Learning about World War Two: Group work discussions and literary engagement using Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2025/n33a4

CW Koekemoer
University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg
South Africa
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7803-7810
christopherk@uj.ac.za

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2025/n33a4

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a generic qualitative research study that investigated 20 pre-service teachers' experiences and perspectives of a group worksheet discussion in a third-year English literary studies module that is part of a Bachelor of Education degree in Intermediate Phase teaching. The participants were interviewed, both individually and in focus groups, and their assessment tasks were analysed. The task was based on the novel, The Book Thief, by Markus Zusak. The academic essay is the dominant form of both formative and summative assessments in many academic disciplines, but especially in literary studies. This is problematic in some ways as most students who enter university do not speak English as their first language and generally struggle with expressing their ideas in academic writing. Additionally, many students do not have sufficient knowledge of history, and group work can supplement historical knowledge gaps that students may have. I argue that group work is underused in English literary studies modules. The findings of this research indicated that group work discussions can facilitate collaborative, inquiry-based and problem-based learning to advance knowledge of history that facilitates skills development in literary studies. These skills include close reading, textual analysis and disciplinary content knowledge.

Keywords: Assessments; collaborative learning; essays; disciplinary content knowledge; group work; history; inquiry-based learning; literary studies; problem-based learning; teacher education.

Introduction

It has been the norm in higher education to rely, often exclusively, on formal academic writing in the form of essays for both formative and summative assessments. Hindley and Clughen[1] note that academic writing, in the form of academic essays, is a "staple university practice required across disciplines to determine student success" including the humanities, social sciences,[2] and history.[3] Godsell et al.,[4] in the context of history assessments, argue that essays preclude "students from incorporating other ways of knowing" and question whether essay topics and their "false standard of objectivity" necessarily allow for students' "own knowledges to be included in meaningful ways". Gibson[5] argues against overusing essays, and contends that for students to write better essays, "we could do worse than, paradoxically, set fewer essays". Gibson[6] explains that this can be effected by deploying a "more varied range of assessment tasks" that may help students to work, "if not necessarily 'beyond the essay', then at least 'towards', 'through', and 'with' it". De Villiers[7] argues that lecturers are confronted with numerous essays of similar shapes and sizes, which results in "autopilot marking". The author[8] further argues that "regenred work", in other words, non-traditional assessments in higher education provide a "productive disorientation" that could lead to more engaged and responsive feedback to students' work. Additionally, generative artificial intelligence brings into question the continued use of traditional assessment practices and the impact it has on academic integrity.[9] This article presents the findings of a study that used an alternative, non-traditional assessment in the form of a group worksheet discussion in a third-year literary studies module that forms part of a Bachelor of Education degree at a South African university.

[1] D Hindley and L Clughen, "'Yay! Not another academic essay!' Blogging as an alternative academic genre", *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 11(1), 2018, p. 83.

[2] I Bruce, "Constructing critical stance in university essays in English literature and sociology", *English for Specific Purposes*, 42, 2016, pp. 13-25; U Wingate, "'Argument!' Helping students understand what essay writing is about", *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 11(2), 2012, pp. 145-154.

[3] S Godsell, B Shabangu and G Primrose, "Against colonial residues, towards decolonising assessment: A case study of a university history course", *Cogent Education*, 11(1), 2024, p. 2. DOI:10.1080/2331186X.2024.2362552

[4] S Godsell et al., "Against colonial residues, towards decolonising assessment…", *Cogent Education*, 11, 2024.

[5] J Gibson, "Beyond the essay? Assessment and English literature", B Knight (ed), *Teaching literature: Text and dialogue in the English classroom,* (Middlesbrough, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 100.

[6] J Gibson, "Beyond the essay?", (Middlesbrough, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 100.

[7] R De Villiers, "Transgeneric assessment: Modernist affordances for the student essay", *Critical Arts*, 39(1-2), 2025, p. 15.

