. <u>Structure connections between moments as plants and payoffs, incorporating elements of suspense and surprise.</u> Some ideas, information, or activities can be presented in such a way that causes students to ask themselves questions, for example about their meaning, their purpose, or their relevance. This focuses students' attention and starts a process of hypothesis generation, both desirable factors in the classroom that are part of the learning process. In addition, delaying the moment when these questions are answered builds suspense, which has cognitive rewards for students when the answers are eventually revealed. These rewards could come about either because hypotheses have been proven to be true, or because they were not and the actual answer uncovers previously unconsidered aspects of the topic. The latter also carries an element of surprise, thereby keeping students engaged and open to the possibility of being confronted with new and unexpected ideas at any moment.

5. <u>Include two types of repetitions: those that support retention of key information, and those that engender a sense of familiarity with the course.</u> For a variety of reasons, students may miss important content, instructions, or task guidelines the first (or second, or third) time they are given by the teacher. It is therefore worth building into lesson plans intentional and appropriately spaced repetitions of key information, preferably in a range of media, i.e. spoken, written, pictoral, etc. These repetitions do not have to come top-down from the teacher but could be elicited from the students. In addition, aspects of the course can be intentionally routinized so that students develop a feeling of ease within the setting and fellowship within the community of course members. Examples of this type of repetition could include the use of a consistent and recognizable style for presentation slides, the same wording of phrases used when giving instructions, or

even the use of a particular piece of music during the "opening credits" of a lesson. At the same time, occasionally breaking an established pattern, such as suddenly changing students' seating arrangements, can have the benefit of signaling a shift of focus in the course or, for example, that it has now entered its third act.

6. <u>Begin lessons with a recap that recalls for students content relevant for what they will later do.</u> A further type of repetition is the opening recap, in which ideas, information, and/or activities from previous lessons can be brought up as reminders. The components of the recap should be carefully considered and consist of elements that either will be relevant for the lesson immediately to come, or that may not reappear for a while but should not fall out of the students' medium- or long-term memory. Reminders could come in the form of presentation slides used in previous lessons, verbal reminders, props, etc. In addition, their meaning can be made either explicit or implicit; in the case of the former, students will be waiting for their appearance, in the case of the latter, students will also begin forming hypotheses about their relevance while they wait.

7. <u>Give students autonomy to help shape the direction of the course and be flexible enough to make changes based on student response.</u> If the HE course is a narrative, it appears evident that students play the dual roles of audience and protagonist. With this in mind, it cannot be ignored that they have some agency in the way that the story of the course plays out, even if this is expressed only through their levels of attendance or effort put into assignments. Considering the fact that a protagonist generally has agency at an even higher level than this, and with an understanding of ergodic narratives that are designed to let the reader decide how they will navigate the text, the teacher should create an educational experience that intentionally and clearly allows for students to play a role in shaping the course narrative. This should include selection of topics and task types, within parameters, and could even extend to means of assessment. The overall framework of the course should still be created by the course designer, but allowing for student autonomy within it. Another type of flexibility that should be shown is by the teacher when they become aware of how students are responding

to course content and activities. This means that edits can be made, new lessons created, or a completely different direction taken if necessary. Student response can come through informal noticing by the teacher, reflection activities, or surveys. In addition, the teacher could create and encourage the use of paratexts in the form of online forums in which students share their thoughts about the course.

8. <u>Experiment.</u> The previous suggestions are based on a very narrow set of elements taken from the vast, and growing, field of narrative theory. Course designers could take any of the others and attempt to apply them to their courses. One example would be using not just the three-act structure to plan a lesson or course, but the five-act structure, the seven-act structure, or even more complex systems such as Dan Harmon's eight-part story circle (O'Meara, 2015). In addition, beyond the idea of structures is the concept of story types. Booker (2004) identified seven, including 'Rags to Riches' and 'Voyage and Return', and each of these could also be used to design the stages of a course. For one final example, it should be mentioned that the so-called 'art film' is one that eschews many aspects of what we could call more traditional narratives by, for example, not providing a pay-off for all of its plants, thereby emphasizing ambiguity over closure (Buckland, 2021). I have no doubt that a creative teacher could design a compelling and meaningful course based on this model.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Summary

