SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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# Exploring Poetry in Dialogue: Learning as Sustainable Development in the Literary Classroom

The climate crisis entails devastating changes for non-human and human life forms alike. This also has epistemological consequences since it places humans in a situation of fundamental uncertainty. Dealing with global risks grows increasingly difficult, and is a core issue in sustainable development (Goldin and Mariathasan 212). This constitutes a challenge to teachers of literature: how are we to choose texts and methods that help students deal with such complexity? I aim to answer this by empirically investigating the collaborative meaning-making of one group of student teachers discussing poetry.

A central motivation for this study is the Norwegian school curricula. Revised in 2020, the curricula include "sustainability" as one of three interdisciplinary topics to be covered in all subjects.[1] The student teachers in this study specialize in language and literature to teach at grade levels 1—10 in the Norwegian public school system. While reading, writing, and other forms of literary and linguistic competence are central to L1 teachers, they are now arguably also teachers of sustainable development. The guiding research question for this study is thus: what can subject-specific Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in literature education look like? Empirical research on classroom teaching can provide a nuanced view of this. While couched in a Norwegian context, the findings of this study will be relevant to

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teachers of literature elsewhere seeking to integrate sustainability in their classrooms.

I start by explaining why I believe we need to develop transactional and dialogic approaches to literature education that take the complexity of literary reading into account. I go on to analyze a dialogue-based teaching session. Lastly, I use findings from the dialogues to argue for the value of acknowledging students' contributions and embracing the uncertainty that is inherent in all pedagogy, but arguably fundamental in ESD.

## 1. From Environmentalist Norms to Collaborative Knowledge Construction

Several scholars of ESD highlight the need to stimulate critical and creative thinking. For example, educational scholars Paul Vare and William Scott suggest regarding ESD as composed of two complementary approaches. What they call ESD 1 has learning *for* sustainable developments as its goal, that is, promoting changes in attitudes and behaviors. For this to be efficient, however, it needs to be paired with ESD 2 or learning *as* sustainable development, which prioritizes critical thinking and the ability to sort out dilemmas and contradictions in sustainable living (Vare and Scott 194). Their point is that given the need for constant adaptation and problem-solving in a sustainable society, ESD cannot focus exclusively on training students in performing whatever actions are considered sustainable at any given moment.

Thus, it seems necessary to develop an ESD that avoids indoctrination (Östman 76). Students should be positioned as authentic problem-solvers in transactional pedagogical processes where "trajectories of learning" are "incited by a 'problematic situation' in which our habitual ways of acting are disturbed," requiring "'inquiry in order to enable us to proceed" (Van Poeck and Östman 1008). My hypothesis is that reading and discussing polysemous literary texts can help position students as sustainable problem-solvers in dialogue.

Moreover, this study takes its cue from recent calls to rethink what pedagogical approaches to literature and the environment can look like. As Timothy Clark has noted, ecocritical scholarship tends to assume that reading fiction can "[offer] some sort of explanatory model or norm of use in the real world" (76). This idea seems to rest on a problematic, monological concept of literary reading: the teacher knows the right attitudes to the environment, and by reading and discussing environmentally-focused texts, students are to acquire the same attitudes. However, this approach has little room for dissent, or for the critical and collaborative way of developing knowledge generally held

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to be needed in ESD (Garrard, "Problems and Prospects"; Parham). Indeed, since imaginative literature acts upon readers in unpredictable ways, it seems more apt for ESD 2.

In aiming to account for the potential of complex reader responses in the framework of ESD, I position this study in what Rita Felski calls *neo-phenomenology*. In her view, literary scholars must be aware that in "the two-way transaction we call reading, texts pass through densely woven filters of interpretation and affective orientation that both enable and limit their impact" (*Uses* 18). Felski's description of literary reading as "transaction" brings to mind the work of Louise Rosenblatt. Her idea of transaction, like that of Van Poeck and Östman quoted above, is inspired by the inquiry-based pedagogy of John Dewey, defined as: "'an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, . . . aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (Rosenblatt 17). Crucially, the transaction is distinct from "interaction" in that it is not a process between two self-contained entities—the reader and the text—but an organic interplay where each factor impacts the other.

Any claims for the utility of literature in ESD, I argue, needs a concept of how such text-reader relations come about. Building on Felski, C. Namwali Serpell suggests using the concept of *affordances* to describe such relations (Serpell 20–1). Borrowed from psychologist James J. Gibson, the term denotes "offerings of the environment" (Gibson 121). Relations between animals—including humans—and their environment rely on what the environment "affords": what can they do when relating to each other? As Serpell states, "a literary text affords aesthetic, affective, and ethical experiences as we read over time" (22). The final clause is important: readers often move back and forth in texts, reevaluating their impressions in a reflective process. This, I venture, is not typical of all readers at all ages but should be considered a procedural skill characterizing competent readers.

