Odyssey to the Model Norwegian State: De/Constructing Migration Journeys Step-by-Step from Students' Digital Stories

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ABSTRACT

This article examines digital stories about migration journeys produced by students in a mainstream upper secondary class in Norway. The digital stories were introduced as part of a social studies module designed to foster critical thinking around migration. The class was made up of ethnic Norwegian students, students with a family migration background, and recently arrived migrant students. Using multimodal analysis, we examined the storylines in the students' digital stories, focusing on the understandings of migration and nation produced. Inspired by Bamberg's (2004) conceptualisation of dominant and counter narratives, we explored the extent to which these understandings interpellated/resisted dominant narratives of migration and nation. We asked: *What understandings of the migrant and of Norway do the storylines re/produce? To what extent do these understandings draw on dominant Norwegian narratives of migration?* Our findings suggest that most of the digital stories draw on dominant narratives, especially that of *Norway as an idealised model state.* In conclusion, we discuss possible reasons for the narrative standardisation and suggest potential ways of opening up educational spaces for more counter narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on digital stories about migration journeys produced by older adolescent students in an ethnically diverse urban upper secondary class in Norway. It was undertaken as part of a wider project aimed at harnessing pedagogical and technological strategies to foster critical thinking about migration. We were interested in what the digital stories produced by the students revealed about the ways in which they understood migration, nation and who a migrant can or should be, and how these understandings engaged with dominant Norwegian narratives of migration.

In 2015, Norway witnessed record high numbers of refugees, many of whom were adolescents from Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Syria (Statistics Norway 2017). The governing Conservative party initially responded by providing additional funding towards the resettlement of these refugees, but soon pushed through a range of anti-migration legislation. Meanwhile, the increased number of newly arrived adolescent refugees who did make it to Norway created new challenges for the educational system. Most were placed in adult education establishments alongside adult migrant students. Others were placed in mainstream secondary schools but in separate units that were segregated from mainstream classes. Both groups of students, whether in adult education or in separate units, completed basic Norwegian education, after which they were transferred to mainstream upper secondary classes. This study is based on data (digital stories) from a mainstream upper secondary class, made up of ethnic Norwegian students, recently arrived migrant students transferred from basic education units and students with a family migration background.

In analysing the digital stories, with the students' understanding of nationhood, integration and migration in mind, we were attentive to the ways in which these related to wider dominant Norwegian narratives of migration. We were curious to find out whether they drew heavily on these sanctioned stories, or whether we could detect any counter narratives, or alternative ways of recounting migration. Dominant narratives about migration are part of a complex picture, with narratives circulating in the media, in government policy and in the public sphere overlapping and feeding into each other. In official Norwegian policies on integration, the dominant narrative is about facilitating migrants' entry into work and ensuring that they start contributing to the welfare state as soon as possible (Norwegian Ministries 2019). At the same time, in the public sphere, integration is increasingly being framed less in terms of the job market and more in terms of a moral or cultural narrative that is concerned with what immigration 'does' to society in terms of 'undermining' its cultural values (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir & Toivanen 2019). When it comes to the Norwegian media, coverage of migrants is rarely explicitly hostile. The exception to this is the framing of Muslim male migrants as a threat to Norwegian values of gender and sexual equality (Bangstad 2011: 7).

The undercurrent of Norwegian scepticism towards non-Western migrants is paradoxical given that the country ranks very highly in terms of global statistics related to equality. Norway receives top rankings in a range of global surveys, such as the United Nations Development Program's *Human Development Report* (2019) and the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* (2020). Deep-seated narratives about Norway as a model egalitarian state pervade the Norwegian social political and media spheres, and academic discourse (Abram 2008). More critical academic voices point to the irony of Norway's self-perception as a bastion of gender equality, while ignoring its problem with homegrown racism. Svendsen, for example,

describes Norway as a nation 'that feels good about itself' while failing to take on board domestic racism against its non-white population or acknowledging historical racism (2013: 11). Moreover, by ignoring domestic racism, the narrative of *Good Norway* shuts down the possibility of addressing its effects. This is particularly salient in educational contexts, where racism is taught with reference to 20th century global history (World War II, colonialism). This focus on the past shuts off the topic of today's everyday racism (Svendsen 2013) and pressures to assimilate (Brook & Ottemöller 2020). At the same time, a recent survey published by Statistics Norway notes an overall trend towards ethnic Norwegians having less fixed expectations around migrants' perceived need to assimilate (Statistics Norway 2021).

