



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

A JOURNEY WITH FRODO

A PATH FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TRANSITIONING TO UNIVERSITY

AUTHORSHIP

Chianese, Gina
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9073-5259>
University of Trieste
Department of Humanities
gichianese@units.it

Ius, Marco
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8709-4171>
University of Trieste
Department of Humanities

Cornacchia, Matteo
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6866-1476>
University of Trieste
Department of Humanities

Madriz, Elisabetta
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8627-1271>
University of Trieste
Department of Humanities

ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to university is a crucial phase requiring self-awareness and decision-making. This paper examines a project by the TLC at the University of Trieste, inspired by Frodo Baggins from the lord of the rings. Engaging 80 high school students in narrative-driven workshops, it emphasized self-discovery, responsibility, and collaboration. Using creative techniques, it showcased the transformative potential of narrative pedagogy in supporting authentic educational choices.

RESUM

La transició de l'educació secundària a la universitat és una fase crucial que requereix autoconeixement i presa de decisions. Aquest article examina un projecte del Centre d'Ensenyament i Aprenentatge de la Universitat de Trieste, inspirat en Frodo Baggins de El Senyor dels Anells. Amb la participació de 80 estudiants de secundària en tallers



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

narratiu, es va posar l'accent en l'autodescobriment, la responsabilitat i la col·laboració. Mitjançant tècniques creatives, es va demostrar el potencial transformador de la pedagogia narrativa per recolzar eleccions educatives autèntiques.

KEYWORDS

Transition, Self-awareness, Educational pathways, Narrative pedagogy, Career guidance

PARAULES CLAU/ PALABRAS CLAVE

Transició, Autoconeixement, Itineraris educatius, Pedagogia narrativa, Orientació professional

INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to university is a pivotal period in students' lives, marked by critical decisions regarding educational pathways and future careers (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). It is indeed a "complex process of transformation concerning the student's life and identity calling attention to institutional and pedagogical innovation" (Biasin, 2021, p. 63). For some, it represents a logical continuation of the academic path they began in school; for others, it signifies a shift from their previous studies. Often, it also serves to delay entry into the workforce (or unemployment). Regardless of the motivation, choosing a university program has become increasingly complex due to the exponential growth and diversification of educational offerings at local, national, and international levels (Biasin, 2021). Working with transition with the attention to career construction in the 21st century require to underline that "the life-designing model for career intervention endorses five presuppositions about people and their work lives: contextual possibilities, dynamic processes, non-linear progression, multiple perspectives, and personal patterns" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 239).

This paper explores the role of the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) in bridging high school and university education through an innovative, character-based project inspired by Frodo Baggins from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The project involved a group of students from several schools in Portogruaro, a city in the Veneto Region. This city hosts the campus of the programmes in the Education of the University of Trieste. The project aimed to support high school students in gaining a deeper understanding of



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

themselves, their strengths, and their developmental needs, empowering them to make authentic educational and life choices.

The project also emphasized the idea that university teaching begins before students officially start their university path. By engaging students in an active and interactive relationship with university scholars, the project aimed to offer them a taste of what higher education entails beyond traditional lectures. The workshops were designed to share with students the work and research on education conducted at the university, fostering a collaborative and exploratory environment. This approach allowed students to experience first-hand the dynamic and participatory nature of university learning and university life.

The project has been implemented twice, in two years, engaging approximately 80 high school students in a series of four structured workshops, each lasting two hours. The workshops employed the metaphor of Frodo's journey to address themes of self-discovery, responsibility, meaningful connections, and personal transformation which are key elements for the transition into adulthood and to face its challenges (Chianese, 2011; Cornacchia & Tramma, 2019). Grounded in constructivist and narrative pedagogies, this initiative positioned students as active agents in their educational journey, emphasizing introspection over external validation (Richardson et al., 2009; Young & Collin, 2004).

This paper situates the project within the broader literature on educational transitions, career guidance, and the use of narrative frameworks, active and expressive arts methods and in pedagogy. It examines the disciplinary scope of the innovation, the stakeholders involved, the resources utilized, and the evaluation methods employed to assess its impact. The goal was not merely to inform students but to transform their approach to educational decision-making, fostering self-awareness and resilience (Ungar, 2011) through an engaging, character-driven narrative.

