

Secondary Publication



Menzel, Nadine

Compassionate Competency : How Literature Can Foster Empathy Towards Animals ; A Didactic Proposal for Higher Education Within the SDG Framework

Date of secondary publication: 14.07.2026

Version of Record (Published Version), Article

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-116159x

Primary publication

Menzel, Nadine (2026): Compassionate Competency : How Literature Can Foster Empathy Towards Animals ; A Didactic Proposal for Higher Education Within the SDG Framework, in: Didaktik slawischer Sprachen, Innsbruck, No. 1, pp. 30–46, doi: 10.48789/2026.1.3.

Legal Notice

This work is protected by copyright and/or the indication of a licence. You are free to use this work in any way permitted by the copyright and/or the licence that applies to your usage. For other uses, you must obtain permission from the rights-holders.

This document is made available under a Creative Commons license.



The license information is available online:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

Nadine Menzel, University of Bamberg, Germany

Compassionate Competency—How Literature Can Foster Empathy Towards Animals

A Didactic Proposal for Higher Education Within the SDG Framework

Animals only appear indirectly in the SDGs, for example, in SDGs 13, 14, and 15. As implicit dimensions of these goals, animals, or rather human behavior towards them, represent an analytical lens how humans treat their environment in general. The seminar in literary studies proposed in this article addresses the question of how empathy towards the animal world can be enhanced in university teaching of Russian literature in BA and teacher education programs on the basis of fictional texts within the framework of education for sustainable development (ESD). The language of seminar instruction is German, and the source material is provided in German and Russian. The seminar incorporates methods for achieving sustainability skills into teaching. In addition to the subject-specific module objectives (acquisition of skills in literary studies and improvement of reading and writing skills in Russian), the following skills, among others, are intended to be acquired and enhanced in line with the ESD objectives: critical thinking, perspective-taking, and ethical judgment. Using transformative learning methods (*emotion journal*, *storytelling*) and based on selected Russian fiction (including Chekhov's *Kashtanka*, Majakovskij's *Khoroshee otnosheniye k loshadyam*), students will acquire ESD competencies in addition to key disciplinary skills.

Keywords: Cultural and Literary Animal Studies (CLAS); education for sustainable development (ESD); transformative learning; empathy; Russian literature

Tiere kommen in den Zielen für nachhaltige Entwicklung (SDG) nur indirekt vor, beispielsweise in den SDGs 13, 14 und 15. Als versteckte Elemente dieser Ziele stellen Tiere, oder vielmehr das Verhalten des Menschen ihnen gegenüber, einen aufschlussreichen Maßstab über den Umgang des Menschen mit seiner Umwelt insgesamt dar. Das in diesem Artikel vorgeschlagene literaturwissenschaftliche Seminar befasst sich mit der Frage, wie Empathie gegenüber der Tierwelt in der universitären Lehre der russischen Literatur für BA- und Lehramtsstudiengänge auf der Grundlage fiktionaler Texte gefördert werden kann. Die Unterrichtssprache ist Deutsch, das Quellenmaterial wird auf Deutsch und Russisch bereitgestellt. Das Seminar integriert Methoden zur Vermittlung von Nachhaltigkeitskompetenzen in den Unterricht. Neben den fachspezifischen Modulzielen (Erwerb von Kompetenzen in der Literaturwissenschaft und Verbesserung der Lese- und Schreibkompetenz im Russischen) sollen unter anderem folgende Kompetenzen im Einklang mit den BNE-Zielen erworben und gefördert werden: kritisches Denken, Perspektivenübernahme und ethisches Urteilsvermögen. Unter Verwendung transformativer Lernmethoden (Emotionstagebuch, Storytelling) und auf der Grundlage ausgewählter russischer Belletristik (u. a. Čechovs *Kaštanka*, Majakovskijs *Chorošee otnošenie k lošadjam*) erwerben die Studierenden neben den fachlichen Kernkompetenzen auch oben genannte BNE-Kompetenzen.

Schlüsselwörter: Cultural and Literary Animal Studies (CLAS); Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE); transformatives Lernen; Empathie; russische Literatur



1. Introduction

By interpreting empathy as a weakness (of Western civilization) (cf. Wolf, 2025), Elon Musk unintentionally highlights the strength of empathy as a sustaining force of democracy. This statement by an anti-democrat underscores the importance of empathy as a conscious ability to consider other people's perspectives and to reconcile political decisions with the interests of all. This article places empathy toward the non-human world at the center as an important skill. The question is to what extent it can be promoted through literature in the context of university education and what approaches and methods are needed to achieve this.¹

Since 2005 at the latest, education for sustainable development (ESD) has been of global relevance in education policy (cf. Sippl, 2023, 69). The task of education in this framework "is not only to enable people and communities to adapt to change at local and global levels, but to foster capabilities to transform the world so we can more fully realize our humanity and protect the biophysical environment on which we depend" (UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 15). ESD, thus, must focus on the enhancement of specific abilities. Empathy is one of them. It is a key competence in democracy education (cf. Stein & Möbus, 2025, 20), but also highly relevant in the context of ESD (alongside solidarity and action), as it "contributes not only to the success of the individual, but also to the collective survival and prosperity of the global community" (UNESCO, 2021, 14). Humans must take into account needs that extend beyond their own. Cultural resources could play a fundamental role in this, because they develop, shape, and negotiate values in the form of literature, film, or religious narratives and are therefore constitutive for our ethical decisions and actions (cf. Rippl, 2022, 42). Cultural sustainability can be understood as a cross-cutting issue, "because every type of discussion is always culturally mediated, i.e., based on certain patterns of perception, methods of cognition, knowledge bases, and values"² (Rippl, 2022, 38).

The frame for sustainability efforts is given by the 17 SDGs formulated in 2015 (cf. UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 14). The goals mentioned here relate to areas influenced by human behavior. Non-human animals are not directly mentioned, but they play a decisive role at least in SDGs 13, 14, and 15. In this article, they should be regarded as representatives of the non-human environment.

