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Think twice

Literature lessons that matter

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CHAPTER 6

MAKING SENSE OF A BLACK BOX' CONTENT

I always forget how crazy things are
So sometimes it catches me off my guard
When they make sense
Peter Hammill – Flying blind

1 INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explained why and how we wanted to open a black box; in the following chapters I described what we found when opening it. Still, opening a black box and finding out what is inside it by itself does not amount to meaningful knowledge. This is perhaps most famously illustrated in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In this novel, mankind succeeds in opening maybe the biggest black box imaginable, i.e., finding the answer to "the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything.". According to the supercomputer designed for this grandiose task, that answer, i.e., the content of that black box, is: 42.

While I think there is a lot more to say about the content of 'our' black box, I do face the same questions as the protagonists in Adams' novel: how may we interpret our findings? What can we take away from them? In this final chapter I will attempt to answer these questions. First, I will review our main findings, to ultimately present my conclusions about what Critical Literary Understanding entails and how to promote it in literature class. Second, I will discuss possible limitations of this research project, by questioning the foundations and the scope of these conclusions. Third, I will review two deliveries of the present research project – the Critical Thinking in a Literary Context-test and the design principles for promoting CLU in literature class – by discussing their value for researchers and teachers. Last, I will present ideas for future research and argue the assertion

– and its implications – that, ultimately, the black box we opened contains the basis of teaching literary arts, and beyond.

2 MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 Critical Literary Understanding as an educational concept

In the first study, we focused on understanding what critical thinking in the context of literature education may entail, conceptually. As I reported in Chapter 2, we first conceptualized Critical Literary Understanding (CLU) as a de-automatized, (re)constructive meaning making process in response to reading literary texts, by synthesizing theories from philosophy, literary studies, and psychology. We proposed that CLU combines literary understanding and critical thinking, as particular critical thinking skills (clarification, judging credibility of a source, deductive and inductive reasoning) and critical thinking dispositions (need for cognition and actively open-minded thinking) may help stimulate de-automatization and (re)construction in literary understanding. To test these theoretical assumptions, and, thus, the viability of CLU as an educational concept, we conducted a cohort study of a program of literary arts, which, according to its teachers, was aimed at stimulating students to think for themselves. Hereby, we tried to answer the following research questions:

Do upper secondary pre-university students show growth in Critical Literary Understanding after attending literature education for four months?

Is growth in Critical Literary Understanding mediated by critical thinking dispositions and moderated by critical thinking skills?

Concerning the first research question: as Critical Literary Understanding (CLU) implies that it can be discerned in an educational context, we hypothesized that students in the investigated program would develop CLU over time. Concerning the second question: as, conceptually, Critical Literary Understanding relies on de-automatization, we expected that growth in CLU would (partially) come about via a development in critical thinking dispositions (mediation), as these have been found to stimulate de-automatization. Furthermore, because we theorized that Critical Literary Understanding also involves (re)construction, we expected that any growth in CLU would be more prominent for students who had a higher level of critical thinking skills (moderation), as, theoretically, having these skills makes one more likely to improve (re)constructive meaning making.

With a sample of 271 pre-university students (Grade 10–12), all three hypotheses were confirmed. First, the results showed significant growth in CLU for all

three Grades, meaning that, on average, students improved their Critical Literary Understanding after four months. In addition, we also found that Grade 12 students, on average, achieved significantly higher levels of CLU than students in Grades 10 and 11, in line with the expectation that students' CLU improves over time. Second, both the mediation effect of critical thinking dispositions and the moderation effect of critical thinking skills showed in the best fitting model of the results, and together these effects explained 37% of growth in CLU. The explanatory power of these effects was stronger in higher Grades, which indicates that critical thinking skills and dispositions play a bigger role in the development of CLU for students with more years of experience. This finding can be explained when we consider that students in higher Grades have more experience with literary tasks that evoke their critical thinking skills and dispositions. Such experienced students are more likely to address these skills and dispositions when confronted with literary tasks than less experienced students who might still be finding out what the tasks' cognitive requirements are.

I argue that the coherence between the findings in this study is a strong argument to view Critical Literary Understanding as an educational goal: CLU can be developed over time and critical thinking skills and dispositions play an important role in its development. Even though the results of this study cannot be generalized to other students, in other literature programs, at other schools, this study laid the groundwork for the next studies in the research project.

2.2 Six types of experiences of de-automatization and (re)construction in literature class

In Study 2, reported on in Chapter 3, we focused on expanding our understanding of what CLU may involve. After all, the first, quantitative, study, had not addressed how students in the investigated program had experienced de-automatization and (re)construction, i.e., the cognitive processes involved in CLU. We attempted to fill that knowledge gap by answering the following research question:

Which experiences of de-automatization and (re)construction – if any – do secondary school students (pre-university track, Grade 10-12, age 14-19) of one Dutch school report when they look back on four months of a specific program of literary arts?

