

die hochschullehre – Jahrgang 7-2021 (33)

Herausgebende des Journals: Ivo van den Berk, Jonas Leschke, Marianne Merkt, Peter Salden, Antonia Scholkmann, Angelika Thielsch

Dieser Beitrag ist Teil des Themenheftes „Paderborner Beiträge 2021“ (herausgegeben von Diana Bücker und Nerea Vöing).

Beitrag in der Rubrik Praxisforschung

DOI: 10.3278/HSL2133W

ISSN: 2199-8825 wbv.de/die-hochschullehre



Promoting Critical Thinking in Literary and Cultural Studies

NADJA FAKHA

Abstract

Critical thinking is one of the most important skills that students need to acquire for their academic success and future careers, but it is often a ‘byproduct’ of literary and cultural studies seminars. Unfortunately, lecturers are often prevented from teaching critical thinking actively due to time-constraints in traditional class settings but using instructional videos can help to circumnavigate time restrictions, and the benefits of this approach are abundant for both lecturers and students. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the theoretical approaches to teaching critical thinking, and to offer suggestions on how these can be implemented in instructional videos. Additionally, the paper includes a detailed account of a research project conducted within the framework of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in which instructional videos were used to teach critical thinking in two literary and cultural studies seminars.

Keywords: Critical thinking; instructional videos; remote teaching; teaching literature and culture; teaching drama

Förderung des kritischen Denkens in Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften

Zusammenfassung

Kritisches Denken ist eine der wichtigsten akademischen Kompetenzen, die Studierende sowohl für den universitären Erfolg als auch für die zukünftige Karriere erwerben müssen, jedoch ist es oft eine Art „Nebenprodukt“ Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaftlicher Seminare. Aufgrund zeitlicher Einschränkungen ist es Lehrenden oft leider nicht möglich, kritisches Denken aktiv zu unterrichten, doch Lernvideos können dabei helfen, zeitliche Barrieren zu umgehen. Diese Herangehensweise hat zahlreiche Vorteile, sowohl für Lehrende als auch für Studierende. Ziel dieses Artikels ist es einen Überblick darüber zu schaffen, wie kritisches Denken unterrichtet werden kann und Aufschlüsse darüber zu geben, wie diese Ansätze sinnvoll in Lernvideos umgesetzt werden können. Darüber hinaus stellt dieser Artikel ein Forschungsprojekt vor, welches im Rahmen des Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) durchgeführt wurde. Hierbei wurden in zwei literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Seminaren Lernvideos genutzt, um kritisches Denken zu unterrichten

Keywords: Kritisches Denken; Lernvideos; Fernunterricht; Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften; Theater unterrichten

1 Introduction

Students often struggle with thinking critically about literature and culture or viewing it as a meaningful representation of historical as well as contemporary cultural issues. Therefore, learning close reading and acquiring skills in critical thinking is vital for the study of literature and culture, especially for writing papers, but also for future professional practice. Struggling with thinking critically means that students – especially bachelor students – find it particularly difficult to analyse literary texts and cultural issues in essays/term papers, which leads to a great deal of frustration (with the subject).

Drama – particularly Early Modern English (EME) drama – and also political speeches appear to be especially challenging for students, because they struggle to find meaning in this kind of material, as they “seem to have difficulty relating what they study to their contemporary world” (Hooper 1996, p. 11). As a consequence, relevant points of criticism that may be contained in these primary sources frequently escape their notice. “The difficulty lies not [only] in thinking critically, but in recognizing when to do so, and in knowing enough to do so” (Willingham 2007, p. 18). Critical thinking (CT) is important for all students, but particularly for prospective teachers who will face various heterogeneous groups; CT can make learning and teaching more effective and can contribute to a harmonious learning/teaching environment free from discrimination and generalisations. “[...] students who are able to think critically are able to solve problems effectively. Merely having knowledge or information is not enough” (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 90). As a consequence, CT is also a significant element of critical behaviour, and it is believed to be an essential component of academic work, so it must be taught as such (Centeno Garcia, Metzger & Salden 2019, pp. 933–934). However, critical thinking with regard to literature and culture is notably challenging for beginners.

Usually, in literary and cultural studies the discussion of a given topic/text in a seminar begins with taking a look at the primary source and clarifying questions or misconceptions the students might have by asking them questions and noting down all relevant information on the board. This method has proven to be relatively effective so far, as students often felt that their knowledge was valuable and useful. The main endeavour in the next steps of the discussion is to transition from the text to a critical analysis of general cultural issues and power structures – first focusing on the historical and then on the present-day context. Unfortunately, this is the step that students struggle with the most, perhaps because referring to contemporary issues on the basis of an ‘old’ or ‘outdated’ text might appear odd to them. Their initial responses are usually very close to the text; abstracting from the issues that the source represents or criticises and applying these to contemporary culture seems to be quite challenging and perhaps even a source of confusion. Interestingly, once I give them some input on how a particular issue or passage is relevant for contemporary problems, the situation changes, and they begin to think critically about the matter – disconnected from the plot or content of the primary source as such. In general, I have perceived that students find it difficult to read, discuss, and write about literary and cultural texts critically, because they appear to believe that a critical analysis/discussion equals a concise summary of the plot or content. This is especially visible and problematic in the essays and term papers they write at the end of the semester. Merely telling students to avoid summaries in their papers and to analyse their topic critically has not proven to be effective, because students continued to make the same mistakes. Thus, it is clear that CT requires specific and straightforward instruction accompanied by abundant opportunities to practise and to receive feedback. Unfortunately, such intricate tutoring and monitoring requires a lot of time, which is often quite difficult as lecturers are frequently met with time-restraints. This is especially problematic since the majority of my students are beginners (BA students in their second/third semester) who need elaborate instruction, not merely with regard to content issues, but also skills – such as CT – that relate to their field of studies. Time-constraints and large seminars have been constant companions of lecturers, restricting their ability of

teaching CT, which will surely continue to be a problem in the future. Consequently, a long-term solution must be found so that lecturers can teach literary and cultural studies as well as CT.