This article suggests ways to implement ESD goals in a higher education seminar. The seminar under consideration is intended for BA and teacher training students in Slavic studies who are specializing in Russian literature (3rd to 5th semester). It is not explicitly designed as a course on "education for sustainable development," but rather as a subject-specific seminar that meets the demand to embed ESD as an integral part of teaching:

There has been a long-standing international consensus that ESD should be 'embedded in the whole curriculum, not as a separate subject' [...]. Embedding does justice to the concept of education 'for'

¹ I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers appointed by the journal for their helpful advice, and to Katharina Bonyhádi for the valuable insights on teaching methods and the inspiring conversations we had about ESD during our walks through the Leipzig Auwald.

² If not indicated otherwise, all translations are mine–NM.

sustainable development by putting its values and principles at the core of education. (UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 17).

Therefore, both subject-specific and interdisciplinary learning objectives and competencies are to be achieved on the basis of Russian literature. This task presents several challenges: subject-specific skills and knowledge must remain central to the course, while proposals for embedding ESD should be designed so that they can be applied to the curriculum with only minimal additional effort. This article addresses these challenges and proposes a set of methodological approaches and a carefully selected corpus of primary literary texts.

2. Empathy and Literature as ESD Components

Science and higher education are generally characterized by a demand for complete rationality—emotions and empathy are often considered flaws.³ This is accompanied by the normative assumption that knowledge is value-free—an assumption “based on the idea that it only stems from rigorous evidence-based processes that lead to objectivity, precision, acceptability and universality” (Bianchi et al., 2022, 17).

Yet this assumption has its limitations, “as our values and world-views shape our perception and understanding of the world at all times, including our perception and understanding of sustainability problems. While descriptive knowledge explains reality through facts, normative knowledge on sustainability aims to identify how the world should look” (ibid., 17). The importance of emotions and empathy in the field of knowledge transfer is growing:

Neben Wissen über die Verflechtungen ökologischer, ökonomischer und gesellschaftlicher Einflüsse werden zunehmend auch kognitive, emotionale, empathische und ethische Prozesse berücksichtigt, die sich aus dem gegenwärtigen Zustand der Natur und den damit einhergehenden wirtschaftlichen und technischen Problemen ergeben. (Wanning, 2019, cited in Rippl, 2022, 46).

Empathy is an integral part of the competencies and skills listed in the relevant materials and publications on ESD and global citizenship education. It is explicitly mentioned in the competence sub area “Promoting nature,” where the development of empathy for the planet is called for (cf. Bianchi et al., 2022, 18) and one of the attitudes to be acquired is to show “empathy with all forms of life” (ibid., 2022, 42).

Empathy is the ability to “affectively [...] empathize with the presumed emotion of another living being on the basis of cognitive understanding of this emotion while maintaining the distinction between self and other” (*Dorsch Lexikon der Psychologie*). This very general definition contrasts with more nuanced definitions, such as those proposed by Elisa Aaltola.

Aaltola (2018) defines six different types of empathy: 1) projective and 2) simulative, 3) cognitive, 4) affective, 5) embodied and 6) reflective. All of these exhibit “differing implications

³ This applies particularly to the field of animal ethics. During the early days of the animal rights and animal welfare movements, philosophical pioneers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan rejected any emotionality in favor of the seriousness of the matter: “If the animal cause is to be taken seriously, Singer and Regan argue, it needs to be firmly grounded in rationality.” (Böhm, 2022, 131–132)

from the viewpoint of both moral agency and human-non-human relations” (ibid., 129). The author differentiates these types according to the direction of the epistemological movement between two instances, i.e. between the observing and the observed (cf. ibid.). In types 1 and 2, the observer unreflectively “seeks to transport herself into the place of the other” (ibid.), whereas type 4 leads to an emotional immersion between observer and observed (cf. ibid., 82). Type 3 is characterized by a state of detachment going hand in hand with a certain emotional distance (cf. ibid., 58). Finally, embodied empathy (type 5) includes a mutual influence, “as we impact the other and she impacts us—there is a dynamic, co-constituting movement at the borders between self and other” (ibid., 129). All types overlap; however, considering the goal of enhancing empathy within a higher education class, type 6, reflective empathy, appears to be the most suitable focus. According to Aaltola (2018), reflective empathy is the most desirable form, as it contains the best elements of all other types. Reflective empathy is a “reflective cultivation of our empathic ability” (ibid., 131), meaning that the empathy, emotions, and resonances we feel are evaluated and classified in a second step in order to enable “awareness of with whom, why and on what ground we empathize” (ibid., 132). Since this procedure involves reflection and thus offers the opportunity to question feelings and attitudes with a certain degree of distance, this type of empathy is particularly well suited to the aims of this seminar.

Empathy towards animals is an ability that is determined by individual or social norms and certain practices (cf. Steen, 2020, 277). Even though it cannot be ‘taught’ directly, it can be developed, promoted, and guided (cf. Heuberger & Kompatscher, 2024, 71)—in the case of ESD, with the help of various teaching methods.

Looking at the definitions of empathy, it becomes clear that empathy requires a counterpart with whom one empathizes (in Aaltola’s words “the observed” one). In the present context, this counterpart is the non-human environment, or more precisely, non-human animals.

The seminar described here aims to approach this topic on the basis of media, more precisely, literature. Animals are an integral and fundamental part of literature; without (textual) animals, humans would not be able to narrate about themselves. According to Zapf (2008, cited in Rippl, 2022, 39), literature, art, and other forms of cultural creativity are important symbolic media for constantly recalibrating the relationship between the environment and inner worlds, thereby creating new options for the future. Cultural artefacts are not only representations of the relationship between nature and culture, but also influence larger cultural systems, thereby enabling creativity, innovation, and self-renewal (cf. ibid.).