The overall goal of this thesis has been to explore the ostensibly very simple premise that the HE course is a narrative. However, as this is, to my knowledge, a novel proposition, and as my background is in HE course design and not narrative theory, it required assembling a hypothesis based first on a foundational investigation into what a narrative is. This meant familiarizing myself with the historical and theoretical background of narratives, after which I arrived at the following definition: a narrative is a designed experience of a story. Although this differs in several respects from the definitions given by most contemporary narratologists (and it poses the further question of what is meant by a story), I do not think it is incompatible with these, but rather puts the focus on the intended effect of the narrative experience on its audience. Based on this, I then argued that the HE course meets this definition because it constitutes a designed experience (in this case, with intended educational outcomes) in a format that uses the main features of a story, i.e. characters, settings, and a chain of connected events. Further to this, I discussed specific narrative elements that aligned with the HE course, achieved through applying data generated from observations in natural settings and teacher interviews. This started with identifying the TV series as the most appropriate narrative model to follow due to its format. Central to the analogy with the TV show was a discussion of the nature of seriality and how it affects the audience experience, including issues of memory and the relationship between individual installments and the series as a whole. I then looked at the ergodic narrative as a way to consider how students help shape the narrative through their engagement with, and reactions to, the course as initially presented to them, resulting in changes to the prepared events and outline by the course designer. I also explored how common narrative structure, i.e. the beginning, middle, and end, and their respective roles and functions, along with intentional connections among discrete events within the story in the form of plants and payoffs, influence the audience experience, and how equivalents of these can be seen in the HE course.

Finally, I made a case for the contributions that these findings could make in the form of implications for teacher reflective practice and the actual practice of HE course design. However, these implications were put forth with the acknowledgement that, due to the highly exploratory nature of my research, no significant claims are being made as to their effectiveness; rather, if reflective teachers, higher education researchers, and/or course designers were to implement any of these suggestions, it should be done in a way that continues in the spirit of exploration and experimentation. Having said that, my investigation into narrative theory and its alignment with course design has led me to believe that experimenting in these areas may have some value, if only because of the seemingly self-evident connections that exist between the two. Moreover, even if the narrative view of the HE course ultimately proves tenuous, I am of the opinion that taking a fresh perspective on one's practice and beliefs has benefits in terms of motivation and creativity.

At the same time, the discovery early in my initial investigation into narrative theory of the notion of seriality, as epitomized by the TV series, felt to me like a significant discovery in terms of narrativizing the HE course. Beyond the structural similarities with a semester-long, once-a-week set of installments, the serial nature of complex TV series seemed a more than appropriate paradigm to help me make sense of how to position individual lessons within their larger aggregation. In truth, the other key narrative elements that I focused on all emerged from the central concept of seriality, from the repetition and recaps necessary for supporting serial memory, to the plants and payoffs that connect temporally separated events, to the three-act structure that organizes the flow of the story, to the ergodicity that allows students' active involvement in it. As stated before, many of these concepts as applied to education likely come naturally to many experienced teachers; however, I think that this is truer at the lesson level than at the course level, which, perhaps due to its extended nature, requires more conscious awareness of the principles of seriality for effective implementation. It is therefore hoped that the juxtaposition of serial narrative elements and the HE course explained in this thesis, along with the authentic examples of them described, leads to further exploration and experimentation.

6.2 Suggestions for Future Research

In this section, I will consider how the identification of narrative elements in the HE course might suggest future research into better understanding effective HE course design. One assumption behind this is that the narrative elements discussed in this thesis, and in particular those relevant to TV serials, have been proven, in many cases, to be successful at engaging and retaining audiences.