In this study, we examine digital stories about migration journeys produced by adolescent students in a diverse mainstream upper secondary class.[1] We analysed the digital stories' multimodal elements (Jewitt 2006; Jewitt 2013; Ohler 2013) and asked: *What understandings of the migrant and of Norway do the storylines re/ produce? To what extent do these understandings draw on dominant Norwegian narratives of migration?* Our findings suggest that most of the digital stories draw on dominant narratives, especially on the narrative of *Norway as an idealised model state*. In conclusion, we discuss potential reasons for the narrative standardisation and suggest possible ways of opening up educational spaces for more counter narratives.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN EDUCATION

A digital story, as used in educational settings, is a story of around 1.5 to 3 minutes produced by students for learning purposes. Text, images, video and sound are all different modes that can be utilised in the final product. The stories can be put together in software that is easy to use, freely available and that does not demand prior editing skills (Ohler 2013). Digital storytelling enables students to make sense of the world in a time of information overload, facilitates planning and literacy skills and fosters creative and critical thinking (Lambert 2013). Digital stories do not need only to be about one's own experiences but can also help students 'to think and write about people, places, events and problems that characterize their individual life experiences or others' experiences' (Sadik 2008: 502). However, when it comes to digital stories about migration, most research focuses on stories produced by migrants about their own migration journey. There is little research on digital stories about migration from the perspective of students with and without their own experience of migration, as in this study.

Central to scholarship on digital stories produced by migrants is a participatory method of researching *with* migrants or refugees, instead of *on* migrants and refugees (Bansel et al. 2016; Lenette et al. 2019). Such studies point to the importance of legitimizing migrants' 'prior knowledges, competencies, and experiences' (Darvin & Norton 2014: 63). They also demonstrate how digital stories can be useful for migrant participants' identity work, providing spaces where they 'negotiated notions of representation – self-representation through storytelling, image making and sharing – and actively re/ situated themselves in relation to their lived experiences' (Alexandra 2008: 109–111).

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1   The literature review and data collection were conducted as part of the wider study *LIM: Language, Integration, Media.* Since we used the same research methods and reviewed partly the same literature, there are some similarities between the literature quoted and the description of the method in Svendsen et al. (2022), of which we are also co-authors.

Digital stories have also been used to research young refugees' experiences of settling in a new country. In an Australian study (Bansel et al. 2016) of digital stories made by newly arrived migrants, participants got several prompts, such as their impressions of being in Australia and whether they felt comfortable or uncomfortable in their new lives. All the stories projected an optimistic future, and none addressed discrimination or racism. Thus, while the prompts opened up for narratives of marginalisation, these were not the stories the participants chose to tell. This study points to another dimension of the use of digital stories that while they may function as a positive method for identity work, their form may also serve to hinder a nuanced telling of migration and silence its problematic dimensions. This insight is pertinent in the Norwegian context given the culturally sanctioned silence around domestic racism (Svendsen 2013).

RESEARCH CONTEXT, METHODS AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

SITE AND DATA COLLECTION

This study was developed within a wider *design-based research* (DBR) project aimed at creating innovative social studies courses for fostering critical thinking about migration (Barab & Squire 2004; Reimann 2011). A key aspect of DBR is collaboration with practitioners. Interviews with teachers and students in the beginning stages of the project identified that students who had recently migrated wanted other students to understand more about their experiences. This resonated with the project's goal of utilizing digital storytelling to allow students to share their experiences of migration if they wanted to reflect on what they had learned about migration in social studies. Following the interviews, researchers in the project with a background in social studies didactics designed an online 5-week curricular social studies course on migration with feedback from social studies teachers, culminating in a final assignment to produce a digital story about a migration journey.

The course material, published on the course website,[2] consisted of learning resources made by researchers participating in this project about migration, indigenous people, colonisation and rights. The resources, which were set up in five weekly modules, included introduction videos, PowerPoint slides, short summarizing texts, videos on how to produce a digital story and tasks for the students to work on, such as a map exercise designed to help students understand the link between colonialism and contemporary migration. The videos were produced using Adobe Spark, using freely available images from Unsplash and Pixabay,[3] mirroring the framework of the digital story assignment given to the students. The last two modules focused on scriptwriting, developing a storyboard, finding images and putting the story together

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2   Link to the course site: https://www.ntnu.no/isl/vierallevandrere. The site was later fine-tuned in line with DBR principles.

