Agonism in a Classroom Discussion on Strindberg’s Miss Julie

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Abstract
In many parts of the world, researchers and policymakers alike report possible threats to democracy and its institutions. Accounts in the media of hatred and threats aimed at people taking part in public discourse, and of a polarized political debate, raise general questions about the current state and future of democratic dialogue and processes. Solutions are sought, by both research and policy, in the educational context. Some researchers have turned to the agonistic theory proposed by Chantal Mouffe, highlighting the democratic role of conflict and dissent. Empirical research on agonism in education is, however, scarce. In this article, we explore agonistic democratic theory in educational practice, more precisely in a conversation about a literary classic in an upper-secondary Swedish L1 classroom. Based on the analysis of data generated through a teacher-researcher collaboration, we propose six didactic conditions that are fruitful for what we call agonistic literary discussions. Contributing to the debate on how education could meet a possible threat to democracy, we argue that an agonistic approach is a productive path. This approach views democracy as an ongoing process, and it views the classroom as a place where the meaning of democracy can be negotiated.

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Introduction

In many parts of the world, researchers and policymakers alike report possible threats to democracy and its institutions, and Sweden is no exception (Bladini, 2017; Swedish Government, 2018). Accounts in national media of hatred and threats aimed at people taking part in public discourse, and of a polarized political debate (Radio Sweden, 2020, 2021), raise general questions about the current state and future of democratic dialogue and processes. The conversation on how the arena of public political discourse can become one in which opponents fight respectfully as adversaries, rather than as enemies, as stated by Mouffe (2013a), is thus of great societal importance.

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Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the teacher and students for their warm welcome and for their wisdom.
Solutions are sought, by both research and policy, in the educational context. Preserving democracy is an objective of the Swedish national school system (National Agency for Education, 2013, p. 4), but how this is to be done in practice is a debated subject. Some researchers have turned to the agonistic theory proposed by Mouffe, promoting education of political adversaries (Ruitenberg, 2009). Studies on agonism in education are, however, still largely theoretical (Koutsouris et al., 2022; Sant, 2019). When they concern subject specific didactics, they are most often focused on social sciences education (Ruitenberg, 2009; Tryggvason, 2018b). A few studies explore agonistic elements in classroom conversation (Hultin, 2011; Roucou, 2022; Skregelid, 2021), but empirical research is scarce. In this article, we aim to explore agonistic democratic theory in educational practice, more precisely, in a conversation about a literary classic in an upper secondary Swedish L1 classroom.

An Agonistic Point of Departure

The Mouffean definition of the problems surrounding the current state of democracy takes its starting point in what she calls an “ethical turn,” or “the current displacement of the political by the ethical” (Mouffe, 2013a, p. 15–16). A foundational building block in Mouffe’s agonism is the idea that the political is concerned with collective identity formation, and that identity formation is dependent on difference. With Jacques Derrida, via Henry Staten, Mouffe argues that for individual as well as collective identities, a “constitutive outside” is required in order for an identity to be established (Mouffe, 2013a, p. 4). No “I” can come into being if there is not something else, something that is not “I.” Consequently, there can never be a “we” without a “they”—the constitutive outside is a requirement for the “we” to exist. Mouffe thereby turns against a Western, liberal democratic, striving toward an all-encompassing “we,” which she argues is hegemonic and disregards power relations and the antagonism that is built into democracy. The concern is not the we/they oppositions in themselves, or polarization, as it were, but the ways in which oppositions are allowed to be articulated. She issues a warning that if these collective identities cannot be established politically as multiple, struggling democratic alternatives, there is the risk that they will manifest themselves in other ways:

When the agonistic dynamics of pluralism are hindered because of a lack of democratic forms of identifications, then passions cannot be given a democratic outlet. The ground is therefore laid for various forms of politics articulated around essentialist identities of a nationalist, religious or ethnic type, and for the multiplication of confrontations over non-negotiable moral values, with all the manifestations of violence that such confrontations entail (Mouffe, 2013a, p. 8).

