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## Axiological constellations in literary response writing: Critical SFL praxis in an ELA classroom

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### ABSTRACT

To engage in critical praxis, teachers of literary response writing need concepts and methods for understanding the efficacy of teaching practices in helping students develop particular dispositions towards texts and the social issues they represent. In this article, the author uses concepts from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to reveal the value positions constructed by 8<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts (ELA) students in essays produced in a critical literary analysis unit. After reading excerpts from two *Harry Potter* novels, students compared the main characters' views on elvish enslavement as evidenced by the passages. This study uses axiological constellation analysis to explore the language choices in essays that constructed contrasting stances towards Harry's character and the representation of elvish enslavement in the texts. The study contributes to understanding how values are constructed in literary response writing and how these relate to broader sociopolitical discourses, with implications for critical praxis in subject English education.

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Dominant discourses in the southeastern United States tend to rationalize the historical enslavement of African Americans and downplay the lasting injustices that are its legacy. These discourses are visible in local monuments that memorialize enslavers and segregationists from history. For example, the name of the school in which this study takes place is a tribute to a Senator who obstructed national civil rights legislation for decades. As a response to this endemic rationalization of slavery in this context, this case study describes student writing from a curricular unit that introduced students in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts classroom to concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a means for critically analyzing two passages from the *Harry Potter* novel series. The classroom analysis of the texts was based on Simmons' (2012, 2016) model of critical literary analysis, which highlighted the problematic ways that the text normalizes Harry's role in and attitude towards elvish enslavement. The unit sought to help students critique the representation of enslavement in the two *Harry Potter* passages as a means for disrupting dominant discourses around related issues in our social and historical context.

To investigate ways that students negotiated this critical stance towards the representation of enslavement in the literary texts, Doran's (2020) method of axiological constellation

analysis was used to analyze the value positions constructed in the student writing. Analyzing the axiological constellations, or networks of value-laden meanings, in the student responses offers insights into the ways students negotiated the critical stance intended by the curricular unit. This analysis functioned as a reflective activity as we engaged in our critical SFL praxis (Harman 2018; Troyan, Harman, and Zhang 2020), informing our dialogue with students about how their interpretations of the literary texts situate them within broader sociopolitical discourses around the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination in our society.

## Review of the literature

Scholars using combinations of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Bernsteinian sociology, and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) have shown how values, attitudes, and moral evaluations (i.e. axiology) underpin what are seen as legitimate literary response practices in standardized assessment practices at the secondary level of school subject English (Christie 2016; Christie and Dreyfus 2007; Christie and Humphrey 2008; Macken-Horarik 2011).<sup>1</sup> Disciplinary knowledge in subject English relies on ‘a shared set of culturally-valued understandings about life and human behavior’ (Christie 2016, 158), which are developed through the guided interpretation of literary texts throughout the years of schooling. From this perspective, success in writing in response to literature requires the development of a ‘cultivated gaze’ (Maton 2014, 99), an implicitly shaped, rather than explicitly trained, means for recognizing and realizing valued dispositions towards an ever-increasing range of texts and ideas. The cultivated gaze in subject English involves enculturation into particular forms of expression and systems of values through the analysis and interpretation of literature that reinforce one’s status as a legitimate knower (Christie 2016; Macken-Horarik 2006, 2011).

Students of subject English learn to recognize and adopt particular dispositions towards literary texts by participating in genres such as character evaluations and thematic interpretations (Christie and Derewianka 2008). These genres require an understanding of how narrative texts position readers to identify with particular characters and value positions (Macken-Horarik 2003; Martin 1996; Rothery and Stenglin 2000). Successful students recognize and realize these ideal subject positions when interpreting narrative texts, reproducing dominant cultural knowledge and values through normative interpretations of texts (Anson 2017; Macken-Horarik 2006; Martin 1996; Peim 2009). Christie and Humphrey (2008) study of writing from high-stakes assessments in Australia, for example, showed that students must not only develop control over language resources that construe symbolic meaning, but their interpretations must also align with dominant cultural values. Likewise, in an examination of response writing on high-stakes assessments in secondary school, Macken-Horarik (2006) found that evaluators viewed critical analysis as a legitimate form of interpretation, requiring that students adhere to mainstream readings of the texts. While critical analysis is not a valued form of literary response in standardized testing situations, critical literacy pedagogy remains a prominent model of instruction in subject English classrooms (Christie and Macken-Horarik 2007).