3   Students were encouraged to use free images from Unsplash or Pixabay. However, some students chose to find their pictures using Google Image Search. As we do not have any certain record of how all students obtained the images used in their digital story, we are not able to credit the creators of the images used by the students. However, as we consider screenshots from the students' digital stories central to a multimodal analysis, we have chosen to include them in the article, and consider it fair use as they are used for educational purposes, and remixed or set in a different context by the students.

in Adobe Spark. The students were asked to create a digital story about migration, which could be either about a fictional person, a real person or about a situation.

While students and teachers thus had access to the range of resources described above, the way the material was used still depended on the teachers. In the present context, the teachers adapted the materials to their students according to their skill levels and what they would find engaging, such as utilizing ethnic Norwegian students' knowledge of their ancestors migrating from Norway to America. One important observation was that some central tasks, such as the map assignment, aimed at developing critical understanding, were not conducted as intended but were rather simplified or done superficially. This was often due to time constraints, with the teachers prioritizing going through the learning material over time spent on assignments.

While the course was piloted in five schools, this study focuses on the digital stories collected in one mainstream class at *Snarveihaugen upper secondary* only. Throughout the piloting period, the project researchers conducted classroom observations. The class was made up of ethnic and non-ethnic Norwegian students, including students who had migrated with their family when they were younger, students who had arrived as refugees rather recently (having transferred from the basic education unit) and students who were born in Norway, with parents who had migrated. Many had family backgrounds from African countries, but also from South America, Asia or other European countries. The class was roughly equally divided in terms of gender. At the end of the course, the students took turns presenting their stories to each other and to students in the basic education class in the same school building. In addition to collecting 17 of the stories, with the help of the teacher, we were given access to one manuscript.

The project received ethics clearance from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.[4] The students received information about the project both in writing through an information letter, and orally in class from the researchers and teachers. Consent was given for participation in the project (see also Svendsen et al. 2022). It was made clear that participation in the research element of the work was voluntary, and we were in continuous dialogue with the teachers to ensure this. Data security and anonymization procedures in the project have been of critical importance. We have also omitted or changed any details that can serve as identifiers of the migration narratives of individual students. We have made sure to store data securely and made thorough anonymizations in the work presented here.

CONDUCTING A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS

In this study, we adopted a multimodal approach (e.g., Jewitt 2013) consisting of the analysis of images, video, voice-over, music, text and narratives. In line with this approach, we reflected on the modal choices available to communicators, the ways in which their selection and combination are shaped by the social, cultural and historical contexts, and the meaning-making practices involved (Jewitt 2013: 3, 2). We watched the digital stories multiple times, then created a content log, with the story title, summary, keywords and points of analytical interest. We found that almost all the stories followed a clear structure: They showed a migration journey, either fictional or based on the experiences of oneself or others, divided into three stages, (1) pre-

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4   Norwegian Center for Research Data approval code: 56814.

migration, (2) the journey, and (3) post-migration. As this pattern so clearly emerged, we decided to structure our analysis around it. We transcribed these digital stories using conventions from *multimodal transcription* (e.g., Bezemer & Mavers 2011). We wrote down the time code for each image change, transcribed the corresponding recorded dialogue, described the multimodal elements (images, written text, music) and wrote down points of analytical interest and keywords based on our research question. Where available, we also added the student's manuscript to the data. In each case, we categorised each digital story according to the phases of the migration story, consisting of *pre-migration, migration journey and post-migration* chronology. Utilizing our coded transcriptions and repeated viewings of the digital stories, we conducted our analysis using *narrative inquiry* (Bamberg 2004; Daiute 2014).

NARRATIVE INQUIRY: MASTER AND COUNTER NARRATIVES

Qualitative research on migration values highlights the *stories* told about migration in order to 'pay attention to people's experiences, practices and understandings' (Gullikstad, Kristensen & Sætermo 2021: 3, author's translation). Contemporary theories of the self view subjectivity as fluid and contextual, constructed through the stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (Riessman 2008). Understanding the self as discursively structured has led to narrative inquiry in the social sciences becoming focused on 'how unquestioned, taken-for-granted meta-narratives can dominate the production of knowledge […] and how narrative methods enable silenced knowledge to be articulated' (O' Grady, Clandinin & O' Toole 2018). According to Bamberg (2004), the function of meta or dominant narratives is to enable people to identify with normative experiences. Such dominant narratives become the mechanism by which we understand our own and others' stories, and their potency resides in their capacity to be naturalised and internalised. However, dominant narratives can become problematic when they do not correspond to our lived experience. When such dissonance is experienced, people may produce or draw on counter narratives, which provide meaning outside of standard scripts. Narrative counterwork can be particularly attractive to members of marginalised groups 'whose voice and perspective whose consciousness has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized' (Delgado 1995: 64). These voices can 'expose the construction of the dominant story by suggesting how else it could be told' (Harris, Carney & Fine 2001: 13). In the following, we identify the dominant narratives related to nation and migration that are either reproduced or undercut in the digital stories, focusing on the three stages: the pre-migration, journey and post-migration.

ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL STORIES ABOUT MIGRATION

RECOUNTING LIFE BEFORE MIGRATION

All the digital stories produced by students in the *Snarveien upper secondary* class open with accounts of the protagonists' pre-migration lives. At the very start of these accounts, we find three types of storylines, each with a different temporal focus. The first and most commonly found pre-migration storyline *escape from the apocalypse* is located in the 'present of war' and constructs the modern-day migrant as a 'victim'. This second storyline, *dream of a better life*, which relates to historic migration, projects into a brighter future and produces the migrant as an 'adventurer'. In the third and least common storyline, located in the past, the modern-day migrant is

constructed as someone who is and always was a 'normal person' and who had a *good life before migration.*

In the *escape from the apocalypse* narratives, migration stories begin abruptly in the midst of conflict. The protagonists appear as ready-made victims of war, their identity bound up with violence. This is the case for Lina's story 'Sara's flight', where the main character's entry into the story coincides with the beginning of war: 'Sara was only 13 when the war started' (Figure 1). Sara is not imagined outside of the war situation and there is no mention of life before the war. Like Sara's life, the war itself has no backstory, no historical or political context. The story starts with a series of images visualizing the war in apocalyptic dimensions. In one image (Figure 1) showing the aftermath of an explosion, we see buildings engulfed in thick black smoke while smouldering clouds lead the eye to the central focal point – towering plumes of bright orange flames. In the foreground, shell-shocked people turn their heads back towards the fire, as if paralysed by fear. This image is followed by a close-up picture of a small street, with the desolate shells of three small homes, their windows bombed out, with twisted concrete pillars, metal bars and electric cabling at hazardous angles.

Such images of devastated public spaces and ruined domesticity construct the migrant as a victim and set the scene for legitimizing Sara's journey: 'Sara's house was ruined. She and her family were no longer safe. They had to flee from their home'. In this and other stories that follow the *escape from the apocalypse* storyline, migration is legitimised on the exceptional grounds of devastating war, and dangerous personal circumstances.

Other stories, which focus on historic emigration from Norway, have less dramatic starting points. In the *dream of a better life* storylines, students describe the migrant's personal dream for a future with more opportunities. These stories are typically about 19th century Norwegian emigration to the US. They feature main characters whose pre-migration life is framed as difficult on some levels, but not catastrophic. These narratives frame migration as a choice rather than a necessity. More importantly they assume that economic benefit is a legitimate reason for migration. This is the case for Kristen's story 'Journey to America', where she tells the story of one of her ancestor's Johan's decision to leave Norway. The story is based around the family farm, set by the fjord in the idyllic countryside, which the narrator's great-great-grandfather Johan leaves behind, never coming back to Norway (Figure 2).
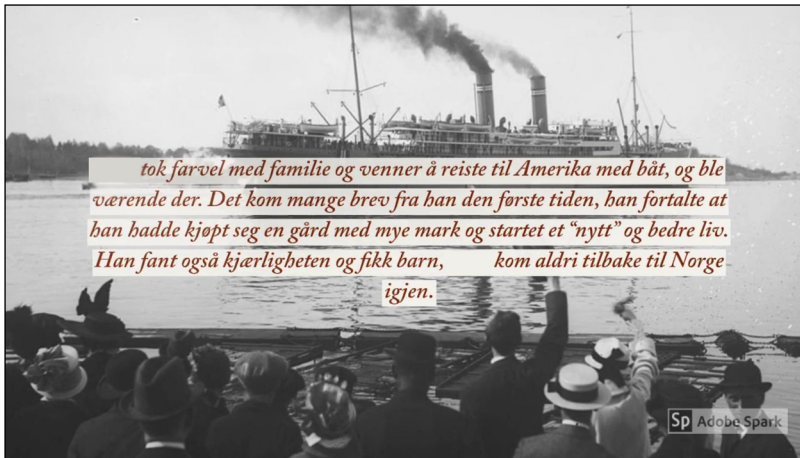
tok farvel med familie og venner å reiste til Amerika med båt, og ble værende der. Det kom mange brev fra han den første tiden, han fortalte at han hadde kjøpt seg en gård med mye mark og startet et "nytt" og bedre liv. Han fant også kjærligheten og fikk barn,   kom aldri tilbake til Norge igjen.