[8] R De Villiers, "Transgeneric assessment…", *Critical Arts*, 39, 2025, p. 15.

[9] JA Haddley and CG Ardito, "Generative AI in assessment: Towards understanding the student view", *MSOR Connections*, 23(1), 2024, pp. 4-14.

The task was based on the novel *The Book Thief* (originally published in 2005) by Markus Zusak,[10] which is narrated by Death personified and explores the childhood experiences of the novel's protagonist, Liesel Meminger. The narrator also explores important events of World War Two. Instead of taking the usual approach of the first lecture introducing the novel, students engaged in inquiry-based and collaborative learning to answer contextual questions about the novel, which the findings show contributed to their ability to understand the context of the novel and to integrate literary devices and textual analysis in their answers. Using literature to teach about history and social issues is a valuable way to extend teaching and learning beyond the discipline of literary studies. *The Book Thief* is an example of historical fiction, which makes it especially useful to teach aspects of world history, specifically about the Holocaust and World War Two. Historical fiction "not only takes its setting and some characters and events from history, but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters".[11] It is essential that students understand the historical context of the novel to interpret the characters, the narrator and the overall themes and settings of the novel.

Critical historical thinking is required when reading historical fiction. Bladfors and Kokkola[12] note that drawing attention to "the fictional aspects of historical fiction may promote readers' capacities for identifying historical truth in fiction". Importantly, though Bladfors and Kokkola[13] caution against using fiction to support history education extensively because narrative elements, such as unreliable narration, "may distort understandings of the past, but may also provide the tools for thinking critically about historical evidence".[14] A solid foundation in historical facts must exist for students to separate what is true from what is fiction in a novel.[15] This is why it is important to provide informed lectures on the historical aspects of the novel. The fictionality and historicity of the novel can only be critically analysed if there is a solid understanding and grasp of historical facts and fictional elements;[16] although, this view underestimates the supplemental role that fiction can play

[10] M Zusak, *The Book Thief,* (Anniversary Edition. New York: Penguin Random House, 2016).

[11] MH Abrams and GG Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learner, 2009), p. 256.

[12] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history: Swedish teenagers read holocaust fiction", *Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics,* 14(1), 2023, p. 2.

[13] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history…", *NJCA,* 14, 2023, p. 9.

[14] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history…", *NJCA,* 14, 2023, p. 2.

[15] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history…", *NJCA,* 14, 2023.

[16] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history…", *NJCA,* 14, 2023.

in addressing gaps in historical knowledge.[17] The fictional elements within a historical text can either illuminate or distort historical accuracies depending on the reader's prior knowledge of the historical context, which is why *The Book Thief* fosters critical historical thinking in relation to the historical context and the narrative perspective.[18]

Literature review

Group work submissions can include two or more students working together to develop skills, knowledge and abilities in higher education.[19] Tumpa et al.[20] observed that group assessments can reduce the marking load, improve skills such as teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, collaborative learning and communication. The group assessment applied a collaborative learning approach, which is a pedagogy that entails students working together to solve an intellectual task.[21] An inquiry-based learning approach was used for the task, which involves building knowledge that actively engages students through generating answerable questions.[22] The assessment additionally allowed students to demonstrate and enhance their disciplinary content knowledge, which is the students' knowledge of the subject matter of a particular discipline.[23]

Group work: collaborative learning

Collaborative learning emphasises students combined intellectual effort to solve a problem.[24] An important aspect of this assessment was that students could incorporate the knowledge from others in their answers. Collaborative learning caters to students' diverse social and intellectual abilities while also embracing differences in knowledge, skills and dispositions among students and these differences then become useful and

[17] G Genis, "Indigenous South African poetry as conduits of history: Epi-poetics – pedagogy of memory", *Yesterday and Today*, 22, 2019, pp. 60-87; S Godsell, "Poetry as method in the history classroom: Decolonising possibilities", *Yesterday and Today*, 21, 2019, pp. 1-28.

