

# DIALOGUE AND DEFAMILIARIZATION: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMING OF AN INTERVENTION FOR CHALLENGING READERS AND IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LITERATURE DISCUSSIONS

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## Abstract

To lead discussions about complex literary texts in a classroom of teenagers is no doubt a challenging task for many teachers. It is therefore meaningful to explore how teachers' management of literature discussions can be supported and improved. Prior research indicates a positive relationship between certain modes of discussion and increased literary awareness. Yet observational studies underscore that open-ended, probing discussions about literature are scarce in today's classrooms.

This article elaborates the theoretical framing of an intervention designed to improve the quality of teacher-led discussions about complex literary texts. We argue that dialogic theory, appropriate for highlighting the processes of classroom interaction, needs to be supplemented by theory that offers an explanation for the role of the literary text and its impact on both readers and their interaction processes. For this purpose, we examine the conceptual matching between theory of dialogic teaching, drawing on Bakhtin's idea of meaning making as inherently dialogic, and theories of literary response, specifically Shklovsky's concept *defamiliarization* and recent didactical analysis of Derrida's concept *undecidability*. The intention of the paper is to suggest a theoretical framing of the intervention, one that allows for both analysis of the aesthetic processes of reading and talking about literature, and specific guidance of teachers' management of those discussions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Unless a given experience leads out into a field previously unfamiliar no problems arise, while problems are the stimulus to thinking. (Dewey, 1938, p. 79)

In this paper, we examine the relationship between theory of dialogic teaching and theory of literary reception for the purpose of analyzing and organizing professional development of teacher-led discussions about complex literary texts. More specifically, we argue that dialogic theory, drawing on the Bakhtinian notion of meaning making as inherently dialogic (Bakhtin, 1986) and *tension* between voices as a learning potential (Nystrand, 1997), can be productively combined with the idea of *undecidability* (Derrida, 1992; see also Johansen, 2022) and *defamiliarization* (Shklovsky ([1917] 1988) as essential qualities of literary reading. The intention of the paper is to demonstrate how the two theoretical frameworks (dialogic teaching on the one hand, and theory of literary response highlighted by the concepts undecidability and defamiliarization on the other) can be applied together as a referential frame for a literature didactics capable of analyzing the aesthetic processes of reading and talking about literature, and for analyzing and guiding the specific character of teachers' management of those discussions.<sup>1</sup> Combined, the two frameworks also provide a basis for an instruction that may challenge students' habitual modes of thinking about literature, and encourage their active and engaged verbal exchange of reading experiences. Analogous to study protocols, describing the methodology of empirical studies, the present paper represents an attempt to elaborate the theoretical framing of an intervention study designed to improve the quality of teacher-led discussions about complex literary texts in lower secondary school. Our fundamental argument is that dialogic theory, appropriate for highlighting the processes of verbal interaction and the unfolding of collective understanding, needs to be supplemented by theory that offers an explanation for the role of the literary text and its impact on both readers and their interaction processes, i.e., in creating space for dialogic interaction. This is important not only to understand the character and the potential of the actual classroom discussions, but also to evaluate the pedagogical possibilities of specific literary texts chosen for a certain group of students at a certain point in time. The aim therefore is to explain the conceptual fit between these two frameworks.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The term didactics, or literature didactics, in our use, should be understood as a subject-specific didactics (or subject didactics), referring broadly to "the research and development of subject-specific teaching and learning within school and beyond." (Rothangel & Vollmer, 2020, p. 126). Thus it derives from the German Didaktik tradition (cf. Westbury et al., 2000), and denotes not only the practice of teaching but also the theoretical underpinnings of and research on the subject-specific practices of teaching.*

<sup>2</sup> *It is worth noting that while theorists like Bakhtin and Shklovsky were concerned with language and literature, rather than teaching, some of their ideas have proven to be highly productive in educational research and practice (Blau, 2003; Wegerif, 2011). Similarly, it is crucial to point out that while Shklovsky and Bakhtin were Russian contemporaries, the dialogic and the formalist tradition differ on several critical points. Although they both highlight distancing*

### 1.1 *What is dialogic teaching?*

Over the past decades, a wealth of research has demonstrated the fundamental connection between language and human cognition, and consequently between the language used in educational settings and students' opportunity for learning (Alexander, 2008; Barnes, 1976; Britton, 1969; Cazden, 2001; Mehan, 1979; Wegerif, 2011). The organization of classroom talk inevitably shapes how and what students learn: their understanding of concepts, their development of reasoning skills, and their engagement in authentic inquiry and problem-solving (Chinn et al., 2001; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Resnick et al., 2015). Dialogic teaching refers to a wide array of approaches to the use of talk in the classroom. In a number of studies, the meaning of the term 'dialogue' is primarily represented by specific characteristics of classroom interaction: e.g., that it is multi-voiced (Dysthe, 1996; Wortham, 1999), that teachers encourage student thinking by certain interactional moves such as authentic questions or increased student responsibility for the organization of discussion (Nystrand, 1997; Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2021), or simply that talk is distributed over a majority of students in the class, and that students provide more substantial responses than replying to factual questions asked by the teacher (Cazden, 2001; Mehan, 1979). In other studies, dialogic teaching refers more principally to a specific perspective on, or stance towards, language, teaching, and learning (Boyd, 2012; Kachur & Prendergast, 1997; Lotman, 1988; Matusov, 2009; Wells & Arauz, 2006). Here, dialogue resides not necessarily in observable traits of the interaction, but in the fact that students have interpretive authority, that the discussion explores multiple perspectives on a given problem, or in the social relations among participants. Needless to say, many researchers recognize the existence of both of these two facets of dialogue, although in order to analyze them empirically, different research designs are often needed.