Hence, literary texts as well as teaching methods have particular affordances that appear in transaction. In order to connect these to ESD, one could start with Greg Garrard's claim that ecocritical teachers should cultivate viewpoint diversity and act as "multi-partial" rather than as activists representing one specific strain of environmentalism ("Cultivating Viewpoint Diversity" 50). To study how the students dialogically make sense of the problems afforded by the poems in question, I draw my main analytical concepts from Sheridan Blau's concept of literary competence. This is because Blau's distinction between *textual literacy, intertextual literacy,* and *performative literacy* overlaps with what are generally acknowledged to be important competences in citizens of a sustainable society.[2] Among the competences listed in

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UNESCO's learning objectives for ESD which correspond with ESD 2 are *systems-thinking*, *anticipatory*, *collaboration*, *critical thinking*, *self-awareness*, and *integrated problem-solving* (UNESCO 10). Identifying forms of literary competence among students may help teachers become aware of the affordances of literature education in ESD.

The perhaps most important element of textual literacy is critical thinking. Intertextual literacy, on the other hand, entails being able to relate literary texts to other "texts," in a wide sense. The student's ability to make sense of the unknown using previous and/or intertextual knowledge is key to literary understanding (Blau 206; Langer 17). This may contribute to systems thinking, but also to the collaborative skills needed among citizens who are to negotiate sustainable policies. Finally, performative literacy encompasses a set of attitudes or personal characteristics: a capacity for sustained, focused attention; a willingness to suspend closure; a willingness to take risks; a tolerance for failure; a tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty; intellectual generosity and fallibilism; and metacognitive awareness (Blau 211). Performative literacy, then, entails the ability to approach a literary text *as literature*. Imaginative literature often generates a need to formulate and explore hypotheses about why the text does what it does. This is potentially an important component not only in systems-thinking and interpersonal competencies, but also when it comes to "anticipatory" competence. This entails being able to imagine and discuss potential futures, knowing that no single person has the full view neither of the present situation nor of what is to come.

With this approach, the study contributes to the nascent field of empirical studies of discussion-based approaches to literature education as relevant to ESD. Also couched in a Norwegian context is the work of Nina Goga, Maria Pujol-Valls, and Lykke Guanio-Uluru. Goga and Valls study the effect of literary dialogue on student teachers' understanding of ecocriticism, while Guanio-Uluru discusses how working with specific reading roles in literature circles provides student teachers with greater confidence in their ability to teach sustainability issues. My study differs from these in that its primary focus is the interplay between sustainability and literary competence rather than how students acquire ecocritical approaches to literature.

This study also differs from those using quantitative approaches such as randomized control studies, claiming to show improvement in readers' attitudes on environmental and animal rights issues (cf. Małecki et al.; Schneider-Mayerson et al.). In my view, there are several problems with such studies. First, they seem to disregard questions of literary quality. Second, such studies are scarcely concerned with how students can become more skilled readers, which limits their

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educational value. Lastly, the researchers have a tendency to uncritically assume which environmentalist attitudes to promote, as if this did not constitute conflicts of interest to be addressed. In one study, the authors argue for using literary fiction to promote moral standards, claiming that "the potential good that could be achieved with the help of the attitudinal impact of literary fiction may outweigh whatever is morally questionable with using literary fiction for that purpose" (Małecki et al. 6). Here, literature is to be harnessed to serve the purpose of ESD 1.

In contrast, the transactional concept of teaching regards knowledge not as established truths to be transmitted from an expert, for example, a teacher, to readers, for example, students, but as something classroom participants construct in dialogue. In the words of the linguist and educational scholar Neil Mercer, we use language to "think together" and facilitating this should be a key concern for teachers of literature. In my analysis, I look for instances of what Mercer calls "exploratory talk," where participants strive to develop shared knowledge and insight through explicit reasoning and criticism (102–3). At stake here, then, is the potential of utilizing dialogic teaching "to stimulate and extend students' thinking, learning, knowing and understanding, and to enable them to discuss, reason and argue" (Alexander 128). In Eugene Matusov's account of dialogic teaching, this approach should feature genuine information-seeking—the teacher is a learner who cannot know the endpoint of the dialogue (Kim and Wilkinson 77). From this perspective, literary reading cannot aim at producing specific environmentally friendly attitudes or empathy for the nonhuman world (ESD 1). What it *can* do, I hope to demonstrate, is create opportunities for critically but respectfully probing into complex ideas (ESD 2).