The “displacement of the political by the ethical,” which she claims is the state of many Western, liberal democracies today, thus renders democratic discussion impossible, because the discussion has come to concern moral values rather than political ones. If democracy is defined as entailing only one hegemonic (morally superior, thus democratic) “we,” it follows that the opposition is constituted as a moral (undemocratic) enemy, rather than a political adversary. Still, it is important to note that an agonistic political approach is not one completely without a consensus. On the contrary, consensus is necessary, as something around which a collective identity can be established. Consensus is also necessary around the values of “liberty and equality for all” (Mouffe, 2013a, p. 7). Nevertheless, consensus is always in the company of dissent, and therefore always a “conflictual consensus” (Mouffe, 2013a, p. 8).

Traditions in Democratic Education

In Beyond learning: Democratic education for a human future, Biesta (2006) proposes two ways of viewing democratic education: education for democracy and education through democracy. Education for democracy, according to Biesta, is the most common view of the relationship between democracy and education—the view that education prepares students for future participation in a democratic society. Education through democracy can also be understood as a way of educating for democracy, but through allowing the educational environment to become a democratic arena in itself.

Striving for a democratic classroom means approaching democratic education not as the acquisition of skills but as democratic engagement. It also means approaching democracy not as a fixed concept but as a concept open for negotiation. Learning, in this context, “is not about the acquisition of knowledge, skills, competencies or dispositions but has to do with an ‘exposure’ to and engagement with the experiment of democracy” (Biesta, 2011, p. 152). It is not about learning of democracy or learning merely for future democratic participation. Rather, it is about taking part in the ongoing process that is democracy.

Hultin (2007) states that there have been two dominating didactic propositions in Swedish democratic education: the dialogic classroom (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2008; Dysthe, 1996; Nystränd & Gamoran, 1991) and the deliberative tradition (e.g. Englund, 2000; Samuelsson, 2018). Both alternatives are examples of what Biesta terms education through democracy, and both have been proposed by researchers and promoted in policy documents from the Swedish National Agency for Education. The deliberative tradition, with its Habermasian roots, focuses in short on reaching a consensus around the rationally best alternative through deliberation. The dialogic classroom is rooted in Bakhtinian dialogism and accentuates that a multitude of voices must be heard in the classroom (Hultin, 2007). In recent years, a third proposal has been articulated, an agonistic approach to democratic citizenship education (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017; Ruitenberg, 2009; Snir, 2017; Todd, 2009, 2011; Tryggvason, 2017, 2019). Often, these proposals stem from theories presented by Mouffe (2013a), and they shed light on the democratic struggle. This approach has largely been formulated in opposition to the rational, deliberative democratic ideal (Ruitenberg, 2009; Tryggvason, 2018a). As mentioned, the agonistic democratic struggle is a struggle between adversaries. Mouffe (2013a) describes the adversary as “the opponent with whom one shares a common allegiance to the democratic principles of ‘liberty and equality
In Mouffe's view, it is central that definitions of liberty and equality are up for debate. She contrasts her definition of the adversary with what she calls a liberal use of the term, simply meaning "competitor" (2013b, p. 186); moreover, she criticizes this liberal definition for disregarding hegemonic power relations. Bringing Mouffean agonism to the micro-level of a classroom discussion, it is therefore important to bear in mind the power relations in the classroom. Equally important is acknowledging the conflict, in which opponents are granted the opportunity to position themselves in relation to each other.

Ruitenberg (2009), among others, has proposed that this conflict should be transferred into the classroom, educating political adversaries. The study on which this article is based is an attempt to offer students the opportunity to take a stand and to fight for their views, in an environment in which the others' opinions are still respected.

We have studied a literary classroom discussion in which students acted as adversaries, that is, in which disagreements about the interpretations of, and opinions about, the literary text were not rationally resolved. The educational goal in these discussions is not that students finally agree on the best alternative. Similarly, the goal is not merely that different opinions are allowed to be heard. The agonistic struggle between adversaries, in which students claim priority for their opinion, is, in itself, an educational goal.

**Toward a Literature Education as Democratic Education**

This article addresses two research fields: the field of democracy and education and the field of literature education. We draw on proposals for agonistic democratic education as well as on research arguing for the democratic possibilities of literature education.

Our contribution to the field of democracy and education is an empirical example of agonistic democratic education in practice. To the field of literature education, we contribute an agonistic approach to the classroom conversation about fiction, adding to the strand of research arguing that fiction has characteristics that make it fruitful for democratic education.

