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To cite this article: Amanda Naylor, Nicholas McGuinn, Ghazal Shaikh, Zoltan Varga & Hege Emma Rimmereide (2021): 'I lost the faith in humanity.' Using William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to Explore Ethical and Moral Issues Through Transnational, Online Literary Exchange, Cambridge Journal of Education, DOI: [10.1080/0305764X.2021.1959519](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1959519)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1959519>



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Published online: 07 Oct 2021.



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'I lost the faith in humanity.' Using William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to Explore Ethical and Moral Issues Through Transnational, Online Literary Exchange

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ABSTRACT

Researchers into Literature and Education from Norway, Pakistan and the United Kingdom used William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to explore the potential of a literary text to encourage intercultural dialogue, employing an innovative teaching method, Google Circles, to provide a platform for asynchronous online discussion among three cohorts of students in higher education. The authors present here the ethical and moral responses to the novel. The authors' analysis of the data explores the students' thoughts about human nature and law and order, as well as responses made by the students to moral turning points in Golding's novel. The authors report that – although the novel provided a space for students from three national contexts to debate major existential questions using the affordances of the asynchronous digital platform – the students found it difficult to distinguish between the writer, the implied author and the narrative voice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 December 2020
Accepted 20 July 2021

KEYWORDS

Ethics; literature education; higher education; online discussion; *Lord of the Flies*; intercultural dialogue

This paper reports on an international collaboration between students and researchers from Norway, Pakistan and the United Kingdom. The project explored how students in higher education in different contexts connect, respond to and discuss William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* through an online exchange. For the project, the students read *Lord of the Flies* independently and were then allocated pre-set roles to prepare for face-to-face, oral discussions in class with peers, in the format of Literature Circles (Daniels, 2002). All three cohorts of students were given a one-hour seminar to discuss the novel. After this, the students engaged in international, asynchronous, online written discussions, over the course of a three-week period, called in this study Google Circles. What is presented here is a further iteration of the coding discussed in the research team's previous paper, 'We are invited to imagine: using a literary text to encourage cross-cultural dialogue about citizenship' (Varga, McGuinn, Naylor, Rimmereide, and Syed [2020]). In the previous study, the team reported on the political, historical and social dimensions of the students'

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responses to the novel, whereas here we report on the moral and ethical responses that arose to the novel, which were in fact the largest overall code of the data from the complete corpus.

The literary classic *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding was chosen because the team needed to find a text that would serve as a stimulus for discussion across nationalities and that was common in all three contexts' syllabi. Other factors also controlled the selection of text. In Pakistan, syllabi and reading lists are decided by the Board of Studies at the participating university and are relatively inflexible; in Norway, the university syllabus focuses on the thematic content of democracy and civics and *Lord of the Flies* frequently serves as a go-to text for such discussions; in the United Kingdom, the novel serves as an examination text for many exam boards.

For the first part of the project, the students took part in face-to-face discussion in the form of Literature Circles – these being learner-centred discussion groups with pre-assigned roles for each participant (for an account of Literature Circles, see Varga et al., 2020). Google Documents were used for the second part of the project: the international, asynchronous online exchange referred to in this study as Google Circles. For this online exchange, each Google Circle had six to eight members, with representatives from each nationality. The order for the entries in the Google Circles was a function of the time-tabling constraints of the project, so the Norwegian students made the first entry, the Pakistani students the second and the United Kingdom students the third. This cycle was then repeated, so that each student had the opportunity to contribute at least twice within their tuition time at university. Although the students undertook the Literature Circles independently, the online exchange in the Google Circles was guided by the three prompts by the research team to help stimulate online discussion:

What elements of the novel did you talk about in your literature circle?

What connections in your group did you make between the novel and your own experiences?

Do you see any relevance of Golding's novel to you now?

In Varga et al. (2020) the team discussed the problematic nature of working with Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The very reason for this article is that the data was so rich in addressing ethical topics without being prompted. Some questions that emerge are the following: What is the role of literature in the classroom? How does the strained relationship between literature and ethics affect our project? How does an ethically oriented reading account for the literariness of the text? Are certain texts more prone to incite ethical discussions?

Literature review

The debate about the relationships among literature, ethics and morality in the Western world is nearly two and a half millennia old. It reaches back at least as far as the 'ancient quarrel' (Gearon, 2019; Smith, 2018) between Plato and Aristotle concerning the role – if any – that the poet should play in the civic life of the Greek *polis*. The debate centres on issues of commitment and disengagement. The latter term, as the literature review will indicate, can be interpreted in a number of different ways. An extreme expression of

disengagement is famously represented by Oscar Wilde's aphoristic Preface to the 1891 edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which declares: 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all All Art is quite useless' (Frankel, , pp. 238–239). Neither Plato (*Republic*, Book X) nor Aristotle (*Poetics*) disputes the potential of the artist – in this case, the poet – for civic commitment. What they do dispute is whether that intervention, with its powerful appeal to the emotions, is to be welcomed as something positive and morally inspirational or negative and morally seductive (and destructive).