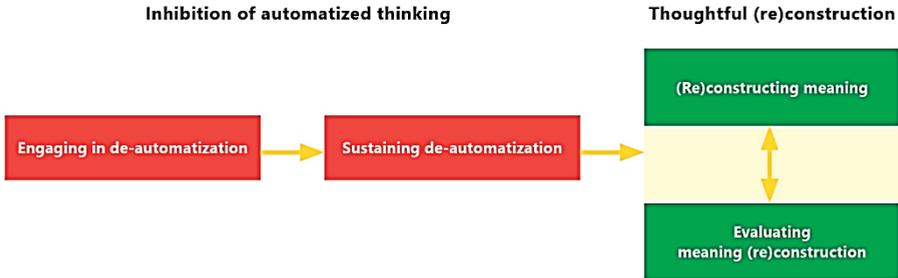
Our expectation that students would indeed report on these types of experiences, was met. From an analysis of 21 interview transcripts, we identified 3 types

of de-automatization experiences and three types of (re)construction experiences. For de-automatization, these were: 1) experiences of questioning, i.e., various ways of being puzzled by what was read in literary texts; 2) experiences of an awareness of interpretability, i.e., a heightened awareness of the possibility that what is read may contain a deeper meaning; and 3) experiences of delay, i.e., postponement of reading in favor of thinking about what was read. For (re)construction, these were: 1) experiences of reasoning, i.e., high involvement in establishing parts to whole relations in the text; 2) experiences of considering alternatives, i.e., the contemplation of multiple possible meanings; and 3) experiences of concluding, i.e., making explicit choices about which meaning was more plausible than other possible meanings. Furthermore, we found that students who had not shown growth in CLU – as assessed in the preceding study – had had significantly less experiences of questioning, delay, and reasoning than students who had shown growth in CLU.

I argue that these findings establish Critical Literary Understanding as a concept for literature teachers to aim for in their lessons. First, all interviewees did indeed report on experiences of CLU when they were asked about their learning experiences in literature classes. Moreover, as 46% of the words in the transcripts were about experiences of CLU, it seems these experiences were prominent in literature classes, as the interviewees had been free to talk about any learning experiences they had in the literature lessons. However, regarding the differences between the Growth and the No-growth group, we should keep in mind that the sample was very small. Still, the significant differences we found do comply with and thus strengthen the concept of CLU: when CLU involves de-automatization and (re)construction, one would expect students who developed CLU to have more experiences of these cognitive processes than students who did not develop CLU, just as the results of Study 2 show.

From our findings in Studies 1 and 2 we gained a theoretically and empirically grounded understanding of what Critical Literary Understanding involves. Consequently, we were able to construct a process-model of CLU (Figure 6.1). In this model we depict the interdependent sub-processes of de-automatization and (re)construction. These are: (1) engaging in de-automatization, manifested in experiences of questioning and awareness of interpretability; (2) sustaining de-automatization, manifested in experiences of delay; (3) (re)constructing meaning, manifested in reasoning and concluding experiences; and (4) evaluating meaning (re)construction, manifested in the experience of considering alternatives.

Figure 6.1: Cognitive processes in Critical Literary Understanding (see also Chapter 4).



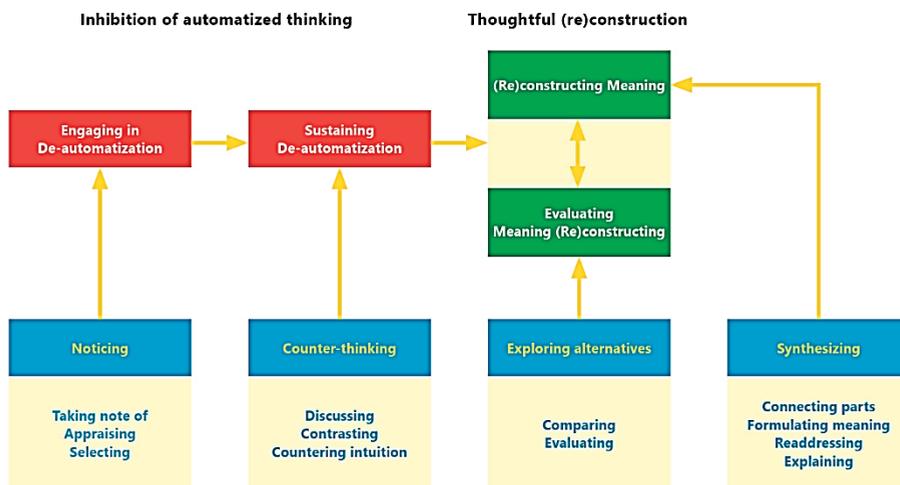
2.3 Learning activities that foster Critical Literary Understanding

