

Agency in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This article discusses current demands on, and approaches to support, the agency of learners in the context of climate action and Anthropocene discourses in education. It challenges educational theories and practices linked with such discourses in light of research findings in the environmental humanities on the paradoxes and quandaries of agency. In their place it suggests a pedagogy of flourishing that productively combines an understanding of the limited agency of individual learners and the potential of capability-oriented arts-based learning practices. The proposal for a revised notion of learner agency in education is supported by evidence for the productivity of such an approach derived from first-hand experiences in tertiary literacy education in English in the context of a German university programme for teacher training.

Keywords: literary learning; teacher training; English Language Teaching; living laboratories; student flourishing; wellbeing

The ‘Anthropocene’ is and remains a highly contested concept. It has been criticised for its glossing over global inequity and unevenly distributed responsibilities for ecological calamity (e.g., Moore 2016); and despite all good intentions and arguments of its advocates, it remains problematically Eurocentric (e.g., Yusoff 2018) and anthropocentric (e.g., Haraway 2016) in a variety of ways. In light of such trenchant critique, there is thus good reason to be cautious in employing the term. However, Anthropocene critique has also yielded fruitful insights into a key quandary in modern planetary thinking and, consequentially, global and environmental education: the question of agency. At the same time an almighty, weather-changing colossus and an insignificant fragment of a torturously huge conglomerate of climate statistics, the human supposedly at the heart of the Anthropocene seems a precarious and ambivalent figure. What does this mean, this article asks, for the young learner at the centre of the educational endeavour? What do this new precarity and this burdensome ambivalence

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mean for her, and for ideas and concepts in language and literary learning? And how would education have to rethink the notion of agency in light of these debates and research in the environmental humanities and ‘humanities-induced Anthropocene science’ (Simon and Thomas 2022: 397)?

In a helpfully memorable pun, Greg Garrard (2015) has discussed this problem of agency as the ‘unbearable lightness of green’ (188): describing the peculiar difficulties of conceptualising human impacts on the climate, he points out that ‘human population simultaneously magnifies the *cumulative* impact of our actions and *dilutes* my individual agency’ (176, emphasis original). It needs to be understood and grappled with, in other words, that the all-powerful impact of human behaviour on the climate and the earth system can only be meaningfully described as a cumulative phenomenon—and thus becomes primarily a matter of statistics rather than experience and agency (cf. Chakrabarty 2021: 43). Individual experience and agency, on the other hand, are instead associated with powerlessness and insignificance. Paradoxically, the more impact the Anthropocene’s *anthropos* exerts on the planet, the less does an individual behavioural decision or action matter. Or, as Garrard (2015) puts it: ‘The heavier we get, the lighter I become’ (185).

This insight has crucial ramifications for education as such and for language and literary learning, in particular. In this article, I want to discuss some of these ramifications and for this will first delve into Anthropocene research in the environmental humanities. These findings will then be brought into a conversation with current educational policy and research in the context of environmental and sustainability education, which will allow me to critically compare the pedagogical objectives found there to key insights from critical Anthropocene research. In order to substantiate my claim that we need to rethink agency and, thus, educational expectations and practices of literature pedagogy, amongst other disciplines and subjects, I will present findings from my own educational practice as a teacher educator and use the insights obtained there to suggest an alternative understanding of learner agency and, eventually, learning objectives in primary and secondary educational settings. These objectives are less concerned with instrumentalist reasoning and the notion of ‘competence’ as a business of effective problem-solving and instead probe into the idea that education in the

Anthropocene can and should be a matter of catering to capabilities and of enabling learner flourishing in these calamitous times.

Learning... in the Anthropocene

That the Anthropocene poses educational challenges is widely recognised. Much of the debates and research resolve around ideas of ‘transformation’ and of educating young learners to become ‘change makers’ (Leinfelder 2013; Macagno, Nguyen-Quoc and Jarvis 2024). Most suggestions also invoke the idea of competence or literacy as the crucial point of leverage for bringing about change, and the number of concepts developed over the last years, from environmental, ecological, sustainability and climate literacies (McBride et al. 2013; Stibbe 2009; Shepardson, Roychoudhury and Hirsch 2017), to transformative and design competence (Schneidewind 2013; de Haan 2008), attest to the enduring appeal of conceiving of the current and future predicament as a problem in need of a solution and the transformative agency of individuals.

