



Narrative lesson planning

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explain a new lesson-planning approach.

This article introduces an original lesson-planning approach that we call ‘narrative lesson planning’ (NLP). NLP is an intuitive, flexible alternative to the traditional tabular lesson plan that enables the planning teacher to write about a future lesson using discursive text, thereby helping them to make explicit their choice of activities, their justifications for these activities and their underlying beliefs and assumptions. By doing so, it enables the teacher, and anyone supporting their development (teacher trainer, line manager) to explore their thinking process in greater depth and clarity and aid their development more effectively than standard lesson-planning approaches. We have used NLP in our own teaching and research involving English language teachers in a range of institutional and national contexts effectively. Below we will describe the elements of a narrative lesson plan, explain how and why it may be useful, offer suggestions for future use and also provide links to free guidelines

and examples for teachers and teacher educators to make use of. We are keen to get feedback on the approach from colleagues around the world. But first a little background.

A brief history of NLP

We began exploring the idea of a narrative lesson plan during our research into the lesson observation process. We were keen to understand whether a more intuitive, narrated approach to lesson planning might fit into a wider framework that we have been developing for teacher self-observation that we have called ‘narrative self-observation’ (Kamali & Anderson, under review). In our background research, we uncovered a similar approach that Marie Doyle and her colleagues called a ‘story lesson plan’ and had previously used in preservice teacher education in the USA (see Doyle 1997; Doyle & Holm 1998). Their approach involved three steps:

- **Step 1:** Write a lesson plan as a narrative containing the elements of setting (location), characters (learners) and plot (what happened).
- **Step 2:** Teach the lesson.
- **Step 3:** Describe the lesson as it actually happened; this could then be compared to the plan, both by the teacher and their mentor.

In their research on story lesson planning, they found that by imagining the future lesson as a story, their preservice teachers devoted more thought to the details of the lesson procedure, the learners as individuals and their own emotions than during traditional lesson planning. This enabled them to better predict the unexpected occurrences and affordances of the lesson and thereby learn usefully from the experience. Although we found their research insightful and encouraging, our procedure and justification for using NLP differs somewhat from theirs for reasons

we justify below, yet we nonetheless acknowledge the important influence of Doyle's work.

So what is a narrative lesson plan?

Our working definition of a narrative lesson plan is a **predicted description and discussion of a future lesson using continuous, cohesive prose**. By planning in this way, the teacher discusses the lesson holistically, with all the elements (students, activities, materials, spaces and time) considered together, rather than summarised into boxes and bullet points. A narrative plan prioritises the coherence of the activities and the decisions that underpin them over the visual clarity and textual brevity of the tabular lesson plans, which we recognise serves an important, albeit rather different, function. Narrative lesson plans both follow and facilitate the natural thought processes of the teacher while planning – their 'visualisation' of the lesson (Doyle 1997) – enabling them to make clear their understanding of the relationship between key elements involved (learners and their needs; teacher intentions; lesson activities; and materials). Because they follow the teacher's natural thought processes, we have found NLPs to be relatively fast and easy to draft, and this drafting can be done either in written or spoken form, with the option to make use of speech-to-text auto-transcription in the latter case.

What are the elements of a narrative lesson plan?

A narrative lesson plan is presented in paragraphs with headings (i.e. avoiding tables or tick boxes). One can start planning at any point in the lesson; for example, with the activities themselves before moving on to other parts of the plan. Nonetheless, to ensure ease of use for readers, we recommend the following order:

1. **Learners:** a paragraph or two describing the learners in the class; the teacher may want to choose three–six key learners to discuss in more detail; these learners can be varied in their attributes and may serve as key focuses for teacher and observer attention during the lesson.



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2. **Background:** a paragraph describing what has happened with the class leading up to this lesson (i.e. the 'timetable fit')
3. **Intended goals:** a sentence or two stating the teacher's hopes, aspirations or aims for the lesson, expressed realistically and naturally, not as bullet-pointed behavioural outcomes
4. **Materials:** a sentence or two discussing key resources to be used in the lesson
5. **Activities:** this replaces the procedure table in traditional lesson planning as the 'body' of the plan. The teacher writes one or two paragraphs of continuous text for each activity, linking their description of what they plan to do and why (i.e. justification), while also discussing potential affordances, challenges and other considerations (possible occurrences and responses) as appropriate.
6. **Reflections:** these are completed after the lesson and may include

both immediate ('hot') reflection and subsequent ('cold') reflection, completed a day or two later. They can be brief or more extensive, but should involve an honest discussion of whatever the teacher feels is important to record, for example, observations on how they feel the lesson went, any challenges or unexpected successes experienced, related emotions and relevant discussion of the learners.