Liam Gearon has argued recently that this 'literary challenge' which has 'beset philosophers since antiquity' becomes 'most charged in times of political turmoil' (Gearon, 2019, p. 394). Bell (2018) cites two examples which are particularly pertinent to the research reported in this paper. In the years leading up to and including the French Revolution, he observes, first Rousseau and then Kant subjected the nature and validity of the artist's civic commitment to renewed scrutiny. Bell describes how Rousseau, in his *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre* (1757), questions the much-vaunted idea that art somehow encourages empathy. If that were the case, Rousseau argues, theatregoers who are moved to pity by a dramatic depiction of poverty would not then be able to ignore the misery of the beggars they encounter outside the theatre. Kant, Bell argues, 'dismissed the sentimentalist view entirely arguing that only when acting on principle and against inclination could one be sure of performing a moral act' and that any other response was no more than 'a form of emotional self-indulgence' (Bell, 2018, p. 714).

Three types of turmoil

Since the turn of the century, the debate concerning literature, ethics and morality has flared again under pressure from three new sources of 'turmoil'. The first is the encroachment of a Neoliberalism which, Harvey suggests, seeks to 'bring all human action into the domain of the market' (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). Grant argues that not even education is immune from the threat: 'something as innocent as delight in learning, or the joy of play', he writes, has been turned 'from an intrinsic good into a saleable good, giving it a price before exchanging it for a private gain' (Grant, 2009, p. xii). Nussbaum (for example, Nussbaum, 1997, 2010) is perhaps the most prominent of the commentators (see also, for example, Levenson, 2017; Small, 2013) who have *fought back*, as it were. She would position the arts and humanities at the very heart of civic debate, arguing that through their capacity to offer 'a style of human relating in which deliberation is nourished by the exuberance of fancy, and moral attitudes are made more loving and more generous by the play of the imagination', they are vital to the very survival of a democracy under threat from the forces of 'economic utilitarianism'. Nussbaum has argued more specifically that literature 'has the potential to make a distinctive contribution to our public life'. Citing Dickens's *Hard Times* as an example, she argues that novels have 'a certain sort of moral-political vision' which may be seen as a possible choice by the reader (Nussbaum, 1991, pp. 879–895). One of the most significant ways in which 'human relating' is increasingly 'nourished' is through a growing awareness that, as Joseph Slaughter argues, 'human rights abuse is characterized as an infringement on the modern subject's ability to narrate her story' (Slaughter, 1997, p. 413). Not only are previously marginalised voices

expressing themselves through literature; canonical works are subject to interrogation from a wide range of contemporary critical practices such as postcolonialism (Spivak, 1985) or ecocriticism (Garrard, 2014).

The second source of current ‘turmoil’ is located within the world of literature itself. Schlant (1999) cites Barbara Johnson’s suggestion that the late twentieth-century *turn* towards postmodernism, with its concern for ‘decenteredness, instability, and nomadism’ (p. 4) and its toleration of ‘difference’ (p. 4) and ‘heterogeneity’ (p. 13) was itself a reaction against the ‘master narratives’ which had such grave consequences for the world in the years leading up to and including the Second World War. Times change. Timmer’s (2010) study of three contemporary American writers who ‘were still in their diapers or not even born’ when the ‘founding fathers of postmodern writing and theorizing first issued their thoughts and texts’, detects a growing sense of disenchantment with ‘the postmodern perspective on subjectivity’ (Timmer, 2010, p. 13). Timmer cites the novelist David Foster Wallace’s perception that a way of writing and thinking about the world which, for Johnson, had provided an ethically vital and bracingly critical defence against the totalitarian dangers of ideological certainty, had degenerated into a world view characterised by

sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. (McCaffery, 1993, pp. 147–148)

Timmer detects a ‘post-postmodern turn in contemporary fiction’ characterised by a weariness with postmodernism’s perceived ‘double deconstruction’: a ‘lack of a shared external frame of reference and ... any stable internal frame of reference’ (Timmer, 2010, p. 306). She notes a yearning for what Doyle describes as a ‘New Sincerity’ – a longing for a ‘more hopeful vision of community within a system of global capitalism and moral relativism’ (Timmer, 2010, p. 259).

The third source of ‘turmoil’ relates to the previous two and is explored, for example, in recent papers by Choo (2017) and Cascardi (2019). Like Nussbaum, they are receptive to the idea of what Cascardi describes as a ‘crisis of the humanities’ (p. 723) imposed by an ‘economic and mostly utilitarian calculus’ (p. 736); they also believe, like Nussbaum, that literature has an ethically and democratically charged obligation to fight back. Like Wallace, they express distrust in that ‘fashionable form of literary criticism privileging ambiguity and disruption of stable meanings in textual interpretation’ which Choo attributes to ‘poststructuralism’ [sic] (Choo, 2017, p. 336) and they are sympathetic towards the aspirations of the ‘New Sincerity’. What distinguishes their position is their response to a third source of ‘turmoil’, namely their perception that the world is currently experiencing a ‘very changed global order’ (Cascardi, 2019, p. 723) characterised by ‘global risks such as terrorism, fundamentalism, and xenophobia’ (Choo, 2017, p. 336) as well as ‘far-right ideologies both secular (nationalist) and religious’ (Cascardi, 2019, p. 738). Both Choo and Cascardi agree that the current state of the world requires literature to work towards the creation of ‘global citizens’ committed to ‘fairness, equality, openmindedness, compassion’ (Cascardi, 2019, p. 725). They differ, however, in their response to what Cascardi calls ‘the contemporary cosmopolitan environment’. While for him, the ‘events of 911’ indicate that ‘the concept of a literature beyond nationalism, a “world literature”, could no longer be understood just as a happy “melting pot” of literary cultures that one