## 2. Research Methodology and Pedagogical Design

This case study features eight M.A. students of Norwegian L1 pedagogy and myself in the double role of teacher and researcher. The students are practicing teachers following a program of session-based teaching, where they convene for one week of instruction eight times during the academic year. On the one hand, this is a culturally and linguistically homogenous group. On the other hand, these are eight individuals with different experiences, and likely also attitudes, concerning the nonhuman environment and sustainability. Although I could have contextualized their participation by carrying out preparatory interviews concerning their attitudes and experiences, it would contradict the epistemological assumptions of this study to suggest

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that their understanding of the poems could be explained by their group identity and stated environmental concerns (or lack thereof) in any straightforward way.

For the data collection, I used a digital recorder to record one teaching session of 1.5 hours. The recording was transcribed within one week after the session. In accordance with GDPR, I use pseudonyms for all the students, who have signed declarations of participation. The data collection was approved by the NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data). The research design could be defined as that of a case study, in that I seek to "understand a real-world case" while involving contextual conditions (Yin 15). More specifically, this is a case of "action research," that is "*research by higher education teachers themselves into their own teaching practice and into student learning . . .*" (Zuber-Skerritt 88). Typical of action research, this study focuses on the teacher's practice more than the learning outcome of students.

During this session week, postcolonial studies, gender studies, and ecocriticism were in focus. We also discussed the "postcritical turn," of which Felski's neo-phenomenology is a central aspect and highlighted the distinction between "paranoid" and "reparative" reading as a fulcrum in contemporary discussions of critical theory (cf. Felski *The Limits of Critique;* Sedgwick). Included in the students' preparatory reading was a textbook co-authored by myself (Samoilow and Myren-Svelstad). The book features a chapter on ecocriticism defining core concepts, discussing its relevance for language arts in school, and presenting an ecocritical analysis of a YA novel.

At the end of the week, I staged a Socratic circle, following Matthew Copeland's guidelines for this method. Four students volunteered to sit in a circle with chairs facing each other. The four remaining students took place in a surrounding outer circle. The texts to be discussed were taken from Ruth Lillegraven's 2016 illustrated collection of poetry for children: *Eg er eg er eg er* [*I am I am I am*[3]], which had been assigned reading material for the session week. I handed out a copy of a poem to each student and instructed the innermost circle to read it aloud first before discussing whatever came to mind. In order to focus the discussion on work with written texts, I did not provide students with copies of the illustrations. A help sheet with three questions lay facing down on the middle of the floor, and students were instructed to use it if they felt the need. The questions prompted students to describe the topic of the poem, the voice of the poetic subject, and the role of the physical environment in the text.

The outer circle was instructed to pay close attention to the dialogue, make notes of whatever they found interesting, and prepare to contribute with their observations at my signal. After working on the

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first poem, I instructed the students to switch circles, and gave them another one to discuss, the roles reversed from the first discussion. Neither group turned the help sheet until late in the conversation and both realized that they had already addressed the prompts. It should be stated that this method demands that the teacher considers the accessibility needs of particular groups of students. For example, linguistic minorities or those with impaired hearing might need the teacher to establish slow and clear speech as a ground rule for all participants.

My choice of texts and teaching method was motivated by the affordances of each. The poetry collection has been the subject of several analyses highlighting its "ecocentric" tendency (e.g. Røskeland 53). Moreover, Lillegraven is a critically acclaimed poet, and I expected high-quality texts to afford enough indeterminacies to make students formulate divergent views on how they describe the relationship between the human and the physical world. The speaker of the poems is most readily interpreted as a pre-teenage girl, and another reason for this choice was thus to allow the students to consider aspects of age and gender in their interpretation.

Copeland stresses the collaborative nature of a Socratic circle and how it transfers classroom governance from the teacher to the pupils (4). This, then, would correspond to Garrard's idea of positioning the student as "a co-producer of knowledge, and the teacher as a 'Trickster Midwife'" ("Towards an Unprecedented Ecocritical Pedagogy" 199).[4] Here, the task of the teacher is not to present complete readings for the students to acquire, but to create a space for a "guided openness." Classroom studies indicate that this is an important principle for inquiry-based learning in literature education (Hansen and Gissel 11). In this context, the content of the poems and the announced focus on ecocritical theory provides a way of narrowing the field of inquiry; as the conversation data indicate, students looked for how the texts describe the relationship between humans and the environment. However, the teacher still has room to clear up misunderstandings, ask questions that challenge students to rethink, or provide academic nomenclature for the ideas students address in everyday language. This also helps the teacher to level the playing field between students, as it provides a chance to delegate speaking time to, and acknowledge the contributions of, those who might find participating in academic discussions challenging.

The transcriptions are translated from Norwegian and rendered in American English orthography. Emphasis is represented by *italics*, descriptions of nonverbal acts are placed in parentheses, for example "(laughs)," my clarifications are in [brackets], and hesitations and interruptions by the speaker are represented by ellipses: ". . . ."