### 1.2 *The quality of openness and ambivalence in literature*

In literature instruction, the deliberate invitation of multiple voices is not only a means to spur broad engagement among students or to fulfil deliberative ideals in the classroom, but also a concrete method for disentangling the manifold interpretive potentials of dense or thought-provoking literature (Langer, 1995). Reading literature in school is in many ways a socialization into the semiotic and interpretive behaviors that open up literary texts (Blau, 2003; Rabinowitz & Bancroft, 2014), but it should also entail a growing awareness of dealing with openness in itself, as an essential quality of literary communication. Johansen (2022) has suggested that a specific quality to literary response lies in suspending the 'desire for closure' (see

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*in perception as the principle of aesthetics—which is the connection between them emphasized in the present paper—for Bakhtin, this refers to a subject-subject relation while it is a subject-object relation to Shklovsky (Emerson, 2005).*

also McCormick, 1989), i.e., to try to overcome our instinctive fixation on consistency and coherence when trying to understand stories and their meaning. Although literary ideals change over time, openness, or ambivalence, remain a fundamental trait of much of literature, or art in general (Eco, 1989). However, in the classroom, to acknowledge ambivalence and openness of literature as integral parts of the text's repertoire, and as intended elements of the literary experience, we need methods for talking about and analyzing those qualities together with students. For this purpose, the present paper links a set of propositions from theory of dialogic teaching to theory of openness and undecidability in literature. A critical concept of the latter is Shklovsky's ([1917] 1988) term defamiliarization. Shklovsky argued that the quality of art is to invite a reflective distance towards the already familiar, seeing it anew, *as unfamiliar*.

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception" (Shklovsky, [1917] 1988, p. 2).

In educational settings, the experience of defamiliarization in reading often provides a good place to commence a shared inquiry because it usually means that readers' habitual modes of perception have been challenged. The readers therefore need each other (or at least they are in principle capable of supporting each other) to make sense of their experience. A number of recent studies suggest that students' experiences of having their interpretive conventions challenged by defamiliarization in complex literature can provide a specific pedagogical potential both by encouraging students' interpretive engagement for interpretation (Gourvenec, 2017; Johansen, 2017; Sønneland, 2019), and by articulating critical aspects of the reading process (Levine, 2019; Miall, 2006). This orientation represents a shift from experience-based pedagogy, in which students' familiarity with the literary content is the means to promote engaged reading (Alvermann & Hruby, 2001; Fodstad & Husabø, 2021).

However, to lead explorative and interpretive discussions about ambiguous and complex literary content is a demanding endeavor for teachers (Fodstad & Gagnat, 2019; Murphy et al., 2016), one that requires ample preparations and an appropriate model for getting students to share, support, and challenge each other's thoughts interchangeably. This is the kind of pedagogy for which the present paper suggests a theoretical framing.

## 2. THE AIM AND DESIGN OF THE INTERVENTION

Prior research has indicated a positive relationship between certain modes of discussion and a growing literary awareness and comprehension in students (Chinn et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2016). At the same time, observational studies underscore the scarcity of open-ended, probing discussions about literature in today's classrooms (e.g., Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Nissen et al., 2021), and some probable explanations to why that is. A recurrent concern of teachers is that when

only a few students are engaged in the verbal interaction, or when the engagement is generally limited, the teachers often seize more control over the discussion than they themselves find constructive (Fodstad & Gagnat, 2019). Other studies indicate that increased teacher control entails more questions about literal meaning (with single correct answers) and fewer questions about story themes or about students' interpretations (Boelé, 2017; Tengberg et al., 2022).

To meet some of these challenges, we have designed an intervention in which teachers and researchers cooperate for a gradual development of the teachers' management of literature discussions. More specifically, we ask lower secondary L1 teachers to implement a specific type of talk called *Inquiry Dialogue* (Reznitskaya, 2012; Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2017) in order to frame their discussions about a selection of particularly complex short stories. Inquiry Dialogue is based on principles of dialogic teaching, a concept that will be developed further in this paper. During the course of a school year, the teachers are observed in their classrooms, receive feedback from the researchers and from teacher colleagues, and meet in small groups to reflect on their experience and plan new lessons together. The specific objective of the intervention study is to find out whether observation and criteria-based feedback to L1 teachers, combined with video-based group reflection, can improve the quality of teacher-led discussions about complex literary texts. In this design lies a presumption that students will learn intrinsically, through teachers' gradual implementation of the discussion model, to take increased and shared responsibility for the discussion. To measure effects of the intervention, we will rate the quality of discussions before and after the intervention according to a set of target features of Inquiry Dialogue, and examine the development of students' interpretive reading skills. The methods thus follow several conventional features of intervention studies. However, the intervention itself rests on a set of theoretical assumptions about dialogic teaching, literary response to a particular type of texts, and the relationship between the two. It is therefore the specific aim of this paper to elaborate this theoretical relationship and demonstrate the conceptual fit between the two frameworks.

### 3. DIALOGIC TEACHING—CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

In educational discourse, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue is often considered the outset for approaches to teaching and learning that centres on talk and shared thinking as the principle for organizing the learning of students (e.g., Mercer et al., 1999; Wegerif, 2011; Wells, 1999).<sup>3</sup> We will return to those more practical implications of dialogism shortly, but before doing that, let us first consider the epistemological

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that for many educational researchers the concept of dialogue also draws on a number of sources other than Bakhtin and Vygotsky, such as the Socratic dialogues by Plato, the dialogic philosophy of Buber, or pragmatists like Dewey and Habermas, to mention a few.

ground from which Bakhtin draws on the idea of dialogue. For Bakhtin, dialogue is not merely the opposite position occupied by two speakers, or two minds, exchanging thoughts and perspectives, and, by doing so, sharing their thinking in ways that impels an expanded vantage point from which they are both able to view the world. It means those things too, but more than that, consciousness for Bakhtin is in itself inherently dialogic, because it is fundamentally *constituted by relation*, i.e., relation to an otherness, someone other than the perceived self. This relation to the other is not seen as opposition to the self but as asymmetry (difference) (Bakhtin, 1981). Holquist (1990) points out that to Bakhtin, perception is always dependent on position. At its simplest form, this means position in time/space. As human, I am aware of the fact that I occupy a single position in time and space, and already the person sitting in front of me, seeing me from the opposite direction, is able to discern something different from what I am able to discern. For our concern here, this also includes a position in terms of knowledge and thinking. Understanding ourselves presupposes an *outsidedness* from which we regard ourselves, and meaning making fundamentally involves perspective taking. This idea of Bakhtin's correlates well with modern understanding of the development of human cognition. Tomasello (2019) suggests that already from infancy, human cognition is fundamentally dependent on, and shaped by, the sharing of attention and intention with significant others, meaning that we socially self-regulate through joint attention and through simulation of what others experience and comprehend in order to attain, gradually, shared and collective understandings of the world. Thus, perspectival thinking shapes the monitoring and the conception of ourselves.