Although I believe that any kind of research into course design could be carried out within a narrative paradigm, because of its relatively novel nature, it is perhaps currently better suited to exploratory studies. Walker (2002) points out that good research should "build on previous research and theory" (p. 166), but since there is little in this field, qualitative and less structured studies seem more appropriate. With this in mind, the type of research I would like to suggest would focus on observational methods, supported by interviews with relevant stakeholders, including course designers, students, and course managers. This bears obvious similarity to the research carried out for the current study, which could be used as a starting point to build upon. Although I did not create a very formal observation tool for my data generation, preferring to let my exploratory note-taking be guided by my awareness of narrative elements rather than confined by them, future research could do so to good effect. This means creating an observation tool designed to collect field notes on specific narrative elements; while quantitative data regarding, for example, the number of repetitions in a lesson or over a course, may be informative, with a narrative, the *how* is just as important as the *what,* so qualitative notes are likely to prove more useful for a narrative interpretation. In addition, documents in the form of lesson plans and syllabuses could be examined to determine a teacher's planned course design, before observations reveal the operational design (Hale, 2007).

Observational and document data could be generated and used in different ways and for different purposes. For example, a single lesson by multiple teachers could be observed and compared or a longitudinal case study could follow a single teacher over the course of an entire semester. These could be done to continue developing an understanding of how the HE course functions as a narrative, to assess

to what extent a lesson or course incorporates the type of narrative tools that make a story more or less effective, or to evaluate the effectiveness, in terms of achieving course aims or other measurements, of a narratively designed course. In addition, research could focus on the course itself as a series of events, but it could also center the teacher who designs it, or the students who experience it. Some specific narrative elements that could be investigated in terms of their applicability to HE course design include the following:

- the difference between courses on the more episodic and those on the more continuous ends of the serial spectrum
- the effects of different lengths of gaps between plants and payoffs
- the effectiveness of different types of repetitions within and across lessons
- how to effectively construct recaps that prepare students for upcoming activities and content
- the effectiveness of an activity, a lesson plan, and a syllabus that follow the three-act structure, including an inciting incident, a midpoint, a climax, and a denouement
- the extent to which students are given autonomy to make decisions about the direction of the course
- the effects of teachers making mid-lesson and mid-course decisions to make changes

6.3 Limitations

As with all research of this nature, decisions must be made regarding the overall scope of the final report. This means that necessary cuts have to be made, potentially leaving large gaps in terms of detailing my research process, elements of narrative theory, and further implications. For example, I would very much like to have included a discussion on different character types in stories (analogous to types of teachers and classmates), as well as listing some of the implications on narrative research, i.e. what narrative theorists could gain from investigating the HE course as a story.

In addition, there were flaws in my research design and execution that limited my ability to generate more valid data. The biggest of these was not observing and interviewing course designers from a wider variety of disciplines. Due to conducting most of my research in Japan and having limited access to English-speaking HE teachers, I had to rely on opportunistic sampling to a degree, which resulted in my participants mainly working in the field of academic skills and language education. My other site of research also limited me to participants from the film and TV studies department of one university. Although I was not considering specific course content when observing lessons, this may certainly have played a part in the type of narrative elements on display. As a result, I cannot reliably make any claims to the generalizability of my findings outside of the disciplines in which the teachers I interviewed work. A second flaw concerns the actual procedure of the observations and interviews I conducted. Although I intentionally used very broad research instruments for these, due to still learning about narrative theory at the time, a more thorough process would have allowed me to conduct two rounds of data generation. The first would have been similar to what I actually did, allowing me to be aware of which specific narrative elements I wanted to look for and ask about. The second round could have then used this information to create more precise tools and therefore generate more focused and valid data.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

The impetus for this study was not only a desire to improve my course design practice; it was also my fascination with, and strong appetite for, stories. A concern I had when starting this project was that learning too much about narrative theory and the way that stories are structured would damage this interest. However, if anything, it has done the opposite, as well as providing me with a fresh perspective into my profession of writing and delivering lesson and course plans. Since beginning this research, without making it part of my actual study, I have found myself approaching my course design through a narrative lens. This means trying to implement some of the implications I discussed in the previous chapter, which I think overall has been a benefit to my teaching. However, a further aspect of experimenting with a narrative approach is the way that it has led me to focus more on my students' perspective. If a

storyteller designs a narrative experience for their audience, they must be very aware of how every aspect of what they communicate affects that audience. As a teacher, I am fortunate to be able to know each member of my audience by name and therefore to consider how the experience I am designing affects them individually.