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Omitted parts of dialogue are marked with parenthetical ellipses: "(. . .)." Since interactional dynamics are not the issue of the analysis, I have generally omitted elements such as double takes and stuttering, in order to make the interpretations and opinions of the students come across more clearly.

## 3. Discussing Human Nature

The first poem discussed by the students is titled "Bestefar borte" ["Granddad gone"]:

| | |
|---|---|
| bestefar med<br>kinn som lêr og<br>hender som røter | granddad with<br>cheeks like leather and<br>hands like roots |
| eit heilt fjell åleine | a whole mountain alone |
| bestefar er død | granddad is dead |
| skal ned i jorda<br>til bestemor | is going down into the earth<br>to grandma |
| ja, seier pappa | yes, dad says |
| alt som kjem til verda<br>skal ein gong bli borte att<br>menneske, plantar, dyr<br>alle er vi her berre<br>denne vesle tida | everything that comes to the world<br>will once disappear<br>humans, plants, animals<br>all of us are here only<br>this little time |
| det likar eg ikkje<br>seier eg | I don't like that<br>I say |
| ikkje eg heller<br>seier pappa | me neither<br>dad says |

(Lillegraven and Johnsen 51)

At the beginning of the conversation, the students note the existential import of the poem, evident in the reluctance of the speaker to accept the cycle of birth and death. They also discuss how the imagery suggests a close connection between—in their words—the human and nature. Two of them, Erik and Kristin, are particularly struck by the simile of granddad's hands "like roots" and the metaphor of him as a mountain. Another, Helen, understands granddad's descent into earth as him going down to grandma *and* nature simultaneously, gathering assent—nods and "m-hmms"—from her fellow students. After a while, I ask the

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outer circle to contribute with their thoughts and an equally open and collaborative discussion ensues. Here, Hanna presents her take:

| | |
|---|---|
| Hanna | Me, I got a bit caught up in part one and two [of the poem]. That is, a little in relation to the concept ecocentric and ... anthropocentric? |
| Teacher | M-hmm. |
| Hanna | Which you write about in your book. Because I think that up until "I don't like that" we're in a kind of *ecocentric* focus. We are part of *nature*, I mean, and we're *equal*. |
| Teacher | M-hmm. |
| Hanna | Am I thinking the right way now? I don't know ... (laughs) do you ... yeah ... |
| Teacher | Yes, tell me what *you* think. |
| Hanna | And there is nothing compared to which we're *higher*. We're in a way *the same* all of us, plants and animals, I mean, there is no hierarchy where we are on top. However, when they come to "I don't like that / I say // me neither / dad says," then the anthropocentric sort of appears, where we regard ourselves as higher and we have big problems with *being* part of this nature like the fact that we will die, too, and we push it away as long as we can. |
| Teacher | M-hmm. |
| Hanna | What ... what I noticed which I think is a little like ... it stands out to me I mean: it is so *typical* for the human that we do not manage to relate to this *death*. One has a wish for eternal ... eternal life. (laughs) |
| Mari & Helen | M-hmm. |
| Hanna | Yeah. And then we place ourselves a bit above the natural, sort of. |
| Teacher | Do you find that the poem concludes in any way here by saying that this is a feeling we have to *acknowledge* or is it something the poem criticizes? |
| Hanna | Yeah, I feel like that feeling is something that's in all of us, which we don't ... I think there are very few who go around saying they feel at one with nature, and death comes when it does and ... you rarely meet people who are in *that* place. |
| Teacher | M-hmm. |
| Hanna | So I feel like this is ... it is part of the natural. That we think in this way. |
| Teacher | M-hmm. |
| Hanna | But that doesn't mean that all people go around believing they're higher up and don't want to care for or ... but I think ... so I won't say that it *criticizes*, but it points to how we ... that feeling *is* there. |
| Teacher | Yes. |
| Hanna | No matter how much we are part of this nature. |

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As Hanna has participated in the outer circle, this is her first chance at a substantial contribution. She applies the analytical concepts she has read about in preparation for the class, attempting to use the dichotomy ecocentric/anthropocentric to make sense of the poem. She concludes by stating that everyone has anthropocentric feelings. Indeed, this is a *natural* part of being human, even when the human is metaphorically described as inextricably connected to the environment.

At the student's somewhat hesitant attempt at defining *ecocentric*, it would have been easy for me to fall into a lecture on the meaning of the concept. After all, Hanna addresses me as an authority figure in this context, wanting me to give feedback on her understanding of what she perceives as key terms. By encouraging her to go on and verbalize her reading instead, I believe that her and her fellow students' understanding was expanded in a different way. Instead of sorting the anthropo-/ecocentric dichotomy into a simple either/or relationship, implying that the poem tries to teach its reader an ecocentric norm, Hanna argues that anthropocentrism could instead be considered a part of the human condition. Thus, she describes the oscillation between eco- and anthropocentrism as something to be tackled and dwelt upon critically. In this way, one could argue that she demonstrates a willingness to suspend closure and a tolerance for ambiguity and paradox.