can enjoy as one enjoys sampling foreign cuisines' (Cascardi, 2019, p. 725), Choo interprets those same events as signalling 'a pressing need for educators to consider how to powerfully cultivate hospitality toward multiple and marginalized others in the world' through what she calls 'cosmopolitan ethical criticism' (Choo, 2017, p. 335).

The role of literature

While most teachers would probably agree with the proposed goal of 'developing students as global ethical thinkers', the way to get there becomes problematic when the strategy becomes prescriptive. Choo's vision of cosmopolitan criticism is characterised in the classroom by a highly interventionist teaching programme in which the literature curriculum is constructed around 'ethical questions and issues', rather than being based necessarily on criteria of literary merit: 'I propose that language and, correspondingly, the aesthetic appreciation of language must be seen as a means to an ethical end concerned with understanding the other. In short, aesthetics is a means to ethics as an end' (Choo, 2017, p. 335). It is this specific confinement of the aims of literature to politics that Liam Gearon takes aim at in his response to Choo's article, warning of the 'risks of ready-made interpretation ahead of any reading' (Gearon, 2019, p. 401). Gearon points at historical examples that show how putting aesthetics to the service of ideology has often led to fundamentalism, but perhaps even more importantly, he advocates the freedom necessary to become ethical thinkers:

By being made conscious of the stories behind the stories, they (all readers) can retain their freedom *as* readers – they are not forced, tacitly, and out of benevolence, to one particular reading, but make reading and writing their own. (Gearon, 2019, p. 403)

The issues raised in the debate between Choo and Gearon recall those issues of commitment and disengagement described by Rousseau and Kant as reported by Bell in his 2018 paper. For Bosmajian, extreme forms of disengagement can manifest themselves as 'a refusal to become aware' (Bosmajian, 1979, p. 17). This can take the form of a 'refusal', for example, to interrogate texts by asking what John describes as two fundamental readerly questions: 'what else is being said here?' and 'why is this story being told in this way?' (John, 2018, p. 656). To read a text without either asking – or acting upon the answers to – those questions could be interpreted as an example of what Mahon and O'Brien describe as 'the cruelty of incuriosity' (Mahon & O'Brien, 2018, p. 698). Schlant (1999), who, like Bosmajian, attempts to grapple with Germany's response to the Holocaust, identifies an artistic silence, a kind of disengagement which is different from Wilde's art for art's sake, Kant's suspicion of sentimentalist responses to art or Rousseau's account of the theatregoer's ethically wilful refusal to become aware. Artists (and their audiences), she notes, may choose to stay silent because they have too much knowledge and because what they have witnessed is beyond articulation (see also Langer, 1975). She cites Adorno's famous pronouncement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno, 1981, p. 34) because, as Schlant puts it: 'Art, by definition, imposes order and creates meaning, while the Holocaust defies any such attempt' (Schlant, 1999, p. 8). Posner would question this position, arguing that literature has always engaged with difficult and even 'morally offensive views'. Prefiguring Gearon's criticism of Choo's approach and his corresponding plea for readerly choice and freedom, Posner argues that to exclude literary

works because they might be considered ‘maimed or even marred by expressing unacceptable moral views’, would be to leave nothing but ‘a skewed sample of literary works’ available to the reader (Posner, 1997, p. 2). Schlant goes even further:

A language that serves only as the ‘creator and bearer of humane, rational truth’ and expurgates the frightening, inhuman, and unspeakable aspects is a censored language, and is on the road to becoming as barbaric as any of the manipulated languages of totalitarian regimes. (Schlant, 1999, p. 9)