Studies in the field of agonistic democratic education have in common a focus on philosophy of education; they rarely propose policy changes (Sant, 2019), and they rarely investigate implications of agonistic democratic education in practice. The subject of social sciences is most commonly discussed (Ruitenberg, 2009; Tryggvason, 2018b); the focus is seldom on language and literature. The study presented here is an attempt to operationalize theories of agonistic democratic education within the subject of Swedish, through literature education. The research presented in this section is Scandinavian, mostly Swedish, with some exceptions in the specific field of agonistic democratic education.

**Agonistic Democratic Education**

Within the field of democracy and education, there is an ongoing debate between proponents of deliberative democratic education, on the one hand (Englund, 2019; Samuelsson, 2018), and those who criticize this tradition and call for an agonistic approach, on the other (Ruitenberg, 2009; Tryggvason, 2018a). Ruitenberg (2009) calls her agonistic approach "radical democratic citizenship education," which refers to education aiming to educate political adversaries (p. 270). In her call for radical democratic citizenship education, Ruitenberg problematizes the deliberative tradition of citizenship education, as noted above, which she argues strives to eradicate conflict (p. 272). Englund (2019), however, sees the risk that agonistic democratic education might shift focus from the issue at hand to the question of identity. In addition, he sees the risk that a focus on the struggle might create or escalate personal student conflicts, resulting in an uncomfortable environment for students. He suggests that agonism could be seen as a step on the way toward a deliberative ideal (p. 49). Lo (2017) offers a partly similar solution but from an agonistic theoretical standpoint, proposing agonistic deliberation. Tryggvason (2018a) defends the agonistic approach, arguing that two false assumptions underlie the concern that the issue, in itself, might be replaced by identity in agonistic democratic education. The first assumption is that a focus on student identities significantly differs from a focus on the issue itself, and the second assumption is that essentialist identities are embraced by agonism (p. 4). He turns to Mouffe to show that they are not; on the contrary, collective identities based on essentialist traits are considered problematic, which we have shown previously. Tryggvason's conclusion is instead that

*the main difference between the deliberative approach and the agonistic approach is not whether the political issue or political identity should be in focus but whether a relation between identities and political issues should be taken into account in citizenship education.* (p. 5)

This means acknowledging and paying attention to identity formation regarding power relations in the classroom. In order to avoid creating conflicts that might be problematic for students' everyday lives in school, Tryggvason (2019) suggests viewing the classroom as a hegemonic struggle, in which the teacher, at the end of the discussion, acknowledges a winning side, for the sake of closure. The winning argument would then be seen as hegemonic, albeit temporarily, always in competition with other alternatives seeking hegemonic status.

**Literature and Democratic Education**

The role of literature in democratic citizenship education is promoted in several studies. In a Swedish context, Molloy (2002) has been highly influential, arguing for Swedish as a subject for democratic education, "constructed and shaped around the students' questions about the society in which they live and whose values they may or may not share" (p. 338). In this democratic Swedish subject, literature plays a central role.

Asplund (2010) views the reading of fiction, in combination with the conversation about fiction, as an act of identity formation.
Based on a study of male students in group discussions without teacher participation, he concludes, among other things, that the students strive for consensus in their discussions and that this is part of their intersectional formation of gender and class identity. Another influential Swedish study is Alkestrand’s (2016) dissertation. She takes the fundamental values of the Swedish curricula for primary and secondary schools as her starting point, when arguing that fantasy literature presents particularly good opportunities for discussing democratic values. The idea that literature has the potential for democratic fostering is also illuminated by Borsgård (2021). He argues that on a transnational European Union policy level, creative elements and democratic education are downplayed in favor of entrepreneurship. Analyzing discourses on democratic education on a national level using Biesta’s concepts of socialization and subjectification, he points out that theories on literature and democratic education tend to view democracy in ethical rather than political terms, treating democracy as a finished project for students to be socialized into, rather than as a process of subjectification (p. 225).