In Study 3, reported on in Chapter 4, we shifted our research focus from understanding what to teach in literature class to understanding how to teach it. Therefore, we needed to gain insights in learning activities for CLU. These are cognitive operations that mediate between a task or an instruction in literature class and students' experience of CLU-subprocesses as an outcome of such a task or instruction. To do so, we conducted a second analysis of the interview transcripts, with additional coding. This time, we focused the analysis on the tasks students performed in literature class: reading for school; constructing a literary mind map, i.e., a graphic organizer of literary devices (such as point of view, symbolism, motives, theme, see also Appendix D) that students discerned in a novel; answering questions about that mind map; reading and processing poetry; comparing novels; participating in classroom-discussions; and processing teacher feedback. In doing so, we tried to answer the following research question:

Which learning activities do students describe when they report experiences of de-automatization and/or (re)construction when working with tasks in literature lessons?

We could identify 12 such learning activities, which we clustered in four types of learning activities (noticing, counter-thinking, exploring alternatives, synthesizing) that each make a sub-process of CLU more likely to occur (see Figure 6.2). Thus, we integrated the learning activities we identified and the model of Critical Literary Understanding in a model for teaching Critical Literary Understanding (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2: Learning activities that stimulate processes in Critical Literary Understanding (see also chapter 4)



Clustering of learning activities based on the cognitive operation they have in common, is good practice in the field of education. Such clustering illuminates how multiple learning activities can support a particular sub-outcome of a main educational goal. As such, clusters of learning activities show teachers multiple roads by which they can stimulate their students' development of a complex (cognitive) skill (see Rijlaarsdam et al., 2017). Thus, I claim that the model of teaching CLU provides a suitable layout for designing lessons or lesson series that aim to stimulate the complex processes involved in Critical Literary Understanding.

2.4 Two approaches for teaching Critical Literary Understanding

In the final study of the research project, reported on in Chapter 5, we focused on the generalizability of the model of teaching Critical Literary Understanding. After all, we did not yet know 1) whether experimental literature lessons based on this model would stimulate students' Critical Literary Understanding more than regular Dutch literature education would, and 2) whether any effect of such experimental lessons would be restricted to the instructional approach implemented at the research school.

To gain this knowledge, we now enlarged the scope of the investigation, in two ways. First, we designed two instructional approaches to teaching Critical Literary Understanding. One approach closely mirrored the original program we

investigated in Studies 1 to 3. In this implicit approach the four types of learning activities were never mentioned to the students. The other approach contained newly designed tasks and was based on indications from previous research into teaching critical thinking that explicit teaching of critical thinking is more effective than implicit teaching. In this explicit approach each of the four types of learning activities were instructed as steps in a strategy for Critical Literary Understanding. Second, besides collecting data at the research school (the critical thinking condition, containing both approaches to CLU), we now also collected data at five other Dutch schools (the control condition).

With this enlarged research scope, we attempted to answer the following research questions:

What is the effect of a literature program that involves the types of learning activities noticing, counter-thinking, exploring alternatives and synthesizing, on pre-university students' (Grade 10) Critical Literary Understanding?

To what extent does explicit teaching (as opposed to implicit teaching) of these types of learning activities has an added beneficiary effect on students' Critical Literary Understanding?

With a sample of 341 students, our expectation concerning the first research question was met: a literature program that involves noticing, counter-thinking, exploring alternatives and synthesizing is effective in stimulating CLU. Based on the model that explained the most variance in the data, students in the critical thinking condition showed significantly more growth in CLU than students in the control condition. Moreover, the results suggest that development of CLU does indeed, as we theorized, depend on teaching, i.e., it is not a meaning making process students easily develop by themselves, through maturation for instance. On average, students in the control condition did not show any significant growth in CLU over the entire time-span of the study and students in the critical thinking condition only showed significant growth after the experimental lessons. In addition, lessons based on the four types of learning activities make CLU development more likely for all students, regardless of their motivation for literature education, as adding interactions between time, condition and three motivation variables (intrinsic motivation, task value and self-efficacy) to the best fitting data model, did not improve that model's fit. Thus, instructional approaches based on the four types of learning activities make students' development of CLU more likely than regular literature education, regardless of students' motivation for literature education.