It is perhaps its deliberate look into the depth of the barbaric that still makes *Lord of the Flies* compelling to contemporary audiences. Paraphrasing Sartre, Adorno asks: ‘Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until the bones break in their bodies?’ This question, he continues, ‘is also the question whether art should exist at all’ (Adorno, 1991, p. 60). We are aware that the attribution of authorial intention to a literary text is problematic (Spivak, 1985). However, one of the reasons why we found *Lord of the Flies* so interesting a choice of text for the purposes of our research is that it is a novel in which the ‘flesh and blood’ (Booth, 2005, p. 75) presence of the author is particularly intrusive. Golding shared Adorno’s sense of revulsion about the Holocaust. He wrote: ‘There were things done during that period from which I still have to avert my mind less I should be physically sick’ (Golding, 1965/2013, p. 213). Disturbingly, however, Golding also perceived in himself a connection with the men who perpetrated the beatings and bone breaking. ‘I have always understood the Nazis’, he confessed, ‘because I am of that sort by nature.’ Moreover, he added, it was ‘partly out of that sad self-knowledge’ that he wrote *Lord of the Flies* (quoted in Carey, 2012, p. 82). Rather than question the purpose of art as Adorno did, therefore, in *Lord of the Flies* Golding deployed his craft as a means of confronting the most profound of ethical issues – what John Wain calls ‘the wickedness of the human creature’ (Wain, 1963, pp. 56–57). The task of the novelist, Golding observed, is to look ‘for the root of the disease instead of describing the symptoms’ (Golding, 1957, p. 45). Identifying himself as a ‘fabulist’, he declared: ‘By the nature of his craft . . . the fabulist is didactic, desires to inculcate a moral lesson.’ And since ‘[p]eople do not much like moral lessons’, the ‘pill has to be sugared, has to be witty or entertaining’ (Golding, 1965/2013). In this way, Golding himself set a precedent for Choo’s interpretation of ‘cosmopolitan ethical criticism’ – one in which the ethical ‘pill’ is ‘sugared’ by aesthetics.

Small wonder, then, that *Lord of the Flies* has been used in the classroom and elsewhere as a medium for the exploration of Choo’s ‘ethical questions and issues’. These can include – to cite just a small example – ‘leadership and followership’ (Ramsey & Bell, 1993, p. 26); ‘the value of democracy and its vulnerability’; (Wigger, 2013, p. 12) ‘how loyalties play a fundamental part in our psyche and our social lives’ (Healy, 2013, p. 90); and ‘citizenship themes’ (Fleming, 2006, p. 134). Small wonder, either, that readers – including our own students – are drawn to those ‘Everyman’ interpretations of *Lord of the Flies*, where, in their extreme forms, ‘Jack is seen as a Hitler stand-in’, Ralph is Neville Chamberlain and Roger represents the Gestapo (Olsen, 2000, pp. 169–170).

Research methods

This is a qualitative study and data collected consists of comments on *Lord of the Flies* from students in their Google Circles in three national contexts in higher education, as part of an asynchronous online exchange. The research question for the whole project, part of which we are reporting on in this paper, is: *How do students in different contexts connect, respond to and discuss Lord of the Flies through an online exchange?*

The participants in this study were all enrolled in the researchers' respective literature courses, selected through convenience sampling (Bryman, 2016), consisting of three cohorts of undergraduates from the three countries. In total there were 19 Norwegian students in their second year of Teacher Training studies; 12 Pakistani students in their fourth year of English studies, many of whom plan to become teachers; and 8 students from the United Kingdom in their second year of Education studies. The participants in all three contexts participated in Literature Circles in their class time and were subsequently offered enrolment in the online Google Circles discussion. All who volunteered to participate were included, hence the somewhat unequal number of students. This being an international project, ethical procedures were followed in line with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data guidelines (www.nsd.no), utilising clear consent and anonymity agreements.

Research design

The research involved three stages (Figure 1). Initially, the students were required to read *Lord of the Flies* independently. They were then allocated pre-set roles to prepare for the face-to-face, oral discussions in class with peers, in Literature Circles (Daniels, 2002). The students then engaged in asynchronous, online written discussions – *Google Circles* – over the course of a three-week period. The students were given three prompts to support their exchanges (as shown earlier). We are aware that any framework put around a discussion will have an impact on how students responded in their Google Circles.

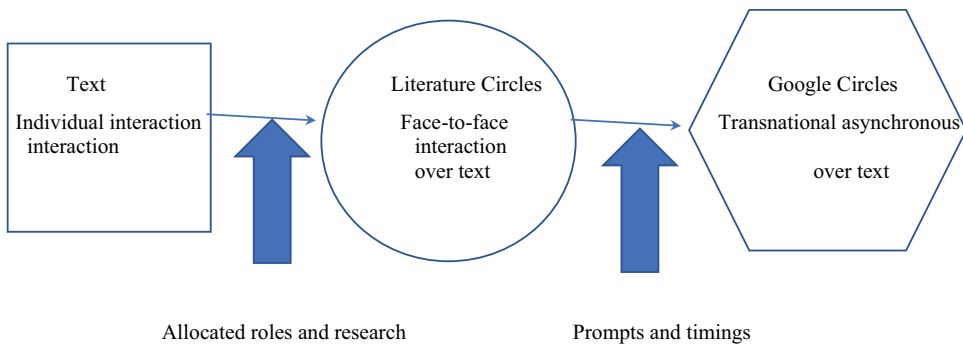


Figure 1. The cycle for Google Circles. Source: Syed, Naylor, Rimmereide, Varga, & Guanio-Uluru (2019).

However, we tried to give the students freedom with very open questions, carefully discussed by the research team. The data in this study is based on the written data from the Google Circle exchanges.

Data collection and analysis

Stage one: analysing the complete corpus of data

The researchers conducted three stages of coding involving an inductive search to categorise the material (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Six main codes were identified in the corpus of data in terms of the responses to *Lord of the Flies*: *moral*; *political*; *historical*; *personal*; *social*; and *the experience of the Literature Circles*. In the team's previous article, Varga et al. (2020), responses to three of these main codes – historical, political and social – were reported. At the time of analysis, the largest individual code was the *moral* response to the text, for which there were nearly twice as many extracts coded as for any other category. In light of this, we undertook a further thematic analysis of *moral responses to Lord of the Flies*, presented in this study.