Therefore, the objective of this research project is to develop a new approach that will teach students to think and write critically about literature/culture with the help of the digital medium. This research project will be conducted in the context of the literary studies seminar “Shakespeare and Otherness” and the cultural studies seminar “Power and Ideology in Political Rhetoric” (summer term 2020). The general learning goals for these seminars were formulated in a way to mirror CT implicitly. Thinking critically about the topics mentioned above implies looking beyond their (historical) boundaries and eliciting as well as evaluating the power structures and ideologies that are represented. This step is vital for the deeper understanding of the texts, which is again a necessary prerequisite for being able to discuss and analyse them in a critical manner, be it orally or in writing. Therefore, the first significant learning goal concerns the ability to identify and explain central concepts (the ‘other’ for the literary studies seminar, and ideology for the cultural studies seminar) based on critical academic research. The learning goals are meant to show students that they need to evaluate the texts they read and that they are expected to apply their knowledge, therefore, both seminars share one goal that concerns reading (secondary) literature critically, decoding power structures, and being able to apply respective findings to a more general/global context. Although learning goals have always accompanied and lead my seminars in the past, they were usually phrased according to the content of the seminar and did not necessarily include non-content skills in general or CT in particular. The intended effect of phrasing learning goals in this manner to incorporate and imply CT, and being generally more aware of CT and learning/writing developments, is that it shapes the teaching and learning process throughout the semester. However, this process requires time – both for teaching and learning CT – and since time-constraints often govern seminars, instructional videos can be used to circumnavigate this issue and teach CT effectively, as they allow students to learn and practise CT at their own pace. For this purpose, the present research project will focus on a didactic discussion concerned with how videos can help define and teach CT actively. The present paper will first discuss the literature concerning CT, and then present the benefits of the digital format in this context.

2 The Current State of Research

A leading definition of critical thinking (CT) is provided by Facione et al., stating that CT is a “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference [...]”, it implies being “inquisitive, [...] open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, [...] orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria [...]” (as cited in Abrami et al. 2015, p.277). Additionally, Willingham states that “critical thinking consists of seeing both sides of an issue, [...] deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth” (2007, p. 8). In general, he remarks that CT must be effective, meaning that “common pitfalls, such as seeing only one side of an issue” or “reasoning from passion rather than logic, failing to support statements with evidence” should be avoided (Willingham 2007, p.11). Additionally, he mentions that CT should be self-directed; lecturers should help students understand CT but should not prompt every single step (Willingham 2007, p.11). Preußner and Sennewald have focused on definitions of ‘skills’ and ‘competences’ as defined in European educational systems (after the Bologna decisions of 2005) and have highlighted the significance of students acquiring the necessary skills to gather, evaluate, and interpret relevant information, as well as working autonomously to find solutions to specific problems (2012, p.10). These competences are also mentioned in the German Qualifications Framework for higher education, and their significance is stressed in this context (Preußner & Sennewald 2012, p.10). Critical thinking – as it has been defined in this chapter – is implied in practically all of the skills mentioned above by Preußner and Sennewald, as students need to know what kind of information to

look for, rule out, and select, when they set out to gather and evaluate information for their own texts. Given the considerable relevance of CT in practically every field of study, it is important to include CT in teaching strategies so that students will be able “to make better judgments, reason more logically, and so forth” (Willingham 2007, p. 8). In the 1980s, various U. S. institutions remarked that CT is indispensable for academic success, but that only few students were able to think critically (Willingham 2007, p. 8). As a result, numerous programmes and teacher guides were designed to teach students CT, labouring under the misconception that it is a skill like any other that can be applied to any situation once it has been learnt (Willingham 2007, p. 8). However, Willingham emphasises that “critical thinking is not a set of skills that can be deployed at any time, in any context”, because it is “dependent on domain knowledge and experience” (Willingham 2007, p. 10). Therefore, CT should be taught in relation to specific contexts, because CT strategies often vary across academic fields. Centeno Garcia et al. also stress that lecturers must have a clear understanding of the definition of CT for their subjects/disciplines/seminars (2019, p. 936). In the context of the literary and cultural studies seminars mentioned above, the following learning outcomes were formulated based on the aforementioned definition:

Students who think/write critically in literary and cultural studies

1. do not summarise the plot/primary source but use their understanding of it to make critical assumptions and evaluations.
2. formulate their thoughts and ideas in a coherent and logical manner following a comprehensible structure.
3. identify power structures and hierarchies between characters/in the primary source and relate these to broader cultural issues.
4. identify significant points of criticism in literature and are able to transfer these to (contemporary) culture.
5. provide arguments and evidence for their arguments from primary and secondary literature.
6. treat stereotypes with caution and are able to explain underlying ideologies.

