

# PERFORMATIVE SPACES

Negotiations in the literature classroom

HEIDI HÖGLUND<sup>1</sup> AND HELLE RØRBECH<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Åbo Akademi University, Finland <sup>2</sup>Aarhus University, Denmark

## Abstract

The term performativity is used in and across various research disciplines, such as language philosophy, gender and cultural studies, and art and literature studies. Inspired by former uses of the concept within other disciplines, this article elaborates on what performativity can offer in research on literary education. Using two theoretical conceptualisations of performativity, poststructuralist and posthumanist, the article explores empirical examples from the authors' previous studies. The analyses highlight how performativity emphasises and, maybe even more importantly, provides theoretical and conceptual tools for studying—ongoing processes and unfoldings in the literature classroom. Negotiation emerges as a key concept. Finally, the study provides suggestions on what performativity can offer in research on literary education, and relates this to recent issues in research on literary education in the Nordic countries as well as contemporary understandings of Bildung.

Keywords: literary education, performativity, negotiation, poststructuralism, posthumanism, Bildung

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term performativity originates from speech act theory (Austin, 1962), in which it is stated that speech acts bring about certain realities “as when judgements are pronounced by a court”, or they “can set into motion a set of actions” under certain conditions (Butler, 2010, p.147). Austin terms the former illocutionary performatives and the latter perlocutionary performatives. The term has subsequently migrated into other areas and research disciplines, such as gender and cultural studies, and art and literature studies (e.g., Butler, 1997; Culler, 2000; Hall, 1999; Jalving, 2011). However, when it comes to literary education, performativity is relatively uncharted territory. In this article, we elaborate on what performativity can offer in research on literary education in L1, as well as providing empirical examples of how situations in the literature classroom can be approached from a performative perspective. By pursuing how theorists have interpreted, reinterpreted, and rearticulated performativity, we will elaborate on its continuing theoretical potential in the exploration of literary educational practices, phenomena, and problems.

Whether performativity emerges in language philosophy, gender, or art and literature studies, it marks a shift from trying to understand how things *are* to engaging in the *becoming(s)* of the world. The focus is not on fixed, final results, but is turned towards active and ongoing processes. The focus is on doings and actions, for example, social practices that actively create gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, and other social categories (Rørbech & Hetmar, 2012).

Although previous research on performativity in literary education is scarce, some recent initiatives indicate a growing interest in the concept within the field. For example, Sørhaug (2018) suggests that performative theory could serve as a common ground for understanding the complex interplay between literature and student groups in the literature classroom, emphasising the collective responses as well as emotional responses in the classroom. Jusslin (2020), in the context of integrating dance into primary school students’ poetry reading and writing processes, has developed performative potentials in her exploration of what is produced in the intra-actions between dancing, reading, and writing.

Previously, we have used the term performative as a basis of the approach of our studies (Höglund, 2017; Jusslin & Höglund, 2020; Rørbech, 2013, 2016). In these studies, negotiation was emphasised in somewhat different ways to cover the collective exploration and interpretation of literature. In this article, we will bring this basis to the foreground and expand on performativity in the study of literary education considering our belief that the term has further potential. With a performative perspective on the literature classroom, we will highlight movements between different understandings and positions that we link to a broader concept of negotiation (Derrida, 2002) than in our previous studies.

By applying performativity in L1 education, we build on established understandings of meaning-making in the classroom as the doing and making of knowledge, identities, and cultures (see e.g., Krogh, 2012; Krogh & Sonne, 2019). Yet, we believe

that performativity can throw light on the dynamic aspects of meaning-making processes in the literature classroom from new angles. As such, inspired by Lefebvre's (2005, p. 403) conception of space, we suggest seeing the social practices in the classroom as the production of spaces: "[t]he space of speech envelops the space of bodies and develops by means of traces, of writings, of prescriptions and inscriptions" (see also Laursen, 2019; Simonsen, 2005). In this sense, when the participants in the classroom negotiate the meaning of the literary text, different kinds of social spaces are produced, intertwined, or linked together. Other Nordic scholars have pointed to the L1 classroom as a site of diverse cultural spaces (Smidt, 2018) and to placemaking practices in the language classroom (Laursen et al., 2020). In our discussion, we will position this study within this "spatial trend" in Scandinavian research.

### *1.1 Background and context*

Previous research has shown that several purposes of literary education in the Nordic countries have existed in parallel; literature reading is viewed as a specific competence, an aesthetic experience, and a means of achieving. For example, personal growth and development often concurrently. Regardless of the dominant tendencies at different times, the position of literary education in the Nordic countries has been both multifaceted and ambiguous (see Gourvennec et al., 2020). For some time now, literature teaching in the Scandinavian countries and particularly Denmark has been premised on a hermeneutic-inspired concept of *Bildung*. Mortensen (2002, p. 441) suggested two decades ago that identity formation is the process in which the self "is confronted with what is alien outside and inside itself". In other words, encountering the other, or otherness, is essential for the transgression of former understandings of the self and the surrounding world in this understanding of *Bildung*. Other positions in Scandinavian literature pedagogy have extended the hermeneutic perspective on *Bildung*, linking the encounter with "the other" with the development of empathy (Persson, 2007), critical literacy (Skaftun, 2009), *Bildung* in culturally diverse classrooms (Rørbech, 2013, 2016) or textual defamiliarisation (Hansen et al., 2020).

In a review of research into literary education at Scandinavian secondary schools, Rødnes (2014) documented two contrasting approaches: experience-based approaches (characterised by an orientation towards the student, rooted in reader-response theory) and analytic approaches (characterised by an orientation towards the text, rooted in New Criticism). Yet, Rødnes (2014) emphasised that a significant challenge for literature teaching is how to uphold both experience-based and analytical approaches, and how to put these perspectives into dialogue. Although researchers have suggested that the two approaches can be regarded as complementary, or even as desirable counterparts (e.g., Persson, 2007), a tension between these two approaches seems to represent one of the key issues dealt with in research into literary education in the Nordic countries in recent years.