While several studies have argued for the possibilities of agonistic democratic theory in education (Lo, 2017; Ruitenber, 2009; Tryggvason, 2017, 2018a, 2019), and several studies have argued for the potential of literature in democratic citizenship education (Alkestrand, 2016; Molloy, 2002), few studies, in Scandinavian or other contexts, have explored agonism empirically in a classroom environment (see Roucau, 2022, for an empirical study). Furthermore, agonism has not often been discussed in relation to literature education, and it has rarely been tried in design studies (cf. Skregelid, 2021, for agonism in art education).

The Design of the Study

This study explores the democratic conflict in the literature classroom, through teacher-researcher collaboration. The methodological starting point is Biesta’s (2010) transactional epistemological position, from which we conduct value-based rather than evidence-based educational research. This means that we take an interest in what is possible and educationally desirable in the practice. It also means that we consider the notion of evidence problematic in an educational context; we present our analysis without the assumption that any educational situation is replicable. In other words, we explore actions in practice and analyze their consequences in light of desirable values of education, in this case, agonistic democratic values. Education without desirable values, Biesta argues, would be meaningless. This approach opens up for teaching designs in which a desired educational situation is explored. In this study, the teacher and researchers designed the teaching in collaboration.

The study was conducted in a class at the Social Science Programme in a Swedish public upper secondary school. The school is located in a midsize municipality in the vicinity of the capital and has around 1,000 students. At this school, one teacher of the Swedish language, who showed an interest in democratic citizenship education, was chosen to participate in the study. The teacher has eight years of teaching experience and has taught this group of students for two years. At her suggestion, the study was conducted on her teaching of the August Strindberg play Miss Julie (1965) in the course Swedish 3 (year 12). Miss Julie is considered a Swedish classic, originally published in the late 19th century and set on Midsummer Eve in the kitchen of a count’s estate. This kitchen becomes the scene of a power struggle between Julie, daughter of the count, and Jean, his servant, who both, for different reasons, feel trapped in the confines of their birth. A constant presence, partly visible, partly not, is Jean’s fiancée, Kristin, who cooks for Julie. The hope was that the main characters of Miss Julie, and the ambiguity that the text invites the reader to feel toward them, would make this drama fruitful as a topic for agonistic discussion.

In focus group interviews, students described the class, on the whole, as willing and eager to discuss various matters. At an early stage of the study, the researcher (Tysklind) and the teacher met informally to discuss agonistic theory and its possible implications for democratic citizenship education. Through this collaboration, the teaching was designed in a way that was thought to open up possibilities for agonistic struggle in the classroom when working with the text. In particular, this meant paying attention to collective identity formation around shared opinions, and to both consensus and dissent. The explicit goal was that the teaching of Miss Julie should give the students the opportunity to position themselves in relation to the text, to each other (individually and collectively), and to their teacher. Teacher-researcher discussions about the design of the teaching continued throughout the period of data collection.

The analytical framework used in this article is a continuation of one previously developed by Hultin (2011). This framework is based on an analysis of empirical data consisting of a literary discussion between students. Constructing the framework, Hultin explored agonistic elements in this literary discussion and the conditions that made these elements possible. The framework was not considered during the design of the teaching in the present study but applied later as an analytical tool. It comprises five didactic conditions for agonistic literary discussions. One condition is the teacher’s sharing power with the students. In an agonistic literary discussion, the preferential right of interpretation does not belong to the teacher. A second condition is an openness to different ways of participation and positioning, in terms not only of speaker and listener positions but also in relation to the text. A third condition is an openness to variations in the students’ language usage. If the discussion is to take on agonistic qualities, Hultin has argued that students must be allowed to address the text in their own vernacular. A fourth condition is voluntariness; in order for a discussion to be democratic, participation needs to be optional. As is the case for democratic participation at large, the decision not to take part must be respected. A fifth and final condition, identified by Hultin, is time and space for thinking. This could, for example, be offered by journal writing.

We combine Hultin’s framework with five recommendations for agonistic democratic education, drawn up by Sant (2019) in a review of research on democratic education. The first recommendation is that a space should be created that opens up for dissent.
Second is the opportunity for students to explore their unique voices and participate on equal terms. Third, is the education of political adversaries, who become opponents rather than enemies. Fourth is viewing education as a place of constant construction and reconstruction of the meaning of democracy. Finally, the fifth recommendation is paying attention to what Ruitenberg (2009) calls political emotions. The first four of these recommendations are considered in our development of Hultin’s framework, while political emotions remain a topic for further empirical investigation.