Stage two: analysing the extracted code relating to morality and ethics

In order to report on the moral dimension of the students' exchanges, the *moral* code was further refined. For this, we applied thematic analysis following the protocol explicated by Braun and Clarke (2006), who argue that it is a theoretically 'flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide [a] rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data' (p. 78). Further to this, they point out that it is important that researchers make their '(epistemological and other) assumptions explicit' (p. 79) and argue that clarity is vital (p. 80). The explanation for this is that 'if themes "reside" anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them' (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, pp. 205–206). Bearing this in mind, as a coding team we moved iteratively between individual and team analysis, keeping dialogue about the data at the forefront of our thinking. The team individually labelled the extracted *moral* responses code to refine the categorisation within that code. All five members of the team undertook this labelling of the first level categorisation individually. This individual labelling was then collated so that all the individual responses to the data were visible in a table.

This phase of the process – termed 'generating initial codes' by Braun and Clarke – is one where a feature of the data is identified, which can be either 'semantic content or latent' (p. 88), which is of interest to the researcher. One of the key elements to Braun and Clarke's (2006) argument is that there are a number of choices that are made in the analysis of data that need to be made explicit, that there needs to be 'to be an ongoing reflexive dialogue on the part of the . . . researchers with regards to these issues' (p. 82). We found a high level of agreement in our interpretation of the data. Braun and Clarke also state that a theme 'represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning' (p. 82), emphasising researcher judgment and the 'key-ness' of a theme, 'whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question' (p. 82). In relation to our data, the interrogation that we were undertaking concerned the nuances of the student's moral responses to *Lord of the Flies*.

This process of applying the agreed themes to the data required a lot of team discussion, as all members of the team had to agree which theme specific data extracts would be allocated to, and which required detailed scrutiny of the data and dialogic exchange over the philosophical or literary meaning of data extracts. After systematically discussing the categorisation of each individual data extract, we finalised themes for subdividing the overarching prime code of *moral* responses. The themes that we agreed for the extracted code of *moral* responses were:

- (1) Connection of novel to human nature
- (2) Laws/rules
- (3) Connection of novel to society
- (4) Morality and Ethics
- (5) Literary devices and aesthetic qualities (prompting moral responses)

Findings

The findings present data which address the overarching research question of the project: *How do students in different contexts connect, respond to and discuss Lord of the Flies through an online exchange?* We present here an overview of the students' responses and extracts presented verbatim from the data. We have utilised numbers for each student to preserve their anonymity. These examples are not representative, but they are noteworthy entry points to a more complex interpretation and problematisation of the literary text.

Theme 1: connection of novel to human nature

For this theme, mentions were coded from the students' discussion of the way they perceived the novel relating to internal human nature, in relation to morality and ethics. Thirty-five extracts were coded. By far the largest category was the students' perceptions of the dualistic presence of good and evil, which was coded at 14 mentions. S31(N) in Group 5 commented: 'We discussed that Golding wanted to show that humanity consists of both good and evil, and that extreme conditions can bring forth the bad in people.' S4(UK) in Group 1 pointed out in the novel that characters represent different possibilities of action that are good or evil, and that if survival is threatened, evil takes over and dominates. This was countered by S1(N) student who stated:

Golding has said that basically human nature is evil inside but I don't agree with this yes though evil side attracts people more but basically human nature is peaceful it is our surroundings that teaches us whom to follow, good side or bad side. In our real life we are surrounded by many Jacks but it depends on ourselves whether we follow them or not.

S18 (UK) in Group 3 reported that the group had discussed how adults perceive that the inherent balance between good and bad in human nature, in children, might affect schooling: 'We also talked about whether we believe children are inherently "good" or "bad", and how this impacts on the freedoms we allow them, and the way our schooling system works.' By contrast, Group 2 discussed that they did not think that evil was

inherent. They observed: ‘In our group we discussed the stark contrast shown between civilization and savagery within the book. We noted how, as the boys became more violent and savage, they became less human than themselves becoming beasts.’ S29 (N) acknowledged how she related to this perceived duality inherent in human nature: ‘The book gives an impression of how humanity consists of both good and evil. I can in a way relate to the book because as a human I sometimes feel conflicted about how to act, feel and think.’

Competition as an inherent element to human nature was identified with five mentions. For example, S24(N) in Group 4 stated: ‘We discussed whether it is human nature to fight for power and kill, if even little boys do it when they get to start over, is then something that we cannot control?’ Jealousy was identified with four mentions, as S3(P) observed: ‘The jealousy of Jack shows how the jealous people around us try to find out chances in order to harm us.’

