



The didactic function of narratives: Teacher discussions on the use of *challenging, engaging, unifying, and complementing* narratives in the history classroom

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ABSTRACT

At a time when society is characterised by a polarised social climate, it is teachers who need to contribute to a nuanced orientation of the world. This article looks at the ways historical narratives can be used as a collective didactic resource in the historical-cultural context of contemporary society. Its purpose is to analyse the didactic function that underlies historical narratives in relation to students' understanding of society. Our study builds on three focus group interviews with six upper-secondary-school teachers of history and social studies. The method used is the stimulated-recall interview whereby teachers talk about various teaching situations. Four uses of historical narratives were identified, each with its own didactic function. The first is the use of the "challenging" narrative, the function of which is to disrupt and realign students' understanding of society. The second is the use of the "engaging" narrative: its function is to involve and activate students in their present understanding of society. The third is the use of the "unifying" narrative, the function of which is to bridge contradictions within society. The fourth and final narrative is the "complementing" narrative, whose function it is to broaden and open students' understanding of society. To address students in terms of their present understanding of society, teachers employ these four narratives as didactic resources. In such a way, these uses of historical narratives tie in with the teachers' overall aim to contribute an alternative perspective to students' current understanding of society. As such, the results reveal the general theoretical knowledge teachers have relating to their profession.

KEYWORDS

Historical culture, Historical narratives, Didactic resource, Didactic function, Teaching profession

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Introduction: The research question

Yes, I also thought about polarisation. It almost has two effects. The first is that many of us get really interested because politics, well it's a lot like showbusiness. But I also think perhaps that students are starting now to lose faith. Just like in the most recent election. It's like politics... it's a negative picture you get of development within society, something I can't quite put my finger on, but generally speaking, more negative. That politics are not that relevant for many young people and maybe that's true, and maybe that's always been the case, I don't know. But I do feel like their faith [in politics] has been lost somehow. That people don't listen to each other – that it's more a case of getting your own opinion across. (Focus Group Interview 1, Teacher Niklas).

In uncertain times, where people's views are often set against each other in irreconcilable terms, it is the role of the school to contribute to the orientation of students within society. In the citation above, the teacher Niklas describes how a polarised social climate has become part of everyday school life. Students do not want to listen to others and are more interested in expressing their own opinions. What Niklas says can also be viewed in light of challenges within society, where the divide between urban and rural, the ongoing climate crisis, and increasing segregation are often described in polarised terms (Larsson & Lindström, 2020). In such a historical-cultural context, with many one-sided narratives, the school has an almost oppositional role of suggesting more nuanced understandings of society (cf. Berg & Persson, 2020).

Advocates suggest that the school subjects of social studies in general and history in particular can contribute a great deal to this mission, which is to work with the nuanced understandings that students have of society (cf. Barton, 2011; Kramming, 2017; Persson & Berg, 2021). This includes the question as to what historical knowledge content can address such challenges. This is an issue that has generated attention in recent years, particularly in regard to the question about students' perspectives (Sandahl, 2020; Berg & Persson, 2020). Various worthwhile ways of thinking have been put forward (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008; Hartmann & Hasselhorn, 2008), while studies have been conducted to find out and then analyse the various ways that teachers support students in their ability to think about historical matters (Persson & Berg, 2021).

However, this debate is about more than just historical content and methodology. It is about how teaching needs to seriously address and, where appropriate, challenge the attitudes and perspectives that students express. Should it not do so, then the risk is that students miss out on important orientation elements in their education (Blennow, 2019). In history didactics research, for example, there has been considerable discussion about which historical narratives can, or should, form the foundation of history teaching in schools (cf. Rüsen, 2006; Nordgren, 2006; Olofsson, 2019). This question is raised because it is known that preconceived aims and objectives can lead to the selection of certain historical narratives and not others (Rüsen, 2007; Sandahl, 2015; Nordgren, 2021).

