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## Students' narrative action in social science teaching in Swedish upper secondary school: Limitations and openings

### **Abstract**

In this article, we undertake a narrative analysis of social science teaching in Swedish upper secondary school as a case study. In doing so, we want to stress the need to pay attention to the contextual and situated limits and openings of the conceivable repertoire of legitimate stories of social science in the Swedish context and its related research. The students' attempts at sense making and action in encounters with the subject matter content, approached in terms of emplotments, render visible to what extent and in what ways the students insert cultural narratives into the subject matter teaching repertoire through their own subject storytelling. Furthermore, it indicates the limits and openings of social science teaching as predetermined "truth telling", that is, as already-established socio-political knowledge repertoires.

In focusing on students' unique, situated and collective interweaving of their "own" experiences with established cultural and political knowledge repertoires, we wish to make a case for the potential to renew society and students' ways of acting and being in this storytelling. If meagre attention is provided to this interweaving, we argue that there is a danger that the renewal of society and of social science education will get lost, or at least disturbed, in an undesirable way.

Keywords: social science, teaching, narratives, students, Swedish upper secondary school, social science education

## Samhällskunskapsnarrativ: En studie av samhällskunskapsundervisning som en väv av berättelser

### **Sammanfattning**

I den här casestudien gör vi en narrativ analys av samhällskunskapsundervisning i svensk gymnasieskola. Genom analysen vill vi understryka vikten av att uppmärksamma kontextuella och situerade begränsningar och möjligheter när det gäller repertoaren av legitima berättelser i samhällskunskapsundervisningen och dess tillhörande forskning. Elevernas försök till meningsskapande och agerande i mötet med ämnesinnehållet, analyserat med hjälp av begreppen handling, karaktär och genre, synliggör i

vilken utsträckning och på vilka sätt eleverna infogar kulturella berättelser i ämnesundervisningsrepertoaren genom sitt eget ämnesberättande. Resultaten indikerar gränser och öppningar för samhällskunskapsundervisning som förutbestämt ”sannings-sägande” genom analysens fokus på elevers unikt situerade och kollektiva sammanvävning av sina ”egna” erfarenheter med etablerade kulturella och politiska kunskapsrepertoarer.

Vi hävdar att det i ämnesberättelserna finns en potential till förnyelse av både samhället och samhällskunskapsundervisningen. Om sammanvävningen av narrativ i undervisningen inte uppmärksammas, menar vi att det finns en risk för att förnyelsen av samhället och av samhällskunskapsundervisningen går vilse, eller åtminstone störs, på ett oönskat sätt.

Nyckelord: Samhällskunskap, undervisning, narrativ, elever, svensk gymnasieskola

## Introduction

This article emphasises the need for increased attention to narrativity and its implications for social science research and teaching. Through storytelling, children and young people can relate their lives and human experience to the repertoire of more extensive, collectively shared narratives in society and to the subject content of social science education (Harris, 2007; Myers & Hilliard, 2001; Tallant, 1992). As sociologist Barbara Czarniawska (2004) puts it, “to understand a society or some part of a society, it is important to discover its repertoire of legitimate stories and find out how it evolved” (p. 5). However, narratives also have transformative potential (Arendt, 2018; Disch, 1997). In a fast-changing world where established “truth telling” in subject teaching does not always keep pace with the world “as it is” or “seems to be”, students’ narratives can play a part in renewing subject teaching by a constant process of translating the subject content into relevant matters and queries of value for their lives and for society. Students’ “own” life experiences, uniquely blended with subject-relevant storytelling, are not only requisites for rich subject comprehension, but also necessary objectives for students’ possibility of becoming persons and agentic beings in the process of linking social science subject content to student and societal needs and aims in a sustainable way (Jägerskog et al., 2022). If social science teaching to a great extent is predetermined as “truth telling”, as already established socio-political knowledge repertoires, there is a danger that the renewal of society and of social science education gets lost, or at least disturbed in a non-desirable way. In such teaching, the encounter between the student and the subject matter is marked by default (Berg & Persson, 2021; cf. Olson, 2020).

However, the encounter between narratives in subject teaching is a complex affair in which the outcome is not self-evident. According to Wertsch (2008), narratives are cultural tools provided by a socio-cultural context. They “shape the speaking and thinking of individuals to such a degree that they can be viewed as serving as ‘co-authors’ when reflecting on the past” (p. 139). In his studies of

national collective memory, Wertsch argues that there are two kinds of narratives: specific narratives, which involve particular dates, settings and actions, and schematic narrative templates, which are more generalised structures. Wertsch's example of a narrative template is the Russian narrative structure "expulsion of foreign enemies", which is played out in different specific narratives connected to different particular events. Narrative templates are simplified and so abstract that the people deploying them often do not notice them. Perhaps because of that, they are very powerful co-authors when we attempt to simply tell "what really happened". Narrative templates resist change: According to Wertsch, information that contradicts a narrative template is "routinely distorted, simplified and ignored" (p. 142). What is most important in a successful narrative, then, is not accuracy but whether it corresponds with the narrative templates of the listener. Porat (2004) suggested that group culture shapes how students comprehend and recollect events. His results call for increased attention to narratives in subject teaching.<sup>1</sup> Narrative theory is well established in research on history education, usually discussing content selection and/or using textbook analysis and interviews with teachers (see, e.g., Berg & Persson, 2023; Danielsson Malmros, 2017; Nordgren, 2006; Persson H., 2018). However, this is a relatively new phenomenon in research on social science teaching, in which few narrative studies have been conducted (Juchler, 2015a).