METHOD

The study employed a qualitative approach to reflect on the project to redesign it and implement it in the future. The group of participants consisted of:

- about 60 high school students, aged 16-18,
- 4 high school teachers in charge of coordinating the relationship with the university and post-secondary guidance,



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

- a group of 4 facilitators who are professors at the University of Trieste who teach education and, since 2024, are also involved in leading and supporting the university's TLC. And have been working also to empower the link between the university and the territory (schools, social services, social enterprises, associations, ...).

Data collection methods included the collection of material created during the workshop and meeting with the high school teachers responsible of the activity and the facilitators.

From the methodological point of view, the facilitation includes different techniques that are well-suited within a context aimed at promoting self-reflection: graphic and symbolic techniques, story-telling, dance, autobiography.

Expressing concepts, actions, and emotions through a medium that integrates narratives, symbols, drawings, metaphors, and actions allows individuals to move beyond stagnation in their practices and the specific challenges that undermine professional well-being. This approach facilitates the initiation of generative pathways toward the creation of new meanings at various levels: personal and within the group. The power of symbolic language lies in its ability to make meanings communicable and understandable to individuals, groups, cultural contexts, and the broader world, thanks to its universal value (Ius, 2020, 2025). Artistic expression further acts as a catalyst for resilience, as every creative process connects the three human dimensions of thinking, feeling, and acting (Lea et al., 2011) with the essential act of finding meaning in one's personal narrative. Through art—and the symbolic language embedded in and promoted by it—individuals and groups are facilitated in sharing their stories and emotions (Cyrulnik, 2009). This is achieved through a dual connection: with the self and one's inner world, addressing intrapersonal, reflective, and intrapsychic dimensions, and with others and the external world, encompassing interpersonal and social dimensions (Vaquero et al., 2014).

The workshops were structured as follows.

In the first workshop, "Me, My Abilities, and Competencies before the journey", students reflected on their skills and areas for growth, mirroring Frodo's introspection before embarking on his journey. What are my abilities? This is the question Frodo asks himself before embarking on his journey. Frodo is not a hero or a knight but a young man with humble aspirations who finds himself compelled to undertake an adventurous journey that takes him far from his life in the shire. The workshop aimed to encourage



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

students to reflect autobiographically on their abilities and competencies, guiding them toward defining their strengths and areas for development. This analysis serves as a foundational step in the “journey” of constructing their educational development plans and future professional choices. To make decisions and embrace change, it is essential to answer the following questions: What can I rely on? What do I need? What knowledge, skills, and competencies do I have? What can I bring to this journey/challenge? How can I organize and integrate my resources? During the activity, participants reflected on four aspects: What I know (knowledge), What I can do (knowledge, skills, and competencies), Who I am (my characteristics and distinctive traits), My resources (internal and external). Additionally, they were guided to reflect on their educational and professional “dream” using three indicators: importance, desirability, and feasibility. They were reminded of the words spoken to Frodo: “Even the smallest person can change the course of the future.”

In the second workshop, “Solitude and Responsibility”, the discussion centered on the challenges of personal responsibility and decision-making, inspired by Frodo’s choices during his quest. Every “journey” involves encounters, confrontations and clashes with others, but it also requires a significant assumption of responsibility for the outcomes of the journey and future decisions. The “journey” that each person chooses to undertake—just like Frodo’s—is the result of a personal decision, yet it can also be undertaken with companions, much like the Fellowship of the Ring. The session, also through dance-movement activities, invited participants to reflect on solitude by identifying moments and situations when they felt alone and considering what they did to overcome those feelings. They then focused on the meaning of responsibility, asking themselves when and for what they feel responsible, and recalling a specific occasion when they felt particularly responsible while being on their own. The group also reflected on the figure of Sam, the friend who “takes the burden upon himself,” imagining walking alongside Sam and considering the qualities they value in a companion. Sam’s role in the story illustrates a remarkable upward trajectory: as Frodo Baggins weakens, consumed by the power of the Ring, Sam shoulders the mission and supports his master. Sam’s extraordinary resilience and unwavering loyalty to Frodo enable him to become the third and final Ring-bearer—and the only one capable of relinquishing the Ring without difficulty. Unlike any other character in Tolkien’s world, Sam willingly returns the Ring to Frodo as soon as Frodo regains his strength. This behaviour sets Sam apart from every other character in Tolkien’s works: his superiority lies in his simple and pure soul, which ultimately allows him to resist the allure and enchantment of absolute power embodied by the Ring.