In this article, we use a complementary point of entry. Our study concerns what teachers have to say about teaching and, like the teacher Niklas quoted above, the narratives they choose to use (cf. Levisohn, 2010) when describing the role that history can play in changing student

perspectives about the world around them. The article is thus based on what previous research terms the perspective of the teaching profession (PTP), the premise of which is that teachers, with their professional ability to make judgement calls, need to select knowledge content for a specific and situated teaching situation. As such, this is about didactic choices that stem from the professional everyday theoretical knowledge-base of the individual teacher (cf. Berg, 2021; Persson & Berg, 2021; Shulman, 1986; Nilsson & Loughran, 2011; Irisdotter Aldenmyr, 2020). With these factors in mind, our general aim with this article is to study teachers' use of historical narratives as a didactic resource by examining what they say. More precisely, its purpose is to analyse the didactic function that underlies the teaching of historical narratives and the way these can influence students' understanding of society.

Prior research: Narratives in the history classroom

The relationship between the historical culture and knowledge content has long been debated in history didactics research. The discussion about the types of history that should be included in the history classroom has been described in such terms as the "history wars" (Macintyre & Clark, 2003; Parkes, 2009; Clark, 2009; Clark, 2012). This is a running debate in countries like Canada, England, Austria, Australia, and Sweden. The divide in opinion has mainly concerned the content of school curricula and the choice of teaching materials (cf. Nash, et al., 1998; Ian Grosvenor, 2002, p. 148-158; Taylor, 2010; Éthier & Lefrançois, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Samuelsson, 2017). A pervasive question in this discussion concerns the basis on which historical narratives are selected in history teaching (cf. Clark, 2003; Parkes, 2007; Clark, 2009; Taylor, 2010).

A common theme in the research relating to narrative selection concerns the content and meaning-making that are desirable (Rüsen, 2006). Here, the historical narrative of the social majority has tended to dominate classroom contexts (Patrick, 1998). Critics of this position argue that there is a great need to complement and, where necessary, challenge this dominant narrative by presenting the history of minorities and other marginalised groups (Nordgren & Johansson, 2015). Here, Nordgren is one of several commentators to point out that the selection of specific narratives can contribute to learners' intercultural competence (Nordgren, 2017). In such a way, the content and meaning-making of the narrative can also be viewed in relation to pre-formulated goals (cf. Johansson, 2021).

Another frequent way to address the question of narrative selection concerns its form. Research by Sommers has identified a hierarchical order of narratives that can be divided into grand narratives and expert narratives (Sommers, 2001, p. 362 f). Another trend is to try to identify the complexity of a narrative and ways of dealing with this (Rüsen, 1987:4, p. 91). Parkes points out that it should be the responsibility of the school to increase the ability of students to deconstruct and critically review the narratives that exist within society (Parkes, 2015). This can be compared with what Rüsen terms *narrative competence*, wherein work to ensure students' ability to engage with the narratives that are evident in society is a primary teaching objective (Rüsen, 2006).

In research on history teaching in Swedish schools, the question about the form and content of historical narratives has also been a frequent theme. This can be noted in, for example, studies that show that a Western perspective is frequently evident in school curricula, teaching content, and teaching materials (cf. Nordgren, 2006; Lilliestam, 2013; Jarhall, 2021). Notable, however, are studies that also point to other existing narratives. For example, in an analysis of Swedish upper-secondary school teaching material, Danielsson Malmros (2016) identified a series of underlying narratives that had been formulated on different moral grounds (Danielsson Malmros, 2016). Berg (2014) has also demonstrated that the Western historical narrative can be complemented and challenged by other narratives (Berg, 2014).

At the same time, there have been more collaborative studies that offer a more instructive understanding of how teachers can and should work with narratives in their teaching. First and foremost, this has concerned questions about students' narrative competence and their ability to

deconstruct and reconstruct historical narratives (Johansson, 2021). Studies have frequently adopted a deductive methodology and have used different theoretical perspectives to interrogate empiricism and empirical approaches (cf. Persson, 2018). Other studies have focused on the idea that understanding narratives, such as the Anthropocene or the notion of civic values, should be part of the goal-setting process (Sandahl, 2015; Nordgren, 2021), while some studies carried out on teaching materials point out the progressive nature of historical ideas and their complexity (Persson, 2018).