In this article, we undertake a narrative analysis of data material from social science teaching in Swedish upper secondary school, containing both field notes from classroom observations and transcribed interviews with students and teachers. The aim of the article is to use narrative theory (Czarniawska, 2004) to analyse material to find the "repertoire of legitimate stories" about society in social science teaching and also students' attempts at sense-making and action through their own social science storytelling. In doing so, we can discuss what is possible to bring to the fore through a narrative analysis regarding students' ways of encountering and depicting subject content in teaching and the transformational potential of these encounters concerning society and students' ways of acting and being in society.

Although considerable research on narratives in history education has been devoted to textbooks and interviews, less attention has been paid to classroom observations. We perceive the need for more studies about the deployment and construction of stories as ways of depicting subject content in subject teaching, considered the place where the subject is created and reproduced in everyday teaching (Goodlad, 1969). A further contribution of this article is its focus on both

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<sup>1</sup> In Porat's (2004) study of narratives about a certain historic event in Israel and Palestine, he concludes that the students did not redefine or change their narratives concerning the historic event in line with textbook excerpts. Rather, they "inserted the cultural narrative into the textbook narrative" (p. 989) through transformative reading and narrative restriction. Porat's study indicates the need to consider narrative processes in teaching, not just textbooks and policy texts.

students' narratives and teachers' narratives about social science content and events. Their storytelling, we argue, can reproduce and change subject teaching, as well as society (Disch, 1997; see also Arendt, 2018).

We take our point of departure in upper secondary social science teaching as where a) students encounter (some of) society's repertoire of legitimate stories through subject teaching, and b) students and teachers emplot social science events/subject content, that is, make sense of them through giving them a certain structure (Czarniawska, 2024, p. 122). Thus, different versions of the same events/subject content can exist simultaneously in teaching due to the emplotments conducted by students and teachers. Bruner (1990) emphasises, in line with Wertsch (2008), that what makes a narrative powerful is not necessarily its truth or falsity, but its plot. Testing narratives against other people's narratives can be seen as a "reality check", as in moments of subjectification (Biesta, 2020). Meanwhile, students' narratives are tested regarding society's repertoire of legitimate stories (Czarniawska, 2004) and what counts as legitimate knowledge of social science in the context and time in which the teaching takes place (Harris, 2007; Christensen, 2022).

To fulfil this aim, the following empirical questions are addressed and discussed in this article:

- How are stories related to the subject specific content/events constructed and used in social science teaching in Swedish upper secondary school?
- Which stories are treated as legitimate, and which are challenged in the subject teaching?

The analysis of the empirical material in this article shows Swedish upper secondary social science teaching as a narrative battlefield that consists of students' encounters with a) the subject form, content, material and culture in the teachers' teaching, and with b) other students' stories about this and about society. Some stories are made relevant, accountable as "good", "right" and worthy of affirmation by the teacher, other students or textbooks and tasks, while others are not. The findings indicate a need for increased focus on the very mechanisms involved in constructing narratives, with a special interest in the messy process of gaining space and the legitimacy of the stories told and not told by the students in subject teaching.

The disposition of this article is as follows: First, a contextual account of Swedish social science education in upper secondary education is provided, followed by an overview of the literature in the field. An account of the theoretical underpinnings, methods and dataset of this work is provided. Subsequently, the findings from the analysis are presented, followed by a concluding discussion.

## Social science education in Swedish upper secondary school

Swedish social science education (in Swedish, *Samhällskunskap*) originated as a national political construct stemming from the aftermath of the Second World War to counterforce the Nazi and radical movements of the time (cf. Englund, 1986/2005; Olsson, 2016). As such, social science has no direct equivalent among the academic disciplines, but constitutes a substantive mix of political science, economics, sociology, media and law (see SNAE, 2011). The assignment of upper secondary social science education is to ensure students' acquisition of subject-specific knowledge and skills, aimed to develop their qualified ability, readiness and possibility to live and act deliberately as political members of society on moral, juridical and judgemental grounds and to embrace certain normative aspects of the Swedish socio-political culture (cf. Ekendahl et al., 2015).

Thus, social science teaching in Sweden, as well as other subject teaching, is a complex "affair". On the one hand, it concerns students' knowledge-related growth in their acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and related conceptual and predisposition repertoires of models and means. On the other hand, it concerns the embracing of normative political and juridical values, such as democracy and its related principles. In addition, the teaching objectives also include students' ability to grow as unique social persons, with an agentic mandate to argue, reason and act as moral, knowledgeable beings in society. Upper secondary students are to enter into a community of subject-specific thought and action, based on student- and teacher-shared reason and sensing experiences, with selected mediated school subject content (cf. Blennow, 2019, 2021).

It also becomes apparent that the purpose of Swedish social science education historically and to the present day is to enact both cultural reproduction and societal change (Englund, 1986/2005; Persson M., 2018), which corresponds with the enactment rendered visible in Nordic social science research (cf. Broman, 2009; Børhaug, 2011; Christensen & Christensen, 2015; Mathé, 2016; Lindmark, 2013; Löfström & Weber, 2022; Mathé & Elstad, 2020; Olsson, 2016; Sandahl, 2015; Tryggvason, 2018; Tväråna, 2019; Wicke, 2019; Blanck & Lödén, 2017; Piepenburg & Arensmeier, 2020). Taking on its political endeavour, students' storytelling in social science teaching is of the utmost value concerning its reproductive and transformative task, as it offers insight into a feasible revitalisation of the subject and of society.

