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Think twice

Literature lessons that matter

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CHAPTER 1

WHY AND HOW TO OPEN A BLACK BOX

there is something in everything if you can only pin down its name

Peter Hammill, *A Black Box*

1 OPENING THOUGHTS

The idea for this book originated in the environment where its content is supposed to land: a literature classroom. There, when we were once evaluating the school year, one of my students responded: "I don't know what it is exactly, or how it comes about, but in literature class I feel I am thinking much more critically than is asked of me in other classes." That remark sparked in me the inquisitive thoughts that ultimately led to the research project described on these pages. Because, as this student made me realize, in respect of exactly what and how they contribute to my students' critical thinking, my literature lessons were a black box to me.

That it is important to open this black box can be derived from recent calls on educators. For instance, education is asked to stimulate students to think critically for themselves, as democratic citizenship depends on such thinking (Nussbaum, 2017). Also, education is encouraged to stimulate students to think critically about who they are and what they stand for, so they can be their own person and feel responsible about that (Biesta, 2015). Furthermore, critical thinking is considered to be one of the 21st Century Skills, i.e., the specific skills students today should develop to be able to participate in 21st century society (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009). In sum, education is being called upon to contribute to a democratic society and to students' individual well-being, and whether teachers can respond to these calls seems to depend, at least in part, on whether they will succeed in stimulating their students' critical thinking.

Such success is known to be hard to achieve (Van der Grift, 2010). In the domains of psychology and philosophy it is generally recognized that to think

critically, students (as all humans) should postpone their initial responses to the matter at hand (Dewey, 1910; Ennis, 2011; Facione, 2015). However, our minds are not optimally wired for this postponement. According to dual process theory, which is grounded in Nobel prize-winning research by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, such postponement is constantly counteracted by our mind's tendency to rely on autonomous thinking processes (System 1) that automatically provide fast responses to the world around us (Kahneman, 2011; Evans & Stanovich, 2013). Therefore, when we want to think critically, it seems we first must inhibit these automatic responses, i.e., de-automatize our thinking (Evans & Stanovich, 2013).

Could the student's response quoted in the first paragraph allude to such de-automatization in literature class? Many scholars in the field of literature studies might agree that it could. For centuries, it was widely accepted that the literary experience is typified by defamiliarization, as literary texts tend to present what is overly familiar to us but in an unfamiliar way (Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Hakemulder, 2000; Armstrong, 2013; see also Van Peer et al., 2021, who discussed how this idea about the literary experience can be tracked back to Aristotle). Defamiliarization counters automatic processing, as it intensifies our perception of the world – according to Shklovsky (2017, as paraphrased in Hakemulder, 2000) – and thereby entices reflective thoughts. For example: in our daily lives, when we perceive a traffic light this will most likely be processed autonomously by our minds, which provide an automatic response: stop, or go on. But when we read a poem in which a traffic light speaks to us, we might experience the overly familiar as strange and begin to ask ourselves, for instance, what traffic lights mean to us and what their existence may tell us about human nature. As such, feeling defamiliarized when reading a literary text might help us to de-automatize our thinking about the world. However, from what we know from dual process theory, it is uncertain whether all literary readers will indeed experience defamiliarization and, if they do, whether this will spark reflective thoughts in them – they could just as easily deem the poem incomprehensible, or beautiful, without giving it much thought either way. After all, the literary experience seems to call for inhibition of System 1-processing, which does not come naturally to us. From this perspective, there is a reason intrinsic to literature education to open the lid of the aforementioned black box: students' understanding of literature itself may benefit from stimulating their critical thinking in literature class.

2 RESEARCH SETTING

The studies described in this dissertation were set in Dutch literature education at pre-university level. By law, Dutch schools and teachers have a great deal of freedom in designing their curricula. For the domain of literature education there are just three, global, objectives: students have to be able to deliver a well substantiated report of their reading experiences with a minimum of 12 literary works (of which 3 published before 1880); students must be able to recognize different kinds of literary texts and be able to use literary concepts to interpret these texts; students must be able to give a broad overview of the outlines of literary history and to place works they read in this historical perspective (Examenblad.nl, 2019, 14). Consequently, which content literature lessons have, which literary works students must read, and how much time is allocated to literature education, is left to individual schools and departments within schools, and often, individual teachers within departments, to decide (Verboord, 2005).