Set against these trends in the research on narratives in history teaching, this article examines teachers' understanding of historical narratives as a didactic resource. As such, this article is not about testing empiricism against a pre-set theoretical goal about the selection of content; nor is it about testing empiricism against pre-set theoretical notions about competence or progression. Rather, in what teachers say about their teaching, an approach is tested where their different choices of narrative are examined in relation to a situated teaching context (cf. Berg 2021; Persson & Berg, 2021).

Analytical framework: The teaching profession and didactic function of the narrative

The analysis of the historical narratives that are evident in what teachers say about teaching content was inspired by Wertsch's theory (2002) of narratives as "schematic narrative templates". What is meant by this is that narratives, in terms of their content and form, have a specific direction and meaning. They are often organised by time as well as by specific event, such as political intrigues or dramatic occurrences (White, 1980). What this means is that the formulation of a narrative is always in relation to a specific meaning. Narratives should also be regarded in relation to surrounding society. This makes it possible to see the connection between the content and form of a narrative and the societal context in which it has been formulated (Riccour, 1976).

In discussions about the role of history in contemporary society – a debate characterised by significant polarisation – there are therefore repercussions for what happens in schools (Sandahl, 2020). There is a widespread expectation that students should, to varying degrees, be able to relate the historical knowledge they acquire in the classroom to contemporary social issues (cf. Stolare et al., 2017). This has become all the more sensitive since there has been a growing trend at the entry of 2020s towards the expression of contradictory and one-sided narratives both in and outside of school (Persson & Berg, 2021). Furthermore, we can see that adolescents in ever-increasing numbers are demonstrating a negative view of the future in relation to both the climate crisis and their own opportunities (cf. Novos, 2016). It is also striking in other studies how the narratives that are formulated about society are positioned in contrast to each other (Sandahl, 2020).

As such, negative and oppositional narratives form the ideological situation that teachers must deal with in their everyday work (cf. Sandahl, 2020; Persson & Berg, 2021). To examine the way in which teachers approach this part of their teaching responsibility, we use their level of professional experience as a point of departure (cf. Shulman, 1996; Nilsson & Loughran, 2011; Berg, 2021). Rather than initially deciding which narratives are appropriate for which teaching purposes, we examine which narratives teachers say they want to use when confronted with particular teaching situations. In such a way, there is more demand placed on the teachers' professional competence to determine which teaching content and narratives to use. When discussing these specific teaching situations, teachers thus need to consider carefully how they will approach students in their learning and what knowledge content they will use (cf. Berg, 2021).

In this article, with teachers' discussions of teaching situations as the framework for our research, we seek to examine the use of narratives as a didactic resource in teaching. We consider how the understandings of society expressed by students influence the choice of narrative made by teachers. Our approach builds upon the theoretical premiss presented in the figure below,

which portrays the idea that in every teaching situation there is both a narrator and a recipient of the historical narrative that has been formed (cf. Nordgren, 2006).