This has helped me consider them, ironically, not simply as characters in a story, but as complete individuals trying to navigate their way through one of the many narratives of their lives. When thinking about why the three-act structure has engaged audiences for so long and what it tells us about ourselves, I started to consider the three acts of our lives. It is hopefully not unreasonable to view the inciting incident at the end of the first act as the moment we leave home to make our own way in the world – a step taken by many when they begin their journey into higher education.

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Appendix A: Participant Information

Pseudonym	Highest degree	Country of institution of employment	Position	Course title and level of observed lesson
Participant A	MA in Linguistics (TESOL), MA in Art History	Japan	Lecturer	Academic Communication 1 (undergraduate)
Participant B	MA in TESOL	Japan	Instructor by Contractual Appointment	Academic Reading and Writing (undergraduate)
Participant C		Japan	Lecturer	IELTS I (undergraduate)
Participant D	MA in Language Testing and Assessment	Japan	Lecturer	Academic Communication 1 (undergraduate)
Participant E	MFA in Cinema Production	USA	Associate Professor of Production	Directing the Short Film III: Directing Actors (graduate)
Participant F	MA in TESOL	Japan	Lecturer	IELTS I (undergraduate)
Participant G	unknown	USA	Lecturer	n/a
Participant H	PhD in Applied Linguistics and TESOL	Japan	Associate Professor	Affective Factors: Psychology of Language Learning (graduate)
Participant J	MA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL	Japan	Lecturer	(undergraduate)
Participant K	MFA in Film Production	USA	Professor of Production and Associate Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Introduction to Cinematography (graduate)
Participant L	M.S. in Communication	USA	Graduate Director, Clinical Assistant Professor	Production Bootcamp: The Film Crew at Work (undergraduate)
Participant M	MFA in Film and Television	USA	Clinical Assistant Professor of Production	n/a
Participant N	MFA in Film Production	USA	Assistant Professor of Production	Women Warriors – Who's Telling the Story? (undergraduate)

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Matthew Schaefer

Interview Question Guide

Interviews will be semi-structured, using some, but not necessarily all, of the questions below, as well as unscripted follow-up questions based on interviewees' responses. Interviews will consist of three parts: the first based on the observed lesson taught by the interviewee, the second based on their general lesson planning strategies, and the third based on their general course design strategies.

A. The observed lesson

1. According to my notes, your lesson consisted of the following activities in this order: [*read from notes*]. Do you agree? If not, what do you think was different? [*Clarify if they're talking about the order of activities or the content*]

2. If you had a pre-written lesson plan, how closely did the actual sequence of activities follow that plan?

3. How does this lesson continue from the previous lesson and how will it connect to the subsequent lesson?

B. Lesson Planning

1. Please create a graphic representation of how you view your lesson at the design stage. This could be a drawing, a diagram, a line, a table, shapes, or anything else.

2. [*Include a transition*] What approaches do you take to your lesson design?

3. Do you have specific lesson planning principles that you regularly apply?

4. Do you plan in detail or in outline, or somewhere in between?

5. What importance do you put on the beginning and ending of lessons?

6. In what cases do you make changes to your prepared lesson plan?

C. Course Design

1. Please create a graphic representation of how you view your lesson at the design stage? Again, this could be a drawing, a diagram, a line, table, shapes, or anything else.