[18] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history…", *NJCA,* 14, 2023.

[19] RJ Tumpa, S Skaik, M Ham and G Chaudhry, "A holistic overview of studies to improve group-based assessments in higher education: A systematic literature review", *Sustainability*, 14(15), 2022, 9638.

[20] RJ Tumpa et al., "A holistic overview of studies to improve group-based assessments in higher education…", *Sustainability*, 14, 2022.

[21] M Holt, *Collaborative learning as democratic practice: A history,* (NCTE: Urbana, Illinois, 2018).

[22] SKW Chu, RB Reynolds, NJ Tavares, M Notari and CWY Lee, *21st Century skills development through inquiry-based learning: From theory to practice,* (Singapore: Springer, 2017).

[23] T Kleickmann, D Richter, M Kunter, J Elsner, M Besser, S Krauss and J Baumert, "Teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge: The role of structural differences in teacher education", *Journal of Teacher Education*, 64(1), 2013, pp. 90-106.

[24] SKW Chu et al., *21st Century skills development through inquiry-based learning…,* (Singapore: Springer, 2017).

valuable resources.[25] Rosedale et al.[26] contend that students learn from each other while they develop their arguments in collaborative reasoning. The dialogue among participants goes "beyond adversarial and coalescent forms because they are embedded in activities in which positions are modified in light of the arguments".[27] This means that students come to new understandings of concepts and questions through discussion and arguments. The arguments are not necessarily adversarial, but allow students to modify their positions. Additionally, new knowledge is constructed through social interactions.[28] Group work is effective because it enables diverse responses and interpretations that emerge through discussion, debate, and argumentation. The diversity of responses that are generated among readers add depth and value to the discussion.[29] While there are benefits to group work, it is often associated with anxiety and uncertainty among teachers and students,[30] and students may feel that some group members do not contribute adequately, resulting in a perception of unfair mark distribution.[31] I maintain that group assessments are a rich assessment resource, as revealed in the findings of the current article, which is underutilised in literary studies.

Inquiry- and problem-based learning

Inquiry-based learning enables students to "answer questions through the exploration and analysis of data"[32] by exploring topics collaboratively, using each other's perspectives and

[25] SKW Chu et al., *21st Century skills development through inquiry-based learning…,* (Singapore: Springer, 2017).

[26] N Rosedale, S McNaughton, R Jesson, T Zhu and J Oldehaver, "Online written argumentation: Internal dialogue features and classroom instruction", E Manalo (ed.), *Deeper learning, dialogic learning, and critical thinking: Research-based strategies for the classroom,* (Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), pp. 263-278.

[27] N Rosedale et al., "Online written argumentation…", E Manalo (ed.), *Deeper learning…*, p. 266.

[28] H Hou and S Wu, "Analyzing the social knowledge construction behavioral patterns of an online synchronous collaborative discussion instructional activity using an instant messaging tool: A case study", *Computers and Education*, 57(2), 2011, pp. 1459-1468.

[29] B Hutchings and K O'Rourke, "Problem-based learning in literary studies", *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 1(1), 2002, pp. 73-83.

[30] RJ Tumpa et al., "A holistic overview of studies to improve group-based assessments in higher education…", *Sustainability*, 14, 2022.

[31] J Forsell, K Forslund Frykedal and E Hammar Chiriac, "Group work assessment: assessing social skills at group level", *Small Group Research*, 51(1), 2020, pp. 87-124; S Orr, "Collaborating or fighting for the marks? Students' experiences of group work assessment in the creative arts", *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(3), 2010, pp. 301-313.