Moreover, Hanna initiates a reflection on the extent to which we should acknowledge that the "anthropocentric" attitude is something "natural" for humans. This indicates that the poem and the dialogic approach have the affordance of stimulating critical thinking and self-awareness competencies, the latter encompassing the ability "to deal with one's feelings and desires" (UNESCO 10). Instead of providing factual knowledge or selected environmentalist norms, the poem as imaginative text allows for patiently and critically exploring the meaning of some potent concepts for one's own life and for society.

This part of the dialogue seems to support the claim that a transactional way of studying a literary text closely and attentively is crucial to the development of the student's reasoning. Note, for example, how Hanna starts by dividing the poem into "part one" and "part two," a formal analysis that had been developed in the inner circle. This likely provided her with a useful starting point to apply the concepts anthropo-/ecocentric to the content of the poem. A particular affordance of the Socratic circle, which is only one of many methods to promote dialogue, consists in how she was able to listen attentively to her fellow students, which likely enabled her to pursue her own train of thought before making her contribution. Conscious of my role in modeling listening skills, I encouraged Hanna to develop her reflection by

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minimal responses, a behavior reflected by Mari and Helen. This again illustrates the power dynamic in play between teachers and students. My goal was to signal that Hanna's contribution was worth elaborating on—only if she had expressed a clear misunderstanding of the concepts, I would have attempted to clarify—giving her fellow students an opportunity to follow her thought. This short sequence, then, illustrates how transactional teaching does not mean that everyone has the same role, but that the teacher needs to be conscious of how he or she follows up contributions.

At the same time, this is in no way a perfectly governed dialogue on my part. After Hanna had completed her reasoning, other students were asked to present their readings. Here, instead of building upon substantial points of Hanna, the conversation turned into a series of monological contributions. One reason might be the students sensing that the "exercise" of the Socratic seminar was about to be finished, making them eager to present their views before we went on to the next part. Perhaps most critically, however, I did not ask the rest of the group to respond to Hanna's point. One way of facilitating an expansion of her ideas could have been to dwell on the anthropocentric attitude of the poetic subject. For example, had I asked them to reflect on whether this is a transcultural attitude or more characteristic of modern Western societies, the students might have discussed how their cultural background influenced their reading of the poem, thus stimulating their ability for critical thinking and self-awareness. This simply did not occur to me in this situation, a fact that highlights the importance of teachers' continuous reflection on their own practice.

## 4. A Tension-Filled Discussion

After the first poem, the students switched places so that the participants of the first listening circle now constituted the new talking circle, and vice versa. The second poem is titled "Veksesmerter" ["Growing Pains"]:

| | |
|---|---|
| eg kjem opp av elva<br>er større og annleis | I emerge from the river<br>am bigger and different |
| kroppen min er<br>blitt ein kropp eg<br>ikkje lenger kjenner | my body has<br>become a body I<br>no longer know |
| for noko | because something |

*Continued*

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| | |
|---|---|
| svingar og svaiar | swings and sways |
| noko sprikjer og sprekk | something sprawls and splits |
| noko boblar og brest | something bubbles and bursts |
| og alt knirkar og knitrar<br>som høgspentlina<br>i skogen | and everything squeaks and sizzles<br>like the power line<br>in the forest |

(Lillegraven and Johnsen 26)

From an ecocritical point of view, one could read this poem as an allegorical depiction of climate change: this is nature speaking, sensing uncomfortable changes brought about by modernity, symbolized by the power line interfering in the pristine forest. At a more concrete level, this could also be read as an imagery-filled representation of puberty. Tom and Hanna immediately express this interpretation. Tom makes the point that rivers are common symbols of journeys and that the imagery possibly suggests that the poem's speaker has passed through childhood. Interestingly, he goes on to highlight how an understanding of the poem as a depiction of puberty can feed into an ecocritical reading:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tom | If one really goes "all out"[5] and completely like paranoid, you know, in one's reading and the fact that in the entire book like climate change lies . . . it lies seething beneath the surface a little, at least the way I read it. Then it is kind of a little, this thing with *growing pains*, it can after all like . . . not only the bodily growing pain, but how nature now is changing *radically* while you grow up as a young person today. So next year, earth will collapse in thirty years, and the following year, it's collapsing in ten years, right? It goes insanely fast and that this . . . that makes it really paranoid, but when you connect it to economic growth and this kind of human, . . . anthropocentric reading, then, so you can like . . . the power line you can read like . . . man's entry into . . . |
| Hanna | Yes. |
| Tom | . . . into nature, right. But then . . . I'm (chuckles) going "all in"[6] on a very kind of . . . because I too read this primarily as puberty. |