Concentrating on the single utterance, Bakhtin defines our position in discourse as both *responsive* and *addressive*: what we say, in one meaning or another, always responds to what others have said before us, and it anticipates what others will say in response to us (Bakhtin, 1986). Thus the utterance is shaped by the social, cultural, and historical context in which it is spoken or written, and it is a link in a chain of utterances. In this chain of utterances, or discourse, speakers jointly contribute by adding their perspectives and perceptions to the conversation. In a dialogic understanding of interaction, the meaning of an utterance is not fixed by the individual speaker, but rather by the responses it generates from other speakers, and by the context in which it is used (Bakhtin, 1986).

To Bakhtin then, meaning making presupposes perspective taking because meaning is in itself the perception of a relation, a discernment of a figure against ground, both existentially and concretely in conversations (Holquist, 1990). For this reason, understanding necessarily involves contrast with other people and their perspectives. Nystrand (1997) has elaborated this idea pedagogically by marking the *refraction* of voices and the *tension* between them as the space for learning. For Nystrand, the learning potential of classroom talk is not the turn-taking by students, or even the multiplicity of voices, but the individual participants' perception of tension between them. It is the tension between voices in classroom dialogue that invigorates students' thinking and learning, not the plurality of them.

Recent work on dialogic teaching operationalizes in various ways the basic principles of Bakhtin. The term 'dialogic teaching' itself was developed by Alexander (2004), but there is a close conceptual unity between a range of approaches that were developed under the label of dialogicity from the mid 1990's and onwards. To Alexander (2017) dialogic teaching is: *collective* (learning is achieved together, not individually); *reciprocal* (learning is based on the consideration of others' viewpoints); *supportive* (student thoughts are invited, and participants support each other); *cumulative* (participants build on each other's ideas, and connect them into coherent lines of thought); and *purposeful* (the dialogue aims at achieving intended learning goals). It is worth pointing out that dialogic teaching in this formation goes beyond the Bakhtinian principles of dialogue. While collectivity, reciprocity, and cumulativeness all connect with Bakhtin's dialogism, supportiveness and purposefulness stress rather pedagogical principles that are more or less unrelated to dialogism, although being sensible and legitimate in an educational perspective.

A concept of importance in our framing of dialogic teaching is *inquiry*. Inquiry-based learning designates a mode in which the learning process is driven by students' questions and their definitions of both the problem and the problem-solving. It has been referred to by researchers such as Wells (1999), Wegerif (2005), and Reznitskaya (2012) as a specific approach to thinking about students' engagement with the content. To Wells, *dialogic inquiry* represents not so much a method or format of teaching as it represents an epistemological stance towards teaching and learning in a wider sense. He draws explicitly on Dewey (1938), to whom an explorative and investigatory mode of thinking in students was a fundamental pedagogical principle both in order to decide on content to be worked upon and to promote an active student engagement. For Wells, as for Wegerif, the inquiry-based approach also aims at building conditions for students to "think together" (Wells, 2009), or to engage in "exploratory talk" (Mercer et al., 1999; Wegerif, 2005), which refers to talk in which participants negotiate ideas, rather than debate each other. Participants clarify ideas in order to explore them, rather than argue to convince each other. In addition, essential qualities of exploratory talk include the willingness to change one's mind, or to voice criticism against your own ideas, which for obvious reasons causes challenge not only to teenagers, but to people of most ages. Reznitskaya, focusing more distinctly on talk about texts in classrooms, has included some of these principles in a more narrowly defined conception of dialogic teaching, termed Inquiry Dialogue (Reznitskaya, 2012; Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2021). Inquiry Dialogue builds on previous models for instructional dialogue informed by sociocultural theory of learning such as Collaborative Reasoning (Chinn et al., 2001) and Philosophy for Children (Gregory, 2007). From Collaborative Reasoning, Reznitskaya takes among other things the idea of focusing on open and contestable questions, and from Philosophy for Children, she brings the idea that introducing young people to certain patterns of discourse can foster their ability to collaborate on complex issues and help them make well-reasoned judgments based on joint examination (Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2017).

In our conceptualization of Inquiry Dialogue, we build mainly on Reznitskaya to specify principles for the realization of teacher-led literature discussions. However, in our understanding, these principles are fundamentally dialogic in Bakhtin's sense, and include:

- Collective exploration of text through shared responsibility and shared problem-definitions
- The use of readers' combined intellectual resources and experiences to make sense of text and solve problems
- Examination of differences in understanding, and comparison of variations of interpretation, with the purpose of reaching sustained, and more well-argued conclusions (this does not necessarily aim at agreement, but at a mutually deeper understanding of the basis for disagreement)
- The necessity of the other's perspective in order to better understand one's own perspective, i.e., utilizing others' perspectives and experiences of reading in order to discern and contextualize one's own experience and understanding of it
- Treating the text as a voice, that is not only an object (work), but as an invitation to dialogue, an utterance bidding for an answer

While we state these principles, it is necessary to maintain that our conception of dialogue is ultimately not based in the syntactic forms of language used in the classroom, i.e., in the specific formulations of questions or the rate of turn-taking between speakers, but rather in the pedagogical function that the teacher or student discourse serves within the process of collaborative interpretation and evaluation of text. In this sense, our approach sympathizes a great deal with the idea of dialogue as an epistemological stance rather than a form of language (e.g., Boyd & Markarian, 2011). At the same time, it is worth pointing out that the difference between 'dialogue as forms of language' and 'dialogue as stance' should not be seen as a dichotomy, but rather as two potentially co-existing facets of the concept. A teacher must, for example, realize his or her dialogic stance *through* language, or at least through forms of interaction. To practice the ability of using the forms of interaction that actually give room for thinking, for multiple perspectives, joint examination, and for collaborative learning, is necessary for most teachers.