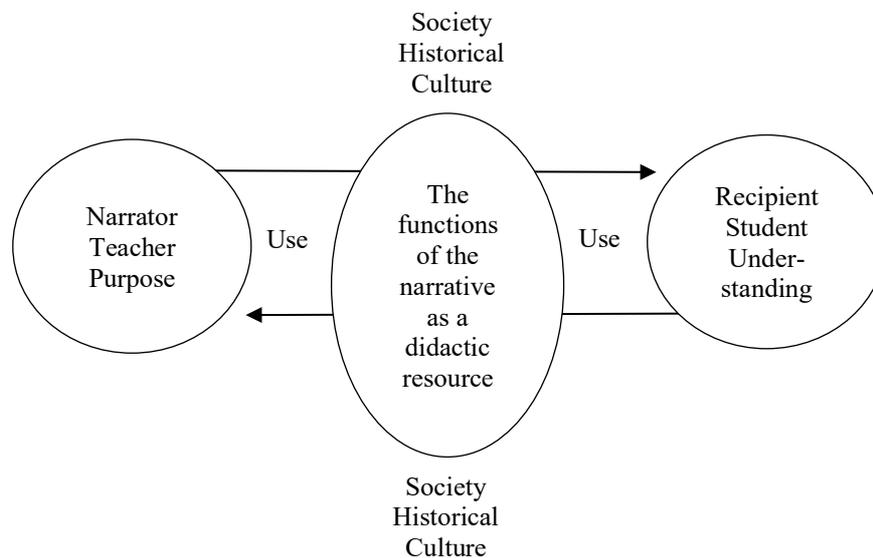


Figure 1. Model for the analysis of the function of narrative in teaching

Teachers, who in this case occupy the role of narrator, have certain intentions when they select teaching content. These intentions are shaped by the understanding of society that they feel their students have. Teachers thus choose a narrative that they feel will best serve the didactic purpose for any given situation. The didactic function of a historical narrative, therefore, should be viewed in relation to the understanding that teachers perceive the students to have.

Method

This article has been written within the framework of a large-scale research project whose purpose it is to examine how it is possible, using the knowledge content of various subjects, to affect the way in which students look at themselves and society. At the time of writing, the research project was being conducted in collaboration with a large upper-secondary school located in a mid-sized industrial town in Sweden. Teachers at the school were contacted by email and then by telephone to establish their interest in taking part in the study. In both the email and the telephone call, a description of the aim of the project and the way it would be conducted was provided. The teachers who chose to take part are all qualified upper-secondary-school teachers and have a great deal of experience within the teaching profession.

This article builds on empirical data from three focus group interviews with six upper-secondary school teachers of history and social studies. As such, this article can be regarded as a case study. Every individual case is interesting in its own right. While we should be cautious when extrapolating from the individual to the general, any single teacher's expressions can be potentially representative of teachers' views as a whole (cf. Yin, 2009, p. 3-7). That said, there may also be others that are not presented in this study. As such, this study should be regarded as

an initial exploration of a question that has received little attention in the research to date (cf. Schüllerqvist & Osbeck, 2009).

The focus group interviews were conducted and audio-recorded using an online platform. They were then transcribed, and names were coded. All names, including place names, and any other information that could make identification possible were anonymised. The focus group interviews were conducted in three stages, and various methods were used. Ahead of the interviews, an email was sent to each of the teachers involved in the study describing the overall structure of the study and outlining the theme of each of the upcoming interviews. The aim of the first interview, which was 120 minutes in duration, was to identify the narratives about society that teachers see among their students. This interview was semi-structured, which allowed us to follow up on what teachers said about their students' narratives using other questions (Esaiaasson et al., 2007, p. 298-301).

Prior to the second and third focus group interviews, we collected the three most common narratives that the students expressed, as made apparent in the first interview with the teachers. The first of these narratives to become apparent in various ways was that students thought living in the country was less desirable than living in the city. The second narrative they articulated was a determination to move away from the perceived limitations of living in the country. Finally, the third narrative that became apparent was students' anxiety, expressed in various ways, about the impact of the environment and climate change on their future prospects.

In the second and third interviews, we used a stimulated-recall method by which teachers, when thinking about these three student narratives, were asked to describe the subject content they would use to nuance these students' understandings (cf. Wineburg, 2001; Berg & Persson, 2020; Persson & Berg, 2021). In both interviews (each lasting 90 minutes), teachers were asked to explain the content they would draw on from the history subject and the methods they would use, drawing on their experience of teaching history, to address these student narratives. At this point, the teachers were also asked to justify their choices and to articulate the thought processes that led to them.

This article builds on data from the didactic "what" question arising from these three interviews – that is to say, what the teachers said about the subject content they would choose to use in order to nuance what they perceived to be students' understanding of society. The analysis was conducted using a four-step method (cf. Samuelsson & Wendell, 2016). In the first step, transcripts were read in their entirety. The second step involved a second reading in which material containing the didactic "what" questions were coded. In the third step, we sorted this coded text into groups that were similar in qualitative terms. We have labelled what we are calling these 'narratives' as *challenging*, *engaging*, *unifying*, and *complementing*. In the fourth step, we conducted an analysis of the didactic functions that are observable in the teachers' use of the identified narratives as a didactic resource.