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

The third workshop focused on “Meaningful Encounters,” pivotal moments during a journey or decision-making process that significantly shape one’s orientation and future (Cornacchia & Madriz, 2014). Similarly, Frodo meets several characters, such as Gandalf, Aragorn, and Galadriel, who offer him support, comfort, and encouragement throughout his journey. During this activity, participants reflected on the meaningful encounters that have marked their own formative and developmental journeys. Using a circle divided into four quadrants, they explored significant figures they had encountered during different life stages: early childhood (0-6 years), primary school (6-11 years), middle school (11-14 years), and high school (14-18 years). They selected the most significant encounter for them and, after briefly sharing their experiences in small groups, focused on identifying the “verbs” that describe the actions of a person who becomes significant. The aim was not to define a profile of a “significant other” but to collaboratively develop the ability to recognize someone as significant through their unique way of offering support, comfort, and encouragement. Subsequently, through a guided visualization exercise, participants imagined meeting a “magical” figure who, during a difficult moment in their journey, offered them an object imbued with magical power to help them in the future. This metaphorical exercise allowed participants to access an internal resource, independent of their life experiences, that they could draw upon in challenging times. After the visualization, participants were asked to draw their “magical object” and give it a title. Divided into small groups, they shared their objects with others and collaboratively created a short story integrating their objects. The goal was to present their “gifts” to the larger group and observe the powerful effect of a community where shared resources offer mutual support, creating a Fellowship-like environment of peers helping peers.

The final session on “Conflict, Crisis, and Transformation” focused on navigating challenges and embracing growth, using Frodo’s internal struggles as a framework. The workshop addressed the theme of crises, focusing on the inevitable transformations, changes, and internal conflicts that arise during any “journey.” These conflicts often involve opposing forces: between “good” and “evil,” “death” and “rebirth,” or “stumbling blocks” and “new beginnings.” Frodo, before reaching Mount Doom, faces the temptation of the Ring’s power and the allure of an easier path. Similarly, the workshop encouraged participants to reflect on the non-linear nature of personal development and the formative value of stumbling and making mistakes. The facilitator read part of the written autobiography of a student and invited participants to explore their own experiences of conflict and transformation, emphasizing how challenges and setbacks contribute to growth and self-discovery. By acknowledging the complexity of



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

their journeys, they gained insights into their capacity for resilience and the power of embracing imperfection as a critical part of their development and identity. These activities demonstrated how meaningful connections and the courage to face internal conflicts can empower individuals to navigate their personal and educational paths with greater clarity and confidence.

FINDINGS

The findings indicated significant improvements in students' self-awareness and confidence in their ability to make informed educational choices. Key results include:

- Self-Perception: participants reported a better understanding of their strengths and areas for development by the end of the program.
- Decision-Making Confidence: felt more equipped to choose a university program aligned with their interests and abilities.
- Resilience and Adaptability: Many students highlighted the importance of embracing challenges and viewing setbacks as opportunities for growth, resonating with Frodo's journey.
- Meaningful Reflection: Reflective activities revealed deep personal insights, with students frequently referencing the impact of identifying and valuing their unique skills and relationships.

The workshops highlighted the key role of peers as companions in the educational journey, drawing inspiration from the Fellowship of the Ring. Just as Frodo's quest was enriched and supported by his companions, students were encouraged to share, reflect, and grow together through group discussions and collaborative activities. This was particularly significant for a subgroup of participants who were facing a specific challenge due to the condition of a member of their class group.