Such a tension, involving somewhat contrastive visions of the purpose of literary education, has created what Faust (2000, p. 26) refers to as a “double bind” for teachers, as they struggle to achieve the objective of making students engage with literature on a personal level while at the same time upholding a commitment to authoritative readings. Faust’s writings also reveal that this issue is in no way only prevalent in a Nordic context but is also a dilemma noticed internationally (see also Fialho et al., 2011; Schrijvers et al., 2019). Addressing this dilemma, Faust (2000) describes the literature classroom as dynamic, temporal and situated within historical and sociocultural contexts. He suggests a way to conceptualise literature teaching that holds two dimensions of reflection: a personal and a cultural level, that combine a phenomenological and a cultural approach, and none of them are founded on the dichotomy of text and reader. Faust’s (2000) suggestions point towards a dynamic and performative perspective on the literature classroom.

Recently, a large Danish research project, *Quality in Danish and Mathematics* (Hansen et al., 2020), developed an inquiry-based approach to literature instruction based on cognitive and phenomenological theories that transcended the opposition of text and reader-oriented approaches in other ways than Faust suggests. However, the primary aim of this project is the development of learning materials and interpretational strategies, rather than focusing on performativity or potentials of *Bildung* in the ongoing processes in literature teaching. Also, Harstad (2018) contributes to a rethinking of moving beyond the split between the experience-based and analytical approaches, emphasising the need for both the affective and the analytical in reading literature. Grounded in works by Deleuze, Harstad (2018) elaborates on literary education as a way of becoming with literature and becoming with the world, emphasising that the impact of literature is difficult to predetermine, measure, or articulate. Consequently, he calls attention to the difficulty in literary teaching of seeking to predetermine students’ encounter with literature.

Acknowledging the previous scholarly work, we see both a need to include and an interest in including other theories and perspectives in the scholarly debate to move beyond the tension between emphasising either the reading subject or the textual object, as well as a need to explore new perspectives on *Bildung* in the literature classroom. Consequently, the aim of this article is to elaborate on how performativity can contribute to research on literary education. The article is driven by two questions: 1) how can students’ meaning making in the literature classroom be approached when thinking with performativity; and 2) what are the potentials and challenges of applying performativity in the study of interpretations in the literature classroom. To elaborate on this, our analysis is achieved by revisiting materials from our previous empirical studies on students’ meaning-making with literature in lower secondary education.

In our rereading of this material, we tried out two different, but still interconnected, approaches to performativity: poststructuralist (Butler, 1997, 2011) and posthumanist (Barad, 2003, 2007). The first study originally combined a poststructuralist and a social semiotic approach to conversations in the literature classroom

(Rørbech, 2013). In our rereading of this study, we emphasised the poststructuralist focus on performativity and reread excerpts from the classroom interactions taking into consideration the concepts of iteration, resistance, and marginalisation (Butler, 1997, 2011). The second study originally used a social semiotic approach to students' video-making interpretative work with poetry (Höglund, 2017). In our rereading of this study, we used a posthumanist approach to performativity and reread excerpts from the students' work with video-making in response to the literary text with the concept of intra-active entanglements (Barad, 2003, 2007). In both rereadings, we also used the concept of negotiation (Derrida, 2002). Based on these analyses, we elaborate on what performativity can offer in research on literary education.

The choice to include two different approaches to performativity was crucial in order to emphasise the flexibility and breadth of the concept. As poststructuralist theories, and particularly the scholarly work of Judith Butler (1997), are highly influential in the theoretical development of performativity, we found it both crucial and productive to include them. Building on Butler's understanding of performativity, Karen Barad (2003, 2007) introduces a posthumanist approach which moves beyond linguistic, discursive, and bodily approaches to an interpretation of performativity that affirms what is, to her, the intra-active becoming of the world (Barad, 2007). These two approaches, interconnected but still different, allowed us to take a dynamic theoretical approach in our study of how performativity can contribute to research on literary education.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 *A poststructuralist approach to performativity*

The term performativity originates from speech act theory (Austin, 1962), which maintains that performative utterances bring forth the reality they are referring to; they effectively contribute to changing the world. In doing so, speech act theory highlights the transformative power of speech (Gond et al., 2016). Several poststructuralist scholars, such as Judith Butler, have elaborated on the term performativity, adding the perspectives of power, knowledge, and deconstruction. Exploring the politics of the performative, Butler (1997) has been particularly influential by turning the attention to the regulatory norms and discursive conditions for becoming or not becoming a subject. Analysing the performative act of positioning a subject in hateful, racist or homophobic discourses (Butler, 1997) and the normative discourses governing the possibilities of doing gender (Butler, 2011), Butler has extended the meaning of Austin's performatives. In both cases, Butler links performativity with *the iteration* of available discourses and cultural norms that make up the conditions for becoming a subject or making other people subjects (Butler, 1997). Yet, she emphasises that concurrently performativity makes the transgression of cultural norms possible, as it is through deviations and resistance that discursive practices are changed

(Butler, 1997). In this way, becoming a subject within regulatory social structures is an ongoing process of conflicting movements, as Boucher points out:

The openness of the process of structuration, however, means that subjectification is not something permanent or stable, but rather represents the precarious assertion of identity through an always-ambiguous demarcation of mainstream subjectivity from marginalised alternatives (Boucher, 2006, p. 113).