Within this setting, we focused on one particular school, with one particular literature program. This was done deliberately, as recent publications suggest that this school's literature program involves tasks that stimulate students' critical thinking (Noorduijn, 2015; Van Silfhout, 2016). There are reasons to believe that, on average, other literature programs at other Dutch schools do not focus as much on this particular quality, because – in general – Dutch literature teachers have insufficient incentives to promote critical thinking in their classes. Dutch literature textbooks typically lack assignments that invite students to think critically about what they read (Witte, 2008). Also, none of the global objectives in the national curriculum we referred to mention critical thinking. Moreover, while development of critical thinking is notoriously hard to assess (Ennis, 2011), Dutch teachers experience a growing social demand for clear-cut assessment of educational development (Sectiebestuur Levende Talen, 2013). At the school of our research focus these obstacles for stimulating critical thinking in literature class might play a less prominent role. The teachers at this school do not rely on standard textbooks for literature education, as they designed the literature lessons and assignments themselves, iteratively, over many years, and always from the starting point that literature education should stimulate students to think for themselves. Also, at the research school literature education is taught as an independent, separate subject, as opposed to a sub-domain of L1-education, which is common practice in most Dutch schools. When literature education is taught separately from L1-education, it is a minor subject, reflected in the fact that its grades hardly count for the nationally set final exams. Consequently, literature teachers at the research school might feel less pressed than their

colleagues at other schools to meet the demands for clear-cut and unambiguous assessment of their students' progress.

By investigating students' responses to this particular literature program, we hoped to achieve our main research aim: to present to all literature teachers the pedagogical building blocks, i.e., the desired learning outcomes and the learning activities that make these outcomes more likely, for fostering students' critical literary thinking in literature class. Building blocks that these teachers may want to adapt in their own literature programs.

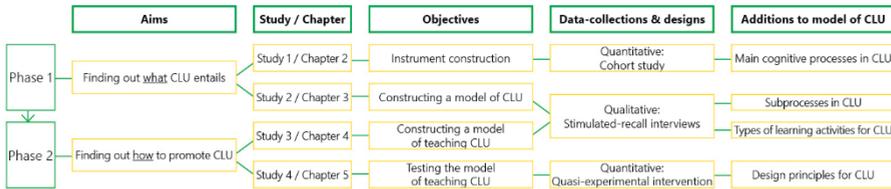
3 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The research project presented in this dissertation consisted of two phases (Figure 1.1). In phase 1 the aim was to find out what the desired learning outcomes are, in terms of cognitive processes that can stimulate students' critical thinking in the context of literature education, a cognitive learning goal that we will henceforth refer to as Critical Literary Understanding (CLU). To achieve that aim, we implemented a sequential mixed method design. We conceptualized CLU and empirically tested this concept by measuring its growth in literature students (Study 1). From those participants we then selected 21 students for a stimulated-recall interview study, to identify the types of experiences of CLU that students had while participating in the literature lessons (Study 2).

In phase 2, the aim was to find out how CLU can be stimulated in literature class. To achieve this aim, we again used a sequential mixed method design. In study 3, we conducted an analysis with additional coding of the interview transcripts collected in Study 2, to identify types of learning activities that make experiences of CLU more likely. Finally, we designed and tested two literature programs which aimed to evoke these types of learning activities, in a quasi-experimental intervention study (Study 4).

As Figure 1.1's third column shows, we will report each study in a separate chapter of this dissertation. As we set up the whole project in publishable papers, each of these chapters follows the structure of a journal article. Consequently, readers of the whole dissertation will experience content overlap between the chapters, especially where the theoretical framework is concerned, although it develops from chapters 2 to 4. On the other hand, this structure allows each chapter to be read on its own. Below, we will briefly review what is reported in each of the chapters.