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This excerpt provides a fascinating example of how oral literary discussion can be academically substantial while differing from written standards of textual coherence. Tom even uses the American expressions "go all out/in," typical of the informal use of Anglophone slang among Norwegians. He expresses an intention to expand upon the interpretation the group has established, referring to the idea of "paranoid" reading as readings that look for latent political content beneath the surface of a text (cf. Sedgwick). By applying the concept of "anthropocentrism," Tom also exemplifies how context is established. He likely uses it because it was introduced in the previous dialogue, by Hanna, who is placed next to him in the circle. Thus, the students keep building on each other's contributions, developing understanding of the concepts under discussion. Again, this demonstrates some of the value of working patiently with polysemous texts.

To Tom, the preparatory reading and discussion on ecocriticism makes him see the possibility of reading the poem as an expression of climate anxiety. Since all of these students have at least some experience as teachers, it is not surprising that they would be especially attuned to how a given poem reflects the lives of the pupils they know. As Tom claims, the accelerating climate change scenarios presented by scientists is a potentially aggravating factor in the lives of young people who are already struggling with bodily "growing pains."

However, as he himself suggests, this reading has only tenuous support in the poem itself. He makes hermeneutic use of what he perceives as a general tendency in the book as a whole. Rather than providing a close reading of the poem, then, this sequence illustrates how the text and the teaching method allow for what literacy scholar Judith Langer calls "Being Inside and Moving Through an Envisionment" (18). In Langer's description of literary reading, this is one of five *stances* readers take, that is, one way of developing one's interpretation of a text by considering the text from different vantage points (16–17). This concept complements Blau's idea of intertextual literacy. By using his knowledge of other texts (e.g. literary theory) and the world (e.g. the lives of pupils), Tom "moves through" various ways of construing a sense of the poem as a whole, thus expanding the knowledge of other participants and in turn their ability to reflect upon the text.

In the ensuing discussion, the students in the inner circle follow up on the ecocritical focus introduced by Tom. They argue that the destruction of nature inherent in the power line could be considered analogous to how puberty is also an upsetting and destructive experience. Interestingly, a somewhat offhand comment by Lisa introduces ideas that resurface at several points. When Hanna claims that humans destroy nature by interfering with it, Lisa asks rhetorically: "But then

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it's like where would we be *without* it [human interference], you know, would we, like, be sitting in caves?" Interestingly, she does not elaborate on this point, perhaps because she garners little minimal response from the others. My impression is that Lisa attempts "repairing" the awkwardness of the situation: she turns the conversational focus to the first stanza, describing her difficulty with making sense of the poem's speaker emerging from the river. Later in the conversation, Tom supports Lisa:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tom | . . . but I think that thought you [Lisa] had about the power line as an image of progress too, then . . . |
| Hanna | Yes. |
| Tom | I mean, that puberty is a necessary evil in a way, right . . . |
| Hanna | M-hmm. |
| Lisa | Yes. |
| Hanna | A transition. |
| Tom | It's not only painful, right, a lot of good things about puberty too, but it brings progress with it. |

Here, Tom develops Lisa's rhetorical question further, drawing validating responses from her and Hanna: puberty, like modernization and industrialization, is painful but also useful. This ambivalence, together with the cooperative atmosphere of the classroom, is what forces the students to "suspend closure," in Blau's words. As Mercer argues, context is a mental construct, consisting of "*whatever information listeners (or readers) use to make sense of what is said (or written)*" (20). The fact that one remark can be followed up at a much later point illustrates this.

In hindsight, this exchange constitutes a missed chance on my part to make the students aware of what Blau describes as "the often trivial and accidental nature of the prior knowledge that they depend upon as readers" (207). Their labeling puberty as an evil is likely influenced by their familiarity with Norwegian teenagers and thus by a Western cultural background. I might have challenged them by mentioning how for example some indigenous North-American cultures regard puberty as a *gift* with the potential of providing a positive connection to nonhuman nature.[7] Thus, while my focus in the moment of teaching was to facilitate a collaborative understanding of the poem, the analysis reveals underexploited "teachable moments" in terms of critical thinking and thus ESD 2.