What makes Butler's ideas interesting in our study is that neither doing gender, nor culture, nor interpretations of literary texts are "freely chosen performances" as Jonathan Culler (2000, p. 513) emphasises, but rather they are dependent on social conventions of doing something in a culture. In other words, Butler's ideas turn the focus to the conditions for becoming an interpretative subject in the literature classroom, to which discursive practices (experiences and ideas) are recognisable and recognised—or marginalised—within the culture of literature interpretation. Elsewhere, however, Butler (2015) stresses that she is not constructivist in the sense that language or discursive practices make the world, but rather de-constructivist as she points to a complex, dynamic, and mutually dependent relationship between language, body, and discourse. In our analysis of the first study (Rørbech, 2013), we applied her understanding of performativity as the compulsive yet transformable iteration of discursive practices, and considered affective readings and emotional responses, as well. However, since our focus is not general conditions for subject formation but the becoming of meanings and identities in literature classrooms, we adapted the ideas of Butler to literary education.

## 2.2 A posthumanist approach to performativity

While Butler's idea of the discursive production of subjectivity and gender emphasises performativity in the intersection of language, identities, and bodies, more recent posthumanist theories have extended and continued this perception. As mentioned earlier, Barad's (2003, 2007) conceptualisation of performativity builds on Butler's poststructuralist thinking but moves beyond linguistic or discursive approaches to an interpretation of performativity that affirms what are, to her, the intra-active becomings of the world (Barad, 2007). Barad (2003, p. 808) proposes a posthumanist notion of performativity as "one that incorporate[s] important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors". With her theory of agential realism, Barad (2007, p. 26) proposes a framework that challenges us to reconsider binary thinking and which "provides an understanding of the role of the human *and* nonhuman, material *and* discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors".

A key element in Barad's (2003, 2007) framework is *intra-action*. With intra-action, as opposed to interaction, Barad (2007) shifts focus from the interaction between distinct subjects and objects to how they emerge in their mutual intra-action. As such, focus is turned towards relations, or *intra-active entanglements*, and what is produced in these relations (Barad, 2007). This view of performativity

acknowledges matter as an active participant: “all bodies, not merely ‘human’ bodies, come to matter through the world’s interactive intra-activity—its performativity” (Barad, 2007, p. 152). All bodies can become *performative agents* (see Jusslin, 2020) that produce something of importance in the meaning-making process or in the intra-action of human and nonhuman matters (Barad, 2007). Accordingly, agency indicates making something happen, and all bodies, human and nonhuman, matter and can become performative agents (Barad, 2007) that produce something of importance in the meaning-making process.

Sheridan and colleagues (2020) emphasise how these understandings of intra-action challenge constructivist and social constructionist epistemologies as they expand the units of analysis relating to the intra-actions of all agentive beings able to act, which challenges the notion that human beings are the only ones acting in the research scene. They draw attention to how sociocultural studies frame materials as mediators of human practices by functioning as components that moderate the human involvement; humans and nonhumans interact, but the meanings and functions of materials and technologies in these interactions privilege human-centred meaning-making (Sheridan et al., 2020). Moving beyond such an anthropocentric view, a posthumanist notion of performativity perceives knowledge as being created in the relations—entanglements—between human and nonhuman agents (Barad, 2003; 2007). Leander and Boldt (2013, p. 22) refer to this as a move from a representational to a non-representational approach, describing literacy activities not as projected to a textual end point but rather as “the ongoing present, forming relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in often unexpected ways”.

Accordingly, our analysis of the second study (Höglund, 2017) focused on the intra-active entanglements, and thus, the performative agents that made a difference and mattered in the students’ meaning-making processes during their video-making process in response to poetry.

### 2.3 *Negotiation*

The concept of *negotiation* played a central role in both original studies. In the first study, Rørbech (2013) used a poststructuralist understanding of negotiation as a theoretical framework based on Blackledge and Pawlenko (2004), who emphasise the relation between knowledge, power, and identity formation in classroom conversations. From this perspective, discussions about the interpretation of the literary texts are at the same time negotiations of subject positions and discursive frames competing for the power to define the meaning of the texts (Blackledge & Pawlenko, 2004). In the second study (Höglund, 2017), negotiation emerged as a key result of the analysis. Based on empirical analyses, negotiating interpretations encompassed opportunities to respond to a literary text by combining, juxtaposing, and emphasising *different* interpretations.

In this article, we extend this by including negotiation with inspiration from Jacques Derrida. In reflecting on the etymology of the word negotiation in the

context of his writing, Derrida (2002, p. 11) referred to negotiation as meaning “no leisure” or “unleisure”. Unleisure is, according to Derrida (2002, p. 12), “the impossibility of stopping, or settling in a position”. He illustrated the concept of negotiation with the image of a shuttle, *la navette*, and described how we move between positions, places, and choices: “[o]ne must always go from one to the other, and for me, negotiation is the impossibility of establishing oneself anywhere” (Derrida, 2002, p. 12). It is a similar interest in negotiations that we want to explore in the literature classroom, moving between positions, not stopping, or settling in a fixed understanding or interpretation.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In this article, our analysis is achieved by revisiting material from our previous empirical studies on students’ meaning making with literature in lower secondary education. Using a *thinking with theory* approach (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), we re-read our previous studies *with* performativity. As proposed by Jackson and Mazzei (2012), thinking *with* theory refers to putting theories to work in empirical material instead of focusing on the interpretation of material through systemic coding or by identifying themes or narratives. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) use the idea of *plugging in* to set forth their thinking *with* theory approach. Plugging in is a process connecting theory to research material and philosophical concepts, which are read through each other and put to work: “[p]lugging in to produce something new is a constant, continuous process of making and unmaking” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 1).

Jackson and Mazzei (2012) suggest three manoeuvres of plugging in which have guided us methodologically. The first manoeuvre puts philosophical concepts to work with the intent of disrupting the theory/practice binary by decentring and showing how theory and practice constitute one another. In this study, this manoeuvre encompasses putting the philosophical concept of performativity to work in our empirical examples from two different theoretical perspectives: poststructuralist and posthumanist.