The answer to our second research question was somewhat unexpected. We hypothesized that students in the explicit approach would significantly

outperform their peers in the implicit approach, but our results indicated that they did not. I think this result might be explained, to some extent, by the design process of the two approaches. The teachers of the implicit approach were also involved in designing the explicit approach, and two of the three teachers in the implicit approach also taught a class in the explicit approach. Therefore, all teachers in the experimental condition became very much aware of the types of learning activities implemented in the tasks of the explicit and the implicit approaches. This awareness may very well have influenced teachers in the implicit approach in their instruction and feedback towards evoking these types of learning activities even when they did not mention them explicitly to their students. If so, this unexpected result could be considered an extra indication of the effectiveness of the types of learning activities for promoting CLU.

In conclusion, the final study offered strong indications of the validity of the instructional design principles: two instructional approaches based on these principles were effective for promoting CLU, while regular Dutch literature education was not.

3 KEY CONCLUSIONS

In the present research project, we tried to determine what critical thinking in the context of literature education involved and how it could be stimulated in literature classes. On account of the findings I reiterated in the preceding paragraphs, I now propose that:

Critical thinking and making meaning from literary texts come together in Critical Literary Understanding (CLU).

CLU is a meaning making process that differs from one's default way of making meaning, which most often relies on autonomous processes yielding automatized responses. In CLU, students inhibit these responses by engaging in de-automatization and then sustaining that de-automatization, from which (re)constructive meaning making occurs. This meaning making involves (re)constructing meaning and evaluating that meaning (re)construction, interdependently.

Furthermore, I propose that:

To foster Critical Literary Understanding in literature classes, tasks and instruction should evoke four types of learning activities: noticing, counter-thinking, exploring alternatives, and synthesizing.

Each of these types of learning activities make stimulation of de-automatization or (re)construction more likely. These types of learning activities can be

implemented both implicitly as well as explicitly in literature lessons that then promote students' development of CLU, regardless of their motivation for literature education.

4 LIMITATIONS

4.1 Researcher bias

In the first paragraph of this book the first-person point of view was used. This was done deliberately to immediately make clear that the research project emerged from my experiences in a literature program I co-designed, at the school where I worked as a teacher. It is certainly possible that these prior experiences with the program we investigated have fueled my beliefs about this program's potential for promoting Critical Literary Understanding. Consequently, the validity of our findings could be questioned, as the collection and interpretation of data may have been susceptible to researcher bias to some extent. This type of bias may, for instance, occur in qualitative data analysis when researchers consider participants' responses that confirm their expectations as reliable and relevant, while neglecting responses that seem to contrast these expectations (Chenail, 2011). Also, in data collection, in particular in interview studies, a halo-effect may occur: an interviewer may become overly focused on interviewees' responses that comply with the interviewer's expectations or beliefs, and as a result he may then forget to pursue other possible responses (Wetzel et al., 1981). However, as the present project involved a considerable amount of qualitative data analysis (in the interview studies) and coding (of the answers in the CTLC, in the cohort and experimental studies) and we were aware of the threats of researcher bias, we took measures to minimize its chance of compromising the investigation. First, qualitative data was never collected nor reviewed by myself alone. Coding of the open answers in the CTLC was conducted by two trained research assistants, who were unfamiliar with the research school and, in Study 4, did not know whether the data they coded belonged to students in the experimental or the control condition. Hence, it is unlikely that coding of the CTLC was biased, as these assistants could not have had expectations about the answers they were coding. Second, while the findings in study 2 and 3 indeed relied on an analysis of qualitative data performed by me, in each study 10% of the data was also coded by a second rater and interrater reliability was high in both studies. Besides these measures we took to minimize researcher bias, all qualitative results were corroborated by quantitative results: the learning experiences we found in study 2 corresponded to the quantitative results of study 1 and the effectiveness of the learning activities we found in study 3 was confirmed in the

subsequent experimental study. This conformity between the findings in a mixed method design is a strong indication of the reliability of the qualitative and quantitative measurements. In sum, while it may be naïve to think that researcher bias did not affect the research presented in this dissertation in any way, I do think that it is highly unlikely that its findings could be explained by it.