The results of this article should be viewed at a group level and not be seen as the stance of any one individual teacher. Even though a variety of opinions were articulated in the focus groups, a theoretical approach for handling variety allows the different didactic functions articulated by individual teachers to be attributed to the group as a whole (cf. Lilliestam, 2013; Berg, 2021). A description of these opinions and the empirical basis for their division into our four distinct categories is provided in detail in the results section of this article. To increase transparency in the analysis, the decision was made to present what the teachers said in long quotations. Those selected for reproduction in this article should be seen as representative examples of the category they describe.

Results

The challenging narrative

The first use of narrative as a didactic resource is termed the *challenging* narrative. It is about offering a way to view society that contrasts with the understanding students express about society. The strategies the teachers articulated repeatedly returned to the issue of challenging students' notions. Camilla is just one of several teachers who talks about this: "I think, then, that it's a bit like the expression 'hollowing out a stone with dripping water' – that you must constantly be looking here and there, you can think like this and then like that." She is referring to a way of teaching that involves the constant presence of the challenging question, often in relation to ideological and value-related issues.

The case below deals with students expressing one-sided views about political parties. The teacher in this case, Therese, believes in the importance of challenging students' understanding with a broader way of looking at political parties and their ideological history. She states:

What I feel is that it wouldn't be enough for me to simply talk about the Social Democrats and their history. I want to keep going. That's where we start to make progress [...] because we have these strong opinions that it's the fault of the Social Democrats and... but you can't just presume that this is how everyone thinks. Just because that opinion is the one we hear doesn't mean that everyone thinks that way. So, my feeling is that I have to keep working on this political path. I must work with other ideological thinking, such as we have in Sweden. These we must keep in mind. It would involve a great deal of work to look at the different political opinions and what they stand for and how they have led to the parties that sit in parliament today and to use this to challenge students on this matter.... And perhaps with some analytical questions, perhaps rounding off with a writing assignment where you can draw them together and discuss and reason so that they get somewhere that they think is best. Then you can see if you were able to change the opinion of anybody at all. (Focus Group Interview 3, Teacher Therese).

This way of working with narratives is about disrupting students' stories by presenting a more nuanced narrative that forces them to look at the issue from another angle or in a wider historical context. In this case, it would mean studying the development of the Social Democrats against the backdrop of the growth of modern party-political ideologies.

There may even be moments when students express their understanding of an issue that is more extreme – in this case, a student expressing strong anti-democratic values. Here, the teacher articulates the need for a relatively large level of realignment in response to the understanding that the student expresses.

Malin: Yes, right, that discussion – how to work with somebody who has a deep-rooted racist view on things. That involves some real work on themes, you could say, because you need to dig deep both into history and into social studies and into genetics. I had a discussion with a boy whose opinions were slightly dubious. He didn't exactly say explicitly that he belonged to any right-wing extremist group, but what he said made you think that could be the case. /.../ He said things that would have made Herman Lundborg proud. So, we had quite the debate. And I'm not sure how I could have had that same debate with a whole class of students. It was okay one on one, but I'm not sure how I would have managed in a teaching situation. (Focus Group Interview 2, Teacher Malin).

In this example, the teacher seeks to realign a student's understanding of history and society that cannot be viewed as historically accurate. The teacher is clear that such a discussion would not be possible in a whole-class situation; rather, it is one that should be had individually with a student. The challenging use of narrative as a didactic resource is thus principally about disrupting or, when required, realigning what is seen to be a student's understanding of society.

The unifying narrative

Another way that the teachers in this study used historical narratives as a didactic resource to nuance the understanding of society held by students has been termed the *unifying* narrative. This is when teachers highlight the similarities that exist within the current social order. Rather than stressing the contradictions within the framework of existing society, they attempt to bridge them. This is notable in this study when, for example, the teachers articulated their efforts to highlight the mutual dependency of rural and urban society. Teacher Therese states, “And I think it’s important as well to make it clear to students that rural and urban societies, they’re not separate. They are actually interlinked.” Here Therese is expressing a historical narrative that points out what unifies rather than sets a society apart.