We analyze our data against the backdrop of the framework, aiming to (1) try out the categories and (2) adjust the framework, taking into consideration our data, Sant’s theoretical review, and agonistic theory. The data consist of field notes from the teacher-researcher meetings and from two classroom observations; video and sound recordings of one lesson, in which students discussed the text in four groups of five and in the whole class; sound recordings of two focus group interviews, with five students each; and a sound recording of one teacher interview. The recorded materials were transcribed verbatim. At the video-recorded lesson, twenty students participated, all of whom had given their written consent to take part in the study. The interviews were conducted after the video-recorded lesson. The design of the study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

The analytical process comprises a movement between video recordings, transcriptions, theory, and Hultin’s framework. First, the video recordings and transcriptions were scanned for moments of agonistic struggle, with a particular focus on the latter part of the discussion, which took place in the classroom and involved the whole class (the lesson is described in more detail below). Thereafter, the framework was applied, and the data were revisited with the aim of trying out its categories. Finally, the framework was adjusted, based on our data, on Mouffe’s theories (2013a), and on Sant’s review (2019).

Didactic Conditions for Agonistic Literature Discussions

We explore the use of Hultin’s (2011) framework on the empirical data and show agonistic qualities in the students’ discussions. In the presentation, Hultin’s didactic conditions are grouped together by their visibility in the presented excerpts from the classroom discussion. Based on the analysis described previously, we have added two didactic conditions for agonistic literature discussion to the framework.

Power, Positions, and Language

The video-recorded lesson begins with a collective recapitulation of the literary text. After this, the students discuss the play in relation to two overarching questions. The first question concerns the characters; the students are asked to discuss in groups which characters they sympathize with. The second question concerns four themes prescribed by the teacher and researchers in collaboration. The themes are class, gender, power, and reputation. In their groups, the students are asked to discuss what they see as the main theme of the text. Before the students start their group discussions, the teacher summarizes the assignment in the following way:

Teacher: The larger question is, the idea is that you in your group come to an agreement, you can disagree, but try to come to some sort of majority decision, around which of these four readings is the most reasonable, which is your reading? Then the question is also, do you have sympathies for any of these people? And who, and why in that case? I can reveal that my sympathies have changed, the older I get.¹

The teacher thus asks the students to strive for consensus in their small groups, while opening up for dissent, or in the words of Mouffe (2013a), for conflictual consensus. In her last remark, where she does not reveal her own sympathies but instead discloses the fickleness of her viewpoint, she opens the discussion up for several possible standpoints. After the group talks, students are asked to share their collective standpoint with the whole class. The purpose of this design is to open up for possible collective identities to be formed around shared opinions and dissent respectively, thus, to turn the classroom into an arena of agonistic struggle.

The first condition of the framework, the teacher’s sharing power, can be seen in the teacher’s instructions, as stated previously. As the teacher asks the students to consider if they sympathize with any of the characters in the play, she reveals that her own “sympathies have changed” over time. This she does without revealing where they currently lie or have previously lain. As the class scatters for group discussions, they do so without any notion of the teacher’s opinions on the matters of discussion. Furthermore, as will be seen in the following transcripts, the teacher’s role in the discussion is as often that of a listener as it is that of a speaker.

The second condition, namely that of openness in terms of student positions, mainly denotes participation in the discussion and taking different analytical positions in relation to the text in Hultin’s framework. Drawing on Mouffe (2013a) and Sant (2019), we also view positions in the sense of students taking a stance and thus positioning themselves against each other. Examples of both this condition, and the third condition of openness to variations in language usage, can be seen in the following excerpts. One group of five students—Silje, Ellen, Amanda, My, and Maja (all names are pseudonyms)—present their collective view, which is that they sympathize with the character Julie. Ellen presents the following argument²:

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¹ All transcripts are translated from the Swedish original. Transcription key:

= immediate continuation
– cut-off or self-interruption
[ ] analyst description or comment

² Ellen here refers mainly to two passages in the play. Firstly, she refers to a story that Jean’s fiancée, Kristin, tells Jean, about how Julie made her ex-fiancée jump over a horse whip as a display of power. Secondly, she refers to Julie’s altered behavior after she slept with Jean.
Ellen: Yeah but you can, well, you feel sorry for Julie. She is confused and she just wants to be, to show that she is rough and tough on the outside and let the guy jump over the whip and then when, Jean gets in her panties she becomes soft like a sponge and that, hmm, I just feel sorry for her.