4.2 Research school bias

One could argue that the entire empirical substantiation of our instructional designs is contextually biased. After all, this substantiation depends on data collected at one school, with a literature program that differs considerably from that of other Dutch schools: literature is taught as a self-contained subject, instead of as part of L1-education; students receive literature education every week instead of only when the L1-schedule allows for it; and the literature program is designed and carried out by all literature teachers at the research school, instead of it being teacher-dependent. Consequently, the present project's validity might be severely limited by the specificity of this research school: the regularity and relative intensity of its literature program and the school's teachers' involvement, and, therefore, maybe high motivation, might all account for our findings. In fact, Study 1 showed that, on average, students at this school develop CLU after four months in its literature program. However, the results of Study 4 contradict this concern: at both pretest and intermediate test (i.e., when the lessons in the critical thinking condition, by design, were not aimed at evoking the four types of learning activities) this particular school's students' level of CLU did not differ from that of their peers at schools with regular Dutch literature education. Also, motivation for literature education did not affect growth in CLU, for either condition. Thus, regardless of how divergent the literature program at the research school might be, where Critical Literary Understanding is concerned, its students seem to be similar to students in regular literature programs: they are unlikely to develop it in literature class unless they are engaged in the four types of learning activities, be it by design in a focused lesson series based on these (Study 4, six weeks between intermediate test and post-test) or over the course of four months in a literature program (Study 1) that was found to evoke these.

4.3 Design of the project as a whole

One could question the design of the project as a whole. Why, for instance, did we not conduct a second experimental study, in which both approaches to teaching Critical Literary Understanding were put to the test again, but at other

schools, with other teachers? After all, such a study might have strengthened the generalizability of our findings. The answer is simple: because we did not choose to focus on generalizability. After all, our main concern in designing the present research project was to maximize the construct validity of the instructional design, in terms of what exactly to teach for and how to teach it. Because we conducted two qualitative studies, actual student experiences in actual classrooms are at the root of the concept of Critical Literary Understanding and the pedagogical design to promote it. As development of CLU can only take place in students' minds, I think it is preconditional for furthering the research in this field that we focused on extending the understanding of what happened in these minds in response to literature education.

4.4 Literature education or Critical thinking education?

I now hear readers saying that we are downgrading literature education as a means to an end. The literature lessons we designed aim to promote students' critical thinking and such a utilitarian approach might overshadow and even blind us entirely for the inherent, aesthetic value of literature. Promoting Critical Literary Understanding in literature class seems to do little in the way of teaching students how to appreciate that value, as it may appear by, for instance, style and composition. It probably does not come as a surprise that I do not agree. On the contrary, I think there is reason to believe the present research project is indeed about teaching the essence of literary arts. Without development in Critical Literary Understanding, I argue, students are less likely to come to appreciate literary devices such as style, gaps, point of view or metaphors. For instance, as much as it may seem unlikely to lovers of literature, it is entirely possible that students remain untouched by Auden's *Funeral Blues*, or do not feel any estrangement in response to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, or are indifferent to Holden Caulfield's muses in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. From a theoretical perspective on what 'literariness' is, such students might not have perceived any of the many foregrounded elements these texts might contain, because they did not succeed in de-automatizing their responses, which the literary experience calls for. Then, it will be hard for them to appreciate these texts as works of literary art. Our findings suggest that when these students are taught to de-automatize their thinking when they read or process what they have read, for instance when they are asked to notice peculiarities in the text and/or counter-think their initial responses, it is likely they will become more susceptible to perceiving foregrounded elements, which they then can think about and truly appreciate (or not). In conclusion, I do not think that Critical Literary Understanding

should be considered as either a concept for literature education or critical thinking education. Instead, in my view – which is corroborated by this dissertation, Critical Literary Understanding entails both literary understanding and critical thinking.

5 OUTPUT

5.1 The Critical Thinking in a Literary Context-test

The present research project delivered a new instrument for educational research: the Critical Thinking in a Literary Context-test (CTLC). At the time this book is written, this test is considered to be one of the few instruments available with good measurement properties that assesses reasoning in response to literary texts (Deane, 2020). Also, the present research project provided several clues to the CTLC's external validity. In study 2 we found that students we selected on the basis of their CTLC-scores did indeed differ in their experiences of CLU in literature class: students in the Growth group, i.e., who had scored higher at the CTLC's second measurement, reported more experiences of de-automatization and (re)construction than students in the No-growth group. Furthermore, in Study 4 the CTLC turned out to be sensitive to differences in instructional designs.

As I see it, the CTLC may be a useful tool for research and education. The instrument may meet the increasing need for measuring growth in cognitive development, as there are three versions of the CTLC, which correlate strongly (see Chapter 5). Also, as the CTLC is found suitable for students of three grades (10, 11 and 12) in pre-university education, the test is widely applicable in higher secondary education. However, coding of students' answers to the questions in the CTLC has proven to be time consuming, which makes the instrument considerably less attractive for researchers and teachers with high efficiency needs. A solution for this problem would be to automate the coding process. Although it might seem counterintuitive to automate the coding of answers to a test about de-automatized, (re)constructive meaning making, recent research suggest that such automation can indeed be a feasible solution, even when assessment of complicated cognitive processes is concerned (for instance, Pander Maat et al., 2014; Crossley et al., 2016). Maybe the most promising possibility in this respect is the software LIWC, which can identify various cognitive processes in written texts (Boot et al., 2017). This software counts words that belong to 66 different psychological categories. Consequently, it can assess, for instance, the degree of negative emotion, or self-reference, or causal reasoning in a text. As the software allows users to add categories of their own, it could be worthwhile to try to come

up with categories that fit the coding of the CTLC, and test if, with these categories, the LIWC software can reliably assess students' Critical Literary Understanding in less time than humans can.