The teacher Malin points out that students, through their social media networks, interact on a regular basis with people from different backgrounds to themselves and that these interactions can help them to substitute the negative images they have received from elsewhere about what rural or urban communities are like. In this way, the teachers maintained that stereotypical images of the town and country can be bridged by students’ personal experiences. Malin states:

... but I also think that... this thing with the internet... I think we touched on this in our first seminar – I don’t know if it was Nils who said it... it’s that both us and the students are fed negative images on a constant basis. It’s always negative news we hear, in the newspapers too... it’s the same thing with the history of rural society, and there are shootings in the big cities, and such contradictions I believe lead to students having the opinions that they do about rural areas and urban areas. But then if we can show that there are good aspects too, if we’re now talking about stories, well then this can be done on the internet. And then you can inform students of the fact that the people you are networking with online, they’re actually from a city. (Focus Group Interview 3, Teacher Malin)

Here, the teacher is referring to the frequent media portrayal of rural communities as hotbeds for right-wing extremist groups and urban suburbs as rife with criminality. She is suggesting that such stereotypes can be surmounted by the views students develop as a result of their social media interactions. In such a way, personal experience can overcome these simplistic contemporary portrayals.

This is also something that is associated with the historical growth of rural areas and historical involvement in national and global collaborations. The teachers themselves highlighted ways in which they could use historical narratives to nuance these negative student attitudes and point out the strong interconnections between rural and urban in both national and global contexts. As the teacher Nils suggested when talking about a unifying narrative he might use:

If I were to do something that has to do with history, it would be obvious considering how I teach the industry and technology programme, and that I, they would work within industry, that is to say capable students, so I would likely focus on large industries. Historically speaking, how [industry] was built up, what it does now, and what it will become. And, you know, how it has changed owners – they are global; they ship throughout the world. Such a large company that in actual fact keeps this rural community afloat – that is something well worth working on – at least that’s what I think. (Focus Group Interview 3, Teacher Nils).

In such a way, it is about showing how people’s lives and work opportunities are closely interlinked in the historical sense with the local community and its ties to the rest of the country and the wider world. This use of a unifying narrative is about trying to encourage students to see connections and not simply divisions – about pointing out to them how aspects of society are, historically speaking, built on cooperation and collaboration rather than contradiction and conflict.

The engaging narrative

The third way the teachers suggested using historical narratives as a didactic resource has, in this article, been termed an *engaging* narrative. At a fundamental level, an engaging narrative is about putting forward the notion that society has developed in an unfair way and that efforts to combat inequality have been, at different times, more or less successful. Narratives of unfairness, then, can generate friction amongst students, which has the potential to lead to engagement, a state where students begin to ask questions and show an interest in wider social issues. Getting students to this point is often about finding some common ground with their experiences and their everyday thinking. Teacher Camilla gives one example that she uses to increase student engagement, and that is the different opportunities there are to play football in rural and urban communities. She states, “They can see that in this regard things are much better in towns. There the opportunities to play sport are at a completely different level. I’m talking about, well, playing time and arenas and football pitches and then maybe even teams too.” She also points out that children interested in playing football have access to something in the region of 10,000 training hours, a figure that could never be matched in rural areas. An injustice like this can prompt students to a sense of engagement and can encourage them, through their own initiative, to do something about it.

With the aim of clarifying how it is possible to work more in-depth with an engaging narrative that aims to increase student involvement, teacher Niklas suggests that examples of unfairness in history can serve to increase student interest – in his case, the historical allocation of natural resources. Niklas says:

So, if I can just add to what Anna says, and I don’t know if it is about time or geography, but, you know, this type of story that is sketched out, I recognise it much more from when I lived in Norrland in my student days. Sort of like, “Us, our forest, our ore, that this country has built its welfare on, and we get nothing in return.” Up there I thought this story was much more powerful. (Focus Group Interview 2, Teacher Niklas)

Niklas is referring to the perception that many people in northern Sweden have that the state takes their natural resources while giving them little in return. This sense of injustice informed many of the attitudes he encountered while a student in the region. Niklas is suggesting that, as a teacher, exposing students to historical injustices and inequalities can help them to better understand the often complex nuances that surround contemporary situations. Rural areas may lack sufficient sporting resources because of strategic decisions taken by remote government agencies. By making apparent such historical factors, student engagement can be sought on the one hand to recognise their knowledge and understanding about the matter in question and on the other to build engagement and agency on the part of the student.