SFL has a long history in the design of teaching practices intended to cultivate a critical orientation to texts encountered in schools (see Rose and Martin 2012; Troyan, Harman, and Zhang 2020). As a form of *praxis*, or ‘embedding theory within practice’ (Maton, Hood, and Shay 2016, 72), SFL has been applied in an many different contexts through teacher education, professional development, and design-based action research projects in a wide variety of subject English contexts (Achugar and Carpenter 2018; Harman 2013;

Moore and Schleppegrell 2014; Rothery 1994; Schleppegrell 2020). This work has emphasized the important role of teachers in ‘providing students with an SFL-informed meta language that fosters their understanding of how to read, write and create semiotic texts in normative and resistant ways’ (Harman 2018, 11). This means going beyond helping students access privileged discourses to develop their ‘capacity to critically examine how practices and texts replicate, reinforce and/or redistribute power’ (Potts 2018, 203).

From this perspective, this study set out to assess the degree to which the unit was effective in helping students develop a critical disposition towards the issue of enslavement in the texts, and by extension, the issues of historical enslavement and its legacy in this cultural context. A study of the axiological constellations in the student writing provided a means for understanding the kinds of gazes acquired by the student writers. To this end, the study investigated the following research questions:

1. How did student language choices in the essays construct constellations of value-laden meanings around the issue of elvish enslavement?
2. To what extent did the axiological constellations in the student essays demonstrate the critical orientation toward the text intended by the unit?

Exploring these questions offers a means for understanding how different students recognized and realized the dispositions valued in this classroom situation as a means for reflecting on our teaching and assessment of the unit. Such reflection is important for considering how to address students’ value positions in classroom discussions and collaborative writing activities leading up to the independent essay and through verbal and written feedback on student responses. This article specifically focuses on the axiological constellations constructed in two distinct independent essays from the data set that demonstrate the gaze each student adopted in response to the SFL-informed literary analysis unit.

## Conceptual framework

Axiological constellations refer to the ways that positive and negative evaluations in a text are associated with other ideas and entities to build up contrasting value positions around a particular issue (Maton 2014). The analysis of axiological constellations involves using concepts from LCT and SFL together to reveal the values constructed in classroom discourse (Doran 2020). Whereas SFL enables descriptions of how the language choices function to achieve particular meanings in classroom texts (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), LCT enables descriptions of the underlying principles of highly valued knowledge and knowing in academic contexts (Maton 2014). Concepts from each theory are applied in this study to reveal the different constellations of axiological meanings in the student essays and consider the ways these networks of value-laden meanings positioned students in relation to broader cultural issues around historical enslavement and its legacy of injustice in our society.

## Legitimation code theory

LCT has been used extensively to examine the hidden criteria for success in a range of disciplines and pedagogical situations and using the theory to inform teacher education and professional development (Macnaught. et al. 2013; Walton and Rusznyak 2020;

Winberg, McKenna, and Wilmot 2020). LCT, often in conjunction with SFL, provides insights into the ways that epistemic meanings underpin ‘knowledge-building’ and social relations underpin ‘knower-building’ through instantiations of different underlying socio-semantic principles in a wide range of disciplinary practices (Martin, Maton, and Doran 2020; Maton, Hood, and Shay 2016). Becoming the right kind of knower in subject English involves writing successful literary responses (Christie and Derewianka 2008), which requires drawing together various entities and ideas into networks of value-laden meanings, or *axiological constellations* (Maton 2014) to demonstrate a particular disposition towards the text.

Axiological constellation analysis reveals how value positions are constructed as texts build up charged meanings that are recognizable and valued in particular discourse communities (Maton 2014; Tilakaratna and Szenes 2020; Doran 2020). This study used axiological constellation analysis to determine the degree to which the students in the text demonstrated a critical stance towards the issue of elvish enslavement in the student writing. Analyzing the axiological constellations in the student texts makes clear how the writers align and disalign ideas and entities in their texts in ways that construct value positions in relation to broader sociocultural discourses. The constellations constructed in each essay provide evidence of the degree to which adopted or resisted the cultivated gaze that was the broader goal of the unit.

### **Systemic functional linguistics**

SFL offers tools for systematically describing how particular language choices evaluated and connected different ideas and entities in the texts, the linguistic basis for showing how these meanings were built up into more abstract axiological constellations. In order to study the values constructed through language choices in the student texts, this analysis draws on the SFL system of APPRAISAL, which ‘is concerned with evaluation—the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned’ (Martin and Rose 2007, 25). This study uses two subsystems of appraisal, Attitude and Engagement, to reveal positively and negatively evaluated meanings in the student texts and the ways these charged meanings are related to other entities and ideas.

Attitude analysis reveals how values are built up over the course of a text through language choices that construe *affect*, *judgment*, and *appreciation* (Martin and White 2005). Affect concerns meanings related to emotion, judgment to the evaluation of people, and appreciation to the evaluation of things and ideas. Attitude analysis identifies positively and negatively charged ideas and their sources, which form the initial constellations of value-laden meanings. Engagement concerns the ways that different voices and perspectives are brought into a text, such as in direct references, quotes, and citations where the writer uses words attributed to others. Engagement analysis revealed how charged ideas and entities were aligned and disaligned with other, non-evaluated meanings in the texts to form the axiological constellations.

