

ANETA MAKOWSKA

University of Szczecin, Poland<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7785-582X> • aneta.makowska@usz.edu.pl

Received: 2026-03-07; Revised: 2026-05-21; Accepted: 2026-05-22; Published on-line: 2026-08-28

EDUCATION AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES. A SKETCH OF POSSIBLE (RE)CONNECTIONS FOR THE PLANET BASED ON THE RIVER ACTION SZCZODRA

Abstract: The aim of this article is to propose an understanding of performative education as a possible response to planetary crisis and the challenges of the Anthropocene. Drawing on the theoretical background of performance and performativity as well as on critical performative pedagogy, the article presents performative education as an agentive, situated, embodied, material, and anti-disciplinary practice. This perspective is developed in dialog with the river action szczODRA, which serves as an illustrative example of such practices and helps to illuminate their potential for fostering more-than-human communities.

Keywords: performance studies, performativity, performative education, crises and catastrophes, SDG 4, SDG 6

1. Introduction

The question of the place of education becomes particularly important in the context of contemporary debates on planetary crisis and the Anthropocene. In this article, I ask how performative actions at the intersection of artistic, social, and research practices may create situations that enable different ways of being and acting in times of catastrophe.

The article aims to propose an understanding of performative education as one possible response to planetary crisis and the Anthropocene. Drawing on the theoretical background of performance and performativity as well as on critical performative pedagogy, I develop an approach to performative education as a particular form of educational practice emerging at the intersection of theoretical reflection and performative action.

The reflections developed in the article are based on a dialogical case study of the river action szczODRA. In this approach, the relationship between theory and case is dialogical: the concept of performative education is neither derived solely from the description of the case nor used simply as a tool for its interpretation.

Rather, the discussion developed in the article between performance theory and the experience of action leads to the gradual emergence of an understanding of performative education as a practice of learning that arises in the relation between theory, research, and action, an agentive, situated, embodied, and material practice that opens the possibility of a more attentive co-inhabiting of the more-than-human world in conditions of planetary crisis.

2. Performance and pedagogy

The connections between pedagogy and performance studies as well as performativity are not frequently addressed in Polish literature. However, a few major studies should be noted. These include research on the performative onto-epistemology of (dis)ability (Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2019), studies on educational alternatives in which performative education is understood as a space for creative civic dissent (Rudnicki, 2016), and work on performative didactics conceived as a space for building reflective academic practice (Chwieduk & Skórzyńska, 2021). We can also find publications in which performance is treated as a pedagogical method or instructional tool (Pieniążek, 2014; Siarkiewicz et al., 2012). In the English-language literature, the performative turn has had a stronger impact on the development of the social sciences and the humanities, as well as on reflection on education. Performance pedagogy extends along a spectrum from understanding it as a subject of instruction to treating it as a process of shaping an attitude toward social life. "(...) Performance as a way of knowing, performance as a strategic analytic; performance as a way of seeing and understanding the nuanced nomenclature of human social dynamics. In this sense performance pedagogy also includes the nature of performativity in/as pedagogy" (Bryant, 2005, p. 256). Critical performative pedagogy emphasizes learning through the creation of embodied social, cultural, and political experiences. "[P]erformance as pedagogical discourse signals students to engage both their critical and creative skills as well as their enfolded knowledge in order to display and present their understanding of complex concepts grounded in social, cultural, and political issues through the body – and maybe more importantly through their experience. Their performances serve as products that evidence their understanding and their resistance" (Bryant, 2005, p. 253). Finally, critical pedagogy employs performance as a way of intervening in the world. "[C]ritical pedagogy understands performance as a form of inquiry. It views performance as a form of activism, as critique, as critical citizenship. It seeks a form of performative praxis that inspires and empowers persons to act on their utopian impulses" (Denzin, 2018, p. 54). As the authors emphasize, critical and performative pedagogy face the challenge of acting in a multicultural world shaped by racial, identity-based, national, and other tensions. The pedagogy of performative practice connects political, cultural, and educational domains.

Critical performative pedagogy emphasizes learning through embodied experiences and actions that become forms of knowledge, resistance, dialogue, and activism. Contemporary approaches link educational, political, and cultural practices, seeking forms of engagement capable of responding to the complexity of a world shaped by identity-based, racial, and multicultural tensions. I suggest that the assumptions underlying this perspective, i.e. engagement with the concerns of the world, sensitivity to inequalities, and the embodied character of knowledge, can be further developed toward a broader engagement with more-than-human worlds, an attentiveness to inequalities within human–nonhuman communities, and a recognition of the wider material situatedness of education.