In addition to the Bakhtinian principles, we rely on considerations typical for dialogic teaching in the wider sense, for instance, that teachers should signal to students that their thinking is an important contribution and is taken seriously (Nystrand, 1997), and that teachers provide support for everyone to be able to participate in the discussion. However, in line with Bakhtinian (and with Nystrand's) thinking, to support students and take them seriously does not exclude disagreeing with them. On the contrary, to explain why I don't agree with you is, in dialogic terms, also a form of taking you seriously.

In a literary, and Bakhtinian, line of pedagogical thinking, shared experience of reading is also both an extension of the individual interaction with the text (meaning that it helps the individual reader to occupy a number of different reader positions



simultaneously) and an extension, and verbalization, of the *heteroglossia* of the literary text, i.e., the presence of multiple voices, or speaking positions (Bakhtin, 1984).

A final point, stressed specifically by Reznitskaya in several works (see fx Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2021) is that text-based inquiry should encourage meaning exchange between students independent of teacher prompts. The teacher's role remains crucial in the talk, although not so much as a mediator of discussion, i.e., by asking questions and organizing turn-taking, but rather as a facilitator of repeated student-to-student exchange, for instance by modeling and promoting students to collaborate by sharing thoughts, examining each other's viewpoints, and producing well-reasoned judgments together. A question of specific importance is thus in what way peer collaboration and interaction is different from interaction with the teacher. A review of recent empirical research suggests that effective and engaging collaboration requires not only that students solve problems together, but that they engage in one another's differing perspectives and try to reconcile opposing positions (Grau & Whitebread, 2012; Kuhn, 2015). Dialogue in this understanding involves the simultaneous consideration of a two-way scrutiny: while you are probing another mind, other participants probe yours. This means being forced to recognize your own position as an alternative among other positions, and therefore also contestable and in need of justification. According to Kuhn (2015) and others, such peer collaboration "incorporate joint 'meta-talk' about standards of evidence and argument" (p. 50). In a similar vein, Piaget (1932) argued that young children's argumentation with adults is conceptually different from that with peers, because the child knows that the adult has epistemic authority, i.e., the adult will be, or at least claim to be, right in the end, whereas the outcome of discussing with peers is less predetermined. Experimental evidence suggests that this leads to more sophisticated reason-giving, which in turn is related to stronger conceptual learning (Kruger, 1992).

Drawing on these theoretical assumptions, implementing Inquiry Dialogue about literature in the classroom should 1) invite students to a *collective inquiry* about text; 2) centre on the *big questions*, the meaningful issues that remain with us after reading; 3) encourage students to *compare understandings*, and evaluate interpretations together; and 4) help students to take *increasingly greater responsibility* for inquiry. The teacher's role to this end is, however, far from a passive one. The teacher should *support students' collective exploration*, rather than lead it, and *support students' exploration of meaning potential of texts*, rather than guide them towards a specific meaning/interpretation.

#### 4. DEFAMILIARIZATION, UNDECIDABILITY, AND NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY

Implementation of Inquiry Dialogue is thus meant to support a shift in teachers' roles; from the provider of answers, towards the knowledgeable, confident facilitator of student-centred dialogues. An important aim for the implementation is to contribute to a conversational culture in which students gradually—through their teach-

ers' facilitation—come to perceive the literary texts as a meaningful utterance, a personal address that calls for their response; that reading, not unlike listening to a personal story told by a friend, is a *responsibility*, for which one, by being addressed, adopts a situated form of *answerability* (Bakhtin 1993, Murray, 2000). To achieve this, students must perceive the literary text as significant enough for their attention and for their engaged participation in dialogue. To induce engagement, teachers often look for themes and motifs that students will perceive as authentic and relevant according to their own lived experience (Kjelen, 2013; Skarstein, 2013), and particularly stress that immersion in text worlds should not be too demanding for students (Tengberg, 2011). While this consideration may sometimes be appropriate, recent research also indicates that a different, almost opposite, route to reader engagement is found in the purposeful use of literary complexity, i.e., to use texts that deliberately exert friction in reading (Gourvenec, 2017; Johansen, 2017; Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017). It appears, according to these empirical studies, that various forms of literary complexity actually evoke students' fascination and interpretive engagement. This is particularly interesting from a pedagogical perspective because by challenging students' habitual ways of comprehending stories, through unexpected or puzzling composition, we can delay the unfolding of motifs or plot (Sønneland, 2019), and open up for a more fundamental discussion with students about their expectations of literature and literary meaning making, and thus highlight their reader conventions and repertoires (Levine, 2019). Two key concepts in this domain of literary thinking are defamiliarization (Shklovsky, [1917] 1988) and undecidability (Johansen, 2022). These concepts will be explored further in the next section and connected to the dialogicity framework.

#### 4.1 Defamiliarization and undecidability

Readers of literature—or consumers of stories more generally—are driven by a *narrative desire* (Brooks, 1984), pointing them forward in the sequencing of the plot. They are also tugged by a 'desire for closure' (McCormick, 1989), i.e., a felt need for coherence, to make all bits and pieces of the story fit together in a consistent unity. These psychological drives — in want for a better word—are tightly connected to the access to immersion in story worlds (Ryan, 2001). When the pieces do not fit, or when the text rejects readers' expectations, the illusion breaks, and the reader is, in Shklovsky's ([1917] 1988) words, *defamiliarized*. To Shklovsky, art represents an intentionally protracted form of communication, meant to restore the reader's sensation of life by undermining habituated perception. While daily communication builds on automatized inferencing of concepts that have become so familiar to us that interpretation of them is instant and effortless, literature entails purposeful deviation from recognized forms of representation. According to Shklovsky, this heightens the reader's perception of the phenomena represented, and incites creativity. Deviation from the known, later acknowledged as places of *foregrounding* by Mukařovský ([1932] 2014), functions as a site of departure for reflective thinking. In literature, as

well as in education, drawing on the works of pragmatists like Dewey (1938) and Biesta (2014), deviation causes a destabilizing experience of the mind that disturbs the automatized flow of perception and communication. According to Shklovsky, the state of defamiliarization is particularly fruitful because it allows a refreshed perception of life, or of the phenomena represented in a specific passage of the text, allowing the reader to behold things anew,<sup>4</sup> to see them from a different perspective than before.