### **Methods**

This qualitative case study (Creswell 2012) investigated the ways axiological constellations (Doran 2020) were constructed in five ( $N=5$ ) typed, single-draft essays, ranging between

400 and 1,000 words. The study explored the degree to which students adopted critical dispositions towards ideas and entities associated with enslavement in the literary texts and in the world beyond.

### **Research context**

The school was located in a working-class town of 17,000 people, in a rural, predominantly White, area of the southeastern United States. The classroom activities took place in a middle school serving approximately 900 students aged 10–14, in grades 6–8. School demographics were reported as 62% White, 15% Latinx, 14% Black, 5% Asian, and 4% multiracial, with 10% of students identified as English Learners (EL). More than half of enrolled students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

### **Pedagogic context**

At the time of the study, I (the author) was the instructional coach at the school, and I developed and implemented the lessons with Dr. Natalie Miller (a pseudonym), a highly-skilled educator with whom I had worked closely for several years as an 8th grade ELA teacher. The unit was based on Simmons' (2012, 2016) model of SFL-informed critical literacy instruction in subject English. Following the examples in Simmons (2012), our goal was to help students critically analyze the representation of elvish enslavement in the *Harry Potter* novels. These lessons provided an opportunity to see how SFL could facilitate critical literary analysis for students who already demonstrated control over the linguistic resources of the genre. Reflection on this early iteration of the unit yielded insights that allowed us to be more responsive when implementing the lessons with future classes, a crucial step in our own critical praxis.

The unit began with students viewing *Harry Potter* book covers and movie posters in small groups to build shared knowledge about the characters and plot. Next, we introduced the first passage, from *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows* (Rowling 2007), depicting a scene in which Harry confronts Kreacher, the enslaved elf Harry inherited, about a locket Harry believes Kreacher has stolen. Working through an identification analysis of this passage based on the example in Simmons (2012), Natalie and I focused the students' attention on the names and other identifiers in the text, which dehumanize Kreacher and position him as inferior to Harry. Using the examples of attitude analysis in Simmons (2012), we also guided students to identify language that created animalistic descriptions of Kreacher and his living space, which are aligned by the author with Harry's perspective. Natalie then led the class through a jointly-constructed response designed to model the linguistic resources of the genre and cultivate a critical disposition towards the representation of enslavement in the passage.

The second passage, from *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire* (Rowling 2000), depicts Hermione introducing the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, and portrays each characters' attitudes towards abolishing elvish enslavement. In contrast to Hermione's abolitionist stance, Ron sees no problem with slavery, insisting that the elves 'like being enslaved', while Harry is ambivalent, 'torn between exasperation at Hermione, and amusement at the look on Ron's face' (Rowling 2000, 224–225). Discussion of this passage centered around

interpreting Harry's actions as apathetic towards abolition, further aligning him with the practice of enslavement.

Following the whole-class analysis and discussion of the second passage, students were assigned the task of writing a character analysis essay, a genre whose purpose is to evaluate characters based on their words or actions (Moore and Schleppegrell 2014). The prompt read: 'Discuss the characters' views on elvish enslavement. Support your ideas with evidence from the text'. This prompt led students to compare the characters based on their association with or opposition to elvish enslavement, and provided students an opportunity to critique Harry for his participation in elvish enslavement.

### *Data collection and analysis*

I took the lead for the classroom text analysis, while Natalie facilitated the student writing and scored the responses. After the individual student products were written and scored, Natalie selected five student essays that she felt represented various levels of success on the task, which she anonymized and provided to me. Natalie further identified one essay, Text 1 as particularly effective in its demonstration of the critical interpretation of the text intended by the unit and another Text 2, which not only failed to criticize Harry, but positioned him on the side of abolition. Excerpts from these two texts, shown in Figures 1 and 2, are used in this paper to illustrate the ways values were constructed in this small set of literary response essays and how these values aligned and disaligned with the critical orientation to the text intended by the unit.