5.2 Design principles for promoting Critical Literary Understanding

In chapter 4 we formulated four design principles for promoting CLU in literature class:

If we want to increase the probability that students develop Critical Literary Understanding in literature class, we should stimulate students to

1. de-automatize their thinking about a literary text, by providing tasks that engage them in noticing salience in literary texts;
2. sustain de-automatization, by providing tasks that engage them to counterthink their initial reactions to what they noticed in a literary text;
3. (re)construct meaning from literary texts, by providing tasks that trigger them to synthesize different opinions and arguments about such meaning;
4. and evaluate their meaning (re)construction , by providing tasks that encourage them to explore alternatives.

There are at least three reasons why these principles can be considered particularly valuable in teaching and educational designing. First, they are theoretically grounded in a multidisciplinary perspective. Such a thorough theoretical foundation is uncommon in educational design research, as the design principles presented therein are often rooted in personal values, or teachers' experiences (Bakker, 2019). Also, these principles are empirically grounded, as the learning objectives and learning activities to reach these objectives were identified in two interview studies, and tested, in a semi-experimental study. Too often it is unclear to what extent educational design principles are grounded in empirical evidence (Bakker, 2019). Moreover, in Study 4 these principles were found to be generative: multiple instructional approaches can be designed from them. This quality makes these principles highly applicable in educational practice, as teachers are not restricted to one program or lesson series, but can adapt the principles in their own lessons, in line with our primary research aim. Thus, for literature teachers and educational designers the present research project has yielded a strongly grounded and versatile set of design principles, as well as two lesson series based on these, applicable in their own practice.

6 OUTLOOK

As discussed above, the present project's generalizability can be improved upon. Therefore, one obvious focus for future research is to put our findings to the test: are instructional designs based on the four types of learning activities effective in other contexts? For instance, the lesson series we designed could be tested in a replication of the quasi-experimental intervention study we conducted, at other schools than the research school, in other educational tracks (Higher vocational education and Preparatory vocational education), and when the lessons are taught by other teachers. Also, other lesson series could be designed on the basis of the design principles we formulated, and then be tested, such as lessons focused on a specific domain of the literature curriculum, such as poetry or literary history, but also lessons that focus, just as we did, on literary interpretation but implement the design principles in fewer lessons than we did. Such types of studies could inform us which type of contents and number of lessons are required to obtain an effect on CLU.

Another possible focus for future research is to refine knowledge of exactly how learning activities mediate between tasks and CLU. As the participants in Study 2 and 3 looked back on four months of literature education, we had to work with their recollections to identify these learning activities. Retrospection might have obscured more subtle and ephemeral workings of these learning activities. Think aloud studies might shed light on these processes, as such think-aloud tasks reveal what students are thinking during task performance. In addition, especially for reading for school tasks, we think that analysis of eye-track data might add another layer to understanding the workings of the learning activities, as these data show how students go through a text: for instance, readdressing parts of it, or pausing during reading. Research methods like think aloud and eye-tracking might give us more insight in the process of CLU development in literature class. The more literature teachers know of this process, the more specific feedback they will be able to give their students in fostering their Critical Literary Understanding.

In general, and in the spirit of counter-thinking: I urge researchers to aim to test the process model and teaching model of Critical Literary Understanding, and explore other, and possibly, easier roads to Rome. For instance, since critical thinking dispositions are found to predict critical thinking (West et al., 2008; Evans and Stanovich, 2013), it may be that instructing students to think, for instance, as open-minded as possible in literature class is sufficient stimulus for them to improve their CLU, which would render the CLU teaching model obsolete. Therefore, to test the necessity of evoking noticing, counter-thinking,

exploring alternatives and synthesizing activities in literature class, an intervention study could contain an additional regular literature education-condition wherein students are simply told to keep an open mind, and think about their answers extensively, with every literature assignment they perform, but wherein the four types of learning activities are not implemented. Comparing the effect of such a condition to that of a CLU-condition might reveal to what extent the aforementioned learning activities are actually necessary.