Of course, students are not expected to write texts that are absolutely perfect in every single one of these points, but a general trend should be visible. As a consequence, instruction must be structured in a way to incorporate these elements to help direct and shape students’ learning, which implies awareness of, what Willingham terms, “surface structure” and “deep structure” (2007, p. 10). The former refers to the obvious, clearly stated level of an issue, while the latter accommodates CT; “the surface structure of the problem is overt, but the deep structure of the problem is not” (Willingham 2007, p. 11). As an illustration, a shallow look at Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (one of the plays read in the lit. stud. seminar) shows that Caliban serves Prospero and is ill-treated by him – a critical perspective will reveal that these two characters are in a coloniser-colonised relationship that comments on (present-day) power structures and imperialist exploitation. This refers to the deep structure, which is not obvious on the plot level, but must be deduced by close reading and critical thinking. Thus, “familiarity with a problem’s deep structure and the knowledge that one should look for a deep structure” are particularly relevant for teachers and lecturers (Willingham 2007, p. 11). Creating “familiarity with a problem’s deep structure” is pivotal for CT, which can be brought about by exposure to “long-term, repeated experience with one problem, or with various manifestations of one type of problem” (Willingham 2007, p. 11). If instructors plan and design their classes in a way to expose students repeatedly to these strategies, searching for the deep structure of a problem, or in this case a text, will become more familiar and thus easier (Willingham 2007, p. 11). Willingham refers to “metacognitive strategies” in this context, which he defines briefly as “little chunks of knowledge [...] that students can learn and then use to steer their thoughts in more productive directions” (Willingham 2007, p. 13). Metacognitive strategies must be complemented by “domain knowledge and practice” to yield satisfactory results (Willingham 2007, p. 13).

Thus, CT need not be a matter of chance, nor do students have to face this hurdle on their own, because it can be taught, but it “must be modeled for students, and students must be given opportunities to practice” (Willingham 2007, p. 18). Abrami et al. introduce four main instructional interventions with regard to CT, namely the generic, infusion, immersion, and the mixed approach (2015, p. 281). Firstly, “[...] in generic courses, CT skills and dispositions are the course objective, with no specific subject matter content” (Abrami et al. 2015, p. 281). The infusion approach “requires deep, thoughtful, and well-understood subject matter instruction in which students are encouraged to think critically” – this approach presupposes that “general principles of CT skills and dispositions are made explicit” (Abrami et al. 2015, p. 282). The immersion approach states that “subject matter instruction is thought-provoking and students get immersed in the subject” – however, in this approach “general CT principles are not made explicit” (Abrami et al. 2015, p. 282). Finally, “[i]n the mixed approach, CT is taught as an independent track within a specific subject content course” (Abrami et al. 2015, p. 281). Of course, the authors are careful to point out that each setting may require a different strategy. Willingham encourages lecturers to make CT principles explicit to students, and to give them the opportunity to practise CT actively (2007, p. 10). Centeno Garcia et al. also emphasise that methods of CT should be made transparent to students, since including it as a learning goal and making its significance clear to students has a positive effect on learning outcomes (2019, pp. 936–937). In general, theoretical explanations are advantageous, but they need to be complemented by practical application, students need open spaces – free of (negative) judgment – to practise CT (2019, pp. 936–937). Therefore, “by encouraging students throughout the process and modeling thinking behaviors, students’ critical thinking skills can improve” (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 97).

3 Promoting CT through Instructional Videos

It has been pointed out so far that teaching CT specifically can improve the quality of instruction, and possible approaches suggested by researchers have been mentioned as well. The purpose of the present chapter is to focus more clearly on common pitfalls, and possible teaching strategies of CT in the context of literary and cultural studies specifically.

As lecturers in literary and cultural studies, we often expect our students to think and write critically about literature and culture on the basis of in-class discussions, which are supposed to stimulate CT. Although this can be expected from experienced students who are perhaps already enrolled in the master’s programme, it cannot and in fact should not be expected from beginners. As Norman noted in 1981, “it is strange that we expect students to learn, yet seldom teach them anything about learning” (as cited in Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 91). Students’ ability to think critically affects their future writing considerably, and therefore also future grades and professions. However, students’ understandable struggle with CT delays their academic success. As I have often perceived during essay discussions in office hours, students are often able to reproduce the knowledge and the arguments from class but seem to be unaware of how they should write critically. Although they have well-documented notes and are able to summarise the content of the seminar, they struggle to identify critical elements in their chosen texts/topics, as they do not know when an element or argument counts as ‘critical’. Thus, it can be assumed that the *method* and definition of critical thinking is yet unfamiliar to them, which is perfectly understandable since they have not been introduced to CT, nor have they had the chance to practise it as researchers recommend. Clement criticised in 1979 that “we should be teaching students how to think. Instead, we are teaching them what to think” (as cited in Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 91). As a consequence, a substantial number of student papers fails to meet the necessary requirements. As lecturers we often ‘hope’ that our students will understand how scholars (for example in secondary sources) think critically about literature and emulate this technique. Although telling students to scrutinise secondary literature in terms of content *and* form may be good advice, it should only complement

clear instruction, because deducing CT from a text is quite challenging, and students' success should not be left to chance. Thus, students frequently learn CT by 'trial and error', which may be inevitable for some aspects (e. g., register, structure etc.) where errors and mistakes are highly individual, yet it would be helpful for both students and lecturers to find out how teaching strategies can be tweaked to promote CT in literary and cultural studies. Unfortunately, discussing sources in great detail is quite problematic in class, firstly due to time constraints, which create the pressure to 'get through' the content of the seminar/topic, because "instructors often have a great deal of content to cover within a short time period" (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 93). "Although content is important, the process of how students learn the material is equally important" and must be included as such in the seminar (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 91). Secondly, classes are heterogeneous groups – some students need more time than others to process and follow what is said in class.

One possible teaching strategy to avoid failures and unnecessary frustration could be using instructional videos to define, teach, and emulate CT. Videos are effective alternatives or additions to a potentially one-sided form of teaching, because they integrate new technologies effectively (Sailer & Figas 2018, p. 318). Using instructional videos in higher education teaching enables a precise transmission and presentation of topics which students can watch at their own pace, making it a more individual and self-reliant way of learning (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 320). Another central element is that students will have the opportunity to pause the videos wherever and whenever they wish, or as Bergman and Sams phrase it, using videos in teaching "allows students to pause and rewind their teacher" (2012, p. 24). This allows a more individualised and beneficial way of learning, because students will "have the chance to process at the speed that is appropriate for them" (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 24). Thereby, videos can be particularly helpful for students who struggle with the topic, especially when they wish to have something explained to them more than once (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 24). In a traditional class setting without video support, these students would perhaps be too shy to ask questions (more than once) and would rather listen passively to the lecturer (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 23).