7. **Takeaways:** typically written some time after the lesson, the takeaways are the learning points (if any) that the teacher feels will be useful in future. If a post-lesson discussion with an observer is planned, these takeaways may emerge from this discussion.

This list of sections is not exhaustive; others may be useful. In our experience, it may take between 30 minutes (informal) and two hours (more formal, more detailed) to complete a narrative

lesson plan and they may range from 900 to 2,500 words in length, when written. If audio recorded, it may take as little as 15 minutes to talk through the lesson, although this may produce over 3,000 words if transcribed! We have developed brief guidelines for teachers and teacher educators interested in trying out NLP in their own context, including useful sentence frames to use in NLPs and an example narrative lesson plan, available here: https://www.jasonanderson.org.uk/downloads/NLP_guide.pdf

Initial feedback from colleagues

As well as finding NLP useful in our own work as teachers and teacher educators, we have also shared the tools for NLP with colleagues, both in our own institutions and further afield, and have received some encouraging responses. Two experienced

teachers working in Türkiye identified several advantages over traditional lesson planning. One teacher mentioned the opportunities it provides to express our full range of emotions (including anxiety before an observation) and experiences when planning, the opportunity to use an informal register when writing and the ease of writing:

I was able to write my feelings and my experience, everything actually I wanted to write, I wrote [it] . . . Because it wasn't formal, I think, and it doesn't have to be very long, that's why I like it, actually.

– Teacher A

The other teacher, who recorded his plan orally before transcribing it, found NLP to be a relaxing, therapeutic learning experience that he enjoyed taking time over, as opposed to the burden of completing a formal lesson plan:

I was more relaxed . . . if a trainer or a teacher takes this as a real journey, like, have a coffee and almost like therapy, speaking to themselves, it's very rewarding.

– Teacher B

An experienced teacher educator working in the UK also chose to plan her lesson orally while writing informal notes on a whiteboard, revealing the nonlinear planning process of many experienced teachers (Clarke & Peterson, 1986:255–296) that contrasts starkly with the forced linearity of traditional lesson plans (see Figure 1). She reflected that she 'really enjoyed the process'. Her subsequent plan revealed evidence of metacognitive reflection upon her planning practices (i.e. thinking about her thinking of the lesson). The extract below illustrates this with regard to the perennial challenges of time management and activity choice:

One of the things as a teacher that I often end up doing, is spending too much time on the initial stages of the lesson, I think. I mean, I've got reasons for it. . . . But at the same time I only have an hour and because this is a short course, I've got to move on tomorrow. So the priority for the learners, what they told me is: We want to do it and get feedback on it, we want more practice feedback. So that suggests to me, that I might need to sort of narrow down and not try to pump too much into those initial stages of the lesson.

– Teacher C

While this feedback on NLP should be treated only as anecdotal (as no formal research methodology was used), it is encouraging, indicating that NLP offers a potentially more natural, enjoyable and formatively rewarding process than traditional lesson planning.

Advantages of NLP

The following advantages of NLP draw upon our own experiences as both teachers and teacher educators for colleagues using NLPs, as well as from the wider literature on language teaching, teacher education and lesson planning as a tool to support these.