Below, I step through an axiological constellation analysis (Doran 2020) of a single paragraph from Text 1 (Figure 1), a significant excerpt that includes the writer's critical interpretation of Harry's character. The findings from this analysis are then compared with

Finally, the protagonist of The Goblet of Fire, none other than Harry Potter, is torn between the two extreme positions in regards to house elves. He does not want to pick a side because his loyalty to Hermione and Ron. Much like his best friend Ron, he is a pure blood wizard, who cannot sympathize with the discriminated house elves. Reasoning more with Ron than Hermione, Harry does not want slavery to be abolished, as long as they have proper treatment. This is a very problematic point of view because slavery is not in the least bit okay, even with the absence of brutality. Harry seems to be more concerned with saving the wizarding world from Voldemort's revolution, than helping the house elves. There's a lot of weight on Harry's shoulders and house elves aren't a priority. He believes Hermione has unrealistic and impactful expectations for her club, questioning "how do we do all this?" He doesn't think it's possible to liberate all house elves. Throughout the book series, he has had a very complicated and complex opinion on house elves. Harry loathes his house elf, Kreacher, a despicable and repulsive slave, who abandoned Sirius to join Voldemort's evil monstrosity. He doesn't hate all house elves however. After Dobby saved his life, Harry went out of his way to free Dobby from the maltreatment of his owner. Regarding the liberation of house elves, he draws the line at Dobby. Since Harry has experience with this master slave dynamic with house elves, he has a sense of supremacy over the creatures. In American history, slave owners have freed African Americans, without being an abolitionist completely against the idea of slavery. This directly relates with Harry's point of view on emancipating Dobby, but tyrannizing other house elves to an extent. Harry respects and accepts Hermione's passion to protect the welfare of house elves, but he is not willing to contribute to the cause and values friendship more than society.

**Figure 1.** 'Harry Paragraph' from Text 1.

Harry is a whole different story. Throughout the passage the only thing Harry asks Hermione is how they would fight for the house elves rights with S.P.E.W. We do know however, that Harry freed Dobby (house elf) in earlier books, but also treated Kreacher (house elf) poorly in latter books. Ultimately the textual evidence shows that Harry doesn't care at the moment, because he is getting closer and closer to fighting Voldemort. However after Harry defeats Voldemort, he would most likely free or fight for the rights of house elves just as he did with Dobby.

**Figure 2.** 'Harry Paragraph' from Text 2.

the constellations from the interpretation of Harry's character in Text 2 (Figure 2) to illustrate the differences in the value positions constructed by each text. Doran (2020) summarized his method of axiological constellation analysis in five steps, reproduced below:

1. Analyze all instances of evaluation, for the source, target and charging (positive or negative). [In SFL terms, analyze for attitude. Focus on the appraiser, appraised and polarity (positive or negative).]
2. Group according to the source/appraiser.
3. Analyze the alignment or disalignment of information associated with the sources identified in Steps 1 and 2. [In SFL terms, analyze for engagement, focusing on heteroglossia from sources identified in Steps 1 and 2.]
4. Add to the constellation built in Step 2
5. Repeat across multiple texts, progressively building the constellation as necessary. (pp. 170–171)

The findings described in the following section show how two student writers built up particular value positions in relation to the representation of elvish enslavement in the text, revealing language choices that aligned and disaligned with the critical orientation to the text intended by the unit.

## Findings

By asking students to discuss each character's views on elvish enslavement, the writing prompt implicitly established two viewpoints on the issue, one *associated with elvish enslavement* and another *opposed to elvish enslavement*. Below, I provide examples of the ways charged words and phrases in the text built up networks of meanings to form axiological constellations. A detailed description of the constellations in the 'Harry paragraph' from a critical interpretation of the text in Text 1 is contrasted with the constellations in an essay that more positively evaluated Harry's character, Text 2.

### Attitude analysis

Revealing axiological constellations in a text involves first identifying instances in the that convey attitude (Martin and White 2005). The different types of attitude (affect, judgment, appreciation) are not of concern in this constellation analysis, other than to identify the *source*



of the evaluation (appraiser), the *target* of the evaluation (appraised item), and its negative or positive *charge* (polarity), which form the meanings that make up the axiological constellations in the text. Identifying the sources of evaluation and their targets involves coding the text for language construing explicit and implicit evaluations through language resources that *inscribe*, *provoke*, and *flag* attitude (Doran 2020; Martin and White 2005). Inscribed attitudes are based on positive and negative denotative meanings of words and phrases, provoked attitudes are implicitly evoked through imagery or metaphor, and flagged attitudes involve language choices that signal stronger or weaker evaluations. Figure 3 reproduces the 'Harry paragraph' from Text 1, but here it is coded to indicate inscribed, provoked, and flagged attitudes.