The second manoeuvre includes careful consideration regarding what analytic questions are made possible by specific theoretical concepts, including how the questions that are thought *with* emerge while plugging in to theory and research material (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). We engage in this manoeuvre by posing—and ultimately also discussing—the questions: 1) how can students’ meaning making in the literature classroom be approached when thinking *with* performativity; and 2) what are the potentials and challenges of applying performativity in the study of interpretations in the literature classroom?

The third manoeuvre includes working with the same data chunks repeatedly, which not only creates new knowledge but also shows the flexibility of both theoretical concepts and material when plugged in (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). By analysing excerpts from our previous studies, we explore how performativity works on



empirical examples from the literature classroom and its potentials and challenges. This was approached somewhat differently compared to the two previous studies. In the first analysis (of study 1), we took a poststructuralist approach to performativity and reread excerpts from the classroom conversations taking into consideration the concepts of iteration, contestation, and marginalisation (Butler, 1997, 2010). In the second analysis (of study 2), we took a posthumanist approach to performativity and reread excerpts from the students' work with video-making in response to the literary text with the concept of intra-active entanglements (Barad, 2003, 2007). Both analyses also plugged in the concept of negotiation (Derrida, 2002). Following the principles of the third manoeuvre, which includes working with the same data chunks repeatedly (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), the excerpts from the previous studies were reread several times with these theoretical concepts in mind. The excerpts presented in this article were included since they, in different ways, highlighted possibilities for negotiation.

Importantly, the present analysis is not a comparison of the two theoretical approaches or the two cases. Rather, the objective is to use various theoretical viewpoints in relation to performativity in the rereading of two different cases as sources for an exploratory discussion. From two different yet linked positions, our analysis aims at contributing to new perspectives on what performativity can bring about in research on literary education.

#### 4. ANALYSIS

In previous studies (Höglund, 2017; Rørbech, 2013, 2016), and from partly different theoretical viewpoints, we have elaborated on students' meaning making in the literature classroom. Revisiting these previous studies, we noticed how the studies in different ways highlighted and emphasised *negotiations*—more specifically, negotiations of contexts of understanding (Rørbech, 2013, 2016) and negotiations of literary interpretations (Höglund, 2017). Based on two conceptualisations of performativity, poststructuralist and posthumanist, and an extended understanding of negotiation (Derrida, 2002), in the following passages we explore material from two different empirical cases from the literature classroom. Even though performativity might turn the attention towards a number of different actions and activities, in the following examples, we focus on how collective processes of literary interpretations unfold among students in lower secondary education.

##### 4.1 *Iteration, resistance, and marginalisation in literary reading*

A qualitative study on culture in literary education in lower secondary school in Denmark (Rørbech, 2013, 2016) explored negotiations (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2004) of meaning, culture, and identities in the literature classroom. The study followed literature teaching in four classrooms (ranging from seventh to ninth grade, age 12–15) for four months. The aim of the study was to explore how literature, culture and

identity were linked in the national literature curriculum, in four teachers' reflections on their didactic practices, and in the four teachers' literature classrooms. The data material consisted of national literature curriculum documents and the Danish literature canon (communicated in the so-called "Canon report, 2004"), teacher interviews and video observations of the four classrooms.

The study was theoretically informed by social semiotics in combination with a poststructuralist approach to identity formation (Butler, 1997), and the processes of collective oral interpretation of literary texts in the classroom were analysed as the students' negotiations of subject positions in diverse discourse communities (Blackledge & Pawlenko, 2004; Davis & Harré, 1990; Davis & Hunt, 1994; Gee, 2008; Kramsch, 2004, 2009). In this sense, the dynamic and temporal aspects of the conversation in the literature classroom were emphasised, and the study pointed to a gap between a static concept of culture in the literature curriculum documents, and a dynamic and performative literature classroom. Using social, cultural and disciplinary practices in the negotiations of meaning with the literary text, teachers and students *made* culture as much as they referred to or confirmed it.

In line with poststructuralist research strategies (Stormhøj, 2006), excerpts from the classroom observations were selected to explore deviations and breakdowns in the classroom conversations and to follow the transformations of the classroom discourses. The conversations around these gaps were characterised by an intense atmosphere, moments of silence, and the teacher's or the students' affective reactions, e.g., hesitation, surprise, or even shock (visible in the transcriptions as a changed intonation, iterations and pauses). Often, these moments were followed by an eagerness to re-establish the classroom discourse and return to shared cultural norms (Rørbech, 2013, 2016).

In this rereading of excerpts from the study, the social semiotic approach was played down, and the poststructuralist approach was further emphasised by plugging in Butler's notion of performativity and highlighting "the embodied-performative aspect of the reproduction and contestation of social structures" (Boucher, 2006, p. 112). Accordingly, we focused on processes of mainstreaming and marginalisation of discourses and subject position, and on how the literary text merged with them. In this sense, the students' exploration of discursive frames to interpret the ambiguous text was linked with their efforts to become interpretative subjects in the literary conversation.

The following conversation took place in a seventh-grade classroom (age 12–13) working with the theme of thrill and horror in young adult literature (see Rørbech, 2013, p. 172). The class was reading the horror story *The Invisible* by the Danish author Peter Mouritzen (2006). The story is introduced by a short paratext (Genette, 1997) that revolves around the poem "Der Erbkönig" (Goethe, 1782). The narrator quotes the first strophe and introduces the theme and the course of the poem. However, "Der Erbkönig" does not only make up a transtextual frame of the following story, but parts of the remaining seven strophes are weaved into the plot as the narration evolves.