Theme 2: laws and rules

The second theme presented here is data that was coded for ways in which the participants expressed when perceived external control is needed to mitigate human nature and codify aspects of morality. Sixteen participants from all six groups talked about the necessity of well-functioning laws and rules for the wellbeing of society within a total of 21 mentions. The mentions suggest that the participants perceive the success of the society in relation to how well laws and rules are functioning. The students commented both on the content of the literary text as well as made comparisons to their own lives. The overriding sentiment seems to be that civilised societies have laws and rules and a majority of the students seemed to have an overall agreement about what civilised societies are.

The participants discussed how the novel emphasised the impact of societal rules on leaders and citizens in society. Seven mentions in four groups commented on the connection between laws and rules and the relationship between leaders and citizens in society, emphasising how everybody, both leaders and citizens, is equally responsible for its success. Most students articulated the importance of rules and laws in all societies in general, like S19 (UK): ‘We need rules to function in a society, and this book gives the reader a [sic.] understanding of what will happen ones [sic.] the rules disappear’. S37 (P) expressed the responsibility by all through this sentiment: ‘As far as we maintain the civilization we maintain the law and order in our lives but when we started to destroy it we harm our lives and peace.’

Other participants, three mentions by two groups, expressed that it is the responsibility of leaders to keep peace, though this can easily be distorted by poor leadership due to flaws in human nature, such as jealousy and envy, as demonstrated by Jack. S3(P) expresses: ‘When there is demise of laws and there are no limits the society becomes savagery as Jack breaks the laws and becomes an evident savage’ S3(P).

Connections to the bigger issues of democracy and civilisation of the novel had five mentions in three groups. For instance, S4 (UK) connected discipline to democracy and peace, arguing that without discipline by the leaders, society would become violent. S27 (N) expressed that ‘the book shows how important rules are to maintain social control and order’, thus emphasising the importance of rules and laws for all. Whereas S39 (UK)

commented on the powerful message of the novel on how democracy and civilisation enforces ‘order in our lives’, others commented on how the novel presents what might happen if rules are not maintained such as, ‘selfish, brutal way of behaving’ S15(N) or ‘we let “the beast” out’ S29(N).

Theme 3: connection to society

For this code, mentions were coded in which the participants responded to the novel linking aspects of the novel’s morality with what they perceived to be moral aspects of their own experience of society, and so perceived internal and external factors, which are static. Thirteen participants from all six groups addressed moral issues in the novel and their connection to society with, in total, 17 mentions. While talking about the novel’s connection to society, participants discussed concepts of good and evil. Although one of the participants talked explicitly about the concept of good, seven participants addressed evil in much more detail. As S9(P), from Group 2, said: ‘I think there are so many evil (sic) in our society which are hidden in the shape of cunning people, who always think for themselves.’ Another student, S30(N) from Group 5, said: ‘Golding wrote this book to show what people can do in hopeless situations, and that everyone has evil inside.’ S15(N) from the same group also states: ‘We think that Golding illustrates his own experience of the brutality in WWII, and shows how evil takes control in a society with a lack of rules.’

Participants also connected the power relations in the novel with the power relations they witnessed in their society. Some of them mentioned power in more general terms alongside other themes, such as S32(P) from Group 5, who stated: ‘This novel is totally related with today’s situation as jealousy, evil, good and power have been talked about in this novel.’ S33 (P) agreed with S32 (P) saying: ‘Golding wrote it in world war 2 but things he says are also there now in our society, evil, Jealousy and power.’ A couple of others from Group 1 and Group 2 referred to power more specifically. As S2(P) said: ‘We have also seen that might is always right. People prefer the person who has might. We have the rich people and all respect and bend down before them but none likes the poor.’ Two of the participants exchanged points about the importance of laws as shown in the novel, concluding that these were important to maintain law and order in society. While most participants connected the novel to present-day society, three participants made connections to historical events. As S18 (UK) from Group 3 writes:

We are invited to imagine what pathologies will arise, in the same way as we are invited to consider the fate of nations who went through the trauma of the second world war, a conflict which clearly informed this story.

Morality and ethics: moral lessons/moral developments/turning points

Although relatively small in number, the researchers observed that these extracts about moral lessons, developments and turning points differ from those identified in the first three themes, in that these seem to be moments of change within the novel, as opposed to the perceived static internal and external factors of the first three themes. A total of nine students from four groups (1,3, 4 and 6) talked about moral lessons, developments and turning points.

Four students in three of the groups formulated a moral lesson or message drawn from the novel. In the case of Group 1, this developed into a discussion after S1(N) expressed his view that ‘Simon is facing his fear when he tries to find the beast himself, which he considered as ‘a valuable lesson, where you do not get anywhere unless you face your fear’. S2(P) added that ‘no society will work effectively if it is built on fear and if no one has the guts to face it’, while Hakim reported that his literature circle had discussed the responsibility of the individual to strive towards improving her or his own environment: ‘The human being is responsible for every blessing or misery in his life, he is the one who is able to transform his surroundings into Heaven or Hell.’

Participants from three groups (1, 3 and 4) talked about the moral development of the characters in their group discussions in a total of five mentions, talking about how characters had turned from ‘innocence to savages’ or from ‘civility to savagery’. Group 1 talked about it more generally – ‘the development of the children, they go from being innocent, coming up with smart and strategic plans to stay alive, and later turn into savages that kill each other’ – while Group 3 and Group 4 mentioned specific events. S15 (N) from Group 3, for example, associates this change with the deaths of the characters of Simon and Piggy while S23(N) from Group 4 points out: ‘The breaking of the conch might represent the point of no return in the savagery of the boys.’