Defamiliarizing deviation is of course no general trait of all literature, although openness and indeterminacy more generally has, at least in the modernist era, been closely linked to ideas of literary quality, and literariness (see fx Attridge, 2004; Miller, 2002). It should also be noted that, at least from our standpoint, the perception of deviation, like the perception of openness or indeterminacy, is strictly speaking a feature of the text and reader-relationship rather than simply a trait laid down in the text. However, later literary scholars who have examined the relationship between specific places of foregrounding in literary texts and readers' perception show that the experience of deviation is to a large extent shared among many readers (Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Zyngier et al., 2007). Readers' pace of reading, their gaze and heartbeat, as well as their sense of strikingness or bewilderment, appear to be caused by more or less the very same literary features.

While foregrounding designates specific elements that "stand out" in one way or another, openness and indeterminacy is also generated in literature by thematic ambiguity and interpretable gaps in the text (Iser, 1978), which are not necessarily located at specific places in the text, but found in the perceived relationship between various elements. Recently, Johansen (2022), drawing on Derrida (1992), has used the term undecidability (da. uafgørlighed) to designate the simultaneous presence of several mutually excluding and equally plausible interpretive potentials, i.e., where openness appears non-reducible to the reader. Undecidability in narrative text thus arises from the case that a given composition of time and events in the story can be perceived from different angles and give rise to incongruent interpretations.<sup>5</sup> This does not necessarily mean that every single reader will discern the same conflicting perspectives in their initial readings, but a classroom of engaged students that share thoughts after reading will certainly stand a fair chance of exposing undecidabilities in stories, and, by doing so, expand their awareness of and sensibility to indeterminacy and literary meaning making in narrative.

Johansen (2022) develops an argument for a literature didactics in which undecidability is the mode of engagement between teacher and students. Related to Derrida's notion of *demeure* (that which abides or remains), Johansen suggests that

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<sup>4</sup> "to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (Shklovsky, [1917] 1988, p. 20)

<sup>5</sup> The concept of undecidability has been referred to by many literary theorists to designate aspects of openness (see fx Riffaterre, 1981).

classroom treatment of complex text should make an effort to sustain some ambiguity and bewilderment instead of quickly trying to reduce it to certainty and consensus. Since undecidability of literary texts relates to real (often ethical) dilemmas without single or certain solutions, they represent to the students a different way of thinking about problem-solving and interpretation. Undecidability incites an effect of surprise, and estrangement, which might offer the reader a new and multilayered perspective of a human condition. This notion aligns with Blau's (2003) argument that a central and more general contribution of literary study to education in all fields lies in teaching students how to endure and embrace, rather than fear, the sense of disorientation, to endure being "temporarily lost", and acquire a "tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty" (Blau, 2003, p. 211–213). These are not merely qualities of reading literature, but qualities of learning and knowing more generally.

To imbue literature discussions with defamiliarization and a bit of strategic disorientation is thus the specific reason for providing nearly 30 eighth grade classrooms with a selection of complex short stories that we ask them to read and discuss. We assume, first of all, based on recent studies (Johansen, 2017; Johansson, 2017; Sønneland, 2019), that various forms of complexity may cause friction in students' reading processes and thus engage them in dialogue and encourage their active, verbal exchange of reading experiences. Secondly, we assume that by articulating and analyzing the referred to complexities together, students' may be able to perceive their own interpretive conventions and repertoires in contrast to their peers' perspectives, and hopefully, by doing so, extend their own interpretive range and readiness.

#### 4.2 *Narrative complexity in short stories*

Although complexity in literature is partly subjective and related to reader, context, and cultural socialization (Johansson, 2021; Zyngier et al., 2007), we propose a working definition of narrative complexity. This definition applies to the short stories used in the project and is adapted to age and literary socialization of the students. To infer criteria and define more explicitly the type of complexities in question, we draw on prior empirical reception studies (Miall, 2006; Thorson, 2005; Zyngier et al., 2007), classroom studies (Tengberg, 2011; Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017), and the theoretical framing outlined above. To what extent this definition will hold to generate the expected literary effects described above is of course a question for the study to answer.

Narrative complexity, consequently, is a proposed theoretical term for friction induced by a certain amount of foregrounding or undecidability in a narrative, which causes defamiliarization and uncertainty about the overall meaning of the story. Literary features expected to cause friction are labelled and summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Elements of narrative complexity

	Aesthetic		Contextual or thematic		
Narration or narrative style: composition, temporality focalization or structure	Openness through paradoxes, contradictions, ambiguity or interpretable gaps	Poetic language such as metaphors, images or symbols	Contextual or cultural distancing, or alienation through unfamiliar references or values	Direct shock through emotionally disturbing or frustrating images or actions	Ethical dilemmas in character representation or plot

All of the aspects listed can contribute to defamiliarization by relating to readers' repertoires and situated expectations. In the following, we develop in more detail how aspects such as narration and ethical dilemmas in the project-related short stories are expected to produce friction and defamiliarization.