Instructional videos can be helpful in this respect, they circumvent time constraints which "[...] are barriers to integrating critical thinking skills in the classroom" (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 93). However, they need to be structured in a way that incorporates and mirrors the CT definitions mentioned above. Unfortunately, lecturers are often prevented from teaching in this manner, because they are confronted with a problem dreaded by all lecturers: many students do not read the assigned texts. While this surely has multiple reasons, it is important to avoid summarising the text, because this has several disadvantages. Firstly, I have noticed that summaries inadvertently encourage students not to read assigned texts. The intention behind summaries is often to construct a common ground for further discussions, but this was not effective in my experience, as students' summarised knowledge of the text was too superficial for that purpose, so the subsequent discussions were of low academic quality. Secondly, they gave students a wrong impression of what they were supposed to do in their papers – summarise a lot, analyse a little. This is supported by researchers as "[...] teaching techniques that promote memorization (often temporary knowledge) [like summaries and] do not support critical thinking" (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 91). Therefore, instructional videos are helpful here as well, because they offer a higher degree of flexibility – students can read the text and watch the video at their own pace, they are not required to read the text by a fixed date or produce critical arguments immediately. Therefore, if lecturers use videos in seminars, this 'problem' can be circumvented, because students are given the freedom of reading assigned texts at their own pace (provided that the entire seminar is taught via videos). Thus, they will be able to benefit more from the videos, because these will contain only relevant analysis which adds to their quality and integrates CT effectively.

Susan M. Nugent points out that "[i]n order for teachers to engage students in such activities as analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating varying views of a subject, we must model the attitudes and spirit of critical thinking" (1990, p. 85). Therefore, it makes sense to construct videos in a way to emulate CT, and also to make students aware of the method(s) one applied. The instructional

interventions mentioned by Abrami et al. (discussed here in chapter 2) are very useful in this context, as they can be complemented by immediate application of CT. All four approaches were used for different purposes in the present research project. Students were provided with one instructional video that focused specifically on CT but in a generic manner, as it defined and explained CT in general, but it also contained various examples from literary and cultural studies, so the video started generically, but finished as a mixed intervention. The content videos, on the other hand, followed the immersion and infusion approaches – the choice of the method depended on the content of each video. The immersion approach was especially valuable at the beginning of a new topic, as it ignited students' interest in the matter, while the infusion method was helpful in the last third of the semester (as students were already familiar with CT by that time), because students were encouraged to collect their own critical ideas, thoughts, and points of criticism. These methods combined explain and encourage CT, allowing students to become familiar with it in theory and practice, and the importance of both is also supported by the literature.

Nugent criticises that “critical thinking is not passive; students cannot be thinking critically if someone else is evaluating varying perspectives for them” (1990, p. 85). While this view might be correct for intermediate learners, beginners need to ‘see’ how CT is done in practise to be able to apply it themselves, “[s]tudents must learn how to think critically before they can apply the skill to content scenarios” (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 94). While there is merit in constructing videos to mirror and emulate CT, it is important to leave gaps in one’s analysis to give students the opportunity of practising CT themselves. Students can be encouraged to fill these gaps by answering weekly study questions that are phrased in a way to guide them towards CT. “[...] critical thinking is a learned skill that must be developed, practised, and continually integrated into the curriculum to engage students in active learning” (Nugent 1990, p. 91), but before they can think critically on their own it is helpful to show and explain what is meant by CT in literary and cultural studies specifically. “Although some students may be naturally inquisitive, they require training to become systematically analytical, fair, and open-minded in their pursuit of knowledge” (Nugent 1990, p. 92). Lecturers need to operationalise CT, not just for their fields of study, but for each seminar specifically, and the results need to be communicated to their students – an instructional video dedicated specifically to CT can be helpful here. In this present research project, the initial videos of both seminars contained a great amount of in-depth analysis, which was gradually reduced in the course of the semester so that the final videos focused only on general analysis in which numerous topics were left untouched to encourage students to think critically on their own. Students were made aware of this reduction in the videos, it was pointed out to them that specific points were addressed only marginally or left out deliberately to give them the opportunity of analysing these points themselves.

Another common ‘hope’ that used to govern my literary and cultural studies seminars all too frequently is for students to realise the present-day significance of a given literary text/passage or cultural product without specific instruction. Yet, understanding the contemporary significance of a text, reducing it to its abstract essence, and relating that to present-day issues requires a great deal of CT. Therefore, the literature on CT seems to support teaching strategies that introduce content matter with personal or contemporary cultural experience (Nugent 1990; Snyder & Snyder 2008; Hooper 1996). This strategy is particularly helpful for raising awareness of the present-day significance of literary and cultural studies, to help students look beyond the supposed entertainment value of literary and cultural products. Hooper emphasises that “critical thinking is appropriate for the teacher of fine arts because the arts [including literature and performance] are a product of thought” (1996, p. 2). Unfortunately, students often assume that thinking critically about literary and cultural products means ‘finding out’ what the author wished to show/express, perhaps because that is more tangible than abstract meditation. They tend to look for a definite answer (right vs wrong) as they were often taught in school. Therefore, educators must be aware that teaching CT to beginners requires patience and understanding, because “[s]tudents may initially resist instructional questioning techniques if they previously have been required only to remember infor-