2. What approaches do you take to your course design?

3. Do you have specific course design principles that you regularly apply?

Appendix C: Ethics Application Form

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)
ETHICS APPLICATION FORM FOR STAFF and PhD STUDENTS

Project Details	Answer
Name of applicant/researcher	Matthew Y. Schaefer
Title of Project:	Developing a Narrative Approach to Higher Education Course Design
Department	Educational Research
Appointment/position held by applicant within FASS or LUMS	PhD Student

Type of study

☐ Involves existing documents/data only or the evaluation of an existing project with no direct contact with human participants. **Complete sections one, two and four of this form**

☒ Includes direct involvement by human subjects (including but not limited to interviews, completing questionnaires, social media and other internet based research).
Complete sections one, three and four of this form.

Contact details
Contact information for applicant:
E-mail: myschaefer1920@gmail.com
Telephone: +81 (0)90 5625-5336 (please give a number on which you can be contacted at short notice)
Lancaster University Address: n/a

PhD Students
Complete this section if this is a PhD student project

3. **Project supervisor(s) names**: Natasa Lackovic

1. **Summary of research in lay terms, including aims (maximum length 150 words):**
   This research aims to develop an approach to higher education course design based on principles of narrative theory. It begins by reviewing narrative theory literature in order to: a. establish in what way the higher education course meets the definition of a narrative; and b. identify what elements of narrative theory could be applied to such a narrative. One assumption behind the research is that experienced educators already include narrative elements in their course design and teaching (albeit unintentionally). Therefore, I will collect two forms of data involving participation from experienced university teachers: lesson observations and follow-up interviews. I will use these data to uncover real-life examples of the use of narrative elements. Finally, a "narrative approach" to course design will be described based on the literature review and collected data.

2. **Anticipated project dates (month and year only)**
   Start date: December, 2022   **End date:** September, 2024

3. **Please describe briefly the intended human participants (including number, age, gender, and any other relevant characteristics):**

The intended human participants would be 12 university teachers and students from one of each of their classes (probably 12-30 students per class). Both teachers and students would include a mix of genders. All teachers would be adults. Most, if not all, students would be over 18, though it is possible that some would be 17.

4. **Are members of the public involved in a research capacity, for example as data collector (e.g. participatory research) and if so, do you anticipate any ethical issues resulting from this?**

No

5. **How will participants be recruited and from where?**

Teachers will be recruited directly from my peer group, i.e. current or former colleagues who meet the criteria of experienced university teachers, which I define as those with five or more years of full-time teaching experience at a university. The reason to recruit in this way is mainly for convenience, as I already have their contact information and being acquainted makes communication regarding scheduling of observation and interview times easier. In addition, using known peers as participants has no detrimental effect on my data collection. I currently have a long list of 30 teachers to be contacted, from whom I hope to reach my target of 12 actual participants.

6. **Briefly describe your data collection methods, drawing particular attention to any potential ethical issues.**

Data collection will involve two steps. The first is live observations of one lesson by each of the participant teachers. This would be a full lesson (probably 90 or 100 minutes long), involving students, in which I take notes to how the lesson is structured. This will be done by noting the format and timing of lesson activities and how all of the activities together form the structure of the lesson. The second step of data collection is a one-to-one interview (approximately 30-45 minutes) with each of the teachers, taking place as soon after the lesson observation as possible. These interviews will consist of three parts. First, I will use my observation notes as prompts to ask whether the lesson structure I identified matches what the teacher thought or intended. Second, I will ask the teacher to describe their general strategy when writing a lesson plan, with a focus on the sequencing of activities. Finally, I will ask them to describe their general strategy when designing a semester-long course, again with a focus on sequencing. The interviews will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed, via the Otter.ai speech-to-text service, for easier analysis. The privacy policy for this service can be found at: https://otter.ai/privacy-policy. Before each interview, I will ask the teacher to not refer to any students by name or to provide any personal or identifying information about them.