The student writer inscribes, provokes, and flags attitudes toward Harry in this paragraph to build up negatively and positively charged constellations of meaning. The inscribed attitudes involve language with positively or negatively polarized denotative meanings:

Much like his best friend Ron, he is a pure blood wizard, who cannot sympathize with the discriminated house elves. (negative)

In this example, the word 'discriminated' describes the house elves as unjustly treated, a patently negative state. Similarly, the word 'proper' in the following statement, signifies something genuine, true, or appropriate, and therefore positively evaluated:

Reasoning more with Ron than Hermione, Harry does not want slavery to be abolished, as long as they have proper treatment. (positive)

Sometimes the student included words or phrases that intensified or sharpened the evaluation. These resources are known as flagged attitudes. The writer uses words and phrases such as 'very' or 'in the least bit' to intensify the negative evaluations in 'problematic' and 'not okay' in the following example:

Finally, the protagonist of The Goblet of Fire, none other than Harry Potter, is *torn* between the two extreme positions in regards to house elves. He does not want to pick a side because his loyalty to Hermione and Ron. Much like his best friend Ron, he is a pure blood wizard, who cannot sympathize with the discriminated house elves. Reasoning more with Ron than Hermione, Harry does not want slavery to be abolished, **as long as** they have proper treatment. This is a **very problematic** point of view because slavery is not in the least bit okay, **even with the absence of brutality**. Harry seems to be more concerned with saving the wizarding world from Voldemort's revolution, than helping the house elves. There's **a lot of weight on** Harry's *shoulders* and house elves aren't a priority. He believes Hermione has unrealistic and impactful expectations for her club, questioning "how do we do all this?" He doesn't think it's possible to liberate all house elves. Throughout the book series, he has had a very complicated and complex opinion on house elves. Harry loathes his house elf, Kreacher, a despicable and repulsive slave, who abandoned Sirius to join Voldemort's evil monstrosity. He doesn't hate all house elves however. After Dobby saved his life, Harry went out of his way to free Dobby from the maltreatment of his owner. Regarding the liberation of house elves, he draws the line at Dobby. Since Harry has experience with this master slave dynamic with house elves, he has a sense of supremacy over the creatures. In American history, slave owners have freed African Americans, without being an abolitionist completely against the idea of slavery. This directly relates with Harry's point of view on emancipating Dobby, but tyrannizing other house elves **to an extent**. Harry respects and accepts Hermione's passion to protect the welfare of house elves, but he is not willing to contribute to the cause and values friendship more than society.

**Figure 3.** Attitudinal language in 'Harry Paragraph' from high-achieving essay (Text 1).  
Note. Inscribed attitude is shown in underline, flagged in **bold**, and provoked in *italics*.

This is a very problematic point of view because slavery is not in the least bit okay, even with the absence of brutality.

In this instance, the inscribed attitudes are understood as inherently positive or negative, but are flagged to intensify the attitude and strengthen the evaluation. Flagging is used extensively in Text 1 to intensify negative evaluations of slavery, Harry's character, and to convey the strong negative attitudes Harry demonstrates towards Kreacher.

Provoked attitude is not directly inscribed, but instead requires interpretation of the metaphor or image to recognize its polarity. In the following example, the writer of Text 1 uses a figure of speech to describe Harry's responsibilities for saving the wizarding world from Voldemort:

There's a lot of weight on Harry's shoulders and house elves aren't a priority. (negative)

This statement conveys the negatively-charged feeling of being 'weighed down' with responsibilities. This instance can be seen as aligning Harry with a feeling of responsibility that the writer also views as negative. In effect, this language choice allows the writer to offer a sympathetic view of Harry by acknowledging that Harry also suffers from negative experiences.

The attitude analysis of this paragraph from Text 1 shows the consistent use of negative evaluations to disalign with slavery in general and Harry's point of view in particular. These charged elements, presented in Table 1, create an initial network of value-laden ideas and entities in each constellation. While the writer offers evaluations that positively associate Harry with the freeing of Dobby and with friendship, these admirable qualities are clearly overshadowed by the writer's depiction of Harry's antipathy towards Kreacher and apathy towards Hermione's abolitionism.

The attitude analysis revealed not only the explicitly charged language in the paragraph, but provided a means for identifying the sources (appraisers) of these attitudes, their targets (appraised items), and their charges (polarity). This attitude analysis provides an initial glimpse into the ways entities and ideas are aligned and disaligned in the texts. The next stage of the constellation analysis concerns the ways these charged meanings are associated with other information in the text to expand these axiological constellations.

**Table 1.** Evaluative attitude in high-achieving essay (Text 1).

<i>Appraiser (Source)</i>	<i>Appraised (Target)</i>	<i>Polarity (Charge)</i>
<i>(Student writer)</i>	Harry	-
	(discrimination against) house elves	-
	(Harry's) point of view	-
	Slavery	-
	(Harry's responsibilities)	-
	(Voldemort's vision for society)	-
	(Dobby's owner's actions)	-
	Harry's actions towards other house elves	-
	Freeing house elves	+
<i>Harry</i>	His house elf	-
	Slave	-
	Two extreme positions	-
	Hermione's expectations	-
	Harry's freeing of Dobby	+
	Hermione's passion	+
	Friendship	+

## Engagement analysis

The engagement analysis reveals the ways the charged meanings in Table 1 aligned and disaligned with other ideas and entities in the paragraph. The engagement analysis draws on Martin and White (2005) model of heteroglossia, which describes the language choices writers use to attribute ideas and information to particular sources in a text. Doran (2020) discusses six linguistic resources for analyzing the ways that different texts align and disalign different sources of information, including positive and negative attitudes (discussed above), projection, disclaim, distance, and proclaim.