Figure 1.1 Design of the research project. Phases, aims, studies, objectives, data-collection, and additions to model CLU



3.1 Phase 1: Finding out what Critical Literary Understanding entails

Conceptualizing Critical Literary Understanding. In Chapter 2, Study 1¹ is reported. This study is about empirically testing a theoretical concept of Critical Literary Understanding (CLU), to enable us to construct a first model of CLU. As a first step, we investigated the main cognitive processes involved in CLU. Therefore, we synthesized current theories on critical thinking and literary reading to reach a theoretical concept of Critical Literary Understanding. We then designed an instrument to measure Critical Literary Understanding in students: The Critical Thinking in a Literary Context-test (CTLC). In a cohort study (Grades 10 to 12 of pre-university education, N = 271), we used the CTLC to assess students' growth in Critical Literary Understanding four months after the beginning of the school year, and the role students' critical thinking skills and dispositions played in that growth.

Identifying student experiences of Critical Literary Understanding. The next step in understanding what Critical Literary Understanding entails is described in Chapter 3, in which we report on Study 2². This study focused on expanding the model of CLU, by determining what the possible subprocesses of the cognitive processes in CLU are. We investigated whether and, if so, how Critical Literary Understanding was experienced in literature lessons, by students who participated in Study 1. In 21 stimulated-recall interviews, students (7 for each of the three Grades) reflected on learning experiences in literature classes in the four

¹ This study is published as Koek, M., Janssen, T., Hakemulder, F. & Rijlaarsdam, G. (2016). *Critical thinking and literary reading: Measuring critical literary understanding in secondary education*. *Scientific Study of Literature*, 6(2), 243-277.

² This study is published as Koek, M., Janssen, T., Hakemulder, F. & Rijlaarsdam, G. (2019). *Literature education as a school for thinking: Students' learning experiences in secondary literature education*. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 19, 1-33.

months between the two measurement occasions in Study 1. Students' literature portfolio's, consisting of all assignments they completed during these four months, served as a stimulus to recall their learning experiences. Transcriptions of each interview were analyzed for types of CLU experiences. In Chapter 3, we discuss these types of experiences as manifestations of subprocesses in CLU and construct a conceptual model of what happens in students' minds when they engage in CLU.

3.2 Phase 2: Finding out how to stimulate Critical Literary Understanding

Identifying learning activities for Critical Literary Understanding. From Chapter 4, in which we report on Study 3¹, the research focus shifts to how teachers might be able to stimulate Critical Literary Understanding. As a first step in answering this 'how-to-stimulate'-question, we investigated the instructional context in which students experienced the manifestations of CLU-subprocesses that we identified in the previous study. We report on the cognitive operations students mentioned in the interview transcripts we collected for Study 2. For the analysis on cognitive operations, we performed additional coding of these transcripts. We identified 4 types of learning activities for CLU. After discussing which of these types of learning activities make which subprocesses of CLU more likely to occur in students' minds, we synthesized the outcomes of Studies 2 and 3 in a model of teaching CLU. This model served as input for the final study.

Testing the effect of two instructional approaches on growth in CLU. In Chapter 5 we report on Study 4, which aimed to experimentally test the effectiveness of the types of learning activities we proposed to stimulate Critical Literary Understanding. To reach that aim, we designed two different 12-lesson instructional units, that incorporated these types of learning activities. One design was based on an implicit approach in which learning content consisted of literary interpretation and the types of learning activities for CLU were never explicitly mentioned to the students. The other design was based on an explicit approach of instruction, in which each of the four types of learning activities were instructed and practiced, as steps in a strategy for critical literary interpretation. We tested the effect of these units on students' development of CLU in a quasi-experimental intervention study (6 schools, 11 teachers, 13 classes) with two panels, three

¹ This study was submitted as *How to Stimulate Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom: An Empirical Study to Identify Learning Activities that Stimulate Critical Literary Understanding, to L1- Educational Studies in Language and Literature.*

measurements (pretest, intermediate test, post-test), two experimental conditions, and a control condition. The first panel, between pretest and intermediate test, served as a control for all conditions. The second panel, between intermediate test and post-test, contained the quasi-experiment. We tested the effect on CLU and whether motivation for literature education (in terms of task value, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation) moderated students' growth in CLU.

3.3 Discussing the whole project

In the closing chapter we review our main findings in terms of answers to our research questions and present our key conclusions. Furthermore, we discuss possible limitations of the project, in terms of validity, design and scope, and discuss its output for research and pedagogical practice. Finally, we discuss ideas for future research and implications for literature education, and beyond.

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