The use of the historical perspective to activate student engagement is something several teachers mention. To further this point, teacher Malin states that comparisons can be made between the urban and the rural in relation to colonial history:

Malin: No, I think there’s a point in what [Niklas] is saying, because when you teach about, for example, colonial history and the like, you look a lot at how the Western world benefited from less-developed continents. The same thing should be do-able within a country. There may well be good reason for [students] to be made aware of the structures that exist and that maybe cities, to a certain extent, attract the most educated workforce or in some other way benefit from rural areas. Then you could ask students whether it is worth it for small communities to put so much money into schooling, for example. If that leads to students being better educated or pursuing higher education, then it will mean that they disappear from the local community and then, all future tax revenue that they generate won’t benefit the place they come from – it will be the cities that benefit. This is absolutely what we may think. (Focus Group Interview 3, Teacher Malin)

In this example, what is made clear is the relationship between the individual and the opportunities they have and how these are dependent on the structural framework of the relationship between urban and rural. This relationship is compared to a historical one, that of a colonial network, where the flow of goods and services is consistently away from the periphery and towards the centre. This narrative can then become one way of explaining the traditional rivalries between city and country, and of making injustice more apparent.

The complementing narrative

The fourth way that teachers use historical narratives as a didactic resource has been termed a *complementing* narrative. This approach is about finding other, more inspirational historical narratives that can complement and improve what students feel they know about their local society. Teacher Camilla points this out when she talks about how she gets her students to interview both young and old people for the purpose of broadening their views on the lives of the people around them. She states, “And then, and what we did is that [the students] put the same questions to classmates that they then put to older people so that they could see the difference between those who are old and young... so when you are working on identity and, you know, what it is in life that forms us into who we are.”

This approach is about developing the way students understand the rural community where they grew up. Life is not pre-determined; instead, there is room for manoeuvre. In this case, teacher Niklas provides an example from the life of the journalist Erik Niva that he usually incorporates into his teaching. He states:

The football journalist Erik Niva, who talked on a national summer radio programme a couple of years back, spoke about being born and growing up in Malmberget and what he took with him from that time. He spoke very concretely about how when he was at high school, 13 students took their own life, because Malmberget as a place was on the verge of physically disappearing because of the situation with the mine there. And he goes into a story that you can react to, that “my place in life is disappearing”. And then he talks about choosing another story – “what did I take with me from Malmberget?” There are such things as he never wears a suit jacket in the football studio, unlike everyone else. ... He was the only one among his classmates who had bookshelves with books – when he was growing up and what this has meant to him. When you have such concrete examples, then students can themselves begin to remember, “What has this place given me, regardless of whether I stay or move away, what is it about me that has been formed by this place?” (Focus Group Interview 2, Teacher Niklas)

Here, Niklas is suggesting that another way of presenting rural society to students can be to highlight its opportunities rather than its limitations. Students can, much like Niva, choose to view their time growing up as something positive as opposed to negative, and their experiences will be richer as a result. Highlighting inspirational life stories that have connections with rural communities can be a good mechanism for articulating complementing narratives.

Nuancing student attitudes about rural life can also be done by offering an alternative, complementary historical perspective. The point is to show how two closely related societies have over the years flourished on different occasions and that this changes throughout history. What this shows is that society is not static. Teacher Therese states:

Well, it’s pretty much like everything else, I would say, that happens in the world, historically speaking. There are times of boom and then things die out in some way. And this applies to rural communities too, I think. You show that before industry existed in these places, it was actually neighbouring communities that were flourishing, much like it is now. And just because things are the way they

are now, it doesn't mean that their history is somehow worse. So, you have to demonstrate this in some way. (Focus Group Interview 3, Teacher Therese)

By highlighting how a place was different in the past, it is possible to show that there are opportunities for change. Society is not static, and there is always potential for changing the circumstances we live in. Using a complementing narrative, therefore, is about identifying and presenting other narratives that point out the opportunities and potential in a particular situation. In such a way, what is made apparent is the potential for change in relation to both the individual and the historical perspective relating to society.

