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Creative writing: Thinking beyond the standard text

Teaching high school students to write original texts

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

'... I need to know some new processes and new methods of writing'

David Bowie, Moonage Daydream

1 CREATIVITY, ESPECIALLY AT SCHOOL

In the documentary Moonage Daydream, David Bowie tells how his writing process inspires original ideas. For instance, he writes short text fragments on loose sheets of paper and cuts them up to combine them in new ways. He organized his life to maximize creative thinking. When a place became too familiar and comfortable, he would move to another country. In the early 1970s, he left for Berlin for two years because he felt that new music was needed and invited Brian Eno to work with him because he needed '...to know some new processes and new methods of writing'. His life revolved around creativity.

David Bowie may be an exceptional example, but these days all of us are expected to be able to color outside the lines or think 'out of the box' to a greater or lesser extent. We need to stand out creatively and shape creative thinking processes. Companies want employees who excel in creative ideas and spend millions on creativity training every year (De Dreu & Sligte, 2016). The idea that creative thinking is crucial for modern society can also be seen in policy articles, books, and scientific papers. If you enter the word *creative* on LinkedIn, you get more than 13,000 results for the Netherlands alone.

Since the beginning of this century, interest in creativity in education (Cremin & Chappell, 2021) has also been increasing: creativity is seen as one of the 21st-century skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). This interest is also reflected, for example, in an OECD international research and development project focusing on creative ability and critical thinking (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019) and PISA's choice to select creative thinking skills as an innovative domain test for 2021 (OECD, 2019, delayed to 2022 by the Covid-19 pandemic). Between 1950 and 2009, the number of scientific articles on creativity or innovation in peer-reviewed journals doubled (Hoelscher & Schoebert, 2015), and the Dutch Ministry of Education's mission statement also shows the importance of creativity: 'The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is working towards a smart, skillful and *creative* Netherlands' (Ministerie van OCW, 2023), author's emphasis). This focus on creativity in education is justified since research has shown that creativity is not only important for learning performance and cognitive ability, but it is also an important predictor of academic success (Gajda, 2016; Gajda et al., 2017).

Are you just lucky if you are born with unique creative skills, if you can think like David Bowie, Frida Kahlo, or Kendrick Lamar, or can you also learn to be creative? While we cannot all learn to write poetry like Lieke Marsman, researchers tend to agree that creative thinking is a skill that can be practiced and learned just like other skills (Craft, 2005; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2019; Lasky & Yoon, 2020). According to Kaufman & Sternberg, creativity '... is not an inherited predisposition fixed at birth, but a set of skills and attitudes that all people can develop to a greater or lesser extent' (2019, p. 3). Sternberg proposed that such development can be fostered by giving people opportunities to think creatively, by encouraging them when they think creatively, and by rewarding them when they think and act creatively (Sternberg, 2010, p. 394). This practicing and learning of creative thinking can and should also happen at school (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Lasky & Yoon, 2020) especially through and with the use of language in Dutch language classes.

2 RESEARCH SETTING

This dissertation focuses on creative writing in Dutch secondary education. The idea arose years ago when, in the Dutch department of the secondary school I was a member of, we noticed that students were losing the joy of writing, especially in the upper grades. Moreover, the quality of their writing was not improving. What was the cause? In lower secondary grades, besides communicative texts such as letters and argumentative texts, students also wrote creative texts, stories and occasionally poetry, but in upper secondary, they mainly wrote argumentative texts. These were often closed tasks: write an argument with a clear position, provide two arguments in support, refute a counterargument, and end your text with a clear conclusion. We realized that there was little room for creativity in such assignments. There was no time for writing narratives and poetry, but we also paid little attention in Dutch language classes to the creativity of argumentative texts. In the lower grades, students had more fun while writing. What if we returned to narrative writing with upper secondary students and gave them more freedom and room for creativity? Could this improve their motivation and would they actually write better texts?