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Moreover, while the inner circle gains more insight into the polysemy of the text, they do not develop any further the allegory Lisa implied with her remark: that the poetic subject's emergence out of the water, interpreted as a metaphor for puberty, could in turn be read as representing human evolution. However, this perspective, too, resurfaces as the outer circle is brought in at the end of the dialogue. Here, Erik marks a cautious opposition to the inner circle's reading:

| | |
|---|---|
| Erik | I also looked at the . . . so, this thing about the river and the power line as a sort of movement in the poem, that we begin with a river and then we end with a power line. You have talked about puberty, but I haven't really picked up that topic. |
| Kristin | *Hmm*! |
| Erik | So, because I have kind of started thinking, like, why the power line, why the river, why is this written into the poem? And then I kind of started thinking the river a little like the Greek philosopher of nature, can't remember who, but this thing like . . . is the river the same when the water is *changed*? Where you can kind of think about the river as life and the water as the "I." And then thinking about the development of the *human* rather than puberty. (. . .) So I interpreted it in this direction too, that there is a sort of movement from nature to nature and industry. |
| Anette | M-hmm. |
| Teacher | And then your idea is that this describes the Human with a capital H, not an individual, but human . . . |
| Erik | Yes, yes. |
| Teacher | . . . evolution in a certain sense. |
| Erik | Yes, yes. |
| | (. . .) |
| Teacher | But then we have a sort of tension here between two ways of reading. Some read it as a description of the puberty of a girl—a specific human. And human development, then. |
| Tom | But what I'm thinking is that we, I mean in one way we touched it, right, how we looked at this alternation between the individual level and then that puberty . . . and then how society has changed and a little . . . |
| Hanna | M-hmm. |
| Tom | . . . the eco-anxiety or what I should call it of the character in this collection, right. So it . . . (turns to teacher) and you used the word *tension* like the tension between . . . |
| Teacher | M-hmm. |

*Continued*

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| Tom | . . . and it's a little interesting with this power line, right, how there's a tension[8] between the individual and the human and the society we have built and that the electricity metaphor, then, the tension metaphor, because we always live in that what do I wish for my life and the individual, and I only like want to live well and comfortably. And then, to take part in a society you might well have to renounce some of the things you wish for, and *especially* now. |
| --- | --- |

Erik positions his contribution as an alternative to what the inner circle has been discussing, receiving an intrigued "Hmm!" in response from Kristin. Erik, too, shows a complex literary competence, describing in a vocabulary of metacognition how the imagery of the poem made him ask certain analytical questions: "I have kind of started thinking (. . .) why is this written into the poem?"[9] He demonstrates awareness of his textual literacy, defined as the "*procedural knowledge* that accounts for a reader's knowing how to construe the plain sense of a text . . ." (Blau 204). His contribution simultaneously shows how active listening in a Socratic circle can contribute to what UNESCO (10) defines as self-awareness competence. Erik proceeds to draw on a different type of intertextual factors than what we have seen before. He refers to the pre-socratic philosopher Heraclitus, to whom is usually attributed the adage that one cannot step into the same river twice (cf. Graham). Based on this, Erik develops an argument for reading the water in the river as a representation of the human as such, the river as life, and the power line as symbol of the intrusion of industry into human history.

We might say that because he has been actively listening to the inner circle, Erik is able to step out and objectify the experience (cf. Langer 20). That is, he takes a bird's eye view of the interpretation of the others, contrasting it with his own reading. As Langer underlines (24), being aware of the different stances that arise during classroom reading provides entry points for the teacher into the dialogue with students. Indeed, to build on the students' contributions and raise their metacognitive awareness, I deemed it necessary at this point to sum up the variety of readings that were on the table and sort them into two distinct strategies. (This does not eliminate complexity; on the contrary, it makes complexity visible and possible to expand upon.) Tom immediately picks up on this, attempting to bridge the two readings. This is typical of exploratory talk where, as Mercer defines it, "[a]greement is sought as a basis for joint progress" (98). My summary could be considered a *repairable*, that is, an utterance identifying a disagreement and

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thus a potential source of trouble in the conversation (cf. Have 133). As such, Tom's effort to resolve the tension expresses a need to make coherent sense of the poem but also to contribute to the collaborative atmosphere of the dialogue.

As we see, Tom builds on my summary and remarks how the conversation has revolved around the individual and the societal level, before suggesting that the era of climate change, rather than representing something radically new, makes old existential questions suddenly acute. Humans have always had to renounce their own wishes and desires to take part in society, and this is simply more palpable right now. Here, he uses ideas brought up by his fellow students to nuance one of his own points from the beginning of the conversation. Tom's point, too, of course, rests on the assumption that all young people need to make sacrifices. In retrospect, this constitutes an opportunity to highlight questions of environmental justice, such as whether certain classes in society have a larger responsibility than others to reduce their possessions.

Indeed, up until this point, the dialogue had been "cumulative," that is, constructive but rather uncritical (cf. Mercer 31), with exceptions like Lisa's rhetorical question. My impression is that this group needed time to work through the texts and get used to the Socratic seminar as method. Once the respectful atmosphere had been established, I venture, Erik was able to frame his new contribution as an opposition to what had been said so far.