After this “introduction”, the narrative starts in medias res. A boy and his father walk out of a cinema after having seen a horror movie. The empty parking space is uncanny and the streetlamps shine “with a faint subterranean light” (Mouritzen, 2006, p. 4) [own translation]. The reader follows the boy and his father on their trip home from the cinema. The atmosphere in the car is tense. The father is nervous and irritated, and the boy is freezing. His thoughts revolve around so-called “ghost words”—words that kind of freeze in the conversation between him and his father and are repeated in his head together with fragments of Goethe’s poem. After a while, the boy finds out that a black horse is pursuing the car. Like the boy in Goethe’s poem, he can see the invisible. Towards the end of the story, the speed of narration increases, and as the last “ghost word”, *divorced*, is stated, the boy utters a cry, and the car crashes with the black horse.

The teacher, Karin, found inspiration in a pedagogy taking its point of departure in reader-response theories. She read aloud the story and, just as she was nearing the end, she stopped and asked the students to write their own endings. After five minutes, four students presented their endings of the story, and the teacher finished her reading. Subsequently, she initiated a collective oral interpretation in the classroom:

Excerpt 1.

Karin: The last strophe is not a part of the “King of the Elves”—the author has written it. How does it end? What happens? Dilan what happens?  
 Dilan: The boy dies.  
 Karin: Okay, the boy he dies.  
 Dilan: In a car accident.  
 Karin: He dies in a car accident, yes. He does.  
 Dilan: And then he comes to an elf world or another world.  
 Karin: Yes, he comes to this elf world, it is true, and why does he die? Why does the boy die, Julie?  
 Julie: Because they crash.  
 Karin: Yes, they crash. It is in the plot. Why does he die too, Ole?  
 Ole: Because he wants to get in contact with the King of the Elves in a way?  
 Karin: He gets in contact with the King of the Elves.  
 Ole: But strictly speaking, it does not say that he dies.  
 Karin: No, it does not, but now we are to interpret, right. Why does the boy die?  
 Mads: Because the boy says, that he [the father] should drive faster, because the horse...  
 Karin: The plot details a car accident. It is on the literal level. What is it that actually kills him?  
 Student: Is it not ghosts?  
 Karin: Yes, you can say so. It is the ghosts—but what do the ghosts represent, Nina?  
 Nina: Well, I think, it is because his parents are going to get a divorce.

In the excerpt (Excerpt 1), the teacher tries to guide the students from a literal understanding of the car accident and the elf world to a psychological interpretation of the ending of the text. With her first question “How does it end?”, she opens a space for diverse interpretations, and the students try to answer her question by referring to everyday experiences and a literal mode of reading (Dilan, Julie, Mads), and to disciplinary knowledge, e.g., fairy tale genre cues (Dilan and Ole), and a figurative

mode of reading (Nina). Their answers are very short as if the students try to hold on to their understanding of small fragments of the text. The teacher recognises the students' readings. Yet, by repeating the same question with some variation, "Why does the boy die?", "Why does the boy die, too?", "What is it that actually kills him?", she tries to push them from the literal and adventurous reading to a figurative one pointing at the symbolic or allegoric meaning of the ghosts: "...but what do the ghosts represent, Nina?"

In the conversation, the students try out culturally accepted and available discourses to answer the teacher's open question and interpret the ambiguous ending of the story. However, using Butler's poststructuralist perspective, we are not only interested in the readings performed in the classroom, but also in the resistance against culturally recognisable norms and understandings, and in the absent or marginalised alternatives. Even though the students in the classroom witness the transformation from a literal and adventurous reading to a psychological interpretation of the ending of the story, there are no signs of transformation or deviance from the mainstream discourses tried out in the conversations.

However, if we consider the oral presentation of some of the students' endings, other aspects of the story unfold. In Pia's suggestion (see Excerpt 2), for example, the obscure, affective and incomprehensible aspects of the ending are accentuated:

Excerpt 2.

Pia: They drive through the rain and it is very dark, and the boy does not like it. They drive into something. The father goes out to see if he can see what it was. The boy sat in the car. He was afraid. There was nothing (...) until the father felt something close by his hand. There was nothing. He could not see anything. He returned to the car and told the son. They would move on, but they were stuck in something. The boy did not like it.

Pia has no name for the threat she experiences in the story. Unlike the fictive character in the novel, she cannot see the invisible: "There was nothing", "He could not see anything", "They were stuck in something", she reads. By repeating the phrase, "The boy does/did not like it" in the first and the last sentence of her text, Pia emphasises one of the affects involved in the narration: the boy's fear. In this way, her interpretation points at an affective reading which the realistic, adventurous, and psychological readings in the classroom marginalised.

We can see the same tendency in Nikolaj's interpretation (see Excerpt 3):

Excerpt 3.

Nikolaj: "Surely, you want to go home?" the father cried. "Yes" the boy said. The boy heard a cry. The father was shot and the boy was alone in the forest without his father, and the car could not move. He was all alone [hard to hear]... a ghost.

In this excerpt (Excerpt 3), the boy's loneliness and loss are expressed by the death of his father and the fixed emotional situation represented by the stuck car, "and the car could not move". These affective interpretations (in Excerpt 2 and 3) and the

students' fascination with affects outside the reach of their language and worldviews are not considered in the classroom conversation, and they do not form a resistance against the three discourses performed.

It is the teacher's first question (Excerpt 1) that initiate the students' attempts to interpret the text and bring about performativity in the classroom. However, in the conversation, the literary text constitutes a resistance against recognisable cultural norms, mainstream subjectivity, or the discourses available to the students. It is not new knowledge that literature is characterised by ambiguity and may challenge the reader's worldview. However, the rereading of the excerpts with the notion of performativity in mind turns the focus from the autonomous text to how it merges with the teacher's and the students' performances. Moreover, it turns the focus from individual reader's readings to the students' iteration of collectively recognisable understandings within the used discourses. In this way, it points to the dynamic between readings performed in the classroom and the marginalisation of alternatives that make the classroom conversation proceed and to the role of literature, which in this case forms a resistance and contributes to performativity in the literature classroom.