In the group discussion prior to this, Ellen made the same argument, talking about this as a relatable experience. However, as it turns out, the group is not in agreement. As Amanda reveals that their sympathies for Julie have changed in the process of reading the book, Maja openly disagrees.

Amanda: But it's also like, none of us felt any sympathy for Julie in the beginning=
Teacher: Mhm.
Amanda: =we just thought she was such a fucking pain. And then that changes sort of really quickly and fast, quickly, fast.
Maja: No.
Ellen: Yes.
Maja: No I really don't feel any sympathy for her. She is so--
Amanda: Don't you even after?
My: But she was tricked Maja!
Maja: No she is so annoying.
Ellen: Okay. Okay you leave the group then.
[Laughter]
Amanda: Yeah totally.
Maja: [Laughter] Yeah [inaudible].

From an agonistic point of view, several interesting things happen in this short excerpt from the discussion. First, it is clear that Maja does not hesitate to disagree with her own group. It is a position that she is comfortable taking. Second, Maja's disagreement disrupts the collective identity of the group. Ellen and Amanda ask her to leave the group, albeit jokingly.

Maja does not leave the group; instead, Amanda, referring to peer pressure, proposes that they change their opinion and sympathize with the other main character, Jean. This is not well received by Felicia, who belongs to a different group, and Felicia is supported by Fanny from her own group, and Silje from the previously mentioned group. Felicia raises her hand, and the teacher asks her to speak:

Felicia: Why, why Jean?
Silje: Yeah, I'm wondering about that too.
[Laughter]
Felicia: I mean, he's an asshat who only wants power.
Amanda: Yeah that's exactly why, there's something wrong.
Ellen: I think I speak for everyone in saying that there's some, there's something wrong with him, you feel sorry for him.

Teacher: But, so you mean that sympathies come from feeling sorry for these people?
Ellen: Yes.
Amanda: What are they otherwise based on?
Teacher: That they are nice?
Ellen: No.
Amanda: Hmm, I see what you mean.
Teacher: That you want to be friends?
Fanny: I mean he's not nice, come on.
Amanda: Well he was--
My: But he's never been nice, I don't think.
Silje: Then it's Kristin for my part.
Fanny: He's a liar and a user, how is he nice?
Esra: Well, one of them is fucking arrogant and the other one is totally manipulative.
Teacher: Okay, so he's a liar and arrogant and an asshat.
Esra: No no no I mean Julie is arrogant.

In terms of openness to different positions, here we see examples of students who question other students' positions (Felicia and Fanny) and students who adjust their views slightly (Amanda and Silje). We also see how one student (Silje) sides with students from another group to question her own group's new decision (made by Amanda and partly by Ellen), that is, they sympathize with Jean.

Moreover, in the previous two excerpts, we can see how the teacher's actions open up the possibility for students to address the play in their own vernacular. Amanda talks about Julie as “a fucking pain,” Maja calls her “so annoying,” Felicia calls Jean an “asshat” and Fanny calls him “a liar and a user.” Finally, Esra, who belongs to a third group, voices the opinion that sympathizing with either of the two main characters is difficult, saying that “one of them is fucking arrogant and the other one is totally manipulative.” The teacher briefly misunderstands her, but Esra clears up the misunderstanding. Her doing so shows that correcting the teacher is an act that is approved of in this classroom. In spite of this misunderstanding, the teacher's summary of this part of the discussion, describing Jean as “a liar and arrogant and an asshat,” legitimizes the students’ vernacular as an appropriate way to analyze literature in this classroom. The importance of creating a classroom that is safe for dissent and in which students are encouraged to “articulate themselves with others” is pointed out in Sant’s (2019) review of research on agonistic democratic education (pp. 678–679). Here, we see that students take different positions in the ongoing power struggle. When the teacher wants to widen the definition of sympathizing with a character, from feeling pity to liking characters for other reasons, Silje is content with concluding that for her part, Kristin is most worthy of sympathy. Felicia and Fanny instead confront Amanda and Ellen, questioning the idea that Jean is a character that is worth anyone’s sympathies. In this power struggle, the students’ ways of positioning themselves become part of emergent identity formations, individual and collective, based on opinions about the literary text. Openness to different student positions and to different ways of participation allows for the discussion to take on agonistic qualities.
**Voluntariness and Space for Thinking**