More critical research has, however, pointed to the fact that neither climate change nor the elusive notion of the Anthropocene can reasonably be described as ‘problems’. Mike Hulme (2022), for instance, notes that

there is no single and comprehensive account of climate change that can do full justice to the physical manifestations, political discourses, and imaginative power of the phenomenon. ... ‘[C]limate change’ is not a problem that can be solved, any more than the ideas of democracy or freedom are ones that can be ‘solved’. (xxix)

And, in a similar vein, Eva Horn and Hannes Bernthaller (2020) remind us that thinking about the Anthropocene ‘means not to resolve but rather to recognize and work through the tensions, the contradictions and aporias of the present’ (12). In educational contexts, this is clearly true for the question of agency and implies that a problem-solving and individualistic focus, as discussed in competence acquisition and literacy research, might be in serious need of conceptual revision, if not of replacement.

This need for a recalibrated focus shows in research in the environmental humanities and adjacent fields that underlines the epochal implications of ecological calamity and their reverberations in Anthropocene discourse. Roy Scranton frames those reverberations as at least implicitly educational ones in his fittingly titled book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), where he claims that the Anthropocene should be seen as ‘humanity’s most philosophical age’ (21) because,

in order for us to adapt to this strange new world, we're going to need more than scientific reports and military policy. We're going to need new ideas. ... We need a new vision of who 'we' are. (19)

Developing such new ideas and visions is not just a philosophical question but, since it depends on the ability and willingness to learn, a pedagogical one. If that implies that we are currently entering 'humanity's most pedagogical age' as well—what would the grounds and contours of an Anthropocene pedagogy be?

With respect to the idea that we are faced with an 'unbearable lightness' when we think about the grave calamity and injustice associated with the Anthropocene, and that we also need a new idea and vision of educational means and ends, we might, in order to begin sketching out ideas for a pedagogy of 'working through the tensions, the contradictions and aporias' of the Anthropocene, turn to ecocritic Timothy Clark. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015), Clark writes about the experiential and psychological consequences of the Anthropocene (discourse) as well as its implications for reading practices. Engaging the question of agency and impact on the different scales of individual, collective and planetary behaviour and impact, he speaks of an 'Anthropocene disorder' (139), marked by a constant confusion of scales and the cognitive dissonance scalar thinking invokes: encountering and experiencing both humanity's impact and one's own powerlessness, as well as the uneven distribution of environmental responsibility, simultaneously leads to 'a sense of disjunction between the destructive processes at issue and the adequacy of the arguments and measures being urged to address them' (140). Clark and others (e.g., Bartosch 2019) maintain that this also leads to an 'emergent unreadability' of fiction (Clark 2015: 47) because we no longer know which scale to use for interpretation and analysis.

Talk of Anthropocene disorder and emergent unreadability sounds dire and difficult to translate into the primary and secondary teaching contexts with which I am concerned here. And yet, at the same time that it confounds traditional teaching protocols, it also throws into sharp relief the specific potential of literary fiction and learning with and through literature: if emergent unreadability is an effect of the Anthropocene, literary fiction is also the place for experiencing it. It might also be the medium through which learners can find words and stories that can be a space for negotiating the unbearable lightness of green; it might help

learners to reflect both on the cognitive dissonance associated with the Anthropocene and the question of agency at its educational core. At best, an engagement with language and literature could help learners to engender new forms of agency better attuned to the quandaries of the Anthropocene and in sync with the conundrum of omnipotent powerlessness described above.

Reading... in the Anthropocene?