The use of literature—understood here as fiction of any genre—to strengthen key competencies within the framework of ESD is recommended and required in language teaching (cf. UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 172). The connection between literature, empathy development, and animals is also explicitly highlighted: “Literature becomes a means of building connectivity between people and animals” (ibid., 175). This is possible because humans are able to understand the emotions and behavior of other living beings thanks to their neural system; they are able to empathize with others without them being physically present or even real: „Unsere Hirnstrukturen reagieren sogar auf fiktionale Ereignisse: Wir leiden mit den Protagonist*innen mit, als ob es sich um reale Menschen oder Tiere in realen Notsituationen handeln würde.“ (Heuberger & Kompatscher, 2024, 70)

Culture and literature, in particular, offer the opportunity to promote a change in thinking in line with ESD. Literature creates fictional models of the world in which elements are combined that are unthinkable in non-fictional reality. In this way, literature can stimulate thought and reflection. In order to motivate this reflection and further thinking, to encourage empathy with fictional characters, and to acquire skills in the sense of sustainable action, targeted methods and questions are needed, which will be discussed below.

3. The Seminar: Goals and Contents

Education and sustainability are closely linked, ideally “environmental knowledge can be converted into environmental action” (Rippl, 2022, 45). To motivate this conversion, ‘transformative learning’ environments are needed:

Transformative learning goes beyond acquiring skills and knowledge. It helps learners reflect on how they acquire and frame knowledge. It also helps them become aware and critical of their own and others’ assumptions. This can lead to changes in thinking, perceptions, beliefs and values, which can transform how learners interpret the world around them. (Bianchi et al., 2022, 33)

The objectives of a seminar on Russian literature that incorporates ESD fall into two categories: 1) subject-specific qualification objectives, and 2) competencies and knowledge in line with SDG 4.

1. Subject-specific qualification and knowledge objectives (shown on the example of Slavic literary studies of the University of Bamberg)⁴ are amongst others: overview of methodological and theoretical approaches of literary studies, the application of literary analysis techniques (including narratological analysis), and literary history.⁵
2. The key competencies of ESD (in line with SDG 4) include “acquiring knowledge,” “solving issues, problems, conflicts,” “thinking critically,” “communicating and negotiating,” “dealing with systems,” “facing the future,” “reflecting on values,” “participating and collaborating,” “changing perspectives,” “thinking and acting inclusively,” and “showing solidarity and responsibility” (cf. UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 21). Empathy is not directly mentioned in any of these competencies. Nevertheless, it is a core competence that is directly and indirectly linked to the following competencies and can be strengthened by them, which is why these will be the focus of the seminar: “acquiring knowledge,” “solving issues, problems, conflicts,” “thinking critically,”

⁴ These qualification objectives roughly align with those noted in module manuals in Slavic literary studies of the University of Bamberg, <https://www.uni-bamberg.de/abt-studium/aufgaben/modulhandbuecher/guk/modulhandbuch-bachelor-slavistik/> (09.02.2026).

⁵ This concept refers to a literary studies course in which language acquisition is taken into account but is not the main focus. Since, in my experience, seminar groups in literary and cultural studies courses are very heterogeneous in terms of language competence, the primary material is provided in two languages: Russian and German translation. Depending on their prior knowledge and language level (or the language level they aim to achieve), students can decide for themselves which text they want to work with. Experience has shown that both text variants are used. The same applies to the task of text production: here, too, students are free to write the fictional text in Russian or German.

“communicating and negotiating,” “reflecting on values,” “participating and collaborating,” and “changing perspectives”.

In order to motivate these seven competencies (and therewith empathy), teaching elements in the form of methods will be presented and examined in more detail below. They correlate with the attached syllabus (see table 1). The aim is to interlink subject-specific and ESD competency goals, in line with the “embedded” teaching approach of ESD.

The title of the seminar is: „Fantastische Tiere. Von Hunden und Pferden in der russischen Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts.“ The proposed seminar is planned with 15 sessions and 15 participants. The literary sources consist of six texts from Russian literature (see table 1), which—apart from Bulgakov’s *Sobachye serdtse*—do not generally belong to the traditional Russian literary canon.⁶ However, they were written by authors who are considered to be part of this canon. The text selection is based on three criteria:

1. *Manageable length*: Apart from Bulgakov’s *Sobachye serdtse*, longer *povesti*, stories, or novels were not selected. Lengthier texts were deliberately excluded to ensure that students could realistically complete the required secondary readings and to provide teacher-training students with text examples suitable for classroom use⁷.
2. *Availability of German translations*: Due to the linguistic heterogeneity of the participants, which was considered in the concept, all texts should also be available in German. One exception is Zamyatin’s *Glaza*, which does not meet this criterion and is therefore suitable for a translation in class.
3. *Inclusion of animal characters*: All texts selected include at least one animal character presented and involved as a diegetic animal (cf. Borgards, 2012, 89–92).

The marginal position that almost all these texts occupy in the canon of Russian literature (with the exception of Bulgakov’s work) is intended to serve as a source of productive irritation (cf. Yacek, 2023)—metonymically, these works represent their famous authors, who are introduced at the beginning of each session in a short presentation by the lecturer. Literary-historical aspects play a role insofar as the works are contextualized in class discussions at various points in the course with regard to their historical contexts and writing styles. Although all these texts include animal characters, they do not belong to a post-humanist writing tradition. They largely reflect characteristics of Cartesian dualism, but precisely for this reason, they offer potential for critical analysis and comparison with contemporary ways of writing and thinking. An important goal of the seminar is to break with traditional dualisms that follow a Cartesian way of thinking. Literature can offer an insightful contribution to this debate through its “aesthetic and imaginative transformation of reality” (Zapf, 2019, cited in Rippl, 2022, 39). Cultural-ecological

⁶ The primary sources are: Ivan Krylov: *Sobachya družhba* (1815), Lev Tolstoy: *Lev i sobachka* (1874/75), Anton Chekhov: *Kashtanka* (1887), Evgeny Zamyatin: *Glaza* (1918), Vladimir Mayakovsky: *Khoroshee otnosheniye k loshadyam* (1918) and Mikhail Bulgakov: *Sobachye serdtse* (1925/1987). Additionally, Bertolt Brecht’s *O Falladah, die du hangest!* (early 1920s) will be read for a comparative analysis. Fairy tales were deliberately not included, as the degree of anthropomorphism attributed to animals in fairy tales makes it difficult to conduct a critical analysis with reference to the students’ everyday environment.