In Excerpt 1, the students and the teacher tried out interpretations by *iterating* available discursive patterns (Butler, 1997), until the teacher stopped the negotiation by stressing the psychological reading. Simultaneously, she excluded the other readings as well as the strangeness and undecidability highlighted in the oral presentations of the two students' endings (Excerpts 2 and 3). In this way, performativity highlights how the available discourses and performed readings are *challenged* by each other and by the literary text, and yet are dependent on each other and the marginalised alternatives, as they constitute the negotiations as movements between positions (Derrida, 2002).

#### 4.2 *Literary interpretation as negotiations of different interpretations*

In a study on students' interpretive work during a digital video-making process in response to poetry, Höglund (2017) closely followed a group of students in eighth grade (age 14–15). Multimodality and transmediation functioned as an entrance to working with poetry in lower secondary education in a project referred to as Video Poetry, in which students were asked to transmediate their interpretations of a poem into a digital video of their own design. Data for the study was produced in a Swedish-speaking school in Finland and consisted of video recordings of a collective video-making process among a group of four students in eighth grade and the digital video they produced. The students worked with the poem "I Want to Meet..." by the Swedish poet Karin Boye<sup>1</sup>. The analytical focus was directed towards how the students used semiotic resources in interpreting literary texts, and social semiotic

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<sup>1</sup> The poem was originally written in Swedish and titled 'Jag vill möta...' The English translation is by David McDuff.

theory of multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, 2006) was used to analyse the designing process and the digital video.

Based in social semiotic theory with a focus on the sign maker, an interest in the students and their actions was emphasised, following a central principle that the designing process is about choosing and assembling resources according to individual interests and ideological positions as well as the perception of the audience and the context (see Jewitt, 2009). The study demonstrated how negotiations of the literary text were connected to negotiations of semiotic resources insofar as *what* to represent is closely connected to *how*; the students' digital video was continuously designed and redesigned according to the semiotic resources available during the video-making process before it took its final shape. First, in the form of exploratory sketching during the students' initial responses, the students discussed what the poem was about and how this could be reshaped into images. Following this, the students summarised their interpretations in writing in a short synopsis for the digital video and made a storyboard. Then they started filming, during which a considerable number of semiotic resources came into play, including the possibility of recording moving images with sound, actors, and lighting. Semiotic resources were further expanded in the final editing phase when the students organised the digital video by sequencing clips and using sound and visual effects. All these different phases continuously requested, encouraged, and even urged the students to negotiate their interpretation of the poem (see Höglund, 2017).

Nevertheless, the students' process was not always a straightforward one facilitated by a variety of available semiotic resources. Neither was it wholly rational and controlled; rather, it involved exploratory and unexpected discoveries—often due to the materialities involved. Consequently, our attention was drawn to performativity in line with Barad (2003, 2007) to further explore this materiality of the interpretive work. More specifically, we reread with the concept of intra-active entanglements (Barad, 2007) to identify performative agents that affected the students' interpretive work and related it to the concept of negotiation (Derrida, 2002).

Following a posthuman approach, agency indicates making something happen that produce something of importance. Consequently, all bodies, human and non-human, matter and can become agentic in intra-active entanglements (see Barad, 2007). In our rereading, we identified in particular two performative agents that made a difference: the video camera and the editing software. As the students started filming with the video camera, they were challenged to (re)negotiate their earlier work. Before filming, the students had elaborated on an interpretation of the poem about showing one's true self and portraying a poetic voice that feels trapped and excluded. Later, they further expanded the trope of finding and showing one's true self to being about sexuality. In their making of the storyboard, the students depicted their ideas of exclusion by sketching a person surrounded by fire and fog, which they referred to as representing fear and intolerance. However, using fire and fog was, understandably, difficult for the students to realise. By exploring different

alternatives using the video camera, the students found other ways of portraying exclusion (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4.

Catrin: Hm, so, she's like with a group, but she can't, she, one can't be homosexual, that is like bad and so she's confined because it's like, well, uhm, what have we...

Linda: Here, here the fire is people.

Catrin: Yes, they've made clear that it's bad to be homosexual and that one is stupid then, uhm, then she can like break free and then she can like somehow realise that you have to be the way you are.

Casper: That's when she throws away the weapons.

Catrin: Mm.

Linda: Is it, can't she just like leave the group?

The video camera intra-acted with the students' portrayal of exclusion as it challenged their earlier ideas, but at the same time it brought about other ways of portraying exclusion. As demonstrated above (see Excerpt 4), the students portrayed exclusion using a group of people surrounding the person and compared the group of people with the symbol of fire; the portrayal of exclusion was entangled with the video camera. Also, as the students were filming, they tested different locations, settings, camera angles and frame shots, and this exploratory work led them to continuously switch between filming and viewing the filmed material. Consequently, the video camera made a difference; it became agentic as it intra-acted with the students as they both adjusted their filming and (re)negotiated their interpretation of the poem.

Besides the video camera, the editing software made a difference in the students' interpretive work, particularly the sound effects. During the editing of their digital video, the students explored different sound effects, and Casper suggested the use of church bells (see Excerpt 5):

## Excerpt 5.

Catrin: We should circle her. How do you do that?  
 Linda: But first we make "boing" on all of these. It's very funny if we have like "boing, boing"  
 Casper: I think, I think that we should have the church bells.  
 Linda: "Tam, tam, ta-tam."  
 Catrin: Yeah, that would also work, but I think that it's too, it's too...  
 Casper: They happily run out of the church.  
 Catrin: But it's the same thing twice over if we have "boing" on all of them.  
 Linda: Okay.  
 Casper: Let's put the church bells on one of them.  
 Catrin: Mmm...  
 Casper: Then it looks like they are running out of the church.  
 Catrin: Yes!  
 Casper: Newly and happily married.