7. **Consent**

7a. **Will you take all necessary steps to obtain the voluntary and informed consent of the prospective participant(s) or, in the case of individual(s) not capable of giving informed consent, the permission of a legally authorised representative in accordance with applicable law?**

Yes

   If yes, please go to question 7b.
   If no, please go to question 7c.

v02-19

7b. Please explain the procedure you will use for obtaining consent?

Please include sample participant information sheets (PIS) and consent forms in your application. If applicable, please explain the procedures you intend to use to gain permission on behalf of participants who are unable to give informed consent. Please include copies of any relevant documentation.

A PIS and consent form (both attached) will be given to each participant teacher to complete at least four weeks in advance of the observation and interview. In addition, the teacher will be asked to give copies of the PIS and consent form to each student in the observed class for completion. If there are any students who are expected to attend the observed lesson but have not completed the consent form due to absences, I will bring extra copies of the PIS and consent form on the day of the observation and give the student the option of completing it before the start of the lesson.

8. What discomfort (physical and psychological eg distressing, sensitive or embarrassing topics), inconvenience or danger could be caused by participation in the project beyond the risks encountered in normal life?

None

Please indicate plans to address these potential risks.
State the timescales within which participants may withdraw from the study, noting your reasons.

Participants are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the lesson observation and interview and up to four weeks following their interview.

9. How will you protect participants' confidentiality and/or anonymity in data collection (e.g. interviews), data storage, data analysis, presentation of findings and publications?

No names of participants will be recorded in any of the data collection. All efforts will be made to omit content that potentially reveals participants' identity. However, if such information does appear in the collected data, it will be deleted and not included in any data analysis.

10. Do you anticipate any ethical constraints relating to power imbalances or dependent relationships, either with participants or with or within the research team?

No

11. What potential risks may exist for the researcher and/or research team?

Please indicate plans to address such risks (for example, noting the support available to you/the researcher; counselling considerations arising from the sensitive or distressing nature of the research/topic; details of the lone worker plan you or any researchers will follow, in particular when working abroad.

None

12. Whilst there may not be any significant direct benefits to participants as a result of this research, please state here any that may result from participation in the study.

Being interviewed about their own teaching and course design may give teacher participants the opportunity to reflect on their practice. This reflection may have professional development benefits.

v02-19

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)
ETHICS APPLICATION FORM FOR STAFF and PhD STUDENTS

Project Details	Answer
Name of applicant/researcher	Matthew Y. Schaefer
Title of Project:	Developing a Narrative Approach to Higher Education Course Design
Department	Educational Research
Appointment/position held by applicant within FASS or LUMS	PhD Student

Type of study
☐ Involves existing documents/data only or the evaluation of an existing project with no direct contact with human participants. **Complete sections** one**,** two **and** four **of this form**
☒ Includes direct involvement by human subjects (including but not limited to interviews, completing questionnaires, social media and other internet based research).
  Complete sections one**,** three **and** four **of this form.**

Contact details
Contact information for applicant:
E-mail: myschaefer1920@gmail.com
Telephone: +81 (0)90 5625-5336 (please give a number on which you can be contacted at short notice)
Lancaster University Address: n/a

PhD Students
Complete this section if this is a PhD student project

3. **Project supervisor(s) names**: Natasa Lackovic

1. **Summary of research in lay terms, including aims (maximum length 150 words):**
   This research aims to develop an approach to higher education course design based on principles of narrative theory. It begins by reviewing narrative theory literature in order to: a. establish in what way the higher education course meets the definition of a narrative; and b. identify what elements of narrative theory could be applied to such a narrative. One assumption behind the research is that experienced educators already include narrative elements in their course design and teaching (albeit unintentionally). Therefore, I will collect two forms of data involving participation from experienced university teachers: lesson observations and follow-up interviews. I will use these data to uncover real-life examples of the use of narrative elements. Finally, a "narrative approach" to course design will be described based on the literature review and collected data.