⁷ Since these texts may still be too complex for use in the classroom, one possible pedagogical focus could be to adapt these reading passages in terms of vocabulary and length for classroom use (e.g., adaptation and shortening, compiling a vocabulary list). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this valuable suggestion.

as well as animal-sensitive perspectives on literature can dissolve the “misguided creation of dualisms (mind-body, culture-nature)” (ibid.).

In the following, individual elements, or more precisely methodologically structuring elements will be presented and organized according to ESD goals.⁸ These elements are integrated into the seminar plan (see appendix) but can also be incorporated separately as individual components into other Russian literary studies classes. Furthermore, on the example of the third session will be shown what the transformation can look like in practice.

4. Achieving ESD Competencies in Practice

4.1 ESD Objectives and Appropriate Teaching Methods

4.1.1 Acquiring Knowledge

This competence does not only refer to ESD knowledge but is a basic element in literary studies and regards literary analysis, approaches to interpretation, and literary history. Knowledge is generally acquired in every seminar session, as the discussions and reflections in each meeting generate new insights and, above all, foster new connections between different areas of knowledge. It is acquired, for example, through reading secondary literature, input from the lecturer, discussions in class, and finally through student presentations on specific topics in the thirteenth and fourteenth sessions.

Since the seminar proposed here aims to make suggestions for the integration of ESD, a subject-specific focus is placed on the theories and methods of *Cultural and Literary Animal Studies* (CLAS) (cf. Borgards et al., 2015). This input, which will be referred to in the second and third sessions (see chapter 4.2), is intended to bridge the gap between purely philologically oriented literary studies and cultural studies. An important part of this is the examination of practices of human-animal relationships, which are exemplified in the primary literary works (zoo animals, pet keeping). This includes the introduction to the concepts of ‘anthropological difference’ (Wild, 2016; Michel, 2024), ‘anthropocentric perspective’ (Borchers, 2018), and ‘anthropomorphism’ (Wild, 2015) in the second session. This knowledge will be incorporated into all subsequent literary analyses and *storytellings*.

4.1.2 Thinking Critically

Not only the acquisition of knowledge but also critical thinking is a core competency to be acquired within university teaching in the humanities. “[This skill] contains to assess information and arguments, identify assumptions, challenge the status quo, and reflect on how personal, social and cultural backgrounds influence thinking and conclusions.” (Bianchi et al., 2022, 14) In

⁸ Due to the complex nature of the subject matter, the competencies to be strengthened may overlap for each primary text and each method. For example, the competencies “knowledge acquisition” and “critical thinking” are inherent parts of every seminar session. In the following, emphasis is placed on certain areas, while other ESD competencies are also considered but not explicitly mentioned for each text or seminar unit.

the course of this seminar, this skill should be enhanced through the following exemplifying measures.

Firstly, studies have shown that phenomena of the human-animal relationship, such as anthropocentrism or the anthropological difference, are closely related to language (cf. e. g. Heuberger & Kompatscher, 2024, 66). In German, linguistic distinctions can be observed, such as the usage of different vocabulary for the same phenomena regarding humans and animals (“töten” vs. “schlachten”). These linguistic peculiarities promote and, conversely, are reinforced by the way we think and talk about animals and, ultimately, how we treat them (cf. Heuberger, 2015). In order to raise awareness for and to clarify these linguistic distinctions, in the second session, two articles addressing the topic will be discussed using the *Think-Pair-Share* method: one article examines the use of language in German (cf. Heuberger, 2015), while the other one provides an introduction to the peculiarities of Russian “zoolinguistics” (cf. Weiss, 1998). Finally, Russian and German examples of these distinctions should lead into a short discussion about anthropocentric strategies in both languages. Here, selected thinking skills can be applied:

Holistic: ‘how does this relate to that?’, ‘what is the larger context here?’ Critical: ‘why are things this way, in whose interests?’ [...] Systemic: ‘what are or might be the consequences of this?’ Creative: ‘what innovation might be required?’ Ethical: ‘how should this relate to that?’, ‘what is wise action?’, ‘how can we work towards the inclusive well-being of the whole system—social, economic and ecological?’ Practical: ‘how do we take this forward with sustainability in mind as our guiding principle?’ (Sterling, 2010, cited in UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 163).

The second example to enhance critical thinking regards a task, where students work comparatively. In the ninth session, students are invited to compare the perspectives and different attitudes of the lyrical subjects in the poems *Khoroshee otnosheniye k loshadyam* (Mayakovsky) and *O Falladah, die du hangest* (Brecht). This task should be approached by using the teaching technique *Think-Pair-Share*. These two poems, which are very similar in terms of their themes and the periods in which they were written, will be examined and discussed to explore the interrelationships between humans and animals, the treatment of animals, and the historical circumstances. The aim is to shed light on how fictional animals represent the human historical condition.

4.1.3 Solving Issues, Problems, and Conflicts

Based on Krylov’s fable *Sobachya druzhba* (third session), students use the *Problem-based-learning* method⁹ (PBL) to discuss and resolve the question of how to approach animal characters in texts. A detailed description of this procedure is given in chapter 4.2 in this article.