Focus group discussions with high school teachers underscored the value of the narrative and creative approach, with students describing the workshops as "enlightening," "emotional," and "highly engaging". However, some participants highlighted feeling unsettled by the proposal, as their expectation was to arrive at university and encounter a more formal and lecture-based context. Facilitators noted increased student engagement (such as the use of cards and drawing), but also greater difficulties for many of them in delving deeper into the autobiographical aspect of the proposal.



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

DISCUSSION

The findings align with existing research on the efficacy of narrative and constructivist pedagogies in promoting self-awareness and authentic decision-making. By framing educational transitions as a journey, the project resonated deeply with students, fostering a sense of agency and personal investment. The use of Frodo's character, the fellowship of the ring and the significant others Frodo meets in his journey provided a relatable and inspiring narrative, bridging abstract concepts with tangible life lessons.

Strengths of the project include its innovative design, interdisciplinary approach, and emphasis on student-centered learning. However, challenges included logistical constraints (e.g., coordinating sessions with multiple schools) and the need to better design the activities and to make them more flexible to adapt to the different groups of students. Comparisons with similar initiatives highlight the unique impact of integrating narratives and creative methods into career guidance, offering a fresh perspective on more traditional approaches.

CONCLUSIONS

This project shown the potential of a Teaching and Learning Center to act as a bridge between high school and university education, fostering self-awareness and informed decision-making among students. The workshops' narrative and creative-driven approach provided a safe and engaging space for introspection, enabling participants to navigate their educational journeys with confidence and resilience.

The achieved impact suggests significant potential for scaling and adapting the project to diverse educational contexts. Future research could be developed by designing a mix method project to systematically collect quantitative and qualitative data.

In conclusion, this initiative underscores the importance of innovative, student-centered approaches in bridging educational transitions, offering valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers striving to support students in their journeys toward self-discovery and academic success.

REFERENCES

Biasin, C. (2021). La costruzione di partnership scuola-università per facilitare la transizione degli studenti. *Educational reflective practices*, 2, 2021, 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.3280/erp2-2021oa12116>.



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

- Chianese, G. (2011). *Il piano di sviluppo individuale. Analisi e valutazione di competenze*. FrancoAngeli.
- Cornacchia, M., & Madriz, E. (2014). *Le responsabilità smarrite. Crisi e assenze delle figure adulte*. Unicopli.
- Cornacchia, M., & Tramma, S. (Eds.) (2019). *Vulnerabilità in età adulta. Uno sguardo pedagogico*. Carocci.
- Cyrulnik B. (2009). Vencer el trauma por el arte. *Cuadernos de pedagogía*, 393, pp. 42–47.
- Ius, M. (2020). Una storia che ha cura di chi ha cura: Formazione e ricerca sul benessere professionale in Emilia-Romagna. *Studium Educationis*, XXI(2), 126–138.
- Ius, M. (2025). The use of sociodrama in social work research. *Z Psychodrama Soziom* 24, 351–364. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11620-025-00864-1>
- Lea, G. W., Belliveau, G., Wager, A., & Beck, J. L. (2011). A Loud Silence: Working with Research-based Theatre and A/R/Tography. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 12(16), 16–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2011.630378>.
- Richardson, M. S., Meade, P., Rosbruch, N., Vescio, C., Price, L., & Cordero, A. (2009). Intentional and identity processes: A social constructionist investigation using student journals. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 74(1), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2008.10.007>.
- Savickas, M. L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J.-P., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R., & van Vianen, A. E. M. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 75(3), 239–250. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.04.004>.
- Ungar M. (2011). *The Social Ecology of Resilience: A Handbook of Theory and Practice*. New York: Springer.
- Vaquero E., Urrea A., Mundet A. (2014). Promoting resilience through technology, art and a child rights-based approach. *Revista de Cercetare Si Interventie Sociala*, 45, pp. 144-159.
- Venezia, A., & Jaeger, L. (2013). Transitions from High School to College. *The Future of Children*, 23(1), 117–136.



CIDUI CONGRESS 2025: Teachers today for the university of tomorrow

Young, R. A., & Collin, A. (2004). Introduction: Constructivism and social constructionism in the career field. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(3), 373–388. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2003.12.005>.