*Projections* refer to instances in the text where a voice other than the student writer's was directly cited as the source of information. This resource aligns the source with the projected information, or proposition, and gives it a positive charge within that constellation. One key feature of Text 1 and other more highly rated essays, was the choice of mental processes (e.g. *thinks, assumes, believes*) as a means for attributing particular ideas to Harry:

He believes Hermione has unrealistic and impactful expectations for her club, questioning 'how do we do all this?'

In this first instance, the student writer attributes a belief to Harry, directly aligning him with an idea that demonstrates his lack of faith in Hermione's expectations. The projection of this idea onto Harry's mindset indicates that from Harry's perspective this idea is positively charged. The choice of 'questioning' is an example of the writer attributing a particular question to the character, although this verb also indicates distance between the speaker and statement.

*Distance* (Doran 2020), allows the writer to 'disalign from the proposition and its source' (Doran 2020, 164). For example, the example discussed above indicates Harry as the source of the quoted statement, but the choice of the verb 'questioning' also distances him from the literal meaning of his statement. Here, the writer uses the ambiguous quote as evidence of Harry's belief that the club's aims are 'unrealistic.' This can be contrasted with the analysis of the same line in the text from another student essay, Text 2, which states:

Throughout the passage the only thing Harry asks Hermione is how they would fight for the house elves rights with S.P.E.W.

This statement creates distance between the writer and Harry when conceding that this is the 'only' thing Harry asks. The wording of this statement does not distance Harry from the literal meaning of the statement, however, and actually aligns him with the positively charged idea of asking how to fight for house elves' rights.

*Heteroglossic proclaim* refers to statements that align a source with a particular idea through statements that justify or elaborate on these relations. In Text 1, this appeared through conjunctions that established causal connections between different ideas and their sources (e.g. *because, therefore, so*):

He does not want to pick a side because his loyalty to Hermione and Ron.

This is a very problematic point of view because slavery is not in the least bit okay, even with the absence of brutality.

Since Harry has experience with this master slave dynamic with house elves, he has a sense of supremacy over the creatures.

Such statements reinforced the relationship between the source and the idea, creating a positively charged bond between the two, while transferring this charge through alignment with additional information. Such instances were common throughout the data set, as all students established a sense of causality to justify their interpretations of each character.

*Heteroglossic disclaim* refers to instances that signal opposition between a source and an idea through negation (e.g. does *not*, are *not*) and counter-expectancy conjunctions (e.g. *however*, *but*, *on the other hand*). In the following statement, the writer uses negation to disalign Harry with the idea that it is possible to liberate all house elves:

He doesn't think it's possible to liberate all house elves.

Because ideas associated with abolition were understood as positively charged in this pedagogic context and those associated with enslavement were negatively charged, this statement disaligns Harry with what is understood as a positive idea, situating him in the negatively-charged constellation associated with, rather than opposed to, elvish enslavement.

In another instance the writer first presents a negative picture of Kreacher from Harry's perspective but uses the counter-expectancy conjunction to qualify this idea and weaken the evaluation:

Harry loathes his house elf, Kreacher, a despicable and repulsive slave, who abandoned Sirius to join Voldemort's evil monstrosity. He doesn't hate all house elves however.

In this example, the writer uses the word 'however' to add nuance to Harry's depiction, building up a complex network of values around his character while taking a firm stance against anything associated with enslavement.

Identifying instances of heteroglossic engagement reveals the ideas and entities that are aligned and disaligned with the charged items in the text. [Table 2](#) presents the results

**Table 2.** List of charged elements in 'Harry paragraph' (Text 1).

Source	Target	Charge
(Student writer) Harry	Slavery	-
	Picking a side	-
	Loyalty to Hermione and Ron	+
	Ron	+
	Sympathizing with the elves	-
	Abolishing slavery	-
	Helping the house elves	-
	House elves being a priority	-
	Hermione's expectations for her club	-
	"How do we do all this?"	+
	Thinking it's possible to liberate all house elves	-
	Hating all house elves	-
	Having a sense of supremacy over the creatures	+
	Tyrannizing other house elves	+
	Hermione's passion	+
	Being willing to contribute to the cause	-
	Friendship	+
Society	-	
Slave owners	Being an abolitionist completely against slavery	-

of the engagement analysis, providing additional sources and charged information that can now be combined with the information in [Table 1](#) to reveal the complete axiological constellations in the paragraph.