#### 4.3 Complexity related to narration

Different aspects of narration may contribute to a felt sense of complexity in reading. The most concise definition of our operationalization of narrative complexity lies of course in the stories we select for the project. As described above, our understanding of complexity in narration is theoretically framed, but it is also based on empirical evidence from prior research (Johansson, 2021; Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017; Johansen, 2017) as well as from our own teaching of literature at different levels. In literary theory, narrative complexity often refers more generally to the degree to which a story is characterized by intricate and interwoven plot lines, layered (or round) characterizations, and ambiguity in terms of story theme (Iser, 1978; Miall, 2006; Nikolaeva, 2011). More specifically, this aspect concerns complexity in narration, for instance non-linear narration, multiple narrators, or shifting focalization (Ibid.). Past empirical studies have revealed that both upper secondary (Johansson, 2021; Thorson, 2005) and lower secondary students (Sønneland, 2019; Tengberg, 2011) struggle even with basic conventions of fictionality, as well as with non-linear narration, and ambiguity in the form of conflicting perspectives, interpretable gaps, or open endings.

Whether these features will cause friction in reading is, as noted above, dependent on readers' past reading repertoires and anticipations. Yet, to strive for coherence and reduce ambiguity is also a natural instinct; we all seek explanations for the unexplained, to reach final answers and certainty (Dewey, 1910; McCormick, 1989). This lies at the heart of Brooks' (1984) idea of narrative desire. Thus various forms of narrative discontinuity will exercise friction against readers' desire for coherence. A typical eighth grade relevant example of such discontinuity is an open ending that does not provide the reader with a satisfying closure of the story. It can also be exemplified by main characters whose gender or other fundamental traits are not revealed or even implied. In this way, the present study intentionally intervenes to

challenge readers' habitual perception and interpretation. Overall, the concept of narrative complexity is closely tied to the extent to which the narrative discourse (Genette, 1980) sustains readers' imagination and emotions, and permits access to a comprehensible story world. This means that predictions about narrative complexity follow from a contextualized understanding of what might be perceived as trouble for a linear and coherent story comprehension by a specific group of readers. Perhaps needless to say, the provided operationalization of complexity represents a hypothesis about the readers' response that we put to empirical test in the study. Results will indicate the validity of this definition.

#### 4.4 Ethical complexity

Related to openness and ambiguity of themes and perspectives are the presence of emotional disturbance, unsolvable dilemmas, or contradictory moral perspectives in the story. While aspects of narration belong to the aesthetic forms of complexity, we generally refer to the following category as *contextual or thematic complexity*. Here, we look more specifically at different forms of ethical friction in reading. Different from aesthetic complexity, these features of the story interact with readers' emotional or moral repertoires, and induce reactions of emotional load or moral provocations. From a pedagogical point of view, this ideally releases a two-step response in a classroom reading: first, it raises the level of complexity by thwarting simplified interpretations of story meaning and moral; and second, it stimulates reader engagement by presenting open, thought-provoking problems to students without any "correct" solutions.

To Shklovsky, defamiliarization includes intensified awareness of the world outside the text. However, Felski (2008) argues that the correlation between the reader's emotional reaction and the unreality of the work of art is complicated, as we can experience stronger emotional reactions to events in (unreal) art than to events in real life, especially if the real-life events occur at a long (mental or physical) distance from us. Moral or ethical dilemmas in reading, therefore, can be expected to arise both as pure fictional construction and as a reaction related to conflicts that exist in the outside world.

One aspect of ethical complexity in literary reading is outlined by Felski (2008) with the term *shock*, which "names a reaction to what is startling, painful, even horrifying." (p. 105). Shock in literature, according to Felski, can include both violent content and avant-garde art. She defines shock as building on fear, often related to disgust and repulsion. The most important feature of the reaction is an encounter with the unexpected: "an experience of being wrenched in an altered frame of mind." (p. 113). Shock thus highlights a sudden disruption of the literary interaction caused by conflict between reader and text repertoires, but it also relates to a more deeply felt sense of discord with, or provocation by, a proposed ethics or moral in the text.

Another aspect of ethical complexity concerns dilemmas related to character representation, relationships, and plot. For instance, several of the texts included in the intervention contain complicated relationships between a parent and a child: disregard, disobedience, betrayed confidence etc. While a reader may interpret or impose a story moral by reference to known cultural norms, the openness of the selected texts persuasively resists simple solutions to the problem, and they do not reproduce conventional morals to satisfy the reader. Instead, the stories prompt the readers—and the classroom when they talk—to consider multiple possible perspectives, or to meditate on the possibility that there are no viable or adequate solutions to some problems.

Embedding ethical complexity in eighth grade literature classrooms is intended to provoke reactions that open up for value-related discussions based on reading, such as moral principles, responsibilities and actions. Ideally, teacher and students will also examine values and value-related propositions and actions in the text critically as part of their dialogue-based, collective interpretation. Teachers are not expected to dig into students' personal life or experiences. However, to share thoughts on moral issues and explore each other's argument for adopting one particular stance instead of another inevitably involves some reference to one's own experience and private sphere. To expose bits and pieces of those experiential backgrounds from which our interpretations arise is a fundamental part of learning through dialogue. In order to move beyond simplified understandings, such as thinking that literary texts can always be interpreted in different ways by different readers, and that no interpretation is ever better than the other, we need some insight into the referential backgrounds against which literary expectations, preferences, and story schemata are formed. It is important to treat ethical dilemmas in stories as text-related problems, for which the reader holds no real responsibility, and for which there may be no satisfactory solution. But literary reading without the juxtaposition of reader and text perspectives and consciousness is no literary reading.

To sum up, narrative complexity is expected to generate friction in reading and challenge students' thinking and interpretive conventions. It aims to create an aesthetic distance through deviation from mundane forms of language and narration, for instance by broken chronology, open endings, emotional disturbance, or by poetic images. By intentional contrast to the common uses of text and language in students' everyday world and experience, narrative complexity aims to challenge habitual modes of comprehension and interpretation, to articulate critical aspects of the reading process, and activate students' metacognitive awareness of their own reading. It also aims to encourage critical exploration of value-related issues and multiple perspectives by provoking reactions to content- or thematically related aspects of the text.