4.1.4 Communicating and Negotiating

These skills will be addressed in this seminar through the following two approaches:

Firstly, based on Zamyatin’s text *Glaza*, which is not available in German or English, translation work is to be carried out. Interlinear translations are produced in four mixed groups of four

⁹ “In this method the learners are introduced to a problem. They then as a group develop some ideas based on that problem by using their prior knowledge and discussing their thoughts as a group. These collective processes lead to ideas about how to solve the problem and the actions that will be taken in order to reach a viable solution” (<https://sustainicum.at/resources/methods/52>).

persons each, including German and Russian L1 speakers as homework for the seventh session. Problematic passages will be discussed together in these groups in the seventh session. Through the translation work, students will explore the internal structures and perspectives of the text and coordinate with each other on translation processes. Finally, all critical passages will be collected, three of which will be discussed in class.

Secondly, presentation skills are considered an important soft skill not only in the humanities. Although these skills are increasingly being practiced as early as in school, experience has shown that presenting in an academic setting is often a new experience for students, and they very rarely receive a thorough introduction to this skill. Therefore, with a particular focus on the skill “communicating and negotiating,” the eighth session will focus on oral presentation methods. To this end, a TED talk¹⁰ will be watched together in class and discussed using the *Think-Pair-Share* technique. The general characteristics of this exemplary TED talk and their respective effects on the audience will be analyzed. The results will be evaluated in a group discussion, whereupon a list of the characteristics of an appealing and adequate presentation will be created. This theoretical knowledge will be applied at the end of the seminar (thirteenth and fourteenth sessions) during 10-minute group presentations. The list of characteristics will serve as a template for feedback to these presentations from the entire class via the 3-2-1¹¹ method. The choice of topic is generally free, however, topics related to human-animal practices discussed in the texts (zoos, pets, animal testing) are suggested and may be chosen for the presentation.

4.1.5 Reflecting on Values

The goal of transforming our societies cannot be attained without attending to values such as respect for self, others and the environment. Nor can it be achieved without our having an ethos or ethics of care [...]. One way to develop this is by using literature. (UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 174).

All primary texts contain a more or less institutionalized practice of human-animal relations, for example, the zoo in Tolstoy’s story and animal experiments in Bulgakov’s text. In doing so, the texts raise the question of how humans treat animals. In order to immediately capture the impressions and feelings that arise when reading the texts, the use of an *emotion journal* is suggested in sessions four, five, six, nine, and ten. Böhm (2022, 136ff) points out that it should be kept parallel to the reading process, as memories, emotions, and impressions quickly fade. These emotions and impressions are discussed and compared in class. In a second step, the reasons for certain emotions, especially those recorded by several students, are analyzed. From a literary studies perspective, emotions can be promoted through certain literary strategies (perspectivization, representation of the fictional world, narrative stance). In a combination of

¹⁰ There are many TED talks that are excellent examples of a successful presentation. For this seminar, Monika Herbstrith-Lappe’s presentation “Innovation beginnt mit Irritation” (TEDxGraz) was chosen because it combines certain elements of a presentation (e.g., visualizations, an informal speaking style, the use of examples) with a topic that is related to finding solutions within the framework of the SDGs.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEyufCK38ZE&list=PLSRNoUx8w3rNZIOp1ceqLs76CSEWTSnFi&index=6>)

¹¹ On prepared sheets of paper, the listening students write down *three* takeaways from the lecture, *two* suggestions for improvement, and *one* question that arose during the lecture (cf. <https://infopool.univie.ac.at/startseite/lehren-betreuen/feedback/>).

emotion journal and literary analysis, subject-specific knowledge is applied and consolidated, and one's own values are questioned and reflected upon.

4.1.6 Participating and Collaborating

This competence refers to the ability to participate in transformation processes and to identify and develop courses of action (cf. UNESCO MGIEP, 2017, 21). In our case, participation and collaboration refer to all group work integrated into the lessons, in which students are motivated to work together and act according to their own abilities and prior knowledge. The following tasks are solved in group work: approaches to animal-sensitive interpretation (third session, see chapter 4.2), translation (sixth and seventh sessions), analysis of the TED talk (eighth session), comparison of poems (ninth session) and presentation of selected topics (thirteenth and fourteenth sessions). Students should be encouraged to work on a problem together and to contribute their prior knowledge, skills and interests.

4.1.7 Changing Perspectives

This skill is required as a core competency when working with literature scientifically. Regarding ESD, working with literature is useful, not only to promote language and reading skills, but also because of the following reasons:

Literature [...] adds another dimension to language teaching and learning, interpretation and thinking skills. Equally important, students can learn, through literature, to identify multiple perspectives on a subject as well as the perspectives and values needed for a sustainable world. Moreover, students can learn to develop empathy—to ‘walk in another’s shoes’—a necessary ability if human beings are to live well with each other, to respect and care for each other and the planet. Literature can be used in language textbooks to deepen students’ understanding of their world and, in particular, the values needed to preserve it (UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 172).

Literary analysis involves examination of perspectives, the text’s polyphony and conceptualization. Some literary texts are particularly well-suited to the goal formulated here of strengthening empathy towards animals, as they use certain literary strategies to convey “inside views [of] characters” without distance (Böhm, 2020, 255). A change of perspective is also an essential part of empathy itself, because empathy requires a “movement from the first-person to the third-person point of view” (Gruen, 2017, 455). Nevertheless, most of all literary analytical perspective change might be fulfilled without empathic inclinations. This is where (*purposeful*) *storytelling*¹² can be put to use as a method, for it helps to promote the empathic element. It is integrated into the seminar in two cases:

Firstly, there is the homework assignment in the first session with the open task “to write a fictional text of any genre in which an animal appears in some way.” The use of AI is permitted and the task is unrestricted in terms of choice of the mode of representation, genre, animal species, or human-animal relationships in order not to limit creativity. The texts are submitted by the third session and evaluated during that session. On further details see chapter 4.2.