### Building constellations

For a complete picture of the axiological constellations in the text, the methods described above were applied to the other paragraphs in each essay, which added information related to Hermione, Ron, and a range of other entities and ideas that made for more elaborate constellations. But here we stay with just the ‘Harry paragraph’ from Text 1 and its exemplification of the critical orientation towards elvish enslavement and Harry that was valued in this writing task. [Tables 3](#) and [4](#) present the axiological constellations in the ‘Harry paragraph’ from Text 1. The constellations represent opposing value positions, built up through charged information. Within these constellations, information was either aligned or disaligned with the value position, as represented by the columns of charged sources, ideas, and entities within each table.

**Table 3.** Constellation opposed to elvish enslavement in ‘Harry Paragraph’ (Text 1).

<i>Aligning with (positively charged)</i>		<i>Disaligning with (negatively charged)</i>	
<i>Sources</i>	<i>Ideas/Entities</i>	<i>Sources</i>	<i>Ideas/Entities</i>
(Student writer) American history	house elves slave owners freed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African</li> <li>• Americans</li> <li>• without being on</li> <li>• the side of</li> <li>• abolition</li> </ul>	Harry Ron Slave owners	Harry discrimination against house elves Harry’s point of view Harry’s responsibilities Voldemort’s revolution Dobby’s owner’s actions Harry’s actions towards Kreacher slavery Harry’s actions towards other elves

**Table 4.** Constellation associated with elvish enslavement in ‘Harry Paragraph’ (Text 1).

<i>Aligning with (positively charged)</i>		<i>Disaligning with (negatively charged)</i>	
<i>Sources</i>	<i>Ideas/Entities</i>	<i>Sources</i>	<i>Ideas/Entities</i>
Harry Slave owners purebloods	Hermione’s passion friendship Ron loyalty to friends being ranked higher in society having experience with a master slave dynamic having a sense of supremacy over the creatures questioning “How do we do all this?” emancipating Dobby tyrannizing other house elves drawing the line at Dobby	Hermione	Hermione’s expectations his house elf Kreacher sympathizing with the elves thinking it is possible to liberate all house elves hating all house elves Hermione’s expectations picking a side being willing to contribute to the cause Voldemort’s revolution society

Text 1 demonstrated the cultivated gaze through the sophisticated analysis of Harry's character that acknowledged his positive attributes while clearly offering an overall negative evaluation of his views on elvish enslavement. In the small set of texts analyzed here, the student writers all situated themselves within the constellation *opposed to* elvish enslavement, but a distinguishing feature of Text 1 was that it built up information related to Harry within the constellation *associated with* elvish enslavement (Table 4), which thoroughly addressed the character's 'very problematic point of view' (Text 1) on elvish enslavement and demonstrates the gaze intended to be cultivated in the unit.

The constellations in Text 1 clearly contrast with those in Text 2, which are presented in Tables 5 and 6. These constellations construct a relatively positive evaluation of Harry's character. In the majority of Text 2, the writer builds up positively charged information associated with Hermione and abolition and negatively charged information related to Ron and slavery, creating constellations that are similar to those in Text 1. When it came to Harry, however, Text 2 offers a view that rationalizes his relationship to elvish enslavement and its perpetuation.

The interpretation in Text 2 does not constitute a critical reading because it positions Harry within the constellation *opposed to* elvish enslavement and not within the constellation *aligned with* elvish enslavement. This positioning was evident in the three essays in the data set that offered weak negative evaluations of Harry's character or none at all, which included downplaying or simply not mentioning Harry's negative associations with the issue while focusing on his freeing Dobby and opposing Voldemort. The constellations in the 'Harry paragraph' from Text 2, therefore demonstrate an overall alignment with and positive evaluation of Harry's character, despite disaligning with Harry's treatment of Kreacher.

While Text 1 aligns Harry with some positively evaluated information, this is situated within a much stronger network of negatively charged meanings, positioning Harry on the side of elvish enslavement, which is clearly distinguished as the wrong side of the issue. Text 2 takes an inverse position. Although the writer concedes that Harry treated Kreacher 'poorly', and 'ultimately, the textual evidence shows that Harry doesn't care at the moment', the text ultimately casts a sweeping positive judgment over Harry's character by proclaiming that after defeating Voldemort, Harry 'would most likely free or fight for the house elves just as he did with Dobby'. Such a statement reinforces the dominant perspective around

**Table 5.** Constellation opposed to elvish enslavement in 'Harry Paragraph' (Text 2).

<i>Aligning with (positively charged)</i>		<i>Disaligning with (negatively charged)</i>	
<i>Sources</i>	<i>Ideas/Entities</i>	<i>Sources</i>	<i>Ideas/Entities</i>
(Student writer) Harry	freeing or fighting for the rights of house elves after defeating Voldemort asking how they would fight for the rights of house elves getting closer and closer to fighting Voldemort	–	Harry's treatment of Kreacher