### Literature overview

This section presents current research on narrative approaches in research on social science teaching in Sweden and internationally to situate the article within the field of research and to render visible the need for further narrative investigation of social science teaching.

In the Nordic context, empirical attention has been given at a general level to upper secondary students' communicative patterns, feelings and experiences as part of their acquisition of knowledge and subject-specific understanding of content knowledge (cf. Blennow, 2019; Blennow & Grammes, 2021; Berg & Persson, 2021; Børhaug & Langø, 2020; Christensen & Christensen, 2015; Gunnarsson, 2020; Mathé, 2016; Håkansson, 2016; Liljestrand, 2002; Lundberg, 2020; Sandahl et al., 2022). This research often affirms an *implicit* notion of the role of narratives in students' acquisition of subject expertise and the related normative aspects. In addition, it often stresses the need to provide a space for students and their "telling" and experiencing related to their personal life experiences (cf. Christensen, 2022). This perspective can be traced to Dewey's work (1938), which stresses knowledge as not just information and ready-made content and formula, but also as providing grounds for new or revised experience (see Hidle, 2022).

In the US, there is a strand of research concerning narratives and counter-narratives about race, marginalisation and hardship in American social science teaching (see, e.g., Ender, 2021; Jimenez, 2020). Other examples are a study of how teacher candidates in the US deal with the dominant narrative of neoclassical economics in a social science methods course (Shanks, 2018) and a study of Spanish teacher candidates' views on narratives as a didactical resource in teaching sustainability (López Serrano & Guerrero Elecalde, 2022). In Germany, there is a strand of research on narratives in *Politische Bildung*, where some researchers focus on the use of political narratives from literary texts in subject teaching (see, e.g., Juchler, 2015b).

In a wider scope, international research has further shown that teachers often avoid controversial conversations for fear of conflict, which threatens an important part of the teaching mission of educating democratic citizens through subject knowledge and understanding (Clandinin et al., 2009; Larsson & Larsson, 2021; Reynolds et al., 2020; Woolley, 2020). Based on these studies, the contributing reasons are teachers' concern about not knowing how to respond to possible conflicts in the classroom, teachers' fear of involuntarily offending a student or group of students and teachers' descriptions of insufficient preparation to face conflicts and discuss difficult and sensitive issues in general during teacher training (Kittelman Flensner, 2020; Larsson & Larsson, 2021; Reynolds et al., 2020; Sætra, 2021; Woolley, 2020).

What has received less attention in social science research is the productive and interventionist role of students' communicative action related to storytelling. A recent exception, though it is not explicitly formulated in narration, is T. S. Christensen (2022), who takes on Bakhtin's (1987) communicative approach in making an elaborate case for the observation of the communicative struggling aspect of teaching as indicating the judgement of quality. Here, it is key to be "counted in" as formulating relevant utterances in the social science discourse. Another study that affirms this view is Harris (2007), who developed a didactical

framework for storytelling in social science in the US. His argument is that storytelling provides grounds for students to combine their personal experiences with specific social science content. Each story created and told by students is uniquely different, which, according to Harris, makes the students, themselves, active agents in their own subject understanding. Christensen and Harris paved the way for increased attention to students' talk as part of the making of the subject. Students are perceived as subjects in their own educational and social growth. Taken together, social science teaching has scarcely been investigated concerning a more specific focus on narrative structures. Therefore, this article contributes to the field by conducting a detailed narrative analysis of social science teaching using concepts from narrative theory.

### Theoretical grids, methods and data set

Czarniawska (2004) conceptualised a narrative as a purely chronological account. A narrative becomes a *story* when it gets emplotted, that is when it is given a structure that makes sense of the narrated event. Therefore, a *plot* adds structure, organisation and “thickness” to a narrative. It answers the question why? and attributes functions to actions and events. It weaves in historic and social context as well as peoples' thoughts and feelings (Polkinghorne, 1988). Emplotment involves techniques such as exclusion and emphasis. Every story constructs human or non-human characters who *need* to have distinctive differences, such as heroes and villains (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 23). Stories can often be categorised in classical *genres* such as romance, tragedy, comedy or satire, which are investigated in turn below.

A *romance* is the story of a hero embarking on a quest to find something lost – love, meaning, glory etc. There are trials underway and enemies, but the hero will ultimately find self-fulfilment and meaning. Metaphors are important – the enemy represents evil and the hero symbolises order.

*Tragedy* centres on crises. The crises in tragedy showcase certain laws of fate that affect the possibilities of the characters in the story. The myth of Sisyphus is a striking example of this genre; the boulder is Sisyphus' fate.

*Comedy* is characterised by happy endings. Here, the characters are part of a whole; they are social beings. Some characters are obstructing (and often funny), complicating the story. However, despite hold-ups and complications, the characters reach a transformed, better society characterised by a harmonic “higher unity” in the end.

*Satire* is marked by irony, scepticism and contradiction. Satire emphasises the absurdity of everything and uses wit to expose and critique foolishness or viciousness.