This is all the more important since bringing about exploration is the most difficult part of dialogic teaching. As Alexander explains, this type of dialogue "makes demands, simultaneously, on the teacher's professional skill, subject knowledge and insight into the capacities and understanding of each of his/her students" (Alexander 132).[10] Instead of a set of attitudes to climate change or the nonhuman environment, the poem seemed to bring up new topics of pondering: is climate change somehow an inevitable evil, much like how puberty is thought of in their culture? Is it something we should consider part of the development of human life and embrace it as a chance to rethink who we are? The poem afforded such reflections, offering readings I as a teacher did not predict. The parts of dialogue analyzed here testify to the potentials as well as the challenges of dialogic teaching.

## 5. Concluding Discussion: A Patient Pedagogy of Uncertainty

While placing high demands on the teacher, dialogic teaching responds to one of the paradoxes in ESD. When we use the natural

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sciences as a reservoir of "hard facts" that are to inform our teaching and shape the beliefs of students, we "*recruit objectivity in the service of activism*" instead of stimulating a pluralist kind of critical thinking (Garrard, "Cultivating Viewpoint Diversity" 49–50). Moreover, this way of implementing ESD in literature education is easily tricked: it is easier for a student to signal the attitudes the teacher seems to look for than to contribute critically and respectfully in evaluating diverse viewpoints.

In my view, the productive way these Socratic seminars unfolded supports the idea that ESD in literature education should focus on contributing to ESD 2 rather than ESD 1. A dialogic approach to texts offers a way of acknowledging that we as teachers "might learn from students the parameters of unprecedented future configurations of environmentalism," as Garrard puts it ("Towards an Unprecedented Ecocritical Pedagogy" 200). Literature does not necessarily—or at all—give us guidance for behavior in the way the natural and social sciences might do. Instead, a relevant affordance of literature is how it allows us to dwell on difficult existential and conceptual topics without arriving at a conclusion. As Viktor Swillens and Joris Vlieghe write in an Arendt-inspired terminology, "the newcomers take the world into new directions that might go against our plans and desires" (1020). We can cultivate pluralism by rejecting the view that students lack something the teacher should provide them with, acknowledging instead their ability to contribute. This means that teachers of literature do not need to do something else than what they are experts in. As the above analysis indicates, ESD in literature education demands that the teacher chooses high-quality texts, facilitates discussion, and assesses the literary competence of students. Committed teachers already do this while continuously seeking to do it better.

While the analysis reveals missed opportunities for developing the dialogue and critical thinking further, this very unpredictability of what happens in student-text-encounters constitutes a factor to be embraced by ESD teachers who seek to avoid indoctrination (cf. Östman 76). If we want to make each individual a *subject* of change, rather than "*object* of change, an object of desires and goals determined by others" (Van Poeck and Östman 1009), we cannot predict the outcome of any given educational attempt. As teachers, then, we need to be attentive to the potential for helping students further in their thinking, while acknowledging that we, too, are fallible individuals.

The scope and data of this study cannot tell us if these students improve their own practice, or whether they fruitfully implement this approach in their teaching. However, as Gert Biesta has argued ("Why 'What Works' Still Won't Work"), identifying teaching methods in the

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belief that they will "work" in all contexts is often futile. This study indicates how the readings and discussions depend on several factors such as the cooperative climate in the group, the previous intertextual knowledge of students, and their cultural background. What this study *can* do, then, is show how teachers seeking to integrate sustainability issues in literary teaching can use the power of interthinking to make students' existing competence emerge and expand. Positioning students as problem-solvers in dialogue has the potential of being an important contribution from the field of literary study in tackling the complex, open-ended situation of the climate crisis.

## NOTES

1. The other two topics are "health and life skills" and "democracy and citizenship."
2. This has been argued by several scholars (cf. Hansson 197; Myren-Svelstad 10; Guanio-Uluru 6).
3. All translations from Norwegian are my own.
4. Always making his companions reach one predetermined insight, Socrates does not really teach in the transactional, unpredictable sense Copeland and Garrard imply (Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk* 94). Adding the qualifier "trickster" is therefore important since it reminds us that learning happens as the result of a breakdown of what we thought we knew (Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk* 48).
5. In English.
6. In English.
7. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.
8. Here, Tom makes an untranslatable pun on the words "spenning" ["tension"] and "høgspentlina" [literally: "highly tensed line," i.e. "power line"].
9. Metacognition is a fundamental dimension of Blau's concept of performative literacy. We see metacognition also in how Tom suggests a paranoid reading of the poem earlier.
10. Alexander terms such dialogue "cumulative," stating that he means the same as Mercer does by "exploratory" (Alexander 132).

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