mation and not think about what they know” (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 97). Students’ resistance in this context could also have to do with the feeling that in-depth analysis ‘destroys’ the enjoyment of cultural products, especially contemporary media products, so superficial plot summary might appear to be students’ preferred choice in this case. Hooper criticises that “[b]ecause of their previous educational experiences, students have been conditioned to accept everything they read in a textbook and what the teacher says without question and then, to give that information back to the teacher in a test” (1996, p. 6). This could perhaps explain why summarising texts (that should have been read and prepared at home) in-class is disadvantageous, because students will emulate what the lecturer does, since “their prior learning experiences often do not require them to think critically” (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 94). Students need to learn to work with literature and accept the fact that there may never be a definite answer to a given question because the answer depends on interpretation, perspective, and argumentation. Questions such as: “What is a ‘good’ piece of literature/a ‘good’ painting or photograph? What does the author/playwright/photographer want to say?” are misleading, because they misrepresent the purpose of literary and cultural products, and they create the illusion that there is a ‘definite’ answer. While this lack of certainty might appear confusing to students, they need to be shown that removing the straight jacket of right vs wrong answers enables critical in-depth analysis based on the literary or cultural product alone. This in turn enables critical analysis, evaluation, and abstraction from text to (contemporary) culture and power structures. Hooper points out that “[...] students need to use critical thinking skills in order to understand the text, to cover the knowledge base, to relate the arts to the contemporary world, and to make personal value judgments” (1996, p. 8). These elements can be seen as incremental; the first step is understanding, then creating knowledge based on this understanding, transferring said knowledge to contemporary culture, and finally evaluating power relations and ideologies on the basis of these results. However, this does not mean that teaching strategies need to mirror the exact same process, in fact, there is merit in starting a given topic or discussion by focusing on the contemporary significance first, “[...] to help students see that many of the issues of earlier generations are still with us” (Hooper 1996, 11). For this purpose, it is important for lecturers to view “their students not as receivers of information, but as users of information”, and to give them the necessary (academic) tools (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 97). This will aid students to understand that “[c]ritical thinking does not exclude creative thinking”, especially in literary and cultural studies, and they might be motivated to consider critical questions such as “[W]hat are alternative interpretations? What other word might the poet have used? What might this phrase imply?” (Nugent 1990, p. 87).

In the context of literary studies, Thomas McKendy (1988, p. 24) suggests teaching Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* by asking students “to look at their own culture’s attitudes towards” a particular religion/people that is discriminated against, for the purpose of understanding the nature of stereotyping and discrimination discussed in the play. This method is in line with the scientific research done on the subject, because “when students don’t have much subject matter knowledge, introducing a concept by drawing on student experiences can help” (Willingham 2007, p. 18). One strategy to prevent students from viewing, for example, *The Tempest* or *The Merchant of Venice* as ‘outdated’ and thus irrelevant is to highlight its broad subject of criticism, namely discrimination based on stereotyping. The purpose of this method is to show students that many of the stereotypes they know “resemble in many ways the kinds of views Shakespeare [and his contemporaries] probably had about Jews” (McKendy 1988, p. 25). So instead of starting with the text and hoping that students would be able to apply its points of criticism to contemporary culture, I started the topic by elaborating on contemporary culture and then moved on to the plays. Thus, the first instructional videos did not focus on the differences and similarities between comedy and tragedy (as they usually did), instead I endeavoured to provoke the students by showing them a pamphlet that was distributed in a block of flats in the UK in early 2020. The text on this pamphlet had obvious elements of ‘othering’, stereotyping, and open racism in response to Brexit – all of which contemporary problems that students were familiar with. The instructional video contained

a thorough analysis of this pamphlet, which was then taken as a transition to academic literature on ‘othering’, and finally, Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. This order contradicts my previous teaching, which would usually begin with a brief introduction to the literary genre, followed by an in-depth analysis of the primary source and the secondary material, and finally the transition to present-day issues (as a final step). However, by rearranging these steps students were encouraged to take on a critical perspective and see that there are more similarities than differences between contemporary culture and EME drama with regard to the underlying process of ‘othering’ and stereotyping. This method has the potential for inspiring students to think critically about (classical) literary texts/cultural products and contemporary culture. “As students understand the values of others, they may find their own values changing. They can solve problems more readily when they recognize the values attached to alternative perspectives” (Nugent 1990, p. 90). Yet, this approach is by no means restricted to literary studies, it can be equally effective in cultural studies as well. The main idea here is to prepone the critical analysis of contemporary issues – in an immersion-approach – and use its findings to read and evaluate the entire primary source critically. In this respect it is helpful to “recognize that the students’ personal or affective responses often based on underlying values may be the catalyst for critical thinking” (Nugent 1990, p. 86). If these “affective responses” are encouraged, students will be able to connect them with the texts, using them as a type of “bridge from their concrete experience to a new and more abstract context” (Nugent 1990, p. 86).

The videos of both seminars were uploaded weekly (eleven content videos for each seminar); students needed to read the texts before watching the respective video. However, the videos were not deleted after one week, on the contrary, they stayed available until the end of the semester, so that students were able to re-watch them even while they worked on their essays. The videos in the cultural studies seminar (“Power and Ideology in Political Rhetoric”) were structured similarly to the literary studies seminar but adhered more to the infusion approach mentioned in chapter 2. In these videos, the contemporary significance of the issues presented in each political speech was not mentioned *prior* to its analysis but as part of it, so I referred to these issues sporadically. My intention was to give a profound analysis of each individual point or argument and to abstract it from the text of the speech to highlight its contemporary significance. Thus, the content-videos were designed in a way to emulate CT. The advantages of this method are abundant. Firstly, it slows down the process of teaching and learning, because lecturers are no longer pressed for time,

Example: Literary Studies

Topic: Violence in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*

1. What is the function of violence in this play?
2. How are the characters affected by it?
3. How is it represented to the audience?
4. What effect should this representation have?
5. Is there anything that you wish to criticise?