Nearing the end of the lesson, which also means nearing lunchtime, the fourth condition of the framework becomes visible in the data. The teacher asks the students to imagine Julie and Jean in a modern setting. She asks how they think the story would play out today, exemplifying with a young man from a poor Stockholm neighborhood falling in love with the daughter of his parents’ employer. In her scenario, his parents’ employer is white and upper middle-class and lives in a wealthy Stockholm neighborhood. Some students start speculating about how their own parents would react in that situation. To begin with, Amanda is one of them, but she abandons her speculations and withdraws from the discussion:

**AMANDA:** I feel like I’m having real trouble having an opinion right now.
**TEACHER:** Yeah I get that, you want food.
**AMANDA:** Yes, that too [laughter], but I feel like I’m sort of floating around everywhere.
**TEACHER:** Yes. That’s allowed.

The reluctance to talk about this issue, expressed here by Amanda, is approved by the teacher. The teacher thus shows that the act of not taking a stand is valid in this discussion; that is, participation is voluntary.

The fifth condition, space and time for thinking, is exemplified in Hultin’s (2011) framework by journal writing. This is something that students in this study bring up as a less preferable way of approaching literature in school. When asked in the focus group interview what they would change in the design of the teaching if they could be in charge, Silje stated that this had been “a lot more fun than writing journals.” In the interview, Gustav, who will be heard in the upcoming section, together with Silje, Maja, and My, described the collective recapitulation that started the lesson as important for their processing of the text. They agreed the text is a difficult read but stated that the recapitulation made them realize they had understood more than they thought. Gustav summarized by describing this as a “puzzle in the brain.” Thus, in this case, space for collective thinking was valued higher by the students than space for individual reflection.

**Collective Identities and Conflictual Consensus**

We extend the framework by adding two didactic conditions for agonistic democratic literature discussions: collective identities and conflictual consensus. The first, collective identities, is the opportunity for students to form liaisons based on shared opinions. In the excerpts here, displaying one struggle over sympathies for Julie and one struggle over sympathies for Jean, students act as adversaries. It is clear in the discussion about which characters the groups sympathize with, that the identity of Maja’s group is shaped by their shared sympathies for Julie. When this opinion turns out not to be shared by Maja, Ellen and Amanda ask her to leave the group. When she does not change her mind, Amanda proposes that the group change their view. Mouffe (2013a) argues that a lack of democratic forms of collective identification leads to political identities being shaped around essentialist qualities (2013a). Here, we see an example of how collective identification can play a role in literature education. We see that the teaching has opened up for the negotiation of an emergent collective identity, taking place in a state of conflictual consensus.

The second didactic condition for agonistic democratic literature discussions that we wish to add is what we, with Mouffe, call conflictual consensus. The recorded lesson ends in dissent. Earlier, as the class talked about the importance of reputation in the text and in the students’ own lives, the teacher asked the students whether they think reputation plays an important role in general, in life. With a show of hands, the students were asked to take a stand. Gustav is one of the students who argued for the significance of a good reputation. Ellen argued the opposite. The lesson ends in the following way:

**TEACHER:** Hey guys, does anyone want to say something, a closing statement?

[Laughter]

**TEACHER:** About this, what we’ve talked about.

[Laughter]

**GUSTAV:** I don’t care what you think, reputation is super important.
**TEACHER:** Gustav says, hell, that’ll be the closing statement, reputation is super important.