¹² Storytelling: <https://sustainicum.at/resources/methods/17>; Purposeful Storytelling: <https://transitionmakers.nl/tool/purposeful-storytelling/>.

Second, the sixth and seventh sessions focus on Zamyatin's *Glaza*. After a narratological examination of the perspectives (on the probably human narrating voice and objectification of the voiceless dog with a narrator's compassionate attitude), the task is to draft a short fictional text in German or Russian that takes the dog's point of view. The method of *storytelling* from the dog's perspective is inspired by Vinciane Despret's (2019) text *Was würden Tiere sagen, würden wir die richtigen Fragen stellen?*. Although Despret's book (ibid., xi-xxi) provides "scientific fables," entangles and refers to ethological and sociological knowledge about human-animal interactions, the question is eminently important when it comes to a change of perspectives between human and non-human beings. The change of perspective with reference to Zamyatin's text is intended to motivate critical reflection on the anthropological difference that also operates in literature.

4.2 Best Practice Example: Session 3—Animals in Fables Beyond the Human Realm

The following paragraph offers a more detailed explanation, illustrating with session 3 how some of the objectives and competencies outlined above can be achieved through the use of a specific primary text, teaching methods, and focused questions.

The session starts with a discussion of the (*storytelling*) texts produced by the students (homework session 1). By writing the text, students adopted the perspective of an author and had to decide how to deploy the animal characters: as rhetorical devices or as characters representing themselves. As part of the evaluation, they are therefore asked about their reasons for choosing a particular literary genre, animal species, and mode of representation. If the students agree, one to three text examples will be provided to each student and discussed on the basis of these questions (15 minutes).

This discussion serves as warm-up and starting point for working on the fable. The main task of this session is the development of animal-sensitive approaches to literary texts. Within this task mainly four objectives are addressed: "acquiring knowledge," "solving issues, problems, conflicts," "participating and collaborating," and "thinking critically". The work is carried out in five groups with three students each. Each group involves one expertise in one of the homework-texts (Borgards, Derrida, Schönbeck). To strengthen students' "problem-solving" skills and thereby foster intrinsic motivation by having them develop and explore tasks and problems on their own, this exercise is performed using the method of *Problem based learning* (PBL).

On the example of Krylov's fable *Sobachya družhba* students are asked to think about how to approach animal characters (sensitively) in a text. A fable is a very suitable text genre for this task, as it genuinely works with animal characters, but, as in fairy tales, mostly uses them as rhetorical figures to represent human characteristics in order to convey moral teachings. Fables are exemplary of a reduced and one-sided integration and objectification of animals in literature. On the one hand, they reflect the anthropocentric perspective; on the other hand, the dualistic way of thinking (animals vs. humans) opens space for discursive engagement with similarities and connections between humans and other animals, and therewith critically question the so-called anthropological difference which shapes human thinking and acting in many ways. Therefore, at the beginning of the class, comprehension questions regarding the

texts by Borgards, Derrida, and Schönbeck will be addressed in a classroom discussion (10 minutes). Furthermore, students are asked for the moral of Krylov's fable and how they would interpret the text.

Afterwards, students should brainstorm on how animals and the human-animal relationship are portrayed in this fable (15 minutes). The following questions might serve as orientation referring to students' knowledge about literary analysis and the phenomena of anthropological difference, anthropomorphism, and anthropocentrism (which were addressed in the second session): Whose perspectives were adopted in the text, whose were not? Which spaces are occupied by animals and humans? What rhetorical figures or tropes are used, and why? How are the animals portrayed (realistically, [strongly] anthropomorphized)? Who and what is human or animal in the text? What is intended with this conception of the characters? Which effects might it have on the readers? What is told about the animal-human bond? What parallels are drawn between humans and dogs in this fable?

In the next step (30 minutes), students should draft and develop a way to sensitively interpret animal characters. Therefore, they draw on literary and narratological approaches and dwell on the excerpts from Borgards (2016a, 2016b), Derrida (2010), and Schönbeck (2020), which were assigned as homework for the third session in different groups. Each PBL group includes an expert on each of these texts. Guiding questions might be: Considering the aims of CLAS, what impact might fables have on the image of a particular animal species (cf. Borgards, 2016a)? What is special about fables compared to other genres of fiction (cf. Schönbeck, 2020, 1-19, 28-34)? In how far are these fable dogs endowed with agency (Derrida, 2010, 31-35, 51-56)? Considering the aims of CLAS, which questions have to be asked interpreting animal characters with an animal-sensitive attitude (cf. Borgards, 2016b, 225-228)?

Each group should develop a draft with answers to these questions, and note further ideas and approaches to an animal-sensitive interpretation. The results will be discussed in the fourth session (keyword listing and clarification of comprehension questions). After having reflected on Krylov's fable from an animal-sensitive perspective, the students are asked a second time how they would briefly interpret it. In addition to this, the instructor will offer further possible theoretical approaches on that topic (cf. Borgards et al., 2015) and contextualize their usefulness regarding the fable in focus.

The task serves to exemplify and provide practical preparation for the seminar topic. It is furthermore intended, firstly, to stimulate intrinsic motivation and sensitize students to dealing with animals in texts and, secondly, to expand literary analysis with additional theoretical approaches.

5. Conclusion

As has been shown, there are possibilities to embed ESD in a way that aligns with subject-specific qualifications in a course on Russian literary studies. However, there are some challenges, which will be briefly summarized below.

The proposed seminar plan with all didactic and methodological elements strongly depends on the number of students and their differing language skills in Russian and German. The data given

above refer to the ideal mix. Unfortunately, these two parameters are beyond the instructor's control when planning a seminar. What is also beyond planning control is the module examination. Overall, none of the tasks suggested above will be graded, but feedback will be provided.