Figure 1: Example: Literary Studies

Example: Cultural Studies

Topic: Imperialist Ideology in Bush's 2001 Presidential Address

1. Where can you identify imperialist ideology and why is it phrased in this way and not differently?
2. What is the desired effect on the audience?
3. Which ideologies are presented and why are they used?
4. How does the speech portray the speaker and his relationship to the audience?
5. Is there anything that you wish to criticise?

12

Figure 2: Example: Cultural Studies

they can structure and script content videos in a way to give students practical examples of critical writing/thinking directly connected to the topic of the seminar. This step also includes making students aware of CT in practice, i. e., pointing out (at the end of a video) how the analysis was structured and for what purpose certain elements were deliberately avoided. This gives students an immediate hands-on experience of why this analysis can be classified as 'critical'. This kind of methodological reflection is quite difficult to include or carry out in a traditional class setting, due to time constraints, but the digital medium is helpful in this respect, and students are able to re-wind or re-watch the video with these explanations in mind. To complement this strategy, another instructional video was designed, dedicated generally to CT in literary and cultural studies, in which CT was defined with the help of current research findings, and also my own operationalisation of CT in this field (see figures 1 and 2).

This video also included effective and less effective examples of CT based on examples from literary and cultural texts that were dealt with in both seminars. Since literary and cultural studies are closely linked, and students usually study both, there is merit in creating one video to accommodate both, so that they will see the similarities, but also the specific points they would have to consider. Students were frequently asked to pause the video and read through the examples carefully to note down their own impressions on why one example was an opinion, and the other an argument. Detailed guiding questions were also provided to help students check whether their papers reflect CT, such as: "Why is this point significant? Did I summarise or analyse? Have I included evidence for my arguments? What is the function of ... ?" These questions were complemented by a preliminary structure that students could adopt:

- a) State your argument clearly.
- b) Incorporate arguments from primary and secondary sources that support your argument.
- c) Elaborate on the significance and function of what you have just written.
- d) Make sure that your argument is connected to the rest of your chapter, to your thesis statement, and to your general topic.

In order to practise these points, students were asked to choose an argument related to the content of the seminar, and construct two versions of it – an effective and an ineffective one, and post these in the forum of the online platform. This way students not only practise producing critical arguments, they can also see more authentic examples from their fellow students and improve their

understanding of CT. With regard to writing critical papers, the videos advised students to compare their texts to secondary sources from the same field, to see which register they would need to adopt. Of course, students are not expected to write in the same manner as scholars of literary and cultural studies, but secondary literature can be helpful as a guideline that they can rely on in case of doubt. Students were also encouraged to view a particular issue from all angles, to think about the possible reception of a given primary source (by audiences), and to criticise a given representation. Students are usually quite reserved when it comes to criticising sources, pointing out irregularities or prejudices that might have shaped a literary or cultural product, and it is important to encourage them to question sources, and think critically about them. The video on CT included examples of how literary and cultural products could be criticised academically, using examples from primary sources that had already been read in class. Apart from the operationalisations mentioned above, the video also contained a more general list of what to avoid, such as summaries, vague or unclear expressions, personal opinions, and generalisations. Of course, the video also included additional references to sources on CT that students could consult in case they wanted to read up on this topic. Thus, instead of the seminar leading up to CT, and treating it as an intended but simultaneously incidental result of a discussion, it is made the central focus and used as a tool for further analysis and evaluation.

4 Student Impressions

For a satisfactory evaluation of the digital medium in teaching CT, it was important to elicit the responses of the students and to find out if they perceived the instructional videos as helpful. As Sailer and Figas point out, recent research has shown that students' subjective evaluation of their learning process also contributes to their learning outcomes (2018, p. 325). Therefore, anonymous subjective evaluation is a helpful instrument in assessing the methods and videos used. Students were asked to give feedback on the content videos online, guided by the following question: "Did the videos make your understanding of [X] easier/more difficult? Why/how?" Participation was anonymous and non-mandatory.

The students in the literary studies seminar ("Shakespeare and Otherness") were asked the question mentioned above with regard to *The Merchant of Venice* after the last video on that play had been uploaded. Students responded positively, stating that the analysis in the videos helped them understand the texts more profoundly. There were seven responses in the literary studies seminar, of which six were remarkably positive. These students noted that they did not think about the play in a critical/analytical way when they read it before the start of the seminar but were able to connect their knowledge about the plot with the critical points mentioned in the videos. One student highlighted that s/he was previously unaware of how contemporary the play actually is, so the discussion of contemporary cultural issues appears to have been beneficial for this student. Other students elaborated on how the videos showed them *how* such texts needed to be read and analysed, proving that they had understood *what* happens in the plays, but the videos directed their attention to how the plays can/should be viewed from an academic perspective. One student specifically noted that s/he was able to identify relevant points of criticism on her/his own but did not know yet how to turn her/his ideas into arguments, and the videos were praised for explaining *how* this is done. This shows that the difficulties that students experience in this context, are not based on an alleged lack of understanding (of the texts) but rather of the *method* of transforming knowledge into a critical argument. Accordingly, this supports the thesis that the method of CT and the content of a given seminar must be taught simultaneously.