Figure 2 Screenshot from Kristen's digital story. Captions: 'Johan said good-bye to family and friends and travelled to America by boat and stayed there. Many letters came from him the first time after his arrival, he recounted that he had bought a farm with lots of land and started a "new" and better life. He also found love and had children; Johan never came back to Norway again'.

The context for Johan's migration is described in ambivalent terms – Norway is experiencing a period of economic growth, but at the same time it is a 'bad' time for farmers. Johan had a 'desire for a better life'. His dream is being spurred on by personal and familial factors as much as economic ones. Johan had not found love, he is not the heir to the farm, there is unemployment in Norway, and rumours of free land in the United States. Johan is constructed as an adventurer and his choice is legitimised as much by the dream of the life to come as by the circumstances which he left.

The third storyline we find at the start of the digital narratives is that of the *good life before*. It focuses on life before migration and frames the migrant as 'a normal person' before the need to migrate arose. Here, pre-migration life is described in unambiguously positive terms. The main character is not reduced to his or her migrant identity but is ascribed a satisfactory life before and beyond that identity. This is the case of Jamal's story about one of his friends, a story he intriguingly titled 'The story of a person'. Jamal describes how a close friend of his migrated to Norway via East Africa from an unidentified location. The storyline establishes his friend's pre-migration life as the good life, conveying a sense of wellbeing and normalcy. Jamal had a 'normal' social life: 'When he was in his country he had friends', and a regular working life: 'They were like people who built and made houses'. The accompanying images show a wooden house being built, with two workmen on the roof. These simple references to a young person working and having friends implicitly undercut dominant narratives of migrants as socially marginalised and parasitical to the welfare state.

JOURNEY STORIES

The digital stories all move from describing life before migration to recounting the migrant's journey, in most cases, a recent journey to Norway. Here the two main storylines appear to be divided along the lines of personal experience of migration. In the case of the stories produced by students with experience of migration, we find a complex, often detailed, 'messy' *survival storyline* where the journey is described as a set of complex challenges and the migrant is constructed as the hero who overcomes them. In the stories of students with no migration experience, we find a chronologically and geographically straightforward *pit stop storyline*, consisting of an itinerary like a list of departure and arrival points along standard migration routes.

The messy *survival storyline* can be illustrated with reference to the manuscript produced by Alya, who called her story 'From East Africa to Norway' where she recounts her own journey to Norway. Her manuscript stands out in its detail and lack of clear linearity. She details many aspects of the journey: the family's modes of transportation, the challenges they encountered and specific episodes that she remembered from different locations along the way. These episodes were incidents that happened to her, but also to her mother, her grandmother and other people that she travelled with.

> Coming to Norway was difficult. Before we came to [East African country], we took a bus from the capital of [country of departure], on a road taking almost 5 days. On our way, we met people who shoot and try stopping the people going from the war, taking our money, and so forth. I was small, but that evening many people were on the bus, and one of us got killed, and they tried to rape the women who were there, there were boys, girls, and old people on the bus, there was a girl who got killed, and two boys who were hurt. I was small, therefore they didn't have anything against me. But my mom, and grandmother, were hit by men who steal and kill people. (Author's own translation)

While shaping the story, she used Google Maps to identify and show the route they travelled and Google Image Search to find images resembling the van that she and her family used to escape (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Screenshot from Alya's story. Captions: 'The bus we took from [country of departure] to [East African country]'.

A similar level of detail is found in Jamal's description of his friend's journey in 'The story of a person'. In his voice-over, Jamal chose to anonymize the name of the friend, referring to him as 'the person' or as 'he', and the names of the cities he went through: 'I will not tell you all information about him because I have to (speak) freely', and 'I call the city Popo. Popo is a fictional name that I use'. Jamal had so much he wanted to tell about his friend's journey that 'The story of a Person' is a 12-minute long story, instead of the suggested 1.5 to 2 minutes. Jamal goes through the different stages of his friend's journey describing them as a set of 'challenges' which he recounts in voiceover form – the challenge of getting lost and exhausted in the

desert without water or food, the challenge of walking through the next country in the dark in freezing conditions and being chased by police and wild animals, and the challenge of dealing with organ traffickers. Jamal's voice-over describes the people who demanded money from his friend and his companions, threatening to sell their kidneys if they did not pay up. Jamal's decision to heavily anonymize the story, from the name of his friend, through his original city, and his explicit assertion that this was necessary for him to be able to tell the story, suggests that he is afraid of his friend being identified.

