

EFFECTS OF CRITICAL THINKING IN LITERATURE EDUCATION

Gepco de Jong

*Centre for the Arts in Society, Leiden University.
Digital and Cultural Studies, Tilburg University (The Netherlands)*

Abstract

The workshop 'Effects of Critical Thinking' provides insight into the subject-taught concept of critical thinking and the impact and effects of using this tool on the thinking process of students in secondary literature classes. The academic skill of critical thinking can be useful in facilitating students to think more deeply about a literary text and the relationship of literature to its social context. By consciously working from an intuitive response towards a reasoned judgement, students experience how critical thinking can deepen their thinking process. In doing so, students consistently reflect on the various thinking steps and the effects that can occur. Critical thinking is a useful tool within literature classes that can enhance a teacher's ability to bolster students in four domains: knowledge about literary conventions, the application of critical thinking as an academic skill, the understanding of the individual thought process and the development of citizenship. After a brief theoretical introduction, participants are asked to read an excerpt from a literary text related to the social issues artificial intelligence and racism. After participants give a primary reaction, a joint analysis of content, narrative style and social context is used to work towards a reasoned judgment. The output of this reflection is then compared with the results of the similar intervention in upper secondary school student cohorts. The workshop's concluding discussion focuses on teacher expectations and the effects of the students' actual thought processes. The workshop is aimed at both researchers and language teachers with a maximum of 25 participants.

Keywords: *Critical thinking, literature, citizenship, secondary education.*

1. Introduction

Interpreting a literary text is closely linked to deep thinking. This connection can be represented with a simple sentence: *for sale: baby shoes, never worn* (Wolf, 2018, p. 41). This sentence can be seen as an objective communication, but in the context of literature, where a story is always being told, it is plausible that a reader intuitively asks questions and thus forms his or her own story: why were the shoes never worn, what drama took place? What might have happened? Readers colour the answer to these questions with their own thought, their own story.

Literature can bridge the gap between the behaviour and way of thinking of a fictional character and the student's reflection on it. Such empathy is not only an important literary competence, but also a core value within citizenship education: the student considers the actions of characters, wonders how the character could have come to a particular act and then asks how he himself would react. Nussbaum (2002) calls this way of thinking moral education: fiction allows the reader to identify with the characters, gains insight into the origins and course of emotions and is thus able to experience how a judgement is made. However, the road to reasoned judgement is not without obstacles. Knowledge about the world reaches the student from two perspectives: the intuitive system and the conscious, rational system. The first system is constantly operational and leads to spontaneous, automatic findings. It is a basic system and provides raw information about, for example, danger and flight behaviour. The second system works slowly and needs to be consciously activated. It needs attention and effort and cannot be used over a long period of time (Kahneman, 2011).

The aim of the study is to construct an educational model of critical thinking that could support students in interpreting literature. After reading the text, the student intuitively formulates an initial reaction and could achieve a conscious and reasoned judgment through an analysis of story, narrative mode, and social context. It is assumed that the student could transfer this way of thinking to opinion formation on social issues.

2. Design

The entire study is conducted according to the methodology of Educational Design Research. This type of research is particularly useful in the development of critical thinking skills, as the iterative form is based on the consistent application of the sequence of analysis, design, and evaluation (McKenney, Reeves & Nieveen, 2014). Based on scientific insights, the design of a lesson is constructed and evaluated and refined after the subsequent interventions. The study consists of four stages that are described in detail in separate chapters: theory and background, a model for critical thinking in literature teaching, critical thinking in the classroom and, finally, critical thinking and the learner.

3. Objectives

The design of the overall study is the construction of an educational model of conscious critical thinking (CCT-model), which allows the teacher to achieve three goals:

- a) the students gain insight into the process of conscious critical thinking at a cognitive and metacognitive level through which they first acquire knowledge about the thought process as an instrument, then learn the skills to be able to use this knowledge and finally develop the attitude to actually use critical thinking.
- b) the students gain insight into the literary techniques and the formal and referential meaning of literature at a cognitive and metacognitive level.
- c) the critical thinking used in the study of literary texts is transferable to situations where citizenship skills are called upon. The students can take a reasoned position in the social debate, considering different views and arguments.

4. Methods

The subject didactic model critical thinking is constructed based on four interventions. The first intervention focuses on formulating the primary response: what is the common thread in the students' reactions while reading the literary text?

The second intervention aims to test the complete model, from primary reaction to reasoned judgement: is it sufficiently clear to the students what to do and does it provide sufficient information for the teacher?

The aim of the third intervention is to examine emphatically and accurately how a student thinks while reading, analysing, interpreting and evaluating literature.

In the fourth and final intervention, the model is used by Dutch teachers from different schools that differ in terms of school organisation, geographical location, and pupil numbers. This intervention is monitored and analysed within a development team, in which the participating teachers, together with the researcher, explore in depth the possibilities and returns of the CCT model. Ultimately, the research yields an evidence-based educational model that teachers can use in a practical and efficient way in their literature lessons.

5. Discussion

Within the current study, two interventions were completed, and it was concluded that some adjustments were necessary. Firstly, the student's thinking process is enhanced when it is explicitly connected to students' competence. At the same time, the student should be challenged by the text to think at an abstract level. Also, a certain autonomy should be offered in the choice of literary texts (Van Tuijl & Van Gijssel, 2015) and sufficient time should be allowed for proper reading. Other concerns arising from the intervention were a sharp distinction in the analysis of content and narrative style, and a conscious reflection on the thought process that proceeds from primary judgment to reasoned judgment. Finally, it was found that linking fiction to issues such as gender, racism and artificial intelligence strongly supported students in increasing their understanding of literary text and a balanced and open-minded thinking about social issues. In general terms, it can be added that a teaching sequence on critical thinking is best introduced with a separate lesson on how conscious critical thinking works in relation to the intuitive and rational thinking system. In addition, it is very useful to use a second, introductory lesson for an open discussion on the value of literature and literature education.

6. Conclusions

Based on extensive literature research, a model of conscious critical thinking was established, in which students work from their primary reaction to a reasoned judgment through the analysis of story, narrative and context. This theoretical model was then tested in an initial intervention, in which it became clear that students' primary reaction to a literary text is primarily to the content and characters. This finding was discussed at the 2023 END Conference. The second intervention shows that the model encourages students to reflect deeply on a literary text, but that the teacher should explicitly consider students' motivation and competence and consciously highlight the links between the components of the analysis. The teacher's expectations do not always appear to correspond with the reality in the literature lesson. In preparation for a third intervention, several readjustments were made, to create enough room to go deep into students' thinking about literature.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank prof. dr. Yra van Dijk (Leiden University), prof. dr. Sander Bax (Tilburg University) and dr. Rian Aarts (Tilburg University) for their inspiring advice and support during this research.

References

- Kahneman, D. (2011), *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Nussbaum, M. (2002). Education for Citizenship in an Era of Global Connection. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 21, 289-303.
- Van Tuijl, C., & Gijssels, M. (2015). Stabiliteit van leesplezier en leesvermijding. *Orthopedagogiek: Onderzoek En Praktijk*, 54(2), 60-73. Retrieved from: <https://www.saxion.nl/binaries/content/assets/onderzoek/meer-onderzoek/wetenschap-en-techniek-in-het-onderwijs/2015-pidk-stabiliteit-van-leesplezier-en-leesvermijding.pdf>
- Wolf, M. (2018). *Reader, come home. The reading brain in a digital world*. Harper Collins Publishers.