The aim of the seminar is to develop a portfolio that contains the following in relation to ESD: an *emotion journal*, the translation of *Glaza* and two examples of *storytelling*. Considering both the subject-specific and the ESD goals, the final examination should consist of an oral exam. Three examination formats are proposed, corresponding to the groups of students, BA and teacher trainees. The former should be given the opportunity to provide a substantial written literary review of one of the primary texts. Within the oral exam, they should contextualize the target group, their intention in writing the review, the characteristics of the literary text and the methods they used to interpret them. Teacher trainees should be given the opportunity to either design a lesson plan on the topic of "Animals in Russian Literature" or adapt one of the primary texts covered in this seminar for use in the classroom (see footnote 8). The oral exam includes contextualization within the curriculum and further questions or, regarding a text adaption, the detailed explanation of shortening processes and the vocabulary list. These types of assessment are intended to support the transition from thinking about sustainability to acting sustainably.

As to the selection of primary texts, empathy often goes hand in hand with experiencing the suffering of somebody else (in this case: fictional animals). Caution is required here: interpretation should not be reduced to the "passively suffering animal," but should also encompass questions of animal agency presented in the text. Literature has the capacity to focus on the subjectivity of animals through empathy for their situation, making them visible and conceivable as wholesome beings, not as objects, but as agents. Here, Böhm (2020, 252) refers to Derrida's *The Animal that therefore I am*, which restores animals' subjectivity and agency, thereby transcending the realm of merely passive suffering.

Another discussion point is the animal species represented in the text. Different species are perceived differently; empathy can only arise when we perceive a particular species on eye level (cf. Steen, 2020, 278–279). A killed insect may not evoke compassion, while a dog's suffering often does. The primary literature employed in this seminar involves mammals, mainly dogs. Empathy is selective (cf. Steen, 2020), a fact that has to be addressed in the seminar.

Thinking about ESD also involves the quality of the outcomes. "We should [...] keep in mind that not all desirable competencies can be measured, and that they will vary with the context." (UNESCO & MGIEP, 2017, 21) This also holds true for empathy (as an indirect objective). But this should not be discouraging. It is important to recognize that shifting human activities toward sustainability is not a short-term endeavor; among other things, it requires sustained commitment and greater support of ESD competencies.

References

- Aaltola, E. (2018). *Varieties of Empathy: Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics*. Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Bianchi, G. & Pisiotis, U., and Cabrera Giraldez, M. (2022). *GreenComp—The European sustainability competence framework*. Publications Office of the European Union. DOI:10.2760/13286, JRC128040.
- Böhm, A. (2020). Limitrophe Mensch-Tier-Begegnungen: Empathie für tierliche Nicht-Personen in Karen Joy Fowlers *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. In S. Catani & S. Waldow (eds.), *Non-Person. Grenzen des Humanen in Literatur, Kultur und Medien* (pp. 247–267). Brill, Fink.
- Böhm, A. (2022). Teaching Empathy and Emotions. J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Human-Animal-Studies. In A. Hübner, M. Edlich & M. Moss (eds.), *Teaching Human-Animal Studies* (pp. 131–148). Neofelis.
- Borchers, D. (2018). Anthropozentrismus. In J. Ach & D. Borchers (eds.), *Handbuch Tierethik. Grundlagen – Kontexte – Perspektiven* (pp. 143–148). J.B. Metzler.
- Borgards, R. (2012). Tiere in der Literatur – eine methodische Standortbestimmung. In H. Grimm & C. Ottersted (Hg.), *Das Tier an sich. Disziplinenübergreifende Perspektiven für neue Wege im wissenschaftsbasierten Tierschutz* (S. 87–118). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Borgards, R. (2016a). Einleitung. Cultural Animal Studies. In R. Borgards (ed.), *Tiere: Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch* (S. 1–5). Metzler.
- Borgards, R. (2016b). Tiere und Literatur. In R. Borgards (Hg.), *Tiere: Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch* (S. 25–244). Metzler.
- Borgards, R., Köhring, E. & Kling, A. (Hg.). (2015). *Texte zur Tiertheorie*. Reclam.
- Despret, V. (2019). *Was würden Tiere sagen, würden wir die richtigen Fragen stellen?* Trans. L. Völkening. Unrast.
- Derrida, J. (2010). *Das Tier, das ich also bin*. Trans. M. Sedlaczek. Passagen-Verlag.
- Dorsch Lexikon der Psychologie (2026). *Empathie*. <https://dorsch.hogrefe.com/stichwort/empathie> (10.02.2026)
- Gruen, L. (2017). Expressing Entangled Empathy: A Reply. *Hypatia*, 32(2), 452–462.
- Heuberger, R. (2015). Das Tier in der Sprache. In R. Spannring, K. Schachinger, G. Kompatscher-Gufler & A. Boucabeille (Hg.), *Disziplinierte Tiere? Perspektiven der Human-Animal Studies für die wissenschaftlichen Disziplinen* (S. 123–135). Transcript.
- Heuberger, R. & Kompatscher, G. (2024). Sprache und Empathie im Mensch-Tier-Verhältnis: Eine selektive Darstellung trennender und verbindender Praktiken aus linguistischer und literaturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive. In P. Steen & H. Rettig (Hg.), *Mensch-Tier-Praktiken aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive. Empathie, Emotion, Agency* (S. 61–76). J.B. Metzler.
- Michel, M. (2024). Tiere und Menschen: Die Diskussion um die anthropologische Differenz. In M. Michel (Hg.), *Rechtsgemeinschaft mit Tieren* (S. 41–120). Springer.
- Stein, M. & Möbus, B. (2025). Wer Werte einfordert, muss sie auch selbst verkörpern. *E&W Zeitschrift der Bildungsgewerkschaft GEW*, 9, 18–20.
- Rippl, G. (2022). Konzepte kultureller Nachhaltigkeit. In C. Sippl & E. Rauscher (Hg.), *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit lernen und lehren* (S. 33–51). Studienverlag. <https://doi.org/10.53349/oa.2022.a2.110>.
- Schönbeck, S. (2020). *Die Fabeltiere der Aufklärung. Naturgeschichte und Poetik von Gottsched bis Lessing*. J.B. Metzler.
- Sippl, C. (2023). Im Fokus: Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit. *DiSlaw* 2023 (2), 69–71. <https://doi.org/10.48789/2023.2.5>.
- Steen, P. (2020). Selektive Empathie mit Tieren. In K. Jacob, K.-P. Konerding & W.-A. Liebert (Hg.), *Sprache und Empathie. Beiträge zur Grundlegung eines linguistischen Forschungsprogramms* (S. 249–284). De Gruyter.
- UNESCO & MGIEP (2017). *Textbooks for Sustainable Development. A guide to embedding*. MGIEP.
- UNESCO (2006). *Education for Sustainable Development in Action Learning & Training Tools N°1*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO (2021). *Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. Eine Roadmap*. UNESCO digital library. UNESCO https://www.une-sco.de/sites/default/files/2022-02/DUK_BNE_ESD_Roadmap_DE_barrierefrei_web-final-barrierefrei.pdf (09.02.2026)
- Weiss, D. (1998). Kleine Einführung in die russische Zoolinguistik. In T. Berger (Hg.), *Slavistische Linguistik 1997. Referate des XXIII. Konstanzer Slavistischen Arbeitstreffens in Tübingen* (S. 273–324). Sagner.
- Wild, M. (2016). Anthropologische Differenz. In R. Borgards (Hg.), *Tiere: Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch* (S. 225–244). Metzler.
- Wild, M. (2015). Anthropomorphismus. In A. Ferrari & K. Petrus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen* (S. 26–28). Transcript.
- Wolf, Z. B. (2025). Elon Musk wants to save Western civilization from empathy. *CNN* March 5. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/05/politics/elon-musk-rogan-interview-empathy-doge> (09.02.2026)
- Yacek, D. (2023). *Begeisterung wecken: Anleitung zu transformativem Lehren und Lernen*. Reclam.