The 'messy' journey descriptions found in migrants' stories stand in contrast to the sparse and generic accounts found in the accounts of students without migration experience. Here, the migrants' challenges are conveyed in generalised and vague terms. We find phrases like 'It was a difficult battle', 'The journey was like a nightmare', 'through burning deserts without food and water'. These stories draw heavily on mediatised narratives and images of the migrant 'crisis' which focused heavily on boat crossings, rescues and deaths in the Mediterranean, as Lina's story 'Sara's flight' also exemplifies: 'They had to travel by boat to get to the border. They knew the dangers of travelling by boat, it didn't have space for all the refugees, and became overcrowded'.

JOURNEY'S END: ODYSSEY TO THE MODEL STATE

All the stories about contemporary migration produced by both students with and without migration experience had Norway as the post-migration destination and all (apart from one which was non-committal towards Norway) featured a *Happy Ever After storyline*. This storyline perfectly reproduces dominant narratives of *the Good Norway* as an idealised nation state. The *Happy Ever After* storyline is narratively constructed in relation to family and working life. It is achieved by the migrant getting a job, buying a house and establishing a family.

Most students visualised their stories' *Happy Ever After* ending with images highlighting the natural beauty of Norway, featuring majestic mountains and deep blue fjords, or pristine cities with attractive wooden houses (Figure 4). These idealised images are contrasted with more negative images of the migrant's home country and are often accompanied by text that explicitly references Norway as a model egalitarian state. This is the case in Ada's story 'Fleeing from Syria', where she describes her protagonist Ali's arrival in Norway. Using a set of striking images, Ada contrasts Ali's life before and
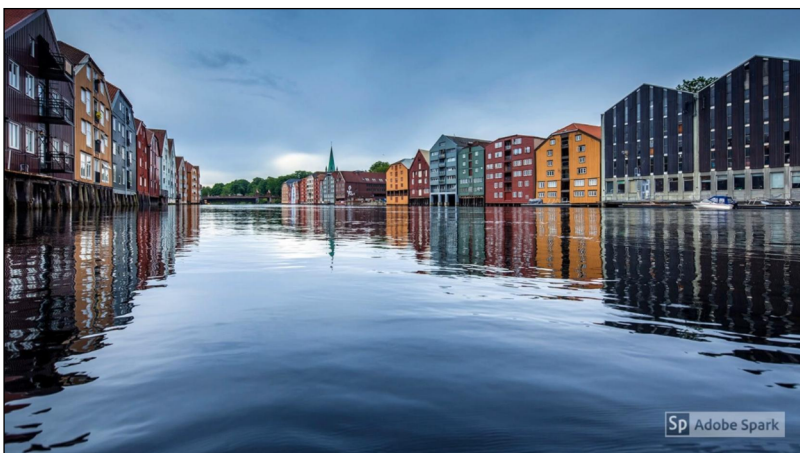

Figure 4 Screenshot representative of how Norway is depicted in the students' digital stories.

after life in Norway. Ada uses 11 black and white monochrome images to depict the pre-migration and journey stages of Ali's story. The first colour picture that appears is of Norway. Its caption 'Fleeing to a country where women are not oppressed', projects a vision of Ali and his mother in an egalitarian land. Life in Norway is then illustrated with five other colour images, including symbolic pictures of pink flowers presumably representing beauty, nature and peace. An image with the caption 'without fear' symbolizing Ali's new life in Norway is then juxtaposed with an image of a boy cowering with his hands in front of his face, followed by a voiceover emphasizing Ali's newfound wellbeing and security: 'Now, Ali and his mom live a good and safe life. Ali is now 15 years old and goes to school. You could suddenly see a happy boy, without fear in his eyes'.

Norway is presented as a model egalitarian welfare state, which provides fully for its migrants. As Alya writes: 'I have not experienced the same as other young people, but after I came to Norway, I got free education, a scholarship, a place to live, freedom, and people respect each other'. At the end of the digital stories, whether produced by students with or without a migration background, the main migrant character is characterised as both happy and grateful: 'Rawanka is very happy he chose to flee to Norway', and 'I am glad I did not quit this fight'. In many of the digital stories, the 'happy ending' storyline is made contingent on the migrant's efforts, that is to say that the migrant needs to work hard for his or her happy ending. This is illustrated in Hilda's first-person digital story 'Flight from Syria'. Hilda skirts through her protagonist's pre-migration life, and through the journey stage, fast-forwarding to the perfect migrant happy ending, producing a perfect migrant, who fulfils all the expectations of the Norwegian welfare state: 'I tried my hardest to become well integrated in Norway. I have learned the language, the culture, I attend school, have gotten an education, to support my family and contribute to society'.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we discuss possible reasons for why the digital stories draw so heavily on dominant narratives of migration and nation, especially that of *the Good Norway* and suggest possible ways of creating more space for counter narratives.