**Table 6.** Constellation associated with elvish enslavement in 'Harry Paragraph' (Text 2).

<i>Aligning with (positively charged)</i>		<i>Disaligning with (negatively charged)</i>	
<i>Sources</i>	<i>Terms/Ideas</i>	<i>Sources</i>	<i>Terms/Ideas</i>
The textual evidence	Harry	–	Caring at the moment

historical issues of enslavement by subsuming Harry's identity as an enslaver into an uncritical portrayal of an embattled, but unassailable hero.

The writer of Text 1 aligned with the house elves, Hermione, and abolition while opposing Ron, Harry, and elvish enslavement. Text 2 acknowledged the problems with Ron's views but still aligned with Harry, whom the writer situated alongside Hermione on the positively charged side of the constellation. In their extended essays, the writers of Texts 1 and 2 reinforced these stances towards the characters and issues as they built up more elaborate constellations.

## Discussion and conclusions

SFL-informed praxis in teacher education involves gaining experience with SFL, applying the theory in disciplinary literacy lessons, and reflecting on and investigating student learning (Achugar and Carpenter 2018). Because a distinguishing disciplinary practice in ELA classrooms is literary response writing, and this requires demonstrating particular dispositions towards entities and ideas represented in literary texts, investigating student learning requires concepts and methods for analyzing the value positions constructed in written responses to literature. While much SFL-informed research has described the linguistic and semantic features of literary response writing, which are underpinned by particular culturally-valued dispositions (Anson 2017; Christie and Derewianka 2008; Christie and Dreyfus 2007; Christie & Humphrey; Macken-Horarik 2006; Rothery 1994; Moore and Schleppegrell 2014; Simmons 2018), this is the first study to use axiological constellation analysis of student texts as a means for investigating student learning in an SFL-informed critical literary analysis unit.

Studying the axiological constellations in these literary response essays offered a way to see how students adopted and resisted critical orientations to the literary texts as a result of our SFL-informed pedagogy. The analysis showed how the language choices in two distinct essays constructed contrasting value positions related to Harry Potter and his role in elvish enslavement. One essay took a critical stance towards ideas and entities associated with enslavement as depicted in the literary texts while the other did not, showing that not all students acquired the cultivated gaze that was the goal of the unit. The fact that students may fail to achieve or actively resist the dispositions cultivated through critical literary analysis presents teachers with the problem of responding to oppositional value positions in the student writing. In the case of this classroom unit, for example, Natalie assigned an A or B to all the essays in the data set. This feedback in response to non-critical analyses of Harry's character, such as that in Text 2, validated the normative gaze demonstrated by the student and the reinforced the dominant discourses that the unit was designed to disrupt.

This underscores the problem for teacher education programs concerning how to develop 'culturally competent and socio-politically aware pre-service and in-service practitioners' (Thomas 2013, 329). Teachers need to effectively negotiate social solidarities through the mediation of diverse perspectives in classroom settings, even though doing so does not mean always validating all perspectives (Thomas 2013). Being able to recognize axiological constellations in their students' work can help teachers be responsive to the value positions constructed in the students' interpretations while offering a way to understand and explain how these relate to broader cultural discourses around social issues, a crucial step towards a dialogical critical literary analysis pedagogy.

Literary response writing fundamentally involves staking out value positions in relation to representations of entities, ideas, and social issues in literary texts, and axiological constellation analysis reveals the ways charged meanings are aligned and disaligned to construct value positions within student responses. Such a perspective is essential for teachers who intend to help students develop critical literacies as it enables systematic reflection on the ways that the design, implementation, and assessment of the writing task reinforces and challenges dominant discourses in the particular pedagogic situation and broader cultural context. Incorporating axiological constellation analysis into SFL-informed teacher education could help more teachers develop greater awareness of the ways that classroom talk around texts in their classes, including their feedback and evaluation of student writing, reinforces and challenges particular value positions.

To conclude, SFL-informed approaches to educational linguistics have always been concerned with critical analysis (Matthiessen 2012), and while this study reinforces this fundamental pedagogic aim, it also suggests that the outcomes of critical praxis cannot be taken for granted. Critical SFL-informed praxis in subject English requires a way of systematically analyzing the degree to which student interpretations take a critical stance towards of the texts, which can be accomplished by describing the axiological constellations in student writing.

## Note

1. While the study was carried out in an "English language arts (ELA)" class, I use "subject English" throughout this paper to align with the description used internationally to refer to the school subject centered around reading and writing interpretations of literature at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

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