To some it may seem far-fetched, even presumptuous, to call for literary learning in the context of global calamity and the epochal sea-change associated with Anthropocene discourse. And yet, I think this view is mistaken for two reasons: to think of reading literature as a pastime or even luxury in a time of turmoil is one of many detrimental effects of a form of hubristic and instrumentalist ecological and educational thinking in global proportions that Jenny Price (2021) calls ‘whole planetude’ (31) and that has found its ways into policy and curricula, as will be discussed below. Secondly, to disregard artistic practice and its reception overlooks the creative and complex ways in which artistic expression is linked with agency (Maggs and Robinson 2020), an idea I will also discuss below and with regard to the university teacher training class I will be describing.

To date, the discussion of the paradoxes of agency has had little impact in educational policy and practice. Indeed, an analysis of national and international frameworks for competence-oriented or literacy education reveals a peculiar tension between endeavours to empower student teachers and the danger of overburdening them with claims that societal transformation and ‘sustainability development’ can be ushered in by educational measures (Bartosch 2022). While the unabashed belief in the power of pedagogy is encouraging, these endeavours betray an insufficient awareness of the key challenge to individualism that climate change and related crises index and that implies a fundamental prerogative to rethink the notion of individual agency as is currently articulated in concepts such as competence and literacy.

The reliance on individualistic ideas of agency vis-à-vis the cumulative impact of human beings on the environment is first and foremost an educational dilemma that, if unaddressed, confronts learners with unattainable goals, clad in the corporate lingo of competences and defined by their measurability and attainability by an individual. A focus on individualistic competences ignores the need for learning scenarios that

enable agency beyond the problem-solving mode and that are attentive to cooperation and to the specifics of a discipline such as English and the particular means and ends of literary and cultural learning. Such learning scenarios, I will argue, allow student teachers as well as teacher educators to rethink the notion of agency so as to encompass more collaborative and creative forms of learning and engaging. This will not only invite educators to notice, respect and include demands beyond the purview of individual decision-making in the context of sustainability, including, amongst other, matters of justice and moral injury (Levinson 2015), as well as questions of mental health and negative emotions (Bartosch and Fuchs 2024), over and against the more upbeat suggestions about changing consumer behaviour and fostering social innovation: it will crucially create a better fit with another key demand formulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda by UNESCO (n.d.): Quality Education.

To frame environmental learning and climate action, as well as a more general approach to Anthropocene pedagogies, as a matter of quality education helps to put learners front and centre again instead of instrumentalising them as supposed ‘change agents’. Without *appropriate* ‘change agency’, children and adolescents will remain unable to meaningfully confront the new realities of the Anthropocene. An educational practice that overlooks this does not bring about transformation but learned helplessness (Maier and Seligman 1976).

Rethinking agency in the Anthropocene

According to Price (2021), ‘whole planetude’ is the key driver of current educationalist and ecopedagogical arguments that always aim at action and solution, and always do so in the sweeping register of the planetary (31). It links the ridiculously small with the radically huge: ‘Change a light bulb, save the planet’ (64) and it invites eclecticism and actionism: ‘Pick a strategy, any strategy’ (64), as well as greenwashing and its very own way of engaged denial: if everything counts, always and everywhere, then nothing does, never and nowhere. This is particularly harmful in contexts in which real power and therefore means of agency are unevenly distributed, for instance in educational contexts.

Traces of such damaging planetary attitudes, however, can certainly be found in many policy documents and curricular suggestions in the context of environmental or sustainability education in the humanities and

elsewhere. These policy documents are variously announced as roadmaps for reaching ‘global goals’ and a ‘shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future’ (UNESCO n.d.). Teaching suggestions are supposed to be ‘encouraging informed low-carbon mobility behaviour, sustainability-conscious eating habits, or an awareness of crossgenerational responsibilities’ for bringing about a ‘great transformation’ (WBGU 2011: 352). As these publications aim at concepts such as ‘global learning’ (as discussed by the German Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, see Schneider and Siege 2016), education, it seems, is tasked with designing and bringing about more general societal shifts, and to do so in the horizon of the planetary.

One central assumption and avenue into the topic of the teacher training class I will now be discussing was that such documents should be studied and used to show that learner agency is twice removed through them—because of the generational rift between reasonably more powerful adult actors and young learners on the one hand, and between local school environments and planetary change, on the other. Instead of following the allure of whole planetude, the class in question was organised around a series of ‘laboratories’ and meant to explore and experiment with alternatives to the defective notions of agency underlying current education.