For the students, finding the sound effect of church bells leads them to elaborate on the poem's topicality in contemporary society. They apply their interpretation of finding, and showing one's true self in relation to sexuality and comment on the relationship between the church bells, marriage, and Finnish marriage law. At the time of this study, Finnish law did not allow people of the same sex to marry<sup>2</sup>, and the issue was the subject of widespread debate in both media and politics. Consequently, the editing software intra-acted with their elaboration of the poem's topicality and encouraged the students to (re)negotiate and connect their interpretation of the poem to contemporary society. As such, the editing software became agentic in the students' interpretive work with the poem.

Both examples presented above point to the intra-active entanglements (Barad, 2003, 2007), and consequently, how both human and nonhuman agents became agentic in the interpretive work and the relations this produced. As such, posthumanist rethinking of performativity, in accordance with Barad, drives us towards a new understanding of materiality. Materiality is no longer "either given or a mere effect of human agency", but rather "an active factor in processes of materialization" (Barad, 2003, p. 827). The rereading showed how both the video camera and the editing software became agentic, emphasising the importance of turning one's attention to the intra-active entanglements of human and nonhuman matters in exploring students' interpretive work on literary texts, especially considering the rapidly changing digital culture.

Moving beyond a human-centred approach, for example as in social semiotic theory of multimodality, towards a posthumanist approach to performativity, shifts the focus to interpretive activity not as projected towards some textual end point but as forming relations and connections, often in unexpected ways (see Leander & Boldt, 2013). Such an approach echoes the description of negotiation by Derrida (2002, p. 12), in which he describes negotiation as movement between positions, places and

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<sup>2</sup> The legal context regarding this issue has changed since the study took place; same-sex couples can now legally marry in Finland.



choices, unable to stop or settle in a position: “[o]ne must always go from one to the other, and for me, negotiation is the impossibility of establishing oneself anywhere”. The intra-active entanglements presented above point to how the students continuously negotiated the poem, elaborating on different interpretations. Even at the very end of the process, when the students were presenting and summing up their work for the teacher, the students emphasised the possibility of different interpretations, here in relation to their interpretation of the poetic voice (see Excerpt 6).

Excerpt 6.

<p>Catrin: Well, uhm, the person is, okay the person is homosexual and like may not, or cannot, show who she really is, or <u>he</u>. And well, and then she breaks free anyway, or he, and dares to show who she is.</p> <p>Teacher: Hm.</p> <p>Catrin: Or he. But here we’ve made it a she.</p> <p>Teacher: Yes.</p> <p>Linda: In both the film and the drawing.</p>
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The intra-active entanglements produced in these examples both enabled and constrained the students in their interpretive work; however, they did not seem to remove the possibility of elaborating on *different* interpretations. Rather, it seemed like the materiality intra-acted with the students as they moved between different positions and possibilities, not settling in a fixed interpretation but rather acknowledging ambiguity and multiplicity. The intra-active entanglements produce the possibility of moving between positions, and it is this movement that is of interest from the perspective of performativity, and, more specifically, which a posthumanist approach to performativity can shed light on.

## 5. DISCUSSION

With the aim of exploring how performativity can contribute to research on literary education, we reread material from our previous studies on students’ meaning making in the literature classroom using two different theoretical approaches to performativity: poststructuralist and posthumanist. The rereading of the first study turned the focus towards the students’ iteration of available discourses—everyday experiences as well as disciplinary practices—in their reading of the ending of a literary text. Also, our rereading emphasised processes of mainstreaming and marginalisation of subject positions guided by the teacher’s questions and trajectories; processes that left some students’ affective readings in the margin of the literature conversation and left out their experience of undecidability or experience of “something” in the text beyond what they could grasp. In this sense, the ambiguity of the literary text along with the teacher’s reading and framing of the conversation brought about performativity in the classroom. The rereading of the second study showed how nonhuman matters, such as the video camera and the editing software, became agentic, emphasising the importance of turning one’s attention to the intra-

active entanglements of human and nonhuman matters in exploring students' interpretive work on literary texts. The rereading emphasised how literary interpretations involved negotiations of a complex set of relations and intra-active entanglements in the literature classroom, highlighting the entangled relations particularly between the students, the literary text, the film camera, and the editing software.

Our analyses highlight how performativity emphasises and, maybe even more importantly, provides theoretical and conceptual tools for studying ongoing processes and unfoldings in the literature classroom. Performativity throws light on how students' iteration of available discursive patterns (Butler, 1997) is challenged by the text, by other readers' readings, and by the didactic framework in the negotiations of meaning. At the same time, these performed readings are linked with the marginalisation of alternatives. In Barad's (2003, 2007) approach to performativity, focus is on intra-active entanglements and how both human and nonhuman become agentic, here exemplified in the literature classroom. Performativity emphasises the intra-actions and entanglements of the texts and readers, together with several other possible performative agents, stressing the relations and becomings. Consequently, performativity can offer an attentiveness to a number of different and parallel readings that coexist and unfold in the literature classroom, both in the centre and in the margins.

In this study, negotiation was a way to emphasise the explorative and dynamic aspects of literary reading. For example, negotiation in our rereading unfolds in the different discourses tried out by the students and contested in the classroom, or in how materiality intra-acted with the students as they moved between different positions and emphasised different interpretations. It also unfolds, to some extent, by expressing the impossibility of establishing oneself in one position (cf. Derrida, 2002). In contemporary society, people continuously face ambiguity, complexity and divergence in relation to previous understandings. The ability to negotiate different stances, perspectives, positions and views is crucial for living successfully with ambivalent situations and perspectives, which is also put forward as a central part of the L1 subject (e.g., Krogh & Sonne, 2019; Rørbech, 2016, 2020a, 2020b; Smidt, 2011, 2018). As demonstrated in our rereading, literary reading activities can encourage students and teachers to reflect on differences and contrasting understandings and to uphold an awareness of multiple views and positions.