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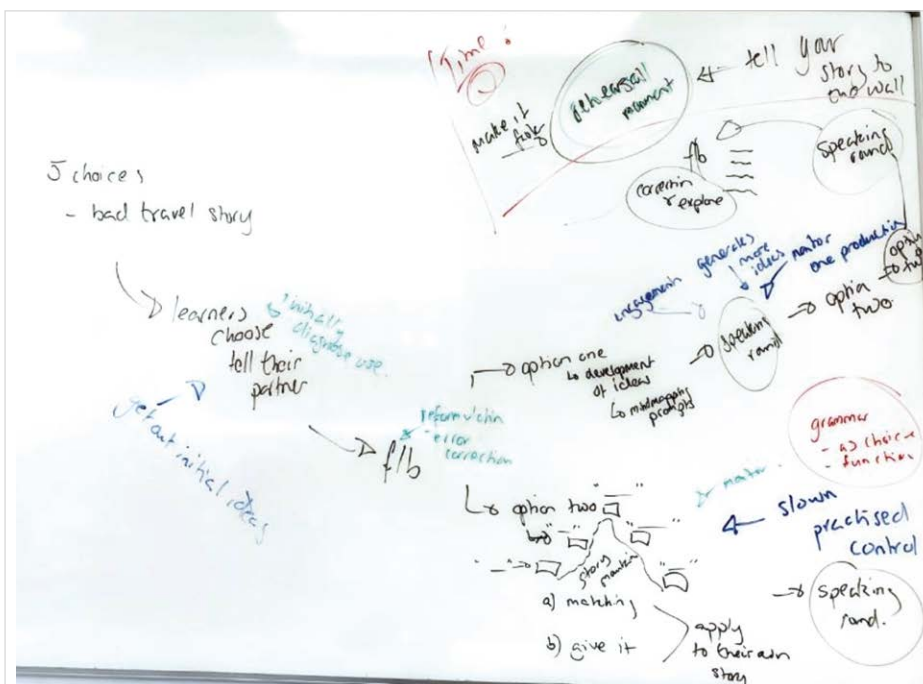


Figure 1: Example of accompanying board work for NLP

Firstly, the process of NLP mirrors how many of us typically plan lessons, by ‘imagining the lesson before it happens’ (Scrivener 2005:109); it cultivates lesson planning as a thinking skill over and above lesson planning as an administrative task (Anderson, 2015; Doyle & Holm, 1998).

Secondly, by describing the lesson using cohesive text, NLP helps us to link together the elements that are often separated into different boxes on a typical tabular lesson plan. By doing so, we think about these elements more closely together, and consider the aims and justifications of specific stages relative to the needs of learners in the class, thereby making planning more effective (Anderson, 2015).

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Thirdly, particularly in preservice teacher education, NLPs encourage teachers to think more carefully about the individual learners in their classes, their needs, their potential behaviour and possible ways to respond to them in the lesson itself (Doyle & Holm, 1998). There is evidence, including from our research (Ončevska Ager & Anderson, 2024), that novice English teachers often find it useful, albeit challenging, to think about the learners and their needs at a time in their own development when they are still developing the procedural skills necessary to get through a lesson successfully.

Finally, and potentially most importantly for teacher learning, the process of writing NLPs presents an opportunity for the teacher to connect with, make explicit and explore the deeper beliefs,

values and assumptions that guide their everyday practice – what Argyris and Schön (1974) call their ‘theories in use’, as also evidenced in the feedback from our colleagues above. These thoughts are thereby revealed transparently to the teacher and any observer, enabling them to identify areas that may require further attention in future (Kamali & Anderson, under review). In this sense, NLP serves a formative, diagnostic role within the teacher’s own education, development and identity formation.

Despite these advantages, we should stress that we do not believe NLP should replace traditional lesson planning. While offering many useful insights, narrative lesson plans are not as clear in format as tabularised lesson plans. As such, they are unlikely to be the best choice when lesson plans are required as administrative protocol, or as a guide for lesson observations that have a less formative emphasis (e.g. when used for monitoring and evaluation purposes).

Conclusion

We offer NLP to our colleagues as a work in progress, a tool that we are experimenting with and finding useful ourselves. We are sharing it at this stage because we believe it may be useful to readers of *Modern English Teacher* for their own use, either as teachers or teacher educators interested in promoting more ‘learning-centred’ (for the teacher) approaches to lesson planning. We invite teachers from different educational contexts to apply NLP in their settings to explore how it is received and adapted.

For any readers interested in collaborating on research into NLP, we welcome this (our emails are provided below). It may be useful to investigate teachers’ cognitive development, reflective practice or identity formation. It may also serve as a useful tool for assessing the impact of specific training interventions on teachers’ cognition, beliefs and teaching. Alternatively, research may focus on the relationship between the teacher and lesson observer, contrasting how both narrative and more traditional lesson plans impact on this relationship or on observer understanding of the teacher’s beliefs and practices.

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