This perspective provides a useful framework for examining educational practices at the intersection of social engagement, material environments, and more-than-human relations.

3. Methodology

The aim of the study is to describe the course of actions within the performative pedagogy of the river initiative *szczODRA*. The research follows the strategy of a dialogical case study (Rule et al., 2015; Mizerek, 2017), i.e. an approach that is neither inductive nor deductive but is based on a dialogical relation between the theoretical and the empirical that mutually impact each another throughout the research process. A distinctive feature of a dialogical case study is that the ontoepistemological assumptions of the research are not fixed in advance but are gradually assumed during the research process. The research has been ongoing since 2025.

The empirical material in the case is collected through the analysis of existing documents and situated interviews. The document analysis includes project documentation as well as materials produced during the initiative, such as audio and video recordings, publications accompanying the events, and other forms of documentation of performative actions. Situated interviews are conducted with individuals involved in the initiative and its participants. In the following section, I present a brief account of the river action *szczODRA*, developed within the dialogical case study described above, highlighting themes relevant to performative education. Imagining performative education through the metaphor of a network or rhizome, as an entanglement of many different, more or less stabilized practices, the account follows only a small part of this assemblage.

3.1. The River Action *szczODRA*: A Performative Response

In July 2022, a mass die-off of fish, snails, and mussels occurred in the Oder River. In the lower Oder, 147 million snails died, reducing their population by 85%; the 65 million mussels that died represented an 88% decline in their population;

and the 3.3 million dead fish corresponds to a 60 percent decrease in fish biomass across the entire river (Szlauder-Lukaszewska et al., 2024). Early media reports on the disaster framed the golden alga as the central cause of the catastrophe, with newspaper headlines announcing, among others: “Golden algae killed fish in the Oder – we have no reason to breathe a sigh of relief” (Dmitruczuk, 2022, my translation). Similarly, inspection and research reports published after the disaster devote considerable attention to this organism, indicating that toxins produced by the algae were one of the direct causes of the death of gill-breathing aquatic organisms.

The mechanism of toxic blooms is not yet fully understood, but several contributing factors have been identified, including high water salinity and elevated levels of nitrogen and phosphorus used in agriculture. However, according to analyses of the ecological disaster, including a European Union report, the underlying and direct causes include large discharges of mining-related pollutants in the Oder basin, low water levels, and high temperatures in July 2022 (Free, 2022). From a broader perspective, these factors are themselves consequences of extractive industry, industrial agriculture, and, ultimately, global climate change (Szlauder-Lukaszewska et al., 2024).

Against this background, a number of civic, artistic, and educational initiatives emerged, seeking to respond to the ecological disaster through performative forms of engagement with the river and its more-than-human communities. One of these initiatives was the river action *szczODRA*, which brought together civic, artistic, and educational practices in a performative response to the ecological disaster on the Oder River. The name *szczODRA* is a wordplay combining the name of the river (Odra) with the Polish word *szczodra*, meaning “generous” or “abundant”, symbolically referring to the vitality of the river and the idea of collective care.

Less than a year later, on 23 April 2023, Michał Zygmunt, a field-recording musician whose works are based on recordings of river sounds, completed in Szczecin a forty-day journey in a wooden boat along the Bug, Vistula (Wisła), Brda, Noteć, Bydgoszcz Canal, Warta, and Oder (Odra) rivers. The aim of the journey was to draw attention to the condition of Polish rivers and to support the initiative to establish the Lower Oder Valley National Park. The journey was documented in the Dyba Lach film *I Bring You Wildness* (*Przynoszę Ci dzikość*).

The artist was to be welcomed on the banks of the Oder by, among others, Weronika Fibich, Rafał Foremski, and Paula Rudź, artists associated with Kana Theatre (Teatr Kana) in Szczecin. Although they ultimately did not manage to meet Michał Zygmunt, their pursuit – by foot, tram, and car – led them to discover a number of unexpected places along the Oder. These discoveries were one of the inspirations for initiating the river action *szczODRA*.

So far, the initiative has taken place in three editions. The most recent one, which I briefly present here, took place in April 2024 in Szczecin as part of the opening events of the 57th KONTRAPUNKT International Theatre Festival. It included

workshops, theatrical events, and performative activities inspired by Caravaggio's painting *The Seven Works of Mercy*, organized around the following acts: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, comforting the imprisoned, visiting the sick, and burying the dead.