[32] BLM Levy, EE Thomas, K Drago and LA Rex, "Examining studies of inquiry-based learning in three fields of education: Sparking generative conversation", *Journal of Teacher Education*, 64(5), 2013, p. 387. DOI:10.1177/0022487113496430

knowledge of various domains.[33] Inquiry-based learning allows students to investigate authentic problems, which enhances their understanding of the topic under scrutiny.[34] Students need discipline specific knowledge, however, they should also be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding within different fields and integrate and synthesise interdisciplinary knowledge,[35] such as linking literature with history. Problem-based learning is well-suited to literary studies, which relies on discussion and debate rather than on questions that require closed-ended yes/no answers.[36] This means that the answers to questions are often undetermined and open to the students' interpretation of literary devices, such as metaphors, symbols, themes, and other techniques.

Disciplinary content knowledge

Shulman[37] influentially differentiated between different categories of a teacher's content knowledge, separating subject matter (disciplinary) or content knowledge from pedagogical content knowledge. Pedagogical content knowledge involves educators representing and formulating a particular subject to make the content comprehensible[38] and accessible to learners[39]. Shulman[40] argued that content knowledge is "the amount and organisation of knowledge in the minds of a teacher". Content knowledge is the teacher's in-depth knowledge of the subject matter that is taught.[41] Student teachers must, therefore, have the necessary content knowledge about the specific subject that they will teach. In literary studies, the concepts include the literary devices that students need to understand.

[33] JC Harste, "What education as inquiry is and isn't", S Boran and B Comber (eds.), *Critiquing whole language and classroom inquiry,* (National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, Illinois, 2001).

[34] BLM Levy et al., "Examining studies of inquiry-based learning in three fields of education…", *Journal of Teacher Education*, 64, 2013.

[35] BLM Levy et al., "Examining studies of inquiry-based learning in three fields of education…", *Journal of Teacher Education*, 64, 2013.

[36] B Hutchings and K O'Rourke, "Problem-based learning…", *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 1, 2002.

[37] LS Shulman, "Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching", *Journal of Education*, 193(3), 2013, pp. 1-11.

[38] LS Shulman, "Those who understand…", *Journal of Education*, 193, 2013.

[39] T Kleickmann et al., "Teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge…", *JTE*, 64, 2013.

[40] LS Shulman, "Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching", *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 1986, p. 9. Doi:10.3102/0013189X015002004

[41] T Kleickmann et al., "Teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge…", *JTE*, 64, 2013; LS Shulman, "Those who understand…", *Educational Researcher*, 15, 1986.

Research design and methodology

Research design and paradigm

The study used a generic qualitative research design to investigate Intermediate Phase student teachers' experiences and perspectives of a group worksheet discussion in an English literary studies module. A generic qualitative research design allows for greater flexibility in choosing data generation methods.[42] A generic qualitative study is concerned with individuals, in this case, third-year undergraduate students, and how they subjectively experience and reflect on a particular phenomenon.[43] This study follows a constructivist paradigm in which the researcher considers participants' subjective experiences and studies their views on a particular phenomenon.[44] The constructivist researcher believes that the nature of reality is constructed socially and that there is consequently no universal reality.[45] Instead, there are numerous truths and versions of a single phenomenon.[46] This research design approach was applied to determine how participants experienced doing an alternative assessment for the study of literature.

Sampling

A purposive sample of 20 participants was selected, all of whom spoke English as an additional language and were third-year students studying towards a Bachelor of Education degree for teaching in the Intermediate Phase. A purposive sample of participants share relevant qualities that can potentially elucidate the focus of the research inquiry.[47] Participants were selected out of a cohort of approximately 200 students whose marks in their second-year English module were: adequate (50-59) (*n*=3); substantial (60-69) (*n*=13) and meritorious (70-79) (*n*=4) to allow for a variety of participants' experiences,

[42] KA Holley and MS Harris, *The qualitative dissertation in education: A guide for integrating research and practice,* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

[43] KA Holley and MS Harris, *The qualitative dissertation in education…,* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

[44] JW Creswell, *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choose among five approaches,* 2nd edition, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2007).