Discussion and conclusion

Our ambition with the writing of this article was to investigate the narratives teachers articulated when discussing the understandings of society that they perceive students to have. In so doing, we identified that for teachers, historical narratives are regarded as a didactic resource in those situational teaching contexts where teachers are looking to nuance student attitudes. The purpose has thus been “to analyse the didactic function that underlies historical narratives in teaching in relation to students’ understanding of society”. When seeking to nuance students’ understandings, teachers adopted what we have identified as four uses of historical narratives and used them for a set of four complementary didactic purposes.

For example, when teachers use *challenging* narratives as a didactic resource, their function is to try to *realign* the present thinking of students – to challenge their current understanding by contributing competing, more nuanced notions. The table below shows how it is a matter of challenging and confronting students who express historically inaccurate narratives as well as narratives that are tendentious and firmly skewed.

Didactic Resource	Didactic Function	Empirical Examples
The Use of the Challenging Narrative	Disrupt, realign	Historical narratives that counteract tendentious and inaccurate historical narratives within society
The Use of the Engaging Narrative	Involve, activate	Historical narratives that demonstrate unjust and inaccurate historical narratives within society
The Use of the Unifying Narrative	Bridge contradictions, see opportunities	Historical narratives that demonstrate similarities and mutual dependency within society
The Use of the Complementing Narrative	Broaden, open up	Historical narratives that show different paths and opportunities within society

Table 1. The Didactic Function of Narratives

By using an *engaging* narrative, however, it can be said that teachers are adopting a mechanism that *activates* student engagement. By exposing students to narratives of injustice and inequality, teachers seek to *involve* students in history so that change seems important. Here it is possible to see how teachers are trying to give students a sense of agency in relation to current society.

When teachers use a *unifying* narrative as a didactic resource, they seek to enact the didactic function of *bridging* the contradictions that they see in students’ understanding of society. In this way, it is also about *seeing the possibilities* in the current social order. Here, the focus is more on what connects things rather than what sets them apart – for example, the subject of urban and rural and what connects them historically. The function of the final narrative – the *complementing* narrative – is to *broaden* the understanding that students have by introducing them to additional, positive, and complementary narratives about the history of rural society. As such, the function of this narrative can also be said to be about *opening up* and to a certain extent also inspiring students to consider not just the negatives but also the opportunities that a situation has to offer. In the

examples presented here, teachers have tried to show how experiences gained at a young age from highly negative situations can contribute in a positive way to a person's life in later years.

The purpose of this article has been formulated based on the premise that we live at a time and in a historical cultural context that are characterised by great diversity of opinion. This is something that affects schools too. Teachers believe that students, at times, express unilaterally-formulated historical narratives. When the question about the narrative as a didactic resource and function in relation to this is examined, several general conclusions can be drawn. It is evident that the use of historical narratives as a didactic resource is based on the considerations teachers make in relation to the situated conditions that can be seen in the teaching situations discussed here. In this sense, it cannot be said that teachers employ pre-formulated content or adopt presupposed goals in the way they go about their teaching.

Instead, teachers have a general wish to problematise the understandings that students express (cf. Persson & Berg, 2021; Irisdotter Aldenmyr, 2020). If students express a narrative that is not historically accurate, then it should be disrupted. A narrative that is based on notions of differences should be met with a narrative stressing similarities. By using narratives as a didactic resource, teachers gain access to the didactic functions that disrupt, activate, bridge, and broaden the understanding students have of society, and in so doing, teachers provide students more with an opportunity for reflection than with any clear answers. The results thus demonstrate a will on the part of teachers to meet students in terms of their present understanding, regardless of what that may be. The choices teachers make when deciding on the historical narrative to use as a didactic resource should thus be seen as a reflection of their experience within the profession and their ability to make appropriate judgements. As such, this research contributes important theoretical and empirical knowledge as a complement to more interventionist and deductively-oriented research approaches (cf. Nordgren, 2021; Johansson, 2021). We therefore also argue that the results reveal a kind of everyday theoretical perspective on the teaching profession, which constitutes an important contribution to knowledge about how complex questions can be addressed in school (cf. Irisdotter Aldenmyr, 2020).

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