**AMANDA:** Curtain!
**TEACHER:** Curtain.
**ELLEN:** No!

Gustav takes the opportunity to get the last word, and the teacher affirms his statement. Ellen, however, makes it clear that the statement is contested. The following collective laughter indicates that the conflict is of a friendly nature. The lesson thereby ends in conflictual consensus. Two competing alternatives are clearly visible, and the students fight respectfully as adversaries.

**Discussion**

Applying Hultin’s (2011) framework to this context, we find four of its five didactic conditions for agonistic literature discussions. Sharing power with students, openness to different ways of participation and positioning, openness to students using their own vernacular, and voluntariness are all visible in this discussion. Space for thinking, in the sense it has previously been discussed by Hultin, is not granted here; the teaching was not designed to offer such space. It was, however, designed to offer opportunities for the formation of collective identities around shared opinions. The design of the teaching also aimed to highlight the democratic conflict in the classroom discussion, through encouraging conflictual consensus.

We view conflictual consensus in light of the debate between proponents of deliberative democratic education and those who
advocate for agonistic democratic education. In response to Samuelsson’s (2018) defense of the deliberative concept of consensus in democratic education, Tryggvason (2019) suggests that classroom discussions could end in the acknowledgment of a temporary hegemonic view, for the sake of closure—avoiding potentially problematic student conflicts. Our use of conflictual consensus has a similar goal, which is to steer toward a state of conflictual struggle that is not destructive. We do acknowledge that conflicts between students could potentially be problematic, and we argue that balancing student disagreement is a matter of teacher judgment (cf. Biesta, 2015). In terms of concrete teaching, knowledge of what conflicts could be fruitful rather than harmful in each specific classroom is situational. Whether or not a classroom discussion has closure may be one factor in tipping the scale from harmful conflict to agonistic struggle. Recognizing preexisting power relations may be another. The notion of conflictual consensus illustrates the educational goal of a classroom in peaceful struggle, and a condition that could facilitate this struggle.

Similarly, we see the opportunity to form liaisons around shared opinions as a didactic condition. If the classroom can become a space in which collective identities emerge in relation to opposing opinions, this can be a way of understanding the role of identity in power relations and democratic education. It is, consequently, a way of treating democracy as a project under construction, in the classroom discussion (cf. Biesta, 2011; Borsgård, 2021). Therefore, we view the possibility of forming collective identities around the literary text as a didactic condition for agonistic literature discussions.

There are limits to our methodological approach, in terms of making power relations visible—between students and between students and the teacher. We argue that the teacher shares the power over the discussion with students, but we cannot, in this analysis, grasp power relations between students outside the scope of this single teaching situation. This is an issue worth exploring in future studies (cf. Öhman & Öhman, 2013; see also Johansson & Emilson, 2016 for an exploration of power relations in an early childhood education setting). So is the role of the literary text, which is another matter in which this analysis has its limitations. We conclude that Miss Julie seems to have qualities that make it fruitful as a topic for agonistic discussion, or at least that made it fruitful in this context. What these qualities are more precisely remains a topic for further investigation. Moreover, the role of emotion, though central in calls for agonistic democratic education (Sant, 2019; cf. Ruitenber, 2009; Sætra, 2021; Tryggvason, 2017), falls outside the scope of this analysis.

Finally, our hope is that the didactic conditions outlined here can serve as a guide for teachers interested in democratic education. We argue that literature discussions have the potential to take on agonistic qualities, and that some conditions are more fruitful than others. What we call didactic conditions for agonistic literature discussions are suggestions that could facilitate agonistic classroom discussions on literature.

Conclusion

We started with concern that democracy is under threat. Contributing to the debate on how education is to meet this possible threat, we argue that an agonistic approach, in which the conflict is highlighted, might be a productive path. This path leads us away from viewing conflict as the main democratic threat, and instead emphasizes and embraces the inescapable role of conflict in a thriving democracy. The literary discussion referred to in this article is an attempt to invite teachers and students to stay in this conflict, in a state of conflictual consensus, as adversaries. Normalizing conflictual consensus could, in consequence, be one way to stave off violent polarization. This approach views democracy as an ongoing process, rather than a finished project that students are to be socialized into (cf. Biesta, 2011; Borsgård, 2021); it views the classroom as a place where the meaning of democracy can be negotiated. The purpose of education in this context is then not to preserve democracy but to take part in its never-ending development.

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