NARRATIVE STANDARDISATION ACROSS THE STORIES: DRAWING ON DOMINANT NARRATIVES

We found a high level of narrative similarity across all the digital stories, which resembled a patchwork of interlacing dominant narratives found in Norwegian cultural and political discourses, as well as in mediatised representations of migration. Norwegian immigration policy focuses on the migrant 'proving' their risk of persecution in their home country (Norwegian Ministries 2019). This type of legitimization is paralleled in the starting points of the stories on contemporary migration to Norway, which dramatize the dangers in the home country. None of the stories imagine modern day migration to Norway being legitimised on economic grounds, or on the desire for a better life. This type of legitimatization is reserved for historic emigration. Similarly, in line with policy documents, which stress the importance of each migrant becoming a 'tax-payer and contributing to the welfare state' (Norwegian Ministries 2019), the endings frame the new life in Norway in terms of migrants working hard and being integrated into the labour market. The stories of contemporary migration

also all draw on recent mediated images of the so-called 'migrant crisis' at all stages of their accounts – meaning that migration has mostly been equated with the most recent migration wave and been visualised in ways that mirror standard media images. This is the case for all the stories made by students, whatever their migration background. What is most striking across all the stories are the resonances between the digital narratives and the dominant Norwegian cultural narrative of *the Good Norway* as a land of equality and opportunity. None of the stories contained any critical perspectives on the situation of migrants in Norway, despite such perspectives being advanced in the teaching materials. The only exception is one digital story that self-consciously anonymised any details that could identify the main character, normalised his past life and presented himself as a hard-working person. This story can be interpreted as an implicit riposte to the abnormalizing of migrants, as well as to widespread perceptions of migrants as parasites of the welfare system, while also invoking the fragility of newly arrived migrants' residency status.

REASONS BEHIND THE NARRATIVE STANDARDISATION

The similarities across the digital stories are also discussed in a separate article (Svendsen et al. 2022) where we argue that the format and digital tools used in the digital stories contribute to creating standardisation. In the present study, we focused more on narrative standardisation. We wondered: Why did all the students who wrote about migration to Norway reproduce *the Good Norway* narrative? Why were so few counter narratives represented? In reflecting on that question, we noted the very different results produced in a text-solicitation exercise we conducted with a similar group of students of the same age. In that study, we asked students to write a letter to a migrant planning to come to Norway giving them advice on what to expect. Students could write in their mother tongue and were not expected to share the letters with other students. These letters produced a much more nuanced view on life in Norway. Migrant students pointed to positive aspects of life in Norway, but also referred to life in Norway as difficult and stressful, noted that assimilation is expected, described the challenges of getting to know Norwegians and referred to racism and work discrimination on the basis of religion and colour. Similarly, the letters written by ethnic Norwegians acknowledge the difficulties migrants will encounter, take assimilation for granted and describe the anti-immigrant hostility new arrivals should expect.

So why were more nuanced narratives not found in the digital narrative format? Firstly, we suggest that the pressure of making digital stories for sharing within a classroom setting might make it more challenging for migrant students to tell stories that draw on counter narratives. In this setting, migrant students may have felt under pressure to perform the identity of the 'good migrant student'. In this sense, the digital narratives did not function as we had hoped as a way for the students to understand their own or others' stories (Bamberg 2004), but rather as a means of retelling an established national story about Norway as the *Good State*. As such, the students chose not to tell more challenging stories, including those of social and labour discrimination, which they or other migrants they know of may have experienced in Norway. While not all non-Western migrants in Norway may experience discrimination, a significant body of research demonstrates that it is widespread and remains a barrier for both migrants and their children in Norway. This has been demonstrated in a range of studies focusing on the labour market (Birkelund, Heggebø & Rogstad 2016; Midtbøen 2016), the housing market (Andersson, Jakobsson & Kotsadam 2012) in everyday

working life (Midtbøen & Kitterød 2019) and in everyday social interactions (Brook & Ottemöller 2020). The picture is more complex for children born of immigrants, who may display relatively high rates of upward mobility (Hermansen 2016) and who tend to adopt a national identity as Norwegian. Despite this, many such youth, especially Muslims, face considerable opposition in their development of such a national identity: 'Young people with an immigrant background from Africa, Asia and the Middle East report that others see them as far less Norwegian than those with an immigrant background from other countries in Europe' (Friberg 2021: 33). Despite the challenges that migrants and their children often face, the established narrative of *the Good Norway* has taken such a hold in the Norwegian imagination that students feel compelled to reproduce it, either because they buy into it themselves, or because they intuitively recognize it as a sanctioned story that they are expected to reproduce.