7 IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERATURE EDUCATION, AND BEYOND

The concept of Critical Literary Understanding might offer a fresh perspective on the relevance of literature education. Because, what do we teach literature for? Usually, advocates of literature education point out known effects of literature reading that are evidently worth pursuing. For instance, on the website of the National Team for Redesigning the Dutch Curriculum, it states:

"Literary texts make us experience the power of language [...] contribute to insight in self and others, [...] give insight in other people's cultures [...] challenge us to think about multiple interpretations, [...] contribute to development of empathy and nuanced thinking, communication and actions." (Curriculum.nu, n.d., translation MK; see for substantiations of these claims, for instance: Mol & Bus, 2011; Djikic et. al, 2013; Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018; Schrijvers, 2019).

As socially desirable as these possible effects of reading literary texts are, maybe the potential value of literature education must be considered at a fundamental cognitive level. The studies I reported on in this dissertation all support the following premise of Critical Literary Understanding: when students are to develop meaning making processes in response to literary texts, they have to (learn to) engage in mental processes that differ from the default, automatized, processes that steer their daily lives. Therefore, literature education can be, inherently, about taking some control of thinking. Potential beneficiary effects to our social lives that may occur as a result, can be considered secondary to that control – not in importance, but in sequence. After all, when desirable effects as those mentioned above do indeed sprout from reading literary texts, then these effects are bound to become more likely when students (learn to) engage in a literary experience, which, as we argued, comes down to de-automatization.

From recent studies into such desirable effects, we can derive indications that these effects might indeed partially depend on de-automatization stimulated in

literature lessons. Schrijvers (2019) designed and tested an instructional unit, called Transformative Dialogic Literature Teaching (TDLT), and found that it promoted students' insight in self and others. The main building blocks of TDLT were two types of dialogues students had to engage in, in each lesson. First, internal dialogues, in which students had to become aware of their responses to a literary text – potential incomprehension included – by actively noticing these, for instance in highlighting words or sentences. Second, external dialogues, in which students had to compare their responses with those of their fellow students, by discussing, for instance, as many alternative endings to a story as possible. In an earlier study, Malo-Juvera (2014) found that literature lessons reduced students' rape myth acceptance. These lessons had two essential building blocks. First, a series of writing tasks, aimed at students noticing their response to a story, for instance, by asking questions to a character. Second, discussions, in which students were explicitly encouraged by their teachers to explore contradictions between their opinions on the story and ask each other questions to elicit alternative perspectives. I argue that the building blocks of both TDLT and the lesson series tested by Malo-Juvera (2014) are likely to have evoked noticing and counter-thinking activities in students' minds. From the findings of the present research project, we know that these types of learning activities make engagement in and sustainment of de-automatization more likely. Therefore, the desirable effects found in both studies might (partially) be explained by de-automatization being successfully stimulated in the lessons. Following this line of thought implicates that literature teachers may have to find a way, first and foremost, to stimulate the de-automatizing, literary experience in their students if they want to increase the likelihood of their teaching being relevant to their students' mental development, and, eventually, to society.

For teachers who agree with this statement, I have some additional recommendations to consider. The first is: Create a steppingstone and incorporate your students' initial responses to a text in all tasks you ask them to perform. In most literature lessons students will have the opportunity to say or write down what their initial responses are, and it is an educational pitfall, I think, for teachers to then steer away from these responses to talk about possible meanings that are in their own mind. This is a trap teachers can easily fall into, because students' first responses may be far off from the responses the teacher expects. For instance, a student's first response to William Wordsworth's *I wandered lonely as a cloud* may be: 'This is a strange poem about a garden.' Accepting such a response as genuine might be hard when you are a scholar who wishes to point out the beauty and depth of this classic poem. Even so, I advise literature teachers to always accept first responses, and design follow-up assignments in which

these first responses remain in the foreground. For instance, by letting students think about what made the poem strange to them, and about a garden; by letting the students' counter-think this explanation and explore alternative responses, to compare and contrast with that initial response; by letting the students formulate a final response and have them explore similarities and differences between first and final responses. Thus, students' first responses may kick-start a series of learning activities that make sustained de-automatization more likely.