In the part entitled "Visiting the Sick: The Life of *Prymnesium parvum*," participants encountered the life and death of the golden alga in various ways. The journey began on number 6 tram in Szczecin, which runs along the river between the stops Wały Chrobrego 13 and Lipowa 12, located about 21 minutes and approximately 6.5 kilometres apart.

During the tram ride, amplified conversations took place with specialists studying the worlds of the Oder: ichthyologist Bogdan Wziątek, environmental researcher Małgorzata Bąk, and ornithologist Łukasz Ławicki. Their discussions concerned the river's titular generosity, the fish, mussels, snails, algae, and vegetation inhabiting it, as well as bird migration corridors along the river, the history of river-based industry, regional fisheries, and their cultural impact.

The tram space brought together festival participants as well as people commuting home, to work, or to school, and others simply travelling by tram. The route led to a structure discovered during the earlier search for Michał Zygmunt, built by Karol Schreder near the Gocław Marina. The host created it for recreational purposes, inspired by houseboats found in other places. After approximately five years of work – as the creator himself notes – the structure "turned out a little too large" and remained on the riverbank.

Visitors to the site could take part in a range of activities: exploring the structure and the Oder riverbank, visiting a buffet serving drinks made from algae, observing the life of the golden alga under a microscope while speaking with the environmental scientist Małgorzata Bąk, and listening on individual audio players to the radio piece *szzcODRA*.

The piece is based on conversations with people connected to the river, individuals who study it through scientific and artistic practices, about the relationship between such activities and personal biographies, as well as about the experience of the 2022 ecological disaster and its possible consequences.

An important protagonist of the narrative is the golden alga *Prymnesium parvum*, which in 2022 rapidly multiplied under favorable conditions, most likely in the enclosed, saline waters of the Gliwice Canal. When released into the freshwater of the Oder, it experienced environmental stress caused by the sudden change in salinity. As a result, the cells swelled, ruptured, and released a toxin known as prymnesin, which dissolves the gills of fish, snails, and mussels (Foremski, 2023).

On the lower deck of the structure, in a specially darkened room, large projection screens displayed microscopic recordings of the organism's life and death. This took place alongside an uninterrupted six-hour concert by Łukasz Jastrubczak (DUCH). Small openings in the walls allowed visitors to observe the river and its surroundings during the projections.

4. Performative education in times of crisis and catastrophe

In the foreword to *Pedagogy of Fasting*, Zbigniew Kwieciński writes that pedagogy and education in times of crisis may hinder or even prevent action: they “may become barriers to development, freezers of change, ‘devices’ that reproduce and conserve previous states of affairs in the consciousness of the youngest generations” (Kwieciński, 2012, p. 10). What we need, he argues, are pedagogies of the borderland, of transition, critical-hermeneutic theories [or perhaps post-critical ones? – A.M.’s note], and oppositional practices that can support possible paths of development.

In my view, one such approach may be performative pedagogy, understood as a form of educational action that engages knowledge, experience, and more-than-human relations. It draws on performance studies understood as an interdisciplinary theory of action, a theory of performances (Schechner, 2006), and performativity conceived as an ethical stance of responsibility and care for a complex human–nonhuman world (Sugiera, 2022). The performative turn shifts the emphasis from observing, knowing, studying, and contemplating reality toward action. It can be understood as a response of contemporary humanities to global problems such as planetary, cultural, and technological transformations (Domańska, 2007, p. 54–55).

This turn often appears in the form of related though not separate scientific and artistic ideas close to pedagogical thinking, such as engaged, preventive, or rescue humanities. These approaches are oriented toward “building social resilience, the capacity to cope with the world, adaptation to changing conditions, and the mobilization of imagination and future-oriented thinking in order to construct alternative (to catastrophic) scenarios of the future” (Domańska, 2022, p. 219).

Although *szczODRA* clearly refers to the ecological crisis and, more broadly, to the problems of the Anthropocene, it does not place them at the center as a hyperobject beyond comprehension, analysis, or change, one that escapes our experience while remaining inseparably entangled with it (Morton, 2023). Instead, the initiative offers various ways of approaching a river marked by catastrophe, creating situations of experience that may be understood as practices of performative education: observing the landscape from a tram, spending time on its banks, wandering through a non-floating structure, and learning its history. The action takes place precisely where the catastrophe occurred and continues to unfold, situating the experience within its material context.