Class design and its connection of research and policy surveying, co-creative experimentation and eventual translation of findings into the more mundane register of school curricula should be understood as an initial step towards a conversation of subject-specific learning in and about the Anthropocene. It draws on extant work on the role of literary reading (Ahlberg 2021), as well as on the value of co-creative arts-based research, which recognises that ‘artistic agency ... is less political, behavioural, or informational, per se, and more fundamentally ontological’ than is currently recognised, and that art and artistic practice should be defined by ‘the quality of attention we pay’ (Maggs and Robinson 2020: 46–47; see also Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023). This work forcefully underlines the specific agency of art as a co-creative practice and thus lends itself readily to being applied in, or translated for, literary learning in the English language and literature classroom.

The aim of the class has been more humble, however, and, at the same time, more far-reaching: instead of directly engaging with literary works

and modelling educational practice on the experiences and interpretations they afford, it sought to engage student teachers themselves creatively and in the spirit of mutual learning and experimentation. This was to help them notice the potential of their professional expertise for rethinking pedagogical intervention and support, but also in the hope of instilling in them a better awareness and sense of learner, as well as teacher, agencies.

The class was designed as a Master's class for students of English in the study programmes for primary, lower secondary and special needs, as well as inclusive, education at the University of Cologne, Germany, and included a total of 30 student teachers in the respective Master's programmes, learning together and exchanging views and experiences on and with different pedagogical traditions and expectations, as well as internships. That is to say, these student teachers had a fair share of professional education due to their BA degrees, which at the University of Cologne is already designed specifically for future teachers and therefore entails subject-specific classes (such as in English language and literature), as well as pedagogy and educational sciences. The majority of the student teachers had also just returned from a six-month practical teaching term at local schools, which not only advanced their skills and knowledge as future teachers but had provided them with insights into the institutional and organisational dimension of education, including disciplinary and interdisciplinary conferences on school development, challenges of standardised assessment, and the empirical evaluation of interventions and innovations.

The class therefore operated on two levels: one conceptual, the other one practice-oriented and design-based. As described above, the first, conceptual leg engaged critically with policy documents and research literature. In addition to our critical analyses of policy documents and teaching materials, we discussed, for instance, that while all documents we analysed were dedicated to educational reform in the context of sustainability, their divergent terminology matters greatly when it comes to implementing some of their suggestions and following their demands. 'Global Goals' (UNESCO), 'Great Transformation', 'transformation education', 'transformative education' (WBGU), and 'Global Learning' (KMK) have a lot in common, but these terms also point to different academic histories, research agendas and prior work to be consulted. They also imply different things with regard to what it means for students to become knowledgeable in any of these fields.

Moreover, none of these documents meaningfully endorsed a non-Western perspective, which is regrettable especially because of the import of matters of justice and values that exceeds the Anglo-European model of formal education (Misiaszek 2018; Martusewicz, Edmundson and Lupinacci 2021) and which could complement and counterbalance some of its problematic tenets. These tenets show in enduring dualisms of nature and culture or environmental and ecological concerns, and they seem hard-wired to proposed solutions, such as the heavily Euro-Western notion of most SDGs themselves, as well as in the very focus on solutions and fixes as such.

A critical discussion of these shortcomings raised an awareness of the importance of conceptual and theoretical work in education; it also instilled a great desire to put some of these considerations into practice. Therefore, the second, co-creative phase drew on the practice of Living Laboratories (Defila and Di Giulio 2018), well-documented in the research literature, which follows a participatory, design-based approach that includes iterative cycles of concept and materials design and joint reflection. These labs aimed at reconceptualising the notion of learner agency in light of the demand for creative and collaborative work in English literary and cultural (primary as well as secondary) education.

As discussed in more detail below, what we—the student teachers and I—called ‘Future Labs’ entailed that we scrutinised research findings, literary texts and methods from literary learning, drama pedagogy, and new-media and experiential-learning methodologies, with an eye on their respective potential for environmental learning. All of this happened in light of our attempt to arrive at a novel notion of agency that we eventually came to describe as ‘flourishing’ in order to highlight the collective and environmental dimensions of learning over and against the individualism associated with agency and whole planetude in extant frameworks and models.