Recently, research has emphasised the potentials, and perhaps even necessity, of undecidability, uncertainty and unpredictability in literary education, for example by stressing the importance of teaching students to handle uncertainty (Borsgård, 2021), by advocating for working with undecidabilities (Johansen, 2019) and by emphasising the "impossible" of literature teaching that seeks to determine students' encounters with literature (Harstad, 2018). With a focus on negotiations in the literature classroom, as "the impossibility of stopping, or settling in a position" (Derrida, 2002, p. 12), performativity may contribute to advancing this research interest. Following both a poststructuralist and a posthumanist approach, performativity goes beyond *being* and focuses on *doing(s)* and *becoming(s)*. From a performative

approach, the research focus lies in the relations and in what is produced in these relations, the emphasis is on the in-betweens and negotiations of diverse and multiple interpretations in the classroom and their becomings. In this sense, performativity suggests a framework that goes beyond binary thinking, and brings about new concepts and viewpoints that allow us to transcend the dichotomy of experience-based and analytical approaches that still dominate literary education research in the Nordic countries (e.g., Degerman, 2012; Harstad, 2018; Rødnes, 2014). As such, performativity could be a possible approach that moves beyond this divide in the study of literary reading in educational contexts.

Seen from the perspective of a hermeneutic conception of Bildung (Mortensen, 2002), subject formation takes place in the ongoing dialogue between text and reader in literature reading. As mentioned before, Mortensen (2002, p. 441) defines Bildung as a process in which the self “is confronted with what is alien outside and inside itself”. However, this understanding of Bildung needs to be extended to embrace the readings that unfolded in our rereading of the conversation about *The Invisible* in the first study. With Butler’s deconstructive approach to identity formation, we turned the focus towards regulative norms and power structures in the literature classroom. In this way, plugging in the notion of performativity in the rereading of the first study called for an extended understanding of “the other” embracing what is marginalised through the students’ and the teacher’s repetitions of social structures and cultural norms embedded in the discourses utilised; the “something” and “nothing” they have no words to describe. In this sense, “the other” or “the alien” (Mortensen, 2002) in our rereading is positioned outside of the culturally recognisable, and outside what is easy to grasp.

Yet, if we link Bildung with the posthumanist perspective in the rereading of the second study, the idea of Bildung needs to be further extended to embrace intra-active entanglements of human and nonhuman agents involved in the negotiations of literary interpretations. Based on the ideas of Barad, Carol Taylor (2017, p. 433) suggests that “[r]ethinking Bildung in a posthuman educational frame is about rethinking agency beyond the individual, such that agency is enlarged, shared and confederate”. By linking performativity in the literature classroom to the question of Bildung from a non-anthropocentric perspective, we wish to point to a need for future research that explores the possibilities of Bildung related to literary education in the light of contemporary posthumanist positions, an approach still unexplored.

By thinking *with* performativity, we have explored the potentials of a concept originally used in disciplines other than literary education. What we have gained by this manoeuvre (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) is a broader perspective on meaning making in the literature classroom, a perspective that embraces social structures, marginalised readings, affects and nonhuman agents that matter. Instead of turning focus to textual structures, reader responses or classroom discourses, we have highlighted other participants and relations that become agentic in the processes of interpretation when the classroom is seen through the lens of performativity. To consider negotiations in the processes of literature interpretations, we believe that

relations, spaces, and materiality are to be emphasised. As such, we suggest viewing the literature classroom as a *performative space* where the focus is turned towards the becomings and unfoldings—negotiations—in the literature classroom. As mentioned in the introduction, other Nordic scholars have pointed to the L1 classroom as a site of diverse cultural spaces (Smidt, 2018) and to placemaking practices in the language classroom (Laursen et al., 2020), a spatial ‘trend’ in Nordic research to which this study contributes.

Still, plugging in performativity does not simply involve applying a set of new theoretical concepts. Thinking *with* performativity, and particularly following a posthumanist approach to performativity, has ontological and epistemological consequences for doing research; it is about approaching or, more precisely, about *being* in and *becoming* with the world from a completely different perspective in comparison to the anthropocentric understandings that influenced our previous studies. Recently, such a paradigmatic shift is proposed as a performative research paradigm (Østern et al., 2021), where knowledge is viewed as knowledge-in-becoming, as a constant creation of difference through researcher entanglement with the research phenomenon and the wider world. This paradigmatic shift follows the larger movement often referred to as relational ontologies or relational materialism (see Bodén et al., 2019; Zapata et al., 2018). What became particularly clear during the process with this study was that the biggest challenge of thinking *with* performativity was the implications this has for ontological and epistemological assumptions. This was not something that changed overnight or by simply applying a different set of theoretical concepts, but rather it requested shifting positions from our previous studies and thinking—a challenge indeed.

Thinking *with* performativity in this study has its limitations as well. For example, exploring the regulative norms and power structures in the classroom from a poststructuralist perspective may have underexposed other important issues, for example that the teacher actually recognised three different interpretations of the ending of the text. Also missing are the teacher’s intentions and reasons for emphasising one reading, the psychological interpretation of the story. As such, within the scope of this article we have not been able to elaborate on performativity in relation to planning for, conducting, and evaluating literature teaching, something for future research to explore.

In this article, we have used a poststructuralist and a posthumanist approach to performativity to expound what performativity can offer in research on literary education. Importantly, we do not argue that performativity makes all other positions and approaches uncalled for or that performativity is suited to address all research aims. Yet, we see interesting potentials, as well as a growing interest, in this approach. With this study, we contribute to furthering the understanding of what performativity can offer in research on literary education and are eager to see what this can lead to.

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