It is an anti-disciplinary activity organized around a scenario that establishes certain “circumstances and intrigue” (Taylor, 2015, p. 148). The intrigue lies in weaving together art, science, and everyday life in ways that require negotiation of the unfolding events. Researchers must step outside conceptual regimes and the spaces of lecture halls or laboratories in order to converse in a tram. Microscopes are placed in the hands of non-specialists. Artists create works based on laboratory recordings of *The Life of Prynnesium parvum*. The private space of Mr. Karol becomes part of a public artistic and scientific laboratory. In performative action

there is no single moment of transmission, correction, or explanation. Different orders coexist and contribute to a shared performative experience.

After the ecological disaster, the Oder has often been portrayed as a dangerous, polluted, and “sick” river. Alongside anthropogenic pressures, stemming from human activity, the golden alga has frequently been blamed for its contamination. In this narrative it functions as a “scapegoat”, a figure that, during disasters and misfortunes, is excluded from the community, burdened with responsibility for collective suffering, and symbolically sacrificed. Such sacrifice allows the continuation of social order (Wojanowski, 2016, p. 25–33).

In the action described here, an important step beyond this anthropocentric perspective took place. By organizing various forms of observation and coexistence with *Prymnesium parvum*, participants were able to approach this single-celled organism with its three flagella. They could listen to accounts of its development, the probable causes of toxic blooms, and their effects on gill-breathing organisms. They could observe how, as a result of osmotic shock, the organism swells and dies as its cell membrane ruptures. In this way, the alga became, at least as I assume, part of the participants’ experience: cognitive, emotional, and affective-bodily.

Such practice of performatively reversing perspectives, in my view, constitutes one of the key challenges of education in the Anthropocene. If many diagnoses of planetary crisis begin with a critique of anthropocentrism and the dual division between culture and nature (Latour, 2011; Moore, 2025; and others), then responsible action must at least attempt to abandon these divisions and expand educational communities toward sensitivity to as many planetary co-inhabitants as possible.

In this sense, performative education helps build more-than-human communities: “[F]or non-anthropocentric educators, the educational is a mode of adding to the world, aware not only that new states of the world (which we hope for) cannot be fully predicted or fully realized (even if they are included in lesson plans, defined by goals, values, etc. something can always ‘go wrong’), but also that such adding to the world hopes precisely for this ‘something more’ (than can be designed or imagined), because only this ‘something more’ is worthy of being desired into existence” (Chutorański, 2020, p. 148, translation mine).

5. Discussion: Performative Education as a Fissure in Times of Planetary Crisis

The river action *szczODRA*, described above, may be understood as one example of how performative practices attempt to respond to the limitations of contemporary environmental or ecological education. Since the 1960s, research has documented the progressive degradation of the environment and the urgent need to limit human impact on it. We also have numerous international and Polish analyses pointing to the limited effectiveness of climate and environmental education (Bińczyk, 2018, 2023). We have been unable to translate the language of science into the language

of politics (that is, into social and educational practice) (Latour, 2009). Around the world, advocates of extractive industries who support high levels of production and consumption are still influential. Nor is there any shortage of climate denialists. It may sound like a truism to say that we still lack effective tools for addressing the most pressing planetary challenges.

The performative practices emerging in initiatives such as *szczODRA* do not claim to repair the planet. Rather, they create small-scale situations in which different ways of experiencing and relating to the more-than-human world may become possible. It is a project a fissure through which another way of acting, another kind of practice, may begin to seep. Taylor describes a performance by Bel Borba from 2013: on the main square in São Paulo, the artist painted large images of astronauts connected by an umbilical cord using bottles of water. The work existed for only thirty minutes. Taylor asks: “The vanishing image? Or Borba’s rapid movements (labor)? Or does the work constitute the interruption into the quotidian? An invitation to interact with the environment? Take a look, his work shouts. This is possible! Or all at the same time? Borba’s interventions in the urban are not about changing it as much as showing that change is possible” (Taylor, 2015, p. 20).

Rather than offering solutions to planetary crises, performative initiatives such as *szczODRA* open spaces in which alternative forms of learning, responsibility, and more-than-human coexistence may begin to take shape.