In a second step of the co-creative phrase, we engaged with the practical and organisational side of teaching and formal education, including demands for curricula and specific school policy. This level built on the insight that rethinking agency also necessitates thinking about the question of teacher agency constrained and enabled not only by creative pedagogical thinking, but by matters of professional collaboration, as well as institutional norms and bureaucracies. Without curricular back-up and the school-wide conversations on, and development of, learning

agreements and pedagogical implementations on school-wide levels, innovation and reform will remain unsustainable and thus have little to no impact in the long term.

For this practice- and policy-oriented phase, we drew on student experiences and my own prior work as a consultant for educational reform for the North Rhine-Westfalian Ministry of Education in the context of curricular reform, which included the development of school-specific disciplinary curricula (so-called SILPs, an acronym based on the German '*schulinterne Lehrpläne*'). Taking the SILP as a model that we could critically interrogate, but eventually also use for our own suggestions for disciplinary innovation, has helped us to get a better grip on the practical demands of teaching and the institutional dimension of rethinking agency. For reasons of brevity, this article does not present this last stage of our work. For the sake of completeness, however, I think it is crucial to have mentioned it nonetheless, for without the respective consideration of professional collaboration, as well as institutional norms and bureaucracies, the image I am drawing of educational reform would not only remain incomplete—more seriously, it would also curtail the value of our work, which is closely linked with institutional teacherly agency.

Future Labs and emergent agencies

At the heart of the co-creative process has been a phase of six weeks of intensive work on four different 'Future Labs', understood as design-based, temporary participatory research units in which students—as future teachers—guide and are answerable to the explorative process. The decision for such a form of explorative learning was informed by the successful establishment of 'laboratories' in a number of related contexts, especially in urban transformation research, but it was also meant to connect individual imagination and agency with a larger body of student teachers as a collective (cf. Moore and Milkoreit 2020) and 'community of practice' (Bartosch 2022).

The laboratories were meant to scrutinise four key fields of learning in the English language arts classroom: 'words', 'acts', 'worlds', and 'tasks'. Thus, the first Future Lab was organised around established research and practices of language acquisition, as well as emergent work by Robert Macfarlane (2015) and by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Brent Ryan Bellamy (2019) on the role of language in grappling with climate crises. The second Future Lab tackled actions and performances

as traditional concerns and added recent work on climate theatre (by Chandal Bilodeau), as well as on poetry (by Michael Malay). The third one focussed on world-making, as known in literary learning and intercultural education, but added the virtual world of the digital environmental humanities and education (Thorne, Hellerman and Jakonen 2021) and recent work on ethnographic methods in education, especially nature storytelling, as developed by Zoë Sadokierski (n.d.) and others. A fourth Lab worked more methodologically and concentrated on the process of task design; it reviewed and used for advice recent work on complex and multimodal task design and thus supported the three thematic labs. The texts and research contexts in all labs served as prompts to get discussions going, ready to be expanded upon or modified by student interests, experiences, or serendipity finds (see Table 1).

Table 1: Future Laboratories

Future Lab	Set texts as discussion prompts	Group work and presentation
I: ‘Words’	Macfarlane, ‘Desecration Phrasebook’ (2015) Schneider-Mayerson and Bellamy, <i>Ecotopian Lexicon</i> (2019)	‘desecration and hope’ lexicons
II: ‘Acts’	Bilodeau, <i>Climate Change Theatre Action</i> (2018) Malay, ‘Redacted Poetry’ (2021)	(redacted) poetry workshop
III: ‘Worlds’	Thorne, Hellermann, and Jakonen, ‘Rewilding ELT’ (2021) Sadokierski et al., ‘Nature Storytelling’ (n.d.)	virtual extinction games storyboards
IV: ‘Tasks’	Hallet and Krämer (2012) • <i>methods reader</i>	methods toolkits

The idea of engaging with these fundamental and well-known areas was inspired by the poet and scholar Kate Simpson (2021), who asks, ‘what if we were to start looking more seriously to words as building blocks—tools for ecological restoration?’ and ‘what if we could focus on the expansion of vocabularies at this crucial juncture, placing value on the restorative properties of linguistics as part of our rewilding efforts?’ (22). In the context of training and education in teaching-degree programmes in the English language arts classrooms, our building blocks and vocabularies, as

well as the restorative and rewilding properties of our toolbox, were assembled in student-centred presentations, workshops, and discussion rounds at the end of the second half of the semester.