[45] SB Merriam, *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation,* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

[46] SB Merriam, *Qualitative research…,* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

[47] M Ahmad and S Wilkins, "Purposive sampling in qualitative research: A framework for the entire journey", *Quality & Quantity,* 59, 2024, pp. 1461-1479; BK Daniel and T Harland, *Higher education research methodology: A step-by-step guide to the research process,* (London: Routledge, 2018).

perspectives, and performance in the group assessment. The two tutors for the module were interviewed in a dyadic interview to gain their perspectives on how students experienced the task. The names used to refer to the participants are pseudonyms.

Data generation

Data generation methods included conducting semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions with the participants of the study, a written reflection task, and an analysis of the students' assessments to answer the research question, "What are pre-service primary school teachers' experiences of, perspectives on, and demonstrable performance in, a group worksheet assessment in an undergraduate English literary studies module?" Data was generated from October 2022 to January 2023. The individual and focus group interviews elucidated participants' perspectives on, and experiences of the use of the group task. Additionally, participants' worksheets were analysed to determine to what extent students achieved the desired outcomes of the questions. The participants' written assessments were read several times to identify common ideas that were evident from their answers. Six codes were devised based on the expected answers and marked the participants who had evidenced the outcomes in their responses. The following codes with the number of participants who had achieved the outcomes were marked, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Codes in relation to assessment outcomes

Codes	Number of Participants
Responses demonstrated understanding/appreciation of the symbolism of weather (question 1)	18
Responses demonstrated an understanding of Aryan ideology/race purity (question 2)	18
Responses demonstrated the ability to analyse an extract in terms of the theme of childhood (question 3)	18
Responses demonstrated the ability to analyse an extract in terms of setting (question 4)	14
Responses demonstrated the ability to analyse an extract in terms of narrative perspective (question 4)	6
Responses demonstrated an understanding of WW2	18

The findings from the analysis of the group worksheet tasks revealed that participants' perceptions of, and their performance in the tasks were similar. The codes outlined in Table 1 indicate that most participants could demonstrate their understanding of symbolism, theme, setting and the historical context of World War Two.

Data analysis

This study used thematic analysis, which is the search for meaning "across a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meanings".[48] When analysing the data, the researcher used the constant comparative method. This method of data analysis involves comparing data segments with each other to identify similarities and differences that are then grouped together in categories to identify patterns in the data.[49]

Ethical considerations

As part of the initial phases of the research project, the researcher had to ensure that permission was given from the Research Ethics Committee of the relevant institution, which was received before conducting research. Each participant was subsequently approached via email. The participants' informed consent was requested. As part of the informed consent form, potential participants were provided with a background to the study, in which it was explained why the researcher requested their participation in the study. Additionally, the intention of the study and the procedures involved in the research were explained, should the participants agree to take part in the study. Further explanation was given to the participants, in that they would be asked to participate in an individual interview, be part of a focus group discussion and that their assessments would be part of the data used for the purposes of the current study. The potential risks and benefits were also explained in the informed consent form. The participants were informed that this was a low-risk study and that their identities would remain confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions.

[48] V Braun and V Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 2006, p. 86.

[49] SB Merriam and EJ Tisdell, *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016).

It was ensured that the participants had a clear understanding that the researcher was aware that they may feel pressure to agree to participate, since the researcher of the current study was the lecturer for the module, and that their participation in the study would not impact on their marks for the module.

Group worksheet discussion

The group worksheet assessment was completed by the participants during a lecture period and required students to write paragraphs in response to a set of questions. There were five questions based on extracts from the novel, which required small groups of two to five students to work collaboratively to answer the questions in paragraph form on the worksheet during the lecture period of 100 minutes. Students then wrote paragraphs as a group in response to the questions. The questions contained extracts from the novel that students discussed and analysed as a group. This task was informed by two approaches to active learning, namely inquiry-based and collaborative learning. An inquiry-based learning approach means that students continuously build and rebuild their understanding through reflection and experiencing by establishing connections between their prior knowledge and new information.[50] Collaborative learning was also an important aspect of this activity, and it underscored students' combined intellectual input[51] as they engaged with the task. An important aspect of this assessment was that students benefitted from the diversity of intellectual and social interactions, which became useful resources in the learning process.[52] Students worked together to answer the questions and collaborated to share and establish knowledge of the literary concepts and the novel's context. There were five questions in the worksheet, each accompanied by extracts from the novel:

Group worksheet questions

1. The extract below gives the reader an idea of the historical context of the novel. What is significant about the narrator's description of Europe as "gray *(sic)*"? Do you notice more than one instance of the colour grey being implied? What does this suggest about Europe during this period?