Combining creative thinking and writing seems a promising solution, but in practice, teaching both skills runs into problems. The problems we experienced with writing skills are not limited to a single school in the Netherlands: everywhere, students' language skills are lagging behind. For example, reading skills have declined in most OECD countries (OECD, 2019) and writing is not doing much better. Graham (2019) showed that students do not always become

proficient writers, as only 24% of students in Grades 8 and 12 in the United States were rated as 'proficient' in writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012) and the National Commission on Writing (2003) labelled writing a neglected skill in schools. These issues with writing instruction are not unique to the United States, but also apply to other countries (Graham 2019; Graham & Rijlaarsdam, 2016). At the same time, secondary schools need to prepare students for a study and work environment that requires a lot of writing (Brandt, 2014; OECD, 2018).

Nor was the lack of narrative writing limited to our school. The disappearance of attention to the creative side of writing in the Netherlands is largely due to an educational innovation in 1998: *De Tweede Fase* [The Second Phase]. Although we do not know exactly how much attention was paid to creative writing before this innovation was introduced, we suspect that there was more time for narrative writing because of the possibility of writing a story as part of the Dutch central final examination. Prior to 1998, the Dutch central final examination consisted of two sessions: reading comprehension and summarizing skills were assessed in one session, and writing was assessed in another. Narrative writing was not explicitly mentioned in the examination program, but during the final exam one of the prompts offered the opportunity to draft a story. The program dated from 1970 and writing skills were described, summarily, as: 'Performing a set task, to be chosen from a number of at least six' (senior general secondary education (*havo*) and pre-university education (*vwo*) examination program, 1970). After narrative writing was removed from the examination program in 1998, writing poetry and narrative fiction remained mostly confined to primary and lower secondary school education (Van Burg, 2010; Van Gelderen, 2010). Likewise, students feel that schools do not pay enough attention to narrative writing. Stalpers & Stokmans (2019) investigated how former students think about narrative writing and reported that 75% of students indicated that narrative writing received little or far too little attention in literature education.

It is not only writing education that has issues, but there is also room for improvement in teaching creativity and creative thinking. Despite the interest in creativity in education among policymakers, teaching creativity is often limited to school subjects aiming at creativity, such as visual arts. This may be due to several reasons, such as teachers not believing in the importance of creativity (Farella, 2010; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2006) or not knowing how to teach it effectively (Cheung, 2012; Kampilis et al., 2009). The use of standardized tests (e.g., *Cito*-tests in the Netherlands: Central Institution for Test Development), and final exams can also, unintentionally, suppress students' creativity (Rinkevich, 2011; Sternberg, 2010). These tests usually do not involve creative learning and

thinking, but the kind of thinking and learning that results in one correct answer. Precisely the problems that call for divergent and creative thinking do not fit into this framework and are therefore not tested (Sternberg, 2010, p. 395).

Nevertheless, there is a renewed focus on creativity in education in the Netherlands. For example, TNO [Netherlands organization for applied scientific research] has developed a questionnaire on creative abilities (Stubbé et al., 2015) and SLO [Netherlands institute for curriculum development] has developed a learning framework Creative Thinking and Action (2020). The proposed 2019 curriculum for Dutch language and literature also highlights 'experimenting with language and forms of language [...] in which play and fantasy play an important role' as one of the seven core aspects of the subject of Dutch language and literature (Curriculum.nu). More attention is also being paid to narrative writing, sometimes in the context of reading literature (Koopman, 2017; Stichting Lezen, 2017). SLO analyzed several Dutch teaching methods and concluded that, regarding creativity, there is no coherence in the methods and an explanation of the importance of creativity is missing (Den Otter, 2022). Furthermore, none of them included a learning framework for creativity.

In Dutch education, sixty-three percent of all teachers primarily use the teaching method, but more than eighty percent of teachers also report finding and developing their own teaching materials (Woldhuis et al., 2018). Teachers give various reasons (e.g., 'I don't know how', 'It's easy to follow') for why the method is still widely used, but more than sixty-five percent of teachers cite lack of time to develop their own teaching materials as the main reason (Woldhuis et al., 2018). In recent years, efforts have been made to change this. The Ministry of Education has provided doctoral grants for teachers, giving them time to conduct research in addition to their classroom work (e.g., Dudoc-Alfa; Dutch Research Council, NWO). This provides an opportunity for teachers to further professionalize themselves through research. This form of research in school practice contributes to the personal development of teachers (Babkie & Provost, 2004) but is also a means of promoting and implementing educational innovation (Mills & Earl Rinehart, 2019). One such grant made this dissertation possible (Doctoral Grant for Teachers, Dutch Research Council, NWO). The aim of this dissertation was to design effective lessons to teach upper secondary students to write more original texts.