Future Lab I drew on Macfarlane's (2015) observation that in the Anthropocene, we need 'to record details of the topographies of toxicity and dereliction that we have made, the phenomena of pollution, corruption and extinction we have caused, and the coming miracles of geoengineering' (n.p.). To this, we added Schneider-Mayerson and Bellamy's (2019) assertion that we ought to focus 'on individual words or short phrases ... that English ... could use to better describe our historical situation, which we now often call the Anthropocene' (xii). This eventually enabled us to link Anthropocene critique with more positive creative engagement *and* established English-teaching concerns, such as are found in language acquisition and awareness pedagogies. Student researchers would discuss the question whether a focus on language was indeed as relevant as other means, bring up and heatedly debate the import of rhetoric on political and societal atmospheres, and eventually design their own, rather balanced lexicon (discussed in Figure 1) as a means to exercise linguistic and conceptual agency.

Figure 1: 'Desecration and hope' lexicons

Upon reading Macfarlane's plea to accept terrible new realities of the Anthropocene and their lack of appropriate linguistic expression as well as Schneider-Mayerson's discussion of the potential of language for 'ecotopian' thinking, student researchers were torn between following their own preferred mode of thinking about the future either in optimistic or pessimistic ways but eventually decided for a 'balanced' approach that allows for both 'desecration phrases' and ecotopian ones. This turned out to be a helpful move because it stirred classroom discussions into the direction of language awareness more broadly and issues of teacher and pupil agencies more specifically. What follows is a short excerpt from the lexicon developed during that time (reprinted here with permission):

Ecotopia	Desecration
cleanlightened adjective; describes the successful and completed process of resetting a damage caused by climate change	Nope the hope that everything will go well without doing something about it or for it
yakamoz (derived from the Turkish, no literal translation) refers to the shimmering of water when moonlight shines on it, which is caused by the bioluminescent plankton in the water. Redefinition expresses the nostalgia for visually perceiving (or feeling) the shimmering water when looking at a contaminated ocean due to sea pollution and the eradication of plankton in the water.	pakao (Serbo-Croatian) literally means "hell" and is colloquially used when it is really hot outside during summer time. Redefinition used to express unbearable heatwaves during the summer period caused by rising temperatures.
yarning (Australian Aboriginal) to learn from a collective group, build respectful relationships, and to preserve and pass on cultural knowledge	lastony "last symphony" of the last singing bird

Future Lab II would concentrate on the question of agency head-on by integrating performance and drama-oriented teaching methods with recent work in 'Climate Change Theatre Action' (Bilodeau 2018), including its digital and global dimensions, as well as a novel take on poetry, developed by Malay (2021) under the title of 'redacted poetry'. This resulted in a poetry workshop (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: (Redacted) poetry workshop

Somewhat surprisingly, student researchers were intrigued by the idea of teaching poetry in a way that suggests and exercises agency. I acknowledge misjudging them because of what I expected to be an enduring dislike in the 'tricky' subject of poetry but am now beginning to see as a rich and fruitful field of exchange—given that agency is part of the pedagogical mix. In the lab, student researchers engaged their own mixed feelings about poetry in general and learning contexts devoted to them in particular but were most thrilled by a text by Michael Malay (2021), in which Malay suggests the use of romantic poetry, and animal representations in particular, to bring home the existential emptiness of extinction: he suggests removing or cutting—redacting—the poems until the extinct animals are literally absent from the text, thus creating not only gaping holes but also challenges for breathing and intonation when reading the poems. In one of the most entrancing sessions of the whole class and semester, student researchers revised John Keats's 'On the Grasshopper and Cricket' (both versions are given below).