## 5. DISCUSSION

As indicated, the model we implement puts perspective taking at the centre of literary meaning making. In line with both of the two frameworks presented above is the belief that to be confronted with an *other* perspective (either through foregrounding or through a divergent peer perspective) is a critical building block for increased literary awareness and extended interpretive range. The essential purpose of this research is to find ways of supporting teachers' gradual development of managing literature discussions, and to incite an explorative and cooperative attitude in students' text-based interaction. We have argued that a dialogic understanding of meaning making connects well with theory of literary defamiliarization and undecidability, and that the combination of the two frameworks provides a particularly fruitful basis for a literature didactics that is able to explain both the aesthetic processing and the interactional network between reader, literary text, and peer readers.

As we have seen, implementation of Inquiry Dialogue draws on a Bakhtinian understanding of dialogue in which tension between voices, as a space for learning, requires more than the sharing of thoughts. It requires deliberate teacher action to invite comparison between perspectives, between different others, and to expose disagreement or other relationships between dissimilar understandings. To enact a dialogic stance in the literary classroom is not, however, to follow a set of rules or an instructional format to enforce refraction of student interpretations (Nystrand, 1997), but rather to adopt an orientation towards comprehension and interpretation that invites the sharing, comparison, and examination of different readings (Boyd & Markarian, 2011).

The perspective of the other is also a governing principle behind having student readers meet various types of narrative complexity. By challenging their already familiarized and habitual forms of comprehending stories, the intervention aims at imposing the need for a more conscious interpretive response from students, and the need for talking about the text with their peers. By gradually adjusting their expectations of the stories they read in school, into some form of tolerance for (maybe even curiosity on) openness in literature, and by making them able to see defamiliarization as part of the literary experience, the instructional intention is for students to experience the rhetoric of a literary address as something different from the non-literary, as a potential of meaning without definite contours, yet dense with latent qualities. To what extent this effect will be realized—as a quality of experience—in the student readings is an empirical question for the study to explore.

The aim of this paper has been, first, to examine the relationship between theory of dialogic teaching and theory of defamiliarization and undecidability, and, second, to demonstrate how the two frameworks can be united in a theoretical frame for analyzing the aesthetic processes of reading and talking about literature, and for analyzing and guiding teachers' management of those talks. In doing so, we imply that there is a conceptual fit between the two theories, making them appropriate and



applicable for empirical analysis and instructional planning. In what follows, we elaborate specific reasons for this claim. On a general level, it could be argued that both of the two frameworks highlight critical dimensions of classroom instruction about literature. More specifically, we need to explain the conceptual and predictive alignment between them.

### 5.1 *The matching of the two theoretical frameworks*

Developing an argument for alignment should consider first of all what to accept as evidence for theoretical alignment. In order to propose that an argument is valid, there should be some criteria for rating the strength of the presented argumentation. We suggest, therefore, the following two criteria to be used as context-specific yardstick for validity assessment of theory alignment:

- 1) That the two theoretical frameworks share an underlying conceptual focus with relation to the intervention activities
- 2) That the two frameworks reciprocally inform and elaborate on each other, i.e., that they offer continuations of each other's modelling definitions of the educational practice in focus (literature discussions), and that they expand each other's theoretical reach within that domain

An additional potential criterion for alignment—or at least one somewhat differently defined—might have been the use of a common frame of reference in terms of theoretical concepts. We argue, however, that when different theories use similar or identical concepts, this renders only two possible options. Either the two theories already stem from a common ancestral line of theories, in which case no argument for matching conceptual fit is needed. Or the use of identical concepts is analogous, but not related through origin, suggesting instead that their meaning is not identical, and that terminology is not a valid argument for conceptual fit after all. We therefore settle for shared conceptual focus (see criterion no 1), instead of insisting on identical use of concepts. In the following, the theoretical alignment of the two frameworks is discussed in light of both of the two criteria above.

### 5.2 *Shared conceptual focus*

In fact, the concept with which we argue for conceptual unity is hardly used at all in any of the two theoretical displays above. The concept is *experience*. Aligning with Dewey's (1938) premise about the essentiality of the quality of human experience in order to understand the effects of education, we suggest that theory of defamiliarization and theory of dialogic teaching both take the specific aesthetic experience as departure. Drawing on theory of literary reception, for example, to examine meaning potential in complex short stories means that we begin with a specific assumption about the reading experience. According to Dewey, the *quality* of experience is crit-

ical to educational progress.<sup>6</sup> A particular aspect of its quality is the principle of continuity. Because each experience modifies our expectations of future experiences, the continuity of experience is a criterion of discrimination (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). This line of reasoning lies at the heart of the formalist-structuralist notions of defamiliarization (Shklovsky, [1917] 1988) and foregrounding (Mukařovský, [1932] 2014) as categories of aesthetic experiences, which appear against the background of everyday language use and everyday representations of human experience. In much the same vein, theory of dialogic teaching specifies principles for classroom exploration of those experiences, in relation to each other, and in relation to specified learning goals, such as comprehension of the particular text, or a subjective perspective on the particular human conditions represented by the text. Just as the experience of foregrounding and defamiliarization presupposes a background experience against which something appears unexpected or deviant, the existence of otherness (an *other* voice) in dialogic teaching presupposes an authentic first-hand experience to perceive this otherness from. In this way, the two frameworks share a conceptual focus on a particular quality of experience as point of departure for literary meaning making and literary learning.

### 5.3 *Reciprocal elaboration of theoretical reach*

The conditions of learning bring us to the second criterion: reciprocal elaboration of theoretical reach. In fact, this one begins right where the first criterion ends. What we look for here is the rate at which the two frameworks inform and elaborate on each other. An evident link between the two theories is the centrality of perceptual shift as a criterion for learning and understanding. In theory of dialogic teaching, perceptual shift has both an axiomatic, philosophical function, and a propositional didactical function. The philosophical function follows from Bakhtin's assertion in that consciousness is itself constituted by relation (Holquist, 1990), more specifically an asymmetry between the perceived self and a perceived other. The didactical function draws on this perceived asymmetry, and works as a principle for understanding the meaning production, and learning, of interaction. A Bakhtinian understanding of meaning, translated to the literature classroom, suggests that learning occurs through the perceptual width, or refraction, created by the simultaneous presence of multiple, divergent voices, or perspectives on the same topic. These can represent values and beliefs, but also difference in background experiences and be related to knowledge and identities. By exposing both the distance itself and the nature of that distance, in terms of experience and values etc., between my own perspective and the perspectives of others, classroom discussions encourage perceptual shifts.