The narrative analysis in this article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted at four upper secondary schools.<sup>2</sup> All four schools are in a large city in Sweden. At each school, a class was observed at every social science lesson for approximately six weeks. Subsequently, individual interviews were conducted with the teachers and around a third of the students in each class. We draw on Frank's assertion about ethnography as a suitable method, for "narrative research can enter into dialogue with people's stories only if the researcher has sufficient proximate experience of the everyday circumstances in which people learn and tell their stories" (2015, p. 38). Stories were collected by combining observations and interviews and by spending several weeks at each school. Hence, the collected narratives are both "naturally occurring" and elicited, which is considered a strength of this study that widens its scope. The combination of methods has also enabled the collection of stories told in teaching and stories kept quiet.

The research was designed and conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council. Accordingly, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, both verbally and in text, and gave their consent. The data have already been pseudonymised in the data set. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and to store the data in a correct way, where the names of the participants and schools, as well as the audio files, were kept in a safe place, away from the other material.

The empirical material consists of a) field notes from classroom observations of every social science lesson for approximately six weeks in each class, and b) 36 transcribed interviews with teachers and students. The first step of the analytical process was immersion in the material to find social science stories connected to the content of the school subject. We have followed Frank's advice to be widely inclusive at this stage, "cultivating reflexive uncertainty about which stories will eventually be most useful" (2015, p. 39).

As the second step of the analytical process, we selected the stories to present in this article. They relate to three subject-specific topics: *violence and dialogue*, *terrorism* and *international organisations*. The reason for the choice of topics is that, in relation to them, we could clearly discern different stories in interplay with the intended knowledge demands and objectives in Swedish upper secondary social science teaching. The third step of the analytical process was to analyse the stories related to these topics by using three of Czarniawska's (2004) concepts: plot, character and genre. In the analysis, we ask: How are the social science narratives made sense of? Which are the characters in the stories, and how are these characters constructed? Finally, we examine whether the story fits into one of four classical genres: romance, tragedy, comedy or satire. The analysis of genre renders visible whether there is a dominant genre in the web of narratives in social science teaching and whether the same social science event/content can be em-plotted according to different genres.

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<sup>2</sup> The empirical material was collected as part of a PhD project (Blennow, 2019).



The students and teachers are represented by numbers in the findings. The first number stands for the school, and the second number represents the order of the interviews. Consequently, T3 is the teacher at the third school, and S48 is the eighth interviewed student at the fourth school. An important consideration in narrative analysis is whether the stories are the participants' own. The participants in the study might tell a story to fit in, give the appearance of a good student and meet the teachers' or the researcher's expectations. This risk cannot be eliminated, but it can be limited by clarifying the purpose and ethical guidelines of the study, as well as by building trust through spending as much time as possible with the participants before they are interviewed. A valuable measure is the combination of observation and interviews (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 49). Another aspect of narrative analysis is that the representation and interpretation of the storytelling are made by the researcher; in fact, the researcher narrates the research. An important measure, thus, is transparency; the reader will be able to read excerpts of field notes and transcripts used in the analysis.

## Findings

The findings respond to the two empirical questions raised in the article: *How are stories related to subject specific content/events constructed and used in social science teaching in Swedish upper secondary school? Which stories are treated as legitimate, and which are challenged in the subject teaching?* Three groups of stories are presented: *violence and dialogue, terrorism and the United Nations and the European Union*. After each story, the analysis of plot, characters and genre is presented.

### **Violence and dialogue**

A recurring narrative in social science teaching material concerns violence and dialogue. These stories are constructed with slightly different emplotment and characters, but evolve around a tension between evaluations of dialogue and violence as solutions to conflicts. The students' stories were connected to personal experiences of war and violence. The first stories on this topic stem from an observed lesson on international law:

#### ***T3's story about international law***

The teacher is lecturing about international law both historically and in the present, stressing the development of international law after the atrocities of the Second World War. He shows a PowerPoint presentation where two striking images depict Dresden first and then Kobane, bombed to pieces. The way he reveals the older picture of Dresden first, then immediately the contemporary picture of Kobane, and the similarity of the images gives the impression that not much has happened in the meantime. Linger on the picture of Kobane, the

teacher says that “international law remains difficult to realise; the success or failure depends entirely on the combatting forces”.

T3’s *plot* regarding international law is that war is terrible, as demonstrated in the images of bombed cities. In the lecture, he says that after the horrors of the Second World War, world leaders agreed to create international law to counter the atrocities of war. However, as T3 continues his emplotment through his choice of images, he illustrates that we still see war and devastation, for instance in Kobane, which leads to the conclusion that it is difficult to realise international law and that the outcome depends on the combatting forces.

In the construction of *characters*, the combatting forces and nations at war are villains because war is terrible and destructive. The realisation of international law depends on these villains. International law is written by unspecified characters, a concerned world reacting to the horrors of the Second World War. International law, as such, is not given any agency; it cannot do anything on its own. Regarding *genre*, this story has clear traces of tragedy: Actors are trying to realise international law repeatedly but are left to the will of the combatting forces.