The Poetry of earth is never dead:
 When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
 And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
 From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;
 That is the Grasshopper's—he takes the lead
 In summer luxury,—he has never done
 With his delights; for when tired out with fun
 He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.
 The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
 On a lone winter evening, when the frost
 Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
 The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,
 And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
 The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills. (John Keats)

The Poetry of earth is [redacted] dead:
 [redacted]
 [redacted] a voice will run
 From hedge to hedge [redacted]
 [redacted]
 [redacted] tired [redacted]
 [redacted]
 The poetry of earth is ceasing [redacted]
 On a lone winter evening, when the frost
 Has wrought a silence [redacted]
 [redacted]
 [redacted] (Future Lab II)

To see and hear the rendition of this new, redacted poem and the new sense of speed, speech and silence it brings about in a recitation has been mesmerising—and a powerful demonstration of the agency of art in a situation of profound and powerless sadness.

Future Lab III engaged in worldings, both digital and analogue, by engaging virtual learning environments and the topic of extinction through an idea of videogame-based and creative learning. This resulted in an exciting and engaged discussion of the uses and limitations of digital technology in educational contexts. Because of the underfunded educational systems, the lab lacked required resources to move the project beyond a storyboard stage and will thus not be discussed in much detail.

Engaging with metaconceptual methodological questions as well as providing more detailed feedback and advice on sustainability education

in and through literature and the arts (as developed by Myren Svelstad 2020), Future Lab IV worked alongside the other laboratories and was tasked to take note as well as stock; their work results are returned to in the last section of this paper.

The findings we arrived at were interesting in a variety of ways, but I want to underline two insights here. The first has to do with existing expertise in teachers and teacher trainees. A look at the lexicon reveals that student researchers would opt for two strategies in particular: the inclusion of words and phrases known from other linguistic and cultural contexts, hitherto not included in their professional vocabulary. These words and phrases contained mostly expressions from their L1 (and, thus, words that mean a lot to the students and would be a potential avenue into meaningful multilingual education). The other strategy was to build portmanteau words. Even though not the most sophisticated strategy, it is literary learning in practice nonetheless, and it underlines the agency of art in getting to grips with this strange world.

The second insight pertains to agency: all of the work was, while being insightful as well as difficult, meticulous as well as playful, experienced as moments of flow and heightened agency. Especially creative work, we learned, exerts its transformative potential because of the sense of agency it instils, which in turn is needed for any meaningful action because it reframes a story of powerlessness vis-à-vis whole planetude into one of collective engagement and serious play.

Towards flourishing in the Anthropocene

By way of conclusion, I want to return to our plenary discussions as well as the work of Future Lab IV. As explained above, the eventual creation of the SILP documents might be too technical and distracting from my main argument here. Yet, I find it important to note that this allegedly more tedious step in the process of ‘streamlining’ creative interventions and explorations, so they can become the same old curricular documents used for bureaucratic and assessment purposes, proved surprisingly exciting. Students still reported the afterglow of their flow experience and approached the technicality of the expected texts with their renewed sense of agency, writing more and in more detail than usual, and learning how to employ, mobilise and appropriate, if need be, technical and bureaucratic language for their own, creative and subversive, needs. I now see our three-step model of critical analysis and discussion, co-creative experimentation

and exploration, and policy translation as crucial for a new concept of learning, discussed in the last two sessions of the class: flourishing.

This is where the student researchers of Future Lab IV proved invaluable. Besides providing continuous input by offering conceptual frames for task design, they took notes on the learning processes, as well as the expressions used, and suggested the term ‘flourishing’. As stated above, one argument for the term had to do with our critique of ‘whole planetude’ and the need to get away from established terms of competence and literacy that seemed to contain it or be affected by it. In the context of discussing the concept ‘flourishing’, it was moreover interesting to see the various forms of resonance it brought about in different student teachers. Some linked the notion of flourishing to the renewed attention to wellbeing and previous suggestions for rethinking learning aims, for instance in what is known as the ‘capabilities approach’ to education (Nussbaum 2011). Famously, Martha Nussbaum (and others) advocate for a notion of education that aligns individual growth with ‘both quality of life and basic justice’ (Nussbaum 2011: 20). This link, and the idea of fruitfully aligning flourishing and capabilities, suggested itself most readily to student teachers in special needs education, as it also underlines the values and import of learner heterogeneity and the value of catering to diversity.