A different student praised this format explicitly, elaborating quite extensively on the advantages of videos that s/he experienced in this seminar. S/he stated that videos could be watched, re-watched, paused, and repeated as often as s/he wished to, noting that this helped him/her to engage more closely with the subject, at her/his own pace. Since the seminar was taught entirely in

English, students might be yet unfamiliar with some words, and the digital format helped this student here as well, because s/he was able to pause the video at any point to look up the words s/he did not know yet, without missing the analysis that followed. In a traditional class setting, unknown words are unfortunately frequently ignored, because students focus rather on understanding the main issues presented. Therefore, the digital format can also help improve language acquisition, particularly with regard to vocabulary that is typical for academic register. Another interesting point this student mentioned concerns the absence of in-class disturbance by fellow students – an advantage that is frequently overlooked when contemplating the digital format. There was only one student who criticised that videos were helpful, but more difficult to follow than in-class discussions. This could relate to the medium as such, but it could also refer to benefits of in-class discussions, such as varying perspectives from other students. Unfortunately, these discussions were not possible, because the seminars did not take place on site due to health hazards. However, the students' overall impressions confirm that instructional videos are helpful for teaching literature and CT in literary studies specifically, and it would be beneficial to blend these forms of teaching, for example in a flipped classroom setting.

Around the end of the seminar, students were asked (also anonymously) the following question: "Was the active explanation of critical thinking helpful? Do you feel that you can read, think, and write critically better than before? Why?" Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was only little participation in the feedback, and there was only one response to this question, but it was interesting and certainly worth noting. The student affirmed that s/he found the video on CT helpful, because s/he was previously unaware of how CT is defined in general, in the seminar, and specifically in academic writing. S/he also pointed out being usually too shy to ask questions about this topic, and that s/he felt better prepared for writing papers after watching the video.

The students in the cultural studies seminar ("Power and Ideology in Political Rhetoric") were asked the same question in the middle of the semester: "Did the videos make your understanding of ideology and political rhetoric easier/more difficult? Why/how?" Four students participated and answered these questions. All four of these answers were positive; students highlighted the benefits of the digital medium as well, particularly the possibility of re-watching and pausing the videos at any point in time. Interestingly, many students praised this format, because it allowed them not only to learn at their own pace, but also to learn without 'disturbing' fellow students by asking questions in class. Although questions are never seen as disturbance by lecturers, students sometimes appear to think about their own questions in this way, and the digital format helped them in this respect. Another student stressed that s/he usually hesitates to ask questions in class (concerning clarifications, vocabulary etc.), and felt that this format suited him/her better. Another student remarked that the videos did not necessarily make his/her understanding of the topics/texts easier, but more 'accessible'. Unfortunately, no students from this class answered the final question concerning the video on CT.

Interestingly, the student responses of both seminars echo the literature on flipped classrooms and confirm the advantages of using videos in teaching. These benefits can promote CT, because they allow a more individualised way of learning, thereby giving students the necessary space to learn without pressure. The burden of needing to understand everything that is said immediately is alleviated, and students are given time and space to understand and practise CT in a safe environment.

5 Assessment of Critical Thinking

Many researchers criticise (multiple choice) exams as unsuitable for assessing CT (Nugent 1990; Snyder & Snyder 2008; Hooper 1996). Students ought to produce – not reproduce – CT, they need to show that they are able to think critically, and this is not possible in a traditional (multiple choice) exam. "Instruction that supports critical thinking uses questioning techniques that require

students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information to solve problems and make decisions (think) rather than merely to repeat information (memorize)" (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 91). Thus, essays are more suitable for assessing CT, and also for giving students the opportunity of practising CT on their own. They give them "the freedom (and responsibility) to explore content, analyze resources, and apply information" (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 92). In this context, it is important to allow students to choose their essay topics and formulate their thesis statements on their own first. Writing an essay (in literary and cultural studies) involves choosing a suitable topic and thesis statement, conducting research, organising available information, and formulating critical arguments using primary and secondary sources. Students need to argue for (or against) a thesis, so they need to "feel comfortable thinking through an answer rather than simply having an answer" (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 96). Concerning the seminars mentioned above, students were told that the essay topics could revolve around one of the topics already mentioned in class (in the videos), but not analysed fully in the videos, so students would have a basis they could rely on. As already mentioned above, the videos contained gaps that students were made aware of; these gaps were left deliberately to nudge students in the direction of potential essay topics, but they would have to conduct research on and think critically about that topic on their own. Subsequent in-depth analysis, evaluation and judgement which are part of the writing process will promote "students' personal discovery of information" (Snyder & Snyder 2008, S. 93). The content of the videos that were used to teach the two seminars was structured and scripted in a manner to emulate CT in writing. This would have not been possible in a traditional class setting, because listeners would experience great difficulties in trying to follow, but since the content was presented in a video, students were able to pause it at any point, and re-watch it as often as they wish to. Structuring the videos in this manner gives students an impression of CT in practice/in writing. Although this does not necessarily need to have an immediate impact on their writing, it can serve as a guideline, so that they know (even if only roughly) what they need to do in their papers.

The student essays, written in the two seminars mentioned above, were evaluated and analysed with regard to how critically and coherently they used the six points that define CT (for the respective seminar) mentioned earlier. It appeared sensible to use a Likert-Scale in this qualitative evaluation. Of course, the students' essays are dependent on numerous factors of which instruction is only one; however, there is merit in taking a look at the content of the essays to find out if there are any peculiarities. The essays in both seminars were quite similar on most of the points (CT criteria mentioned above); however, they differ considerably in one aspect which concerns summaries. The literary studies essays contained very little summary; in fact, no student scored 'very poor' in that category, while the cultural studies essays exhibited six students who scored 'very poor' in this category. The latter identified power structures and hierarchies slightly more often than the literary studies essays, but it is remarkable that so many of them summarised quite a lot. A possible explanation could be that the idea/concept of a summary is quite clear in the literary context. A closer look at the individual essays that performed very poorly in this category, reveals that the students retold and explained passages from the primary sources, in this case political speeches, instead of analysing them. This shows that they were still struggling with the surface structure of the speeches and had not moved on to the deep structure yet. As a consequence, it can be stated that students of a cultural studies seminar might perhaps need more examples on how non-literary cultural products can be summarised, and what differentiates this kind of summary from critical analysis. Ideally, this explanation should include many examples that illustrate both how it should be done and what should be avoided. The literary studies essays, on the other hand, performed comparatively well on identifying significant points of criticism in literature, and transferring these to (contemporary) culture, perhaps because they profited from the immersion approach, and the discussion of cultural issues that preceded the analysis of the primary sources.