### ***S31’s story about international law***

Several students with war experiences are present in this lesson. One is Student 31. She is quiet during the lesson, but when interviewed, she tells a story regarding international law in conflict. In her story, she narrates her experiences with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The story departs from personal experiences of war, with detailed descriptions of hearing bombs fall near her house, seeing smoke, learning that a relative was killed just across the street and the feeling of “next, it will be us”. She describes having to flee to another part of Baghdad just to discover that, the next day, that area was also bombed. This part of the story is dramatic and captivating; it places the story firmly in the realm of personal experience, enabling a judgement of what happens “in reality”. “When you talk about human rights and stuff like that, you say that: ‘No we are not going to do anything [bad]’, but still, when in war, it’s just [...] they do it. They are allowed to do it.” She confirms that this is still the case by discussing an uncle living in a city where ISIS [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria] recently destroyed a museum. Correspondingly, she makes a judgement about the social science lesson: “So, when they talked about human rights, I thought it was just crap”, before turning to talk about an overreliance on dialogue in the EU and the UN: “When they sit in the EU, when they sit in the UN, when they sit talking about everything, they just ... ‘Yes, no one is going to fare badly’. But in reality, it isn’t like that. In reality, many people die.” S31 ends the story by stating that the situation in Iraq has not improved since the invasion. “Before, there was only one who murdered many. Now many are murdering many, quite many.”

The *plot* established in this story regards a discrepancy between what is said and what is done: “When you talk about human rights, the combatting forces say that they will not do anything violent and that everyone will be all right, but then,

people die anyway.” From her personal experience, S31 stated that, in reality, people are dying and that sometimes interventions based on international law worsen the situation.

The *characters* in this story are negotiators from outside (UN, EU), combatting forces and civilians who are victims of violence. The *genre* that can be traced in S31’s story is tragedy: Humans are subjected to laws of faith, laid bare through war. The law of faith is that dialogue is used as conflict resolution repeatedly, but it is a failure. It cannot stop people from being killed. Strikingly, S31 rejects the subject-teaching story about international law and human rights. However, when analysing the emplotment in the stories of T3 and S31, they are very similar. For some reason, the student does not pick up the teacher’s story, which we return to in the discussion section of this article.

### ***S36’s story about experiences of violence***

Another story about the juxtaposition of students through experience or a lack of experience comes from an interview with Student 36, who connects it to experiences with violence through war, similar to Student 31, but also through violence in the home and in the streets. S36 begins the story with the statement that he has experienced war. He continues the emplotment by establishing the experience of violence as a decisive boundary between “foreigners” and Swedes. He does not just have different experiences than people born in Sweden; he has *more* experiential knowledge. However, this knowledge cannot be used in the social science class: “I have more experiential knowledge than a person who has lived in peace all the time. We know what hardship means. We know lots of things, but right there, in that classroom, you can’t let it show. You can’t say, ‘I have experienced war, I know how it works’, because no one would have accepted it. They would have said, ‘That is no experience that counts’.” S36 alternates between speaking about himself and a “we”, who are “foreigners” who have experienced war. He continues the emplotment by juxtaposing himself with students born in Sweden: He has seen dead people, while they have never seen anything, only partied. He has been beaten at school, at home and in other places, while they have never been beaten. He states that experience with violence makes one stronger, but that strength does not “count” in the teaching: “Here, if you are strong, you can’t just bring that into the class. They will think, ah, he is so stupid. He has been beaten, so he thinks because of that – they assess it differently.” At the end of the story, S36 discusses that Swedish prisons are ineffective because they do not use violence, which is used as proof that violence can help. Again, he is drawing a line between “foreigners” and Swedes: “We, who have been beaten, know where the boundaries are. If you are beaten, you don’t want to do it. [...] We know it helps because it has, but they think it doesn’t help. So, that’s it. They have not experienced such a life.”

The *plot* in S36’s story is that some people have experienced trouble and violence, and they know that violence can be helpful. Other people born in

Sweden have had an easy life. He mentions this issue relative to Swedish social science teaching, which, according to his story, is by and for people who have had easy lives. Accordingly, what one learns through violence does not count in Swedish social science teaching. It cannot be mentioned. The *characters* in the story are constructed with clear differences, which are repeatedly affirmed: Experienced foreigners who are “in the know” versus naïve, inexperienced natives who party a lot. In S36’s story, there is no hero as in romance and no striving for harmony as in comedy. The story has traces of tragedy since the division between “foreigners” and “natives” is unbridgeable. There are also traces of satire in the section about the naïve natives.

### **Terrorism**

A subject topic with several simultaneously existing, both expressed and withheld emplotments, is terrorism. The teachers in the study recognise a vivid web of stories about terrorism, partly because of several contemporary terrorist attacks. One of them even prepares the teaching in relation to a perceived student narrative.

#### ***T4’s story about terrorism***

One of the teachers is carefully preparing to teach terrorism as part of the subject content of international relations. He is constructing the plot in a way that he thinks will widen the student perspective that terrorism is connected to Muslims. In a way, he is planning the teaching in response to a perceived student narrative. He is trying to outnarrate a story that connects terrorism with Islam. In an interview before the lesson, he discusses how he is constructing his plot; he wants to emphasise that terrorism is an old phenomenon that has always existed and that it is used by people without any other means.