Secondly, when migrants' 'realities' are situated in an environment of structural disadvantage, they often draw on the media rather than on their own reflections to express how they want their future to be (Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert 2012: 147). We suggest that the insecurities related to the students' citizenship status were another reason students with recent migration experience drew on idealised mediatised images of Norwegian cities and landscapes to represent their future, rather than on images that could reflect the realities of the social and economic challenges migrants often face.

Thirdly, also relevant for why students *without* migrant backgrounds in our study also produced stories that did not adopt a critical perspective on migration is that the school setting might have shaped the content of the stories. For example, many of these stories started out by being facts-based, defining migration, listing population numbers and numbers of refugees and the head of state of the pre-migration country. Many students were concerned with how the stories would be evaluated by their teacher and prioritised descriptive elements from the course that were easy to reproduce.

Finally, we speculate that in the process of creating the digital stories, the *technological* aspects of putting together the stories became too foregrounded, taking time away from the often time-consuming process of making thoroughly processed narratives. Time is often spent teaching and learning *how to use* technology, instead of actually *using* technology for the desired purpose (Chingona et al. 2010: 29).

COUNTERING NARRATIVE STANDARDISATION

In order to try to counter narrative standardisation and to create room for a wider range of narratives, we suggest two strategies. The first is to emphasize *narrative possibilities* and the second is *to create a safe space* for sharing experiences and reflecting on narratives together. To increase narrative possibilities, less emphasis could be placed on technologies, and more on narrative dimensions. More examples of counter narratives could be presented to the students, including fictional stories suitable for promoting critical reflection especially for students with no migration background. As noted by Leavy (2013), 'Through fiction, readers develop relationships with characters that can serve as guides into different social worlds. As readers begin to care for the characters and develop empathy, previously held assumptions, values and stereotypes, and even world views can be challenged' (p. 50, in Lawrence & Cranton 2015: 4). This strategy could be reinforced by discussing various perspectives

on migration, and asking the students to reflect on these various perspectives as part of their assignment.

A second strategy to counter narrative standardisation would be to create a safe space for students with and without migration background/experience to learn from and inspire each other through dialogues about their or their families' migration experiences, including the ones that are not normally present in dominant discourses. In order to make students with migrant backgrounds comfortable about opening up about their experiences/perspectives, it is crucial to hold meaningful *dialogues* (Vesterlind & Winman 2015), a task that is not straightforward: As Skrefsrud (2020: 155) reminds us, if teachers place too much emphasis on students' cultural backgrounds, it might have unintended outcomes in the sense that minority students may feel even more isolated from their peers. Students may identify with several different communities, and depending on the context, they may choose to highlight or downplay their belonging to a certain community (Sen 2006, in Skrefsrud, 2018; Skrefsrud 2020). This supports our finding that students might have avoided counter narratives in favour of dominant narratives in order to signal some sort of belonging to Norway. Sharing difficult experiences which could be interpreted as signalling one's difference openly is a vulnerable thing to do, which might also be a reason why we saw more counter narratives in the anonymous letters mentioned earlier. At the same time, acknowledging difference can be productive within a pedagogical framework that explicitly foregrounds its value. We agree with Skrefsrud that the goal of intercultural understanding 'is not to overcome what seems strange and peculiar; rather, it aims to explore it, discuss it, engage in dialogues with the unfamiliar, and even learn from it' (2020: 161), which can be achieved if teachers see differences as opportunities for better understanding. By creating safe spaces for the sharing of stories where differences are valued, counter narratives might be encouraged, and the potential of digital storytelling in classrooms might be increased.

CONCLUSION

Examining why sanctioned narratives of *Norway as an idealised model state* predominate across the digital stories produced by a diverse group of students in an upper secondary class, we conclude that meaningful dialogues about migration and a stronger focus on narrative rather than the technological potential of digital storytelling could facilitate more critical perspectives.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors have contributed equally to data collection, analysis and writing.

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