6 Conclusion

Student success is not necessarily linked to instruction directly, but it plays a significant part nonetheless. Critical thinking is one of the most important skills that students need to acquire in their studies, and although it is desired by lecturers, it is rarely taught actively, partly due to time constraints in traditional class settings. Therefore, the digital medium can help to circumnavigate time restrictions by relocating lessons into videos – the benefits of this approach are abundant for both lecturers and students. The former can script and structure their videos in a way to accommodate CT definitions and emulate CT actively, while the latter have the necessary freedom to learn at their own pace. Another benefit of teaching CT through videos is that it enables lecturers to define CT for their respective seminars and share that definition and fitting examples with their students, without compromising precious time in-class. Students can watch, re-watch, and re-wind the videos as often as they wish, even during their writing process, if need be, without having to sacrifice the additional explanations of their lecturers.

Thus, videos are a suitable medium for teaching CT, because lecturers can script the content of their videos to emulate CT, which cannot be done as easily in traditional class settings, because listeners might have problems following the arguments. As a consequence, using videos to teach and mirror CT can add to the quality of the seminar sessions and promote students' understanding of CT. As mentioned above, the students in the literary and cultural studies seminars reacted positively to the videos and praised the freedom that these gave them. The brief analysis of the essays has shown that operationalising CT for a given seminar and sharing this knowledge with students can improve their understanding of what their papers specifically need to reflect. Thus, teaching CT actively can improve student performance, particularly when it includes many effective and less effective examples to give students a clear idea of CT. Future research could focus on promoting CT in a flipped classroom, in which videos complement in-class discussions. It would be interesting to find out whether these in-class discussions would be more critical than in a traditional class setting. In this case, it would be possible to work more closely with the students and elicit their impressions. Students could be asked to write a critical five-minute-paper on a given topic at the beginning, during, and at the end of the semester. This formal assessment of their progress could perhaps be complemented by a brief explanation of their impressions concerning the methods that improved or slowed down their understanding of CT.

Bibliography

- Abrami, P. C., Bernard R. M., Borokhovski, E., Waddington, D. I., Wade, C. A., & Persson, T. (2015). Strategies for Teaching Students to Think critically: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 85(2), 275–314.
- Bergmann, J., & Sams, A. (2012). *Flip Your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day*. International Society for Technology in Education.
- Centeno Garcia, A., Metzger, C., & Salden, P. (2019). Kritisches Denken als Lernziel: ein Blick aus der hochschuldidaktischen Praxis. *Die hochschullehre*, 5, 931–939.
- Hooper, W. L. (1996). Teaching Critical Thinking in the Fine Arts. *The Journal of General Education*, 45(1), 1–17.
- McKendy, T. (1988). Gypsies, Jews, and The Merchant of Venice. *The English Journal*, 77(7), 24–26.
- McMillan, J. H. (1987). Enhancing College Students' Critical Thinking: A Review of Studies. *Research in Higher Education*, 26(1), 3–16.
- Nugent, S. M. (1990). Five Prerequisites for Teaching Critical Thinking. *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, 6(2), 85–96.
- Preußner, U., & Sennewald, N. (2021). Literale Kompetenzen an der Hochschule – eine Einleitung. In U. Preußner & N. Sennewald (Hrsg.), *Literale Kompetenzen an der Hochschule* (S. 7–33). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Sailer, M., & Figas, P. (2018). Umgedrehte Hochschullehre. Eine Experimentalstudie zur Rolle von Lernvideos und aktivem Lernen im Flipped Teaching. *Die hochschullehre*, 4, 318–337.

- Snyder, M. J., & Snyder, L. G. (2008). Teaching Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills. *The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, 50(2), 90–99.
- Willingham, D. T. (2007). Critical Thinking: Why is it so hard to teach? *American Educator*, 109(4), 8–19.

Author

M.A., Nadja, Fakha. University of Paderborn, Department of English and American Studies, Paderborn, Germany; Email: nadja.fakha@uni-paderborn.de



Zitiervorschlag: Fakha, N. (2021). Promoting Critical Thinking in Literary and Cultural Studies. *die hochschullehre*, Jahrgang 7/2021. DOI: 10.3278/HSL2133W. Online unter: wbv.de/die-hochschullehre



die hochschullehre

Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Studium und Lehre

Die Open-Access-Zeitschrift **die hochschullehre** ist ein wissenschaftliches Forum für Lehren und Lernen an Hochschulen.

Zielgruppe sind Forscherinnen und Forscher sowie Praktikerinnen und Praktiker in Hochschuldidaktik, Hochschulentwicklung und in angrenzenden Feldern, wie auch Lehrende, die an Forschung zu ihrer eigenen Lehre interessiert sind.

Themenschwerpunkte

- Lehr- und Lernumwelt für die Lernprozesse Studierender
- Lehren und Lernen
- Studienstrukturen
- Hochschulentwicklung und Hochschuldidaktik
- Verhältnis von Hochschullehre und ihrer gesellschaftlichen Funktion
- Fragen der Hochschule als Institution
- Fachkulturen
- Mediendidaktische Themen

Alle Beiträge von **die hochschullehre** können Sie kostenfrei als PDF-Datei herunterladen!

wbv.de/die-hochschullehre