Terrorism is dealt with in this class as part of an observed whole-class lesson on international actors. The PowerPoint slide on terrorism consists of a short definition of terrorism and the symbols or flags of four organisations: The Islamic State (IS), Basque Homeland And Liberty (ETA), Red Army Fraction (RAF) and Irish Republican Army (IRA). The teacher begins by saying that a terrorist organisation “uses violence or a threat of violence against institutions and civilians to reach their political goals”. Afterwards, a student raises his hand and says that, nowadays, terrorism is synonymous with Muslims. In response to the student’s statement, the teacher narrates the following:

T4: Well, many people associate it with that because there are many well-known terrorist attacks. But terrorism is not new. When you do not think that the usual political ways are sufficient, many groups ... that’s why we are going to talk about some different terrorist organisations here.

The teacher continues his narrative by mentioning, in turn, IS: fighting for their interpretation of Islam; RAF: fighting to turn Germany into a communist state

through terror; IRA: Catholics who today have chosen a primarily political way, but have been noticed for several spectacular terrorist attacks; and ETA: the Basque who fight for independence from Spain. He concludes, “So terrorism is a group that acts outside of the legal system and tries violence and the threat of violence. And it has existed in a lot of different contexts throughout history.”

The *plot* to which T4 adheres in this story is that terrorist organisations use violence or a threat of violence against civilians or institutions to reach their political goals. They do not consider ordinary political channels sufficient. He also emphasises that terrorism is a method that has always existed. The *characters* that the story centres on are terrorist organisations of various kinds with different religious or political beliefs and/or a wish to gain sovereignty and power. Through the emplotment of terrorism as a historical phenomenon, T4 shows that only some of the terrorist organisations are Muslim. The story about terrorism has traces of romance. The characters fight for their cause; there is a meaning behind terrorism. The teacher is nuancing the view of terrorists as pure evil because he is emphasising the reasons for terrorist acts as fighting for a cause. However, there are also traces of tragedy, as terrorism is framed as something that has always existed and seems hard to change.

### ***S33’s counter-story about Islam***

In the excerpt from the lesson above, one student stressed the connection between terrorism and Muslims, claiming them as synonymous. This was expected by the teacher and affected his lesson plan. The emplotment of terrorism as performed by violent Muslims is present not just in this but in several classrooms. In the material, this emplotment was performed openly by students during the lessons. Student 33 reacted to those stories by telling a counter-story about Islam in an interview. She takes her point of departure from her family. Her parents are Muslims, and they have taught her a great deal about Islam. That is the background for her reactions to social science teaching: “I heard someone in class say that Muslims kill people, and I, I just got pissed off, because I have parents who have grown up like that. I feel, like, what the hell (starts crying)? I was really disappointed. It hurts me a lot to hear people say it is wrong when they do not know.” She said that she did not say anything in class and added that she was shocked that practising Muslims in class did not react to what was being said. S33 continues her story by talking about two friends of hers saying in class that Islam oppresses women, which saddened her. She continues her emplotment by saying that some people have formed the wrong opinion and explains it by the consumption of “propaganda”, exemplified by the film *American Sniper*, about the invasion in Iraq: “[T]hey portray it like we should pity the invading American soldiers. But it is they who maybe want to colonise the whole of the Middle East or something. It is so sad, the way some people are influenced by that picture.” According to S33’s story, propaganda affects what can be said: “No one mentions

foreign soldiers in Iraq and how many people they kill.” She juxtaposes the opinions gained from propaganda with her knowledge about Islam:

S33: I know that Islam is a very nice religion, just like all the others. [...] I have seen many lectures and read about them to be certain of that, and I have parents who have taught me, too. I know that it is not like people say. That’s why I get really upset when people say that I am wrong about it. I am one of those who ought to know it well because I have actually seen people who are believers here and I have seen what normal and good humans they are.

In S33’s story, Islam is a positive faith like other faiths, and Muslims can be good and nice people. The *emplotment* clarifies that some people perceive Muslims as violent, partly due to propaganda in the media and popular culture depicting Muslims as villains. Correspondingly, American soldiers, for example in Iraq, can kill people without getting much attention, while Muslims are generally connected to violence. The *characters* constructed in the story are good Muslims who are victims of generalisation, people in the West who get the wrong impressions of Muslims through propaganda and practising Muslims who do not counter, or even agree with, the generalisations. S33’s story about Islam is difficult to categorise regarding its *genre*, but it bears traces of comedy’s striving for unity and harmony, obstructed by Western propaganda and practising Muslims who do not counter generalisations. In contrast to tragedy, the deficient society in the story has the potential to be turned into a desirable society because it is not subject to invincible laws of faith. This counter-story about Islam is never told in lessons. It falls silent in relation to friends in the classroom telling stories about Islam and violence.

### **The United Nations and the European Union**

The United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) are the topics of a cluster of stories that differ compared to those represented above. In the following, a couple of students openly tell a satiric story about the UN and the EU and are close to outnarrating the teacher.

#### ***T4’s story about the UN***

Again, the teacher is prepared to meet a counter-narrative in class. He juxtaposes himself and his view of the UN with that of certain students, saying in an interview that he thinks the UN is very important and that many students, conversely, have a negative and frustrated perspective of the UN: “[T]hey don’t do anything; they just make things worse.”

In the observed social science lesson where the teacher addresses realism and liberalism in relation to international relations, his story about the UN as a step in the direction of cooperation for peace is countered. In the interaction, the teacher starts to fill in and repeat the students’ narrative, so his original narrative appears blurred throughout a couple of minutes.