Two Norwegian students from Group 1 and Group 4 talked about specific moral turning points in the novel. S1(N) chose key moments in the moral trajectory of the novel’s two main characters. In Jack’s case, Chapter 6 when he chose hunting over being rescued. In Ralph’s case, Chapter 5 when he chose not to blow the conch, for fear that its authority would no longer be accepted. S23(N) also chose a moment involving the conch: the point in Chapter 11 at which it is shattered during Piggy’s murder. In addition, S23 (N) chose a scene where Simon faces ‘the beast’ alone and concludes that violence and savagery lie within the human heart. S4 (UK) in Group 1 and S17 (P) in Group 3 did not cite specific instances, but instead discussed the concept of moral turning points more generally. Two respondents – S9(P) from Group 2 and S34(UK) from Group 5 – offered personal responses to the moral turning points in the novel. S34(UK) said that she could ‘absolutely understand how Golding saw how people changed in different circumstances’. S9(P) gave a more dramatic response, suggesting that his encounter with the novel had proved a moral turning point in his own life. He noted, starkly: ‘I lost the faith in humanity while reading this book.’

Literary devices and aesthetic qualities (prompting moral responses)

Instances where the students’ moral responses were prompted openly by the aesthetic qualities of the novel were coded under this theme. Even if the students were not always directly aware that they were responding aesthetically, each group identified literary devices that triggered ethical readings and interpretations of the novel, with a total of 15 mentions. In all, of the six groups at least one group member presented an allegorical reading either of characters or the plot as a whole. (These allegorical readings were either based on the previous literature circle discussion or on personal interpretation). However, in three groups (3, 4, 6), literary devices that allow for more complex interpretations, such as symbols and metaphors, were also mentioned.

Members of several groups reported discussing ‘how different characters represent different morals, values and ideologies’ (S23 [N]), mainly focusing on Jack and Ralph. In Group 1, the online dialogue teased out a more nuanced reading after the initial one-to-one identification of the allegorical meaning of the characters. The participants ranged from ‘Jack represents evil’ and ‘Ralph has represented good’ (S3 [P]) to S4 (UK)’s comment that ‘[p]eople can be both good and evil under given circumstances’. The allegorical interpretations were also extended to the plot as a whole on several occasions, either evoking real historical events, such as ‘the brutality in WWII’ (S15[N]) or addressing more general societal issues, for instance, how ‘[w]eak people are often afraid to speak up their own meanings and thoughts, while the stronger people are allowed and actually stand up for what they think’ (S36[N]), or the universal battle between ‘good and evil’ (S32[P]).

As noted earlier, three of the groups identified symbols and metaphors in the novel, although not always providing a full discussion of these. These examples are not representative, but suggest a more complex interpretation and problematisation of the literary text. S15(N) in Group 3 reported that they ‘discussed what “The Lord of the Flies” is in the story. We think that it is a metaphor for evil or “the devil” in some way’. As an answer to him, S13(N) gave details of how in her literature circle they discussed ‘the pig’s head on a stick. Firstly considering the religious context of it being a symbol of the devil, second because of its connection to the title of the book.’ S38(P) provided her own interpretation of the ‘beast’ and the ‘Lord of the Flies’, according to which they symbolise ‘the fear or the demons inside every human, and in the end we see what can happen if the demons take over and the rest of our humanity dies out’.

Discussion

Our data analysis suggests that the students were not reluctant to utilise the technological affordances provided by Google Circles in order to create a virtual ‘public square’ through which to share their thoughts about moral issues raised in their reading of *Lord of the Flies*. Moreover, this experience gave them the opportunity to engage with ‘*conversational virtues*’ [original italics] which, Bakhurst argues, add ‘considerable value’ to the moral and educational development of young people (Bakhurst, 2018, p. 686). Finally, the ‘performative’ language (Arditi in Lane, 2013, p. xi) characteristic of public square discourse sanctioned the use of moral, philosophical and legal terminology, not only by the students who are native speakers of English, but also – and perhaps more pertinently – for those for whom it is an additional language.

It would be tempting to interpret the students’ observations that ‘everyone has evil inside’ or that ‘society’ contains ‘cunning people who always think [about] themselves’ as further evidence of what Miller calls the ‘political philosophy of lamentation’ which ‘places justice so far out of the reach of human beings that nothing we can practically achieve will bring us significantly closer to the cherished goal’ (Miller, 2013, pp. 228, 230). However, writing in defence of dystopian texts (such as *Lord of the Flies*), Sypnowich suggests that ‘at its best’, dystopia ‘reminds us of its opposite’ and thus keeps alive that key philosophical and ethical question ‘what is the good life?’ (Sypnowich, 2018, p. 673). It could be argued that each of those seemingly negative, even despairing, comments

from the students actually suggests an idealistic yearning for, and a capacity to imagine, a better world. It would be difficult to accuse the students of demonstrating either Mahon and O'Brien's 'cruelty of incuriosity' or Bosmajian's 'refusal to become aware'.