Statements

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved by the Committee for the Application of Ethical Standards in Scientific Research at the University of Szczecin, 14.01.2026.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

AI Tools Declaration: During the preparation of this manuscript and/or the underlying study, the author used GPT-5.3 (OpenAI) for the following purpose(s): language editing and translation. The author reviewed and edited the output where necessary and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Barad, K. (2012). Posthumanistyczna performatywność: Ku zrozumieniu, jak materia zaczyna mieć znaczenie (J. Bednarek, Trans.). In A. Gajewska (Ed.), *Teorie wywrotowe. Antologia przekładów* (pp. 323–360). Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Bińczyk, E. (2018). *Epoka człowieka. Retoryka i marazm antropocenu*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Bińczyk, E. (2023). *Uspołecznianie antropocenu. Ekowerwa i ekologizowanie ekonomii*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Bryant, K.A. (2005). Performance and pedagogy. In N. Madison & J. Hamera (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of performance studies*. SAGE Publications.

- Chutorański, M. (2020). *Nie(tylko)ludzkie wymiary edukacji. W stronę pedagogiki nieantropocentrycznej*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego.
- Denzin, N.K. (2018). Introduction. In *Performance autoethnography* (pp. xiv–10). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315159270-1>.
- Dmitruczuk, A. (2022, August 18). *Złote algi zabiły ryby w Odrze — nie mamy powodów, by odetchnąć*. Wyborcza. <https://wyborcza.pl/7,177851,28804999,zlote-algi-zabily-ryby-w-odrze-nie-mamy-powodow-by-odetchnac.html>.
- Domańska, E. (2022). Zwroty badawcze w historii i innych naukach humanistycznych. In E. Domańska & J. Pomorski (Eds.), *Wprowadzenie do metodologii historii* (pp. 218–236). Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Free, G., Van De Bund, W., Gawlik, B., Van Wijk, L., Wood, M., Guagnini, E., Koutelos, K., Annunziato, A., Grizzetti, B., Vigiak, O., Gnecci, M., Poikane, S., Christiansen, T., Whalley, C., Antognazza, F., Zerger, B., Hoeve, R., & Stielstra, H. (2023). *Unijna analiza katastrofy ekologicznej na Odrze w 2022 r.* Urząd Publikacji Unii Europejskiej. <https://doi.org/10.2760/536489>.
- Foremski, R. (Comp.). (2023). *szczODRA*. <https://soundcloud.com/szczodra/szczodra>.
- Giroux, H., & Shannon, P. (2013). *Education and cultural studies* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.
- Kwieciński, Z. (2013). *Pedagogie postu. Preteksty. Konteksty. Podteksty*. Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.
- Latour, B. (2009). *Politics of nature* (C. Porter, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. (2011). *Nigdy nie byliśmy nowoczesni* (M. Gdula, Trans.). Oficyna Wydawnicza.
- Latour, B., & Rose, J. (2021). *After lockdown* (1st ed.). Polity.
- Mizerek, H. (2017). Studium przypadku w badaniach nad edukacją: Istota i paleta zastosowań. *Przegląd Pedagogiczny*, 1, 9–22.
- Moore, J.W. (Ed.). (2025). *Antropocen czy kapitalocen? Natura, historia i kryzys kapitalizmu* (K. Hoffmann, Trans.). Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria.
- Morton, T. (2023). *Mroczna ekologia. Ku logice przyszłego współistnienia* (A. Barcz, Trans.). Oficyna Związek Otwarty.
- Pieniżek, M. (2014). Edukacja performatywna jako skuteczny model nauczania. *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Cultura*, 6(168), 106–119.
- Rule, P., & John, V.M. (2015). A necessary dialogue: Theory in case study research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 14(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406915611575>.
- Schechner, R. (2006). *Performatyka: Wstęp* (T. Kubikowski, Trans.). Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.
- Siarkiewicz, E., Trębińska-Szumigraj, E., & Zielińska-Pękał, D. (2012). *Edukacyjne prowokacje: Wykorzystanie etnografii performatywnej w procesie kształcenia doradców*. Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.
- Sugiera, M. (2022). Performatywność jako postawa/perspektywa: Wstęp. *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, 71(4), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.36744/pt.1425>.
- Szlauer-Łukaszewska, A., Ławicki, Ł., Engel, J., Drewniak, E., Ciężak, K., & Marchowski, D. (2024). Quantifying a mass mortality event in freshwater wildlife within the Lower Odra River: Insights from a large European river. *Science of the Total Environment*, 907, 167898. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2023.167898>.

Taylor, D. (2015). *Performance*. Duke University Press.

Wojnowski, K. (2016). *Pożyteczne katastrofy*. Universitas.