[50] M Panasan and P Nuangchalerm, "Learning outcomes of project-based and inquiry-based learning activities", *Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2), 2010, pp. 252-255.

[51] SKW Chu et al., *21st Century skills development through inquiry-based learning…,* (Singapore: Springer, 2017).

[52] SKW Chu et al., *21st Century skills development through inquiry-based learning…,* (Singapore: Springer, 2017).

2. In the following extract, the narrator describes Liesel's features. Explain what the narrator means by "German blond *(sic)*" and "dangerous eyes" in the novel's context.
3. Rudy innocently painted himself black because he wanted to be like the American Olympian Jesse Owens, whom he admired. The passage below includes various instances of Rudy not grasping prejudice. What does this reveal about children in the context of Nazi Germany?
4. The narrator (Death) provides a description of the events at the Death Camp in Auschwitz from his perspective. From this extract, (1) explain what the Holocaust is; (2) what happened at Auschwitz and (3) how does the narrator experience these events?
5. Consider the genre of the novel and the context. Why do you think the author uses Death as a narrator in this novel?

Discussion of the findings

The main findings of the study are that students learnt about the historical context of the novel through the group worksheet and were able to integrate literary devices and textual analysis into their discussions. The group task departed from the usual lecturer approach of taking time in the first lecture to teach about the context of a particular text, for example, teaching about post-colonial Nigeria before teaching Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or teaching about class and gender norms in eighteenth century England when introducing a Jane Austen novel. This approach is called genetic criticism and focuses on teaching about the author's life and social context.[53] Instead of taking this traditional approach, inquiry-based and collaborative learning approaches were employed for the purposes of the current study. In addition to learning from each other by discussing the questions, participants also used the Internet to fill in the knowledge gaps they had about the Holocaust and World War Two. Many students had no significant prior knowledge about World War Two prior to doing this group assessment, which is part of a broader challenge in South Africa where students have limited grasp of historical content.[54]

[53] SA Wolf, *Interpreting Literature with Children,* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003).

[54] A Carolin and T Bennett, "Using a historical memoir to improve curriculum coherence in teacher education: The case of Trevor Noah's born a crime", *Yesterday and Today*, 27(1), 2022, pp. 13-42; B Roberts, G Houston, J Struwig S Gordon, "Survey shows ignorance about big moments in South Africa's history – Like the Sharpeville massacre", *The Conversation,* 19 March 2021 (Available at https://theconversation.com/survey-shows-ignoranceabout-big-moments-in-south-africas-history-like-the-sharpeville-massacre-157513, as accessed on 17 April 2024).

The group task also encouraged the critical skill that is used in literary studies, which is reading the text closely, analysing the implications and effects of the extracts, and understanding literary devices through the discussions. Students were not assessed according to language criteria, and they subsequently felt that this was beneficial since it allowed them to solely focus on the ideas that emerged from the discussion. The participants also noted that the task encouraged their interpersonal communication and debating skills.

Historical context and prior knowledge

Literature can be employed to teach students about different periods, cultures, and historical events. Using historical fiction has the added benefit of teaching students about world history. Literary texts can also be used to support teaching in other disciplines. Bladfors and Kokkola[55] note that fiction is widely used to teach history, especially historical events like the Holocaust. Additionally, repeated encounters with historical fiction can support critical, historical and literary thinking.[56] Carolin and Bennett,[57] in their study of teaching Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime* at a South