When the teacher asks the students about examples of how cooperation can work, the class is silent. After a short while, the teacher answers the question himself, exemplifying the UN, which after the Second World War for the first time in history brought together most of the countries of the world. He ends by saying, “So maybe the UN is a sign that we are on our way to how the world can cooperate.” One student immediately says “no”. What follows is an exchange in which the teacher, to a great extent, fills in and confirms the students’ narrative:

T4: But what does the realist say, then?

Student: There will always be a threat because humans are greedy.

T4: Yes.

The same student: Eventually, someone will do something stupid to gain more power.

T4: It will still be like that, despite the cooperation.

Student: The UN has not been able to stop the different genocides.

T4: We have many failures where it has become apparent that the UN can’t do anything about the situation.

After this exchange, one student said that we feel more secure due to the mere existence of the UN and that the UN is a good way for countries to communicate. This led the teacher to return to his emplotment, saying, “[T]he fact that we actually cooperate is a sign that we actually can do it, not just with like-minded states.” Another student chimes in:

Student: Isn’t Saudi Arabia chair of human rights in the UN?

T4: Yes. This is also a criticism. The UN has agreed, but they budge on many all-important regulations. For example, every member state has to acknowledge and sign the declaration for human rights, and still, many countries do not follow parts of the statutes.

What the teacher wanted to tell the students in class can be analysed as follows: The *emplotment* centres around the UN as an important step in making the nations of the world cooperate for peace. It was a struggle to establish the UN, but after the Second World War, it was possible. T4 frames the mere existence of the UN as a sign that we can cooperate. When it comes to *characters*, the story juxtaposes a somewhat anonymous “they” who attempted, and eventually succeeded, to bring many nations together in the UN with realists who tried to stop the UN. In T4’s story, we trace the *genre* of comedy: there are some obstructions, but the pursuit is common harmony.

### ***S48’s story about the EU and UN***

From students in the classroom come different stories about shortcomings, contradictions and self-affirmation. They contradict the teacher’s story about the UN and are voiced in whole-class teaching. In an interview, one of these students, S48, elaborated on his story about the UN and the EU. The emplotment revolves around hypocrisy, with the main example being that Saudi Arabia presides over human rights in the UN. A recurring statement he makes is that both the UN and the EU are framed as progressive in teaching, while in reality they are not

progressive at all. S48's story also lingers on the inability of the UN to maintain peace because they are not allowed to interfere. "It's a bit like people get to feel well, 'yes we have done something good', when they have done nothing." He also describes the EU as a "big circlejerk", where the big parties from the member states all have liberal opinions: "When only liberal parties or some slightly conservative get to decide things and parties who are not that much liberal-thinking are not heard, then it is just a big group patting each other's shoulders. 'Ok, you are liberal as me, Germany, pat, pat, pat, we share opinions'."

According to the S48's *plotment*, the EU and the UN say they are being progressive and working for peace, but in reality, they are just patting each other's backs. Organisations exist because nations can feel better, as if they are doing something, but they are not changing anything. In the EU, the political parties with influence in the organisation are all alike, liberal or slightly conservative, and deviating opinions are not heard. In the UN, countries that are acting against the aims of the organisation get prominent positions. Ironically, Saudi Arabia can be the head of human rights.

The *characters* in the story are politicians, nations' representatives, who are putting up an illusion of doing something. When it comes to *genre*, the story has clear traces of satire, focusing on the absurdity of the UN and EU, rejecting their work as illusions and using irony, scepticism and contradictions. There is a trace of joy in the ironic stance with which some of the students approach international relations. Another student in the same class is looking forward to a UN role play next semester, merely because there is the possibility of dwelling in the contradictions and ill workings of international cooperation. In the interview with him, he stresses the wish to be Russia, as "Everyone hates them; they are the strongest" and "It is entertaining because then you can be a real Putin and put the blame on someone else all the time". A striking aspect of the stories about the UN and the EU is that they are not kept silent; the students do not seem to be risking anything by voicing them during class. Furthermore, the teacher does not clearly oppose the stories; rather, in class, his story is collapsing into the students' story.

## Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have used narrative theory to analyse the "repertoire of legitimate stories" about society in social science teaching as well as students' attempts at sense making and action through their own social science storytelling. Taken together, the findings reveal the vivid narrative web weaving that creates and recreates the social science subjects' limits and openings for reproduction and change in teaching contexts. The stories elucidate a range of cognitive, emotional and sensory "testing", resignation and hope in the subject teaching regarding both the form and the content. Students' unique blend of personal life experiences in their storytelling about society and social science renders visible the subjects'



historical and present limits of what “counts” in the teaching context and what does not. All in all, the findings of the narrative analysis illustrate that social science teaching offers the possibility for students to grow and gain agentic “interventional” power as unique persons in society and calls for increased attention to and elaboration of narration in research and in the teaching practice. This indicates some strengths of narrative research, as such an approach a) increases the *understanding* of the communicative action in the teaching, b) provides deepened insight into what narratives *do to* the subject teaching in directing the teaching and its related content and form, and c) renders visible the *role and impact* narratives have in students’ encounters with the subject content and in their ways of coming to terms with it.