2. **Anticipated project dates (month and year only)**
   Start date: December, 2022   **End date:** September, 2024

v02-19

Appendix D: Consent Form

Lancaster University

CONSENT FORM

Research Project Title: *Developing a Narrative Approach to Higher Education Course Design*
Name of Researcher: Matthew Y. Schaefer
Email: m.schaefer@lancaster.ac.uk

Please read each point in the table below carefully. If you consent, please tick the corresponding box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the above research project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within four weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason, at which time my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included, and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles, publications, or presentations without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to Lancaster University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____   _____   _____ (DD/MM/YY)
Name of Participant   Signature   Date

Researcher's Statement:
I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

_____   _____   _____ (DD/MM/YY)
Name of Researcher   **Signature**   **Date**

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original will be kept in the files of the researcher.

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet

Lancaster University

Participant Information Sheet

Research Project Title: *Developing a Narrative Approach to Higher Education Course Design*
Name of Researcher: Matthew Schaefer

I am a PhD student in the Higher Education: Research Evaluation and Enhancement program in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about the designing and teaching of university courses. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to understand teachers' approach to the designing and teaching of university courses. My study is not to judge or evaluate your teaching. It is an informal conversation about how you understand and feel about some of the ideas and questions I'll ask concerning course design, planning, and execution.

Why have you been invited?
I have approached you because my research investigates approaches to university course design and teaching, and you are an experienced university teacher, who has for several years been designing and conducting semester-long courses for groups of students.

What will you be asked to do if you take part?
If you decide to take part, it will involve the following two phases of data collection:
1) The first step would involve me conducting an observation of one of your classes in the Spring, 2023 semester.
2) The second step would involve an interview with you as soon as possible after the observation. The interview will be done in person if possible, and via Zoom if not. The interview itself would last approximately 30-45 minutes, although the total time investment may be up to about 60 minutes.
You would not need to prepare anything for either the observation or interview.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
Taking part in this study, specifically the interview, will allow you to engage in informal reflective practice regarding your beliefs and practice of higher education teaching and course design. In addition, your participation will potentially contribute to our field's understanding of course design and teaching.

Do you have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if you change your mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to four weeks after taking part in the study (i.e. the date of the interview).

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What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any disadvantages or risks involved with taking part.

Will your data be identifiable?
No. The data will be reported anonymously. After the observation and interview, only I, as the researcher conducting this study, and potentially my supervisor (name and contact details below), will have full access to the data generated. I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will the information you have shared be used and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the data for research purposes, including my PhD thesis and potentially academic publications, such as journal articles and/or book chapters, and academic conference presentations. When writing up the findings from this study, I may reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I may use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in any publications and/or presentations. If anything that you tell me in the interview or that I observe in the lesson suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my supervisor. I would also inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How will your data be stored?
I will take handwritten notes of the observed lesson and I will audio record the interview for subsequent transcription. I will assign pseudonyms to all files. Your data will be stored in encrypted files and on a password-protected computer. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. In accordance with Lancaster University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if you have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me at: m.schaefer@lancaster.ac.uk
You may also contact my supervisor with the following information:
Name: Natasa Lackovic
Email: n.lackovic@lancaster.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:
Name: Paul Aswin (Head of Department)
Email: paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights, please visit: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

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Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

v19-09-19

Appendix F: Ethics Approval Document

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH | LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

May 2023

Dear Matthew

Thank you for submitting your ethics application and additional information for **'Developing a Narrative Approach to Higher Education Course Design'**. The information you provided has been reviewed and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As Principal Investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer (Dr Murat Oztok or Dr Natasa Lackovic).
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to **Dr Natasa Lckovic** for approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you require further information about this.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Doherty
Programme Co-ordinator
PhD in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement

Appendix G: Ryan's (2007) List of Conditions for Narrativity

Spatial dimension

(1) Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.

Temporal dimension

(2) This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.

(3) The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.

Mental dimension

(4) Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.

(5) Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents.

Formal and pragmatic dimension

(6) The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.

(7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld.

(8) The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience. (pp. 28-29)