In literary theory (Shklovsky, [1917] 1988), defamiliarization explains a particular type of perceptual shift, dependent on the reader's previous experience of language in general and literary representations and imagery in particular. Much in line with

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<sup>6</sup> See also Dewey (1934) for an extended discussion about the quality of experience.

Dewey's insistence on the quality of experience as critical to what we are able to perceive or discriminate in new experiences, narrative complexity in the shape of ambiguity or foregrounding produces a sensation of defamiliarization against a background of specific expectations. In dialogic classroom interaction, where readers' perspectives and reactions are verbalized and contrasted, this perceptual shift has the quality of exposing readers to their own habitual modes of thinking, as well as the open meaning potential of literature. Narrative complexity thus serves the purpose of imparting a specific experience of bewilderment or estrangement in students, in order to produce not only the need for prolonged reflection on the experience itself, but also the need for discussing the text with peers. In addition, we assume that the qualities of openness, or undecidability, of plot and story meaning will fuel the discussion with enough diversity of interpretation for students to be forced to encounter perspectives dissimilar to their own. In this way, the two frameworks also reciprocally elaborate on each other's theoretical reach. A model for explaining aesthetic effect (defamiliarization) becomes a building block for providing a content-specific representation to reveal the potential of a theory of interaction (dialogicity). In return, a theory of consciousness, and of meaning making as dependent on perspective taking (dialogicity), makes a fundamental and eloquent contribution to explaining the cognitive and experiential grounds on which the assumption of a specific aesthetic effect (defamiliarization) rests. Again, we stress that Dewey's thinking on the stimulus to, and the act of, reflective thinking provides a conceptual connection between the two frameworks presented here. In *How we think* (1910), Dewey points out that the act of reflective thinking always arises from some state of perplexity or doubt, or a lack of coherent meaning, and that the guiding factor of reflective thinking is the demand for a solution that will overcome this state of perplexity. However, following Dewey, the reflectiveness of reflective thinking also involves a willingness to endure a state of uncertainty, and to suspend judgment during further inquiry (Dewey, 1910, p. 13). In fact, Dewey points out that "the most important factor in the training of good mental habits consists in acquiring the attitude of suspended conclusion, and in mastering the various methods of searching for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur." (Ibid.) This assertion is essentially at the core of the pedagogical thinking through which the present literature intervention is formed, and it also binds together the response-theoretical and the dialogical vantage points from which the main body of the intervention activities are designed.

#### *5.4 Implications for the intervention*

A critical implication of the theoretical elaboration above is that in order to expound the undecidabilities and ambiguities of complex stories, several, independent voices are necessary. In some cases, students may initiate explorative and cooperative dialogue on their own, but in most cases, the teacher's orchestration of student voices is critical not only for the interaction to be productive and explorative, but also for it

to linger in a state of slight disorientation and uncertainty about textual meaning, for the readers to suspend closure, and maintain an interpretive mode of thought. This is why a dialogic stance of the teacher is particularly fruitful when engaging students with complex literary texts. However, for this to occur in authentic intervention classrooms, theoretical ideals must be complemented by concrete suggestions of teacher moves that facilitate students' explorative interaction. In particular, when providing feedback to teachers, after watching their literature discussions, concrete strategies, questions, and models for action will be required. Yet to maintain the position declared above, and combine a focus on developed practice with a focus on the growth of a reflective, dialogical stance in teachers, theoretical principles and practical guidance must be balanced against each other. This is undoubtedly a delicate but essential pedagogical challenge of the intervention practice. It means for example that feedback to teachers based on lesson observations must not focus exclusively on teacher actions, but also identify and deliberate how action is rooted in teachers' thinking. Prior professional development research of similar type has shown that an intervention may well have a significant impact on teachers' action without really affecting their pedagogical thinking (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Conversely, the development of teachers' pedagogical stance must originate in joint, careful attention to and reasoning about situated, authentic practice (Borko et al., 2017; Gaudin & Chaliès, 2015).

We set out to examine the relationship between theory of dialogic teaching and theory of literary reception for the purpose of analyzing and organizing professional development of teacher-led discussions about complex literary texts. In the paper, we have tried to tie the two frameworks to each other, showing both their conceptual accord and their reciprocal value. However, defining narrative complexity so that the target audience (here 8th grade students) experience strikingness, perplexity, and defamiliarization, and perceive ambiguity and undecidability in the process of interpretation, cannot be done with a high rate of predictability. An intervention design for multiple classrooms—the present intervention includes nearly 30 classrooms—will inevitably have to rest on a generalized impression of readers' cultural and literary repertoires, based on available empirical evidence. Yet the single teacher will stand a much better chance of pinpointing the type of complexity that is likely to provoke his or her students' interpretive thinking and explorative, interactional attitude. In preparation of the intervention, we can learn from teachers' experience and adjust text selection to some extent. Because even if the state of defamiliarization relies heavily on widespread language and cultural conventions, and even if, as reported above, studies have verified significant consistency in readers' experience of narrative complexity, the interplay between familiarity with conventions and experience of complexity is a highly situated and personal form of impression, based in the individual reader's sensitivity to a unique rhetoric address. This specific sensitivity to an aesthetic form marks the starting point for the intervention. A tolerance for remaining there, in a state of perplexity, but being able to speak about it with peers, and explore its qualities, marks the properties we wish to cultivate. We aim at

clarification, not certainty. Borrowing from Wittgenstein ([1922] 2013), we aim at the logical clarification of thought, believing that interpretation is a learning activity, not a body of doctrine or an end result to be accomplished.

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