One conclusion from the analysis is that it is not only a hegemonic subject narrative that affects and conditions the subject teaching in the classroom, but also students’ stories. Thus, the findings depict social science teaching as a narrative battlefield where emplotments related to subject content battle each other. Some stories are successful, while others are silenced. In the examples in which a student’s narrative is withheld and the teacher’s narrative is dominant, we can still consider that process as resulting from a partly implicit battle between narratives. Stories built on personal experiences with war, violence and religion, as in the case of S31, S33 and S36, are most often *not* told in the teaching, as there tends to be a certain sensitivity among the students that doing so would trigger reactions from other students and/or the teacher. The overall impression is that there is no room for many stories in the teaching situation. They are usually withheld, sometimes just because of *one* other story told by another student, which has consequences for the plurality of narratives available in the subject teaching. This issue also means that “quiet” stories do not have a chance at a “reality check” regarding other students and the teacher.

Unsurprisingly, students who keep their stories to themselves in the subject narrative cases have a strong sense that their story is the truth and that other stories told in the teaching are wrong or single track. This finding affirms the points made by Blennow (2019), Porat (2004), Liljestr and (2002), Tryggvason (2018) and Lundberg (2020). In the case of S33 and the stories of Islam, as well as S36 and stories about violence, there is clear controversy in the material. However, one finding is particularly interesting concerning Wertsch’s (2008) work on narrative templates: The case of S31 is striking because the analysis shows that her story is similar to the teacher’s story about international law, and still, she rejects the teaching as unrealistic and na ive. Here, her narrative template seems identical to the teacher’s, but she still rejects the teacher’s narrative. The teacher’s story is not emplotted as a personal experience, which could be why S31 does not see it as similar to her story. This illustrates Bruner’s (1990) thesis that the power of a narrative lies not in its truth or falsity but in its plot. The critical point of personal experience in paving the way for the sensing of “truth telling” and student engagement is in tandem with H akansson’s (2016), Math e and Elstad’s (2020),

Gunnarsson's (2020) and Børhaug and Langø's (2020) work, where the importance of students' personal and social feelings blending with the subject teaching communication is rendered visible and shown to be important and valuable for the subject's comprehension.

Regarding which stories are accepted and which are challenged in social science teaching, we can observe that, in both the case of terrorism and of international organisations, the teacher intentionally aims to challenge the expected student narratives through instructional planning. From a narrative perspective, it becomes visible in the analysis that such didactic challenges can be seen as both delimiting and opening for the students' co-creation of the subject's narrative web.

When tracing the four classical genres in social science narratives, it is apparent that all four *can* be traced in the students' and teachers' emplotments. Romance is traced in the narrative of terrorism. Tragedy is mainly found in the narrative of international law, satire in relation to the narrative of the EU and the UN and comedy in the narrative of the UN. The empirical findings indicate that classical genres have the potential to signal hope and the possibility for society to renew itself. Tragedy, though, can block the possibilities of subject content knowledge change and delimit students' experience of agentic thinking, choice and optimism as part of society, as it highlights laws of faith that hinder change. It might be significant to raise further questions about comedy's potential for teaching practice. Through its emphasis on the power of the collective to endure complications and attain a better society, this genre provides grounds for belief in the social and for striving for a transformed society. Notably, comedy is not the dominant genre in this material. It seems relevant to ask: What would happen if Swedish upper secondary social science teaching involved more comedy?

We argue that the results demonstrate the need for research that advances theoretically informed, narrative approaches to social science teaching that consider society's repertoire of legitimate stories, students' encounters with the teaching as a unique potential for transformation of social science education through narration and the complex encounters between stories in the teaching situation. In addition, more systematic elaboration is needed concerning students' storytelling in and through teaching and its relationship to the revitalisation of society. If more student stories are outspoken, more stories will be "reality checked", and the teaching can then offer a widened repertoire for the students of communicating and expressing themselves as subject-aspiring storytellers in the teaching context. In the opening of more and *different* stories in students' encounters with the subject content and other students, increased potential is provided for their unique blending of everyday life experiences with subject knowledge content. Such storytelling needs collective and narrative space in the subject-specific qualifying context and in the wider social storytelling context (Harris, 2007; Liljestrand, 2002; Mathé, 2019; Blennow & Grammes, 2021; Christensen, 2022). Social science teaching, we argue, cannot do without a

genuine understanding and didactic awareness of the contextually and culturally woven webs of narratives in the teaching situation. This does not mean, however, that any student story “goes” or is considered valid or legitimate, which would betray and abandon the students in their growth as unique social beings and how they narrate the world. However, teaching must calibrate and take seriously the contextual conditions from which the students select and choose to stress experiences and narrative skills to give voice to their stories about society in subject teaching, as this defines the very distinction between being educated, not taught or instructed (Biesta, 2020).

Such teaching, as Hidle (2022) remarks, offers students the possibility of *new experiences* in their encounters with subjects’ body of knowledge, which has the potential to offer space and voice for the renewal of subject teaching and the revitalisation of society. This returns us to the initial concerns about truth telling in social science teaching and in society. In taking students’ subjective, unique storytelling seriously, their outspoken “truths” can be reality checked during instruction. In this practice, the students are hopefully offered a widened opportunity for coming into being as potential parts of the subject narrative webs (Disch, 1997) and further as unique and partaking persons in society – not without resistance, controversy, challenge, being messed with and sometimes disrupted, but as subjective, entwined “truths” and fragments of experience and genuine surprise born in the encounters with the subject and other students. Only when opening up for more narratives in the subject teaching is the Swedish social science subjects’ historic and current task fulfilled to bring both “old” and “new” thinking, ideas and action into the subject teaching practice and into society.

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