Student teachers in other subjects, especially history and applied philosophy, pointed out that ideas of flourishing can be traced to ancient Western philosophies of eudaimonia. We found that, in the context of our class, flourishing, like eudaimonia, ‘refers to the attainment of a “life well lived” or the “good life” in the holistic sense’, and it is ‘achieved through the active propagation of justice, self-control, courage and prudence, and the removal of vices’ (Whiting et al 2018: n.p.). Student teachers more advanced in psychology and pedagogy noticed that flourishing, as opposed to languishing and pathology, appears in positive psychology and aims at living ‘within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience’ (Frederickson and Losada 2005: 678). It may thus indeed be worthwhile to consider these contexts and their implications for teaching practices, especially over and against looming and ever more manifest wellbeing and mental health crises among young learners (McGorry et al. 2024).

My point in referencing these issues and conversations is to show that, on the one hand, the class offered various inroads into thinking about—and doing—research that addresses and potentially transforms practices

by mobilising previous knowledge and expertise in a value-informed way. This, too, matters in the context of agency. Secondly, it allowed us to jointly advance these patches of knowledge and information into a more coherent and creative new take on the philosophy of education and the question why we are doing what we are doing—and to what end. Eventually, the sense of agency we collectively let emerge and felt was important to cultivate can provide a basis for better understanding socioecological transformations and future-making research beyond technofixes and solutionism.

Michele-Lee Moor and Manjana Milkoreit (2020) attribute the manifest failure of societies ‘to create pathways toward more sustainable and just futures ... to a triple failure of the imagination’: the magnitude and scale of environmental change constitutes the first dimension of this failure; the lack of a ‘sociological imagination’, that is, ‘the ability to see the social structures that are continuously recreating and reinforcing our current environmental conditions’ is the second; and the, as yet, underdeveloped ‘collective ability to imagine a rich and detailed set of possible futures’ makes up the third one (1). Moore and Mikoreit therefore suggest an analytical framework based on three interrelated concerns, which acknowledge the importance and cognate nature of imagination and transformation: ‘(1) the role of imagination in transformative agency, (2) the potential causal power of imagination in transformation processes, and (3) imagination as a component of the dynamic relationship between the individual and the collective’ (2).

While their survey is not concerned with formal education or educational policy at all, I find their line of inquiry more than suitable in the context of educational research on flourishing and rethinking agency in the Anthropocene as it points to a number of key concepts and ideas discussed here, especially the centrality of the imagination and its link and possibly causal relationship with transformation, as well as the potential link between individual and collective entities and agencies.

Our journey into rethinking agency in the Anthropocene at least has led us into comparable terrain and suggested similar pathways to the connection between transformation and the imagination, as well as to the dynamic relationship between individual and collective, cooperative efforts. Indeed, in assembling workshop results and discussing their impact on us, we felt a lot like what Blanche Verlie (2022) calls a ‘cloudy collective’ (93). We experienced agency but also acquired a sense of it

being distributed, and of us being ‘implicated’ (in the sense of Rothberg 2019) in a number of meaningful and substantial ways. As we moved into this direction, eventually, we saw the profound implications of rethinking agency, not just in ecological contexts, but in the current political climate as well: are not much populism and polarisation at last partially connected to a sense of agency, or lack thereof? And are not exercises in agency one powerful way of creating the kind of resonance so in demand in education elsewhere, yet currently out of sight (Rosa 2013)? It seems after all a fruitful exercise indeed to think about the Anthropocene and its collapse of the human and the natural, but only if we do so with an awareness of and attention to matters of agency. The creative toolkit of the English language arts classroom awaits and a host of learners are ready.

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