Despite such seemingly positive outcomes, however, our findings do not provide a ringing endorsement for those who suggest, as Mahon and O'Brien (2018), citing Richard Rorty, put it: 'moral judgements would be made with the help of proper names rather than general principles' (p. 699) – that '[l]iterature holds the potential to lead the insensitive and the superficial towards the responsive and the detailed' (p. 695). As we explored our findings, we were confronted by an increasingly awkward question: would the quality or content of our students' engagement with moral issues in *Lord of the Flies* have been any different if they had not been required to read the novel at all, but had simply been given a brief plot summary to work from? We touched on this issue in our previous paper (Varga et al., 2020) and need to revisit it in more detail here. 'The addressal structure of language', Williams writes, 'brings us to see that in language I am in the position of being in response' (Williams, 2018, p. 636). "[R]eading well", Nussbaum argues, requires an acute alertness to how a text attempts to shape that response: 'We should be aware at all times how our attention and desire are directed.' She goes further, suggesting that this 'precision of attention that makes for interest is itself a moral feature' (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 894).

For Rooney, an awareness of *textuality* is key to literary engagement: 'We lose the evidence of textuality', she writes, 'when we read past or around its effects, when we "read without seeing", as Derrida puts it' (Rooney, 2006, p. 2). As the relative paucity of references in the findings to what we have called the 'literary devices' of *Lord of the Flies* suggests, our students do indeed seem to have 'read past or round the text'. And in terms of *intertextuality* as well as textuality, they made no reference, for example, to the nineteenth-century novels of adventure – such as *The Swiss Family Robinson* or *The Coral Island* – which provide such an ironic framework for *Lord of the Flies*. Drawing upon the work of Leavis, Bell argues that 'an aesthetically attuned critique' is necessary if we are to convert literature's account of 'the lives of men and women on this planet' into 'wisdom' (Bell, 2018, p. 719). In *Lord of the Flies*, Piggy may well play the role of the Philosopher from Plato's *Republic*, but the reason why we engage with that possibility is because Golding has used aesthetic craft to make him vividly present in the reader's imagination – his short-sightedness, his asthma, his class background, his sadly old-before-his-time ways of speaking – all these details help not only to create a rich and nuanced hinterland to the novel but, also, as Schlant notes, remind us that: '[l]iterature uses words to strategize silences, to contour avoidances, to reveal unstated assumptions, to disclose what it wants to hide or deny' (Schlant, 1999, p. 9). To discuss the novel's characters as if they were no more than crude representations of particular human qualities, as in the extract 'Jack breaks the laws and becomes an evident savage' from the data, is to close down the rich interpretative possibilities of the text – what it chooses to say and what it chooses not to say – and to miss altogether, for example, its sophisticated exploration of English exceptionalism and the English class system.

In his sustained campaign against what he sees as an 'assassination attempt' upon authorial agency by 'Barthes and Foucault and others', Booth (2005, p. 75) has long argued that readers need to learn how to disentangle the 'flesh and blood person' who actually writes the text from the 'implied author' and the 'narrative voice' – a narrative

voice which may have been created deliberately as ‘partially or totally unreliable’ (Booth, 2005, p. 75). *Findings* comments such as, ‘Golding has said that basically human nature is evil inside’, suggest that our students found it difficult to make these distinctions or – *pace* the occasional ‘I disagree’ – to question the ideology underpinning the narrative. The students’ apparent willingness to accept language at face value recalls Doyle’s concern lest the post-postmodernist turn towards ‘the New Sincerity’ lead to ‘a suspension of cynicism and introspective rationalization of any kind, and therefore a complete surrender to blind trust’ (Doyle, 2018, pp. 259–260).

Conclusion

Where is the teacher of literature in all this? There seem to be two polarised positions. At one extreme lies Gearon, who would champion the autonomy of the reader against imposed readings – particularly imposed readings sanctioned by the state. ‘The books teach themselves,’ Gearon writes. ‘The instructor can only seek to be a means by which the authors teach the course’ (Gearon, 2018, p. 207). At the other extreme is Choo. She appears to follow Gearon in that she criticises what she calls a ‘didactic ethical criticism’ which ‘centers on evaluating a literary text based on state or societally endorsed moral principles’ – then, ironically, proposes a countervailing ‘cosmopolitan ethical criticism’ which is equally prescriptive and, which, by seeking to ‘anchor literature units [sic] not around genre or stylistic features but around ethical questions’ (Choo, 2017, pp. 342, 345), threatens to reduce a literary text to nothing more than a starting point for the discussion of *issues*. Our students seem to have opted for Choo’s approach. As teachers of literature, we find both Gearon’s and Choo’s positions problematic. There were many occasions during the project when we would have wished to intervene – to open up our students’ discussions so that they became more than merely an exchange of unchallenged statements about morality, to encourage them to explore the aesthetic riches of the text. If anything, this project has affirmed our belief that teachers have an important role to play in helping their students develop and refine their capacity for sophisticated textual engagement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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