In this introduction, I will briefly define creative writing and conclude with an overview of the chapters in this dissertation.

3 CREATIVE WRITING

Creativity is '... the ability to produce work that is both novel (original, unexpected) and appropriate' (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999, p. 3). 'Novel' can vary from 'unusual' to 'unique' (Hayes, 1989). 'Appropriate' means that the creative product must fit the task, the intended audience, and the context. However, this general definition of creativity cannot simply be applied to student writing (Glăveanu, 2010). Recent research has shifted from a focus on eminent creativity to different levels of creativity (Beghetto & Kaufman; 2007; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) and in the Four-C model of creativity (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007), creativity can range from a subjective and personal form of creativity (mini-c), to more objective forms of creativity that take place in everyday life (little-c), to creativity at a professional level (Pro-c), and finally to eminent creativity (Big-c). Students' narrative writing belongs to everyday (little-c) creativity. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on little-c creativity.

Writing is a form of meaning construction, and therefore a productive and creative process (Flower & Hayes, 1977; Galbraith & Baaijen, 2019; Hayes, 1989). A writing task is a creative open task, without a fixed correct response, and is therefore heuristic rather than algorithmic (Amabile 1996). The path to the solution of the task is ambiguous. This is especially true for narrative fiction writing because the problem-solving space is much larger for narrative fiction than it is in communicative writing, where the writer must fulfill an explicit rhetorical purpose: to persuade or to inform. Such a purpose goes with more or less fixed elements. An argument usually requires students to state a position in the introduction, then present some arguments and refute a counterargument. Here, the writer's and reader's expectations of text structure coincide, which is far less the case in narratives. Although narratives also have more or less fixed components (like fairy tales), there are fewer constraints on text structure in creative writing which gives writers more freedom.

Another distinction may be more decisive: the role of imagination. Writing a fictional text requires imagination. In a communicative text, writers share the world they are writing about with the reader. The text they write reflects that world. In a fictional text, authors do not refer to an external, existing world. They create and represent a fictional world (Doyle, 1998) and empathize with the characters they create: how do they feel, what do they think, what are they capable of, and what choices do they make? The same applies to expressive texts, texts about personal experiences, memories and emotions. Authors must evoke that world of experiences and memories and while writing, meaning is created/asigned to those memories and emotions. Perhaps this externalization of a

fictional world is the crucial feature of fiction writing. Teaching creative writing is teaching imagination.

4 OUTLINE OF THIS DISSERTATION

The main aim of this dissertation was to develop teaching materials for creative writing based on effective design principles for creative thinking as well as teachers' practical experiences in the classroom. We have tried to answer four main questions:

1. What are the differences between narrative and communicative writing processes? (Study 1, Chapter 2)
2. Does instruction in a narrative writing unit improve the quality of tenth-grade students' narrative and argumentative texts and influence their writing process? (Study 2, Chapter 3)
3. Does an instructional unit that introduces a creative thinking strategy for communicative texts and narrative writing techniques improve the quality of tenth-grade students' communicative and narrative texts and influence their writing process? (Studies 3-4, Chapter 4)
4. What is the overall effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving students' creative writing? (Study 5, Chapter 5)?