The second recommendation is: Include other genres than literary novels or short stories in literature lessons. I assume that in the typical Dutch literature class, reading and processing literary prose is the dominant content. After all, the most intense discussions in the domain of literature education, at least in The Netherlands, are about which novels students should read, at which literary level. And most commonly, the final literature exam is a conversation between the teacher and the student about the books the latter has read. While I certainly do not want to advocate against the use of literary prose in literature classes, I do argue that when stimulation of the literary experience is the aim, other genres might be just as effective, or even more so. The first of these genres is poetry. In Study 3, we found that poems offer clear opportunities for de-automatization, as students often struggle, initially, to find coherence, and, at the same time do not have much difficulty to notice words or sentences that are striking to them (see also Koek, 2015). Moreover, poems are generally shorter than novels or short stories, which means it is often possible to read and process them in a single lesson. The second and third genres I propose to include are films and tv-series. These are narrative genres traditionally not associated with literature classes, but they can be works of art and, therefore, may still contain the foregrounding that may spark the literary experience (Van Eik & Groenendijk, 2012). I think that audio visual works of art may indeed provide ample opportunity for noticing, counter-thinking, exploring alternatives and synthesizing activities in literature class. For instance, in one episode (Green et al., 2001) of *The Sopranos*, Dr. Melfi, the female psychiatrist of this TV-series' main protagonist, mafia boss Tony Soprano, is brutally raped. The rapist is captured by the police, only to be released within a day, due to a technicality. A few weeks later Dr. Melfi walks into a coffee bar and sees a picture of her rapist above the bar: he is the Employee of the month; she flees from the bar, heavily distressed. Meanwhile, in another story line we have seen how ruthless Tony Soprano deals with two Russian gang members who have stolen something not even that valuable from his sister. At the end of the episode Tony Soprano sees Dr. Melfi for an appointment, unaware of what happened to her. Halfway through the appointment, she bursts into

tears, and he is shocked. He kindly tries to console her and asks if there is anything she wants to tell him. Then there is about a minute of silence in the scene, before Melfi answers. This episode, and that last minute in particular, may spark heavy de-automatizing discussions about its meaning, since the situation, in the way it is portrayed by the director, calls for strong emotional first reactions – as any reader who is now curious about Dr. Melfi’s answer might imagine –, as well as allows for counter-thoughts and reflection on what is just, what is good, what is bad.

The third recommendation is: do not give up. Sustained de-automatization may be hard to promote as it can be inherently frustrating for students, as the teachers participating in Study 4 experienced (Koek, 2018). When students have to counter-think what they consider a literary text might mean, they may find that task frustratingly alien to what they may be used to in school: to come to an understanding of learning content as quickly as possible. However, such frustration, as hard as it can be to deal with as a teacher, may actually be a sign of the learning activities at work. After all, the findings of Study 4 clearly indicate that having students engage in and sustain de-automatization in their (re)constructive meaning making is entirely possible in the literature classroom.

And beyond? Reading and processing literary works may be apt activities to stimulate the cognitive processes involved in Critical Literary Understanding, but that does not mean that stimulation of these processes is only possible through literature education. Critical Literary Understanding is domain specific, but, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the cognitive processes involved can also be considered to be hallmarks of critical thinking in general. This means that teachers, across all domains, may profit from the insights presented in this dissertation when they want to develop their students’ critical thinking. This potential benefit might indeed be very welcome, as promoting students’ critical thinking is considered to be one of the hardest teacher tasks, in any domain (Van der Grift, 2010). To take it one step further: assuming all (presumed) knowledge and beliefs are rooted in human thinking, I think it may be essential for any teacher to be as aware as possible of the types of thinking their students can engage in, and of how to stimulate their students to take some control of their own thinking. Then, maybe one day many students in many classrooms may find: ‘Through school I have learned to think much more critically than I am usually stimulated to in my daily life.’

8 CLOSING THOUGHTS

A typical feature of doing research is focus. While focus may be a necessity in gaining understanding of a particular phenomenon, it can have unintentional side effects on those who take note of the research, for instance, readers of a dissertation. In the present research project, the focus has been on finding out what Critical Literary Understanding is, and how to promote it. Therefore, readers of this dissertation may have got the idea that the cognitive processes involved in CLU are inherently preferable to the default, automatized processes they inhibit. To be clear: I do not think they are. The mind's default, autonomous processes facilitate smooth interaction with the world and may play an important role, for instance, in expert intuitive thinking and by providing easy access to what we have previously learned (Kahneman, 2011). I think it is fair to assume people would be lost, anxious and cognitively exhausted every day of their lives if all processing in their minds were to be non-automatized and (re)constructive. So, fortunately, the human mind facilitates de-automatized as well as automatized thinking. We do know that the latter can be so persistent that de-automatization does not even occur in our minds, especially when we are not aware of how to engage in and sustain it. We also know that humans usually do not improve de-automatized thinking by themselves. Therefore, it is important that we experience, at school, that, and how we can actually "think twice", both automatized and de-automatized, about anything. As the studies reported in this dissertation have shown, in teaching Critical Literary Understanding such an outcome is more likely to occur than in regular literature education. Thus, literature lessons that successfully stimulate Critical Literary Understanding matter.