Sources for Methods

3-2-1. *Infopool besser lernen* (Universität Wien). <https://infopool.univie.ac.at/startseite/lehren-betreuen/feedback/feedback-auf-referate-und-praesentationen/> (09.02.2026)

Emotion journal [Tagebuchmethode]. *Methodenpool Uni Köln*. <http://methodenpool.uni-koeln.de/tagebuch/darstellung.html> (09.02.2026)

Problem based learning (PBL). *Sustainicum Collection*. <https://sustainicum.at/resources/methods/52> (09.02.2026)

Purposeful Storytelling. *Transition Makers Toolbox*. <https://transitionmakers.nl/tool/purposeful-storytelling/> (09.02.2026)

Storytelling. *Sustainicum Collection*. <https://sustainicum.at/resources/methods/17> (09.02.2026)

Think-Pair-Share. *Sustainicum Collection*. <https://sustainicum.at/resources/methods/25> (09.02.2026)

Tables

	Primary Source	Intended ESD Goal	Didactic Approach	Task
1		Changing perspectives	Storytelling	Writing of a text with animal character(s) (homework for 3rd session)
2		Thinking critically; Acquiring knowledge	Think-Pair-Share	
3	Ivan Krylov: <i>Sobachya družhba</i> (1815)	Acquiring knowledge; thinking critically; solving issues, problems, conflicts; participating and collaborating	Problem based learning	Discussion of possible approaches to literary animal characters
4	Lev Tolstoy: <i>Lev i sobachka</i> (1874/75)	Reflecting on values	Emotion journal	
5	Anton Chekhov: <i>Kashtanka</i> (1887)	Reflecting on values	Emotion journal	
6	Evgeny Zamyatin: <i>Glaza</i> (1918)	Reflecting on values; participating and collaborating	Group work; Emotion journal	Translation of Zamyatin's <i>Glaza</i> (homework for 7th session: interlinear translation)
7	Evgeny Zamyatin: <i>Glaza</i> (1918)	Communicating and negotiating;	Group work; storytelling	1) Working on the translation of

		participating and collaborating; Changing perspectives		Zamyatin's <i>Glaza</i> (refinement, problems) 2) Writing of a text (in German or Russian) which adopts the dog's perspective in Zamyatin's <i>Glaza</i> (homework for 8th sessions)
8		Communicating and negotiating; participating and collaborating	Think-Pair-Share	Analysis of TED Talk (draft and discussion of feature list for an appropriate and appealing scientific presentation)
9	Vladimir Mayakovsky: <i>Khoroshee otnosheniye k loshadyam</i> (1918) / Bertolt Brecht: <i>O Falladah, die du hangest!</i> (early 1920s)	Reflecting on values; thinking critically	Emotion journal; Think-Pair-Share	Comparison and historical contextualization of two poems (Mayakovsky and Brecht)
10	Mikhail Bulgakov: <i>Sobachye serdtse</i> (1925/1987)		Emotion journal	
11	Mikhail Bulgakov: <i>Sobachye serdtse</i> (1925/1987)			
12	Mikhail Bulgakov: <i>Sobachye serdtse</i> (1925/1987)			
13		Communicating and negotiating (training);	3-2-1 feedback	Presentation (10 mins) on chosen topic (selection of topics given)

		participating and collaborating		(application/training of presentation skills and feedback)
14		Communicating and negotiating (training); participating and collaborating	3-2-1 feedback	Presentation (10 mins) on chosen topic (selection of topics given)— application/training of presentation skills, feedback by class
15				

Table 1: Proposed syllabus with ESD goals and corresponding methods¹³

¹³ The syllabus contains only the ESD objectives; details on subject-specific and general didactic objectives in accordance with a “constructive alignment” have been omitted for reasons of space and focus.