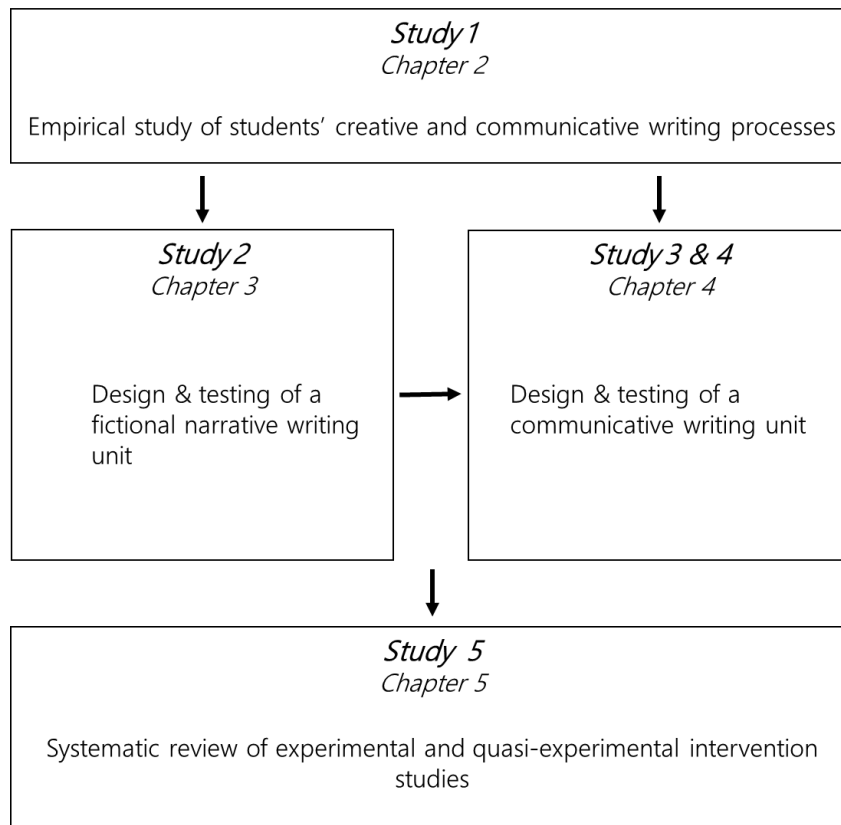
We answer these questions in the next five chapters of the dissertation. Figure 1.1 shows a schematic overview of the structure of this dissertation.

To answer the four central questions of this dissertation, we conducted several studies, each with different aims. First, we investigated whether there is a distinction between argumentative and creative writing processes and, if so, what this distinction entails (Chapter 2). We also examined the effect of the writing process on the quality of students' writing. After all, to develop effective creative writing instruction, it is necessary to understand the effectiveness of the writing process. For example, an instructional designer may not need to focus on revision if it turns out that revision is not that important to the quality of creative writing. Thus, this first study was a prerequisite for the successful execution of the follow-up studies.

Chapter 3 describes the design of a narrative writing unit in collaboration with teachers. We based this design on Schacter et al.'s (2006) Creative Teaching Framework and encouraged writing in flow by using divergent thinking tasks. We investigated whether the unit could improve the quality of students' narrative and argumentative writing in upper secondary education. In addition, we

examined the influence of the unit on students writing processes. Creative Self-Concept was included as a moderator. In this chapter, we describe the results and effectiveness of the narrative writing unit.

Figure 1.1 Design of the research project and outline of the dissertation



In Chapter 4, we designed and evaluated a writing course *Pimp your text* to encourage students to write more original and captivating communicative texts through divergent thinking and narrative techniques. The design was based on the design principles we described in Chapter 3. We conducted two studies to examine the effectiveness of the communicative writing unit. Study 3 was a design study in which we adapted and tested the design for communicative writing. In a subsequent quasi-experimental study (Study 4), we examined whether the new design improved the holistic text quality of the target tasks (communicative writing) and non-target tasks (narrative fiction) and affected students' writing

speed. In both studies, two sets of three classes (Grade 10) participated in a pre-posttest design (Study 1) and in a switching replications design (Study 2). In Study 4 we included Writing Attitude, Creative Self-Concept, and Approach and Avoidance Motivation as moderators.

Finally, we conducted a meta-analysis of creative writing in secondary education to determine whether additional design principles were needed. Chapter 5 presents the results of this analysis: a systematic review of the effectiveness of thirteen studies on creative writing in secondary education. This chapter describes the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the search strategies used, the coding and analysis, and the results. The results of the meta-analysis can help secondary teachers develop effective narrative writing instruction.

Chapter 6 summarizes the major findings of this dissertation, discusses the contribution of these studies to writing education, and provides an outlook for further writing research and practice.

Chapters 2 through 5 are based on research papers of which Chapter 2 and 3 are published. Therefore, each chapter can be read independently. The downside is that there is considerable repetition and overlap, especially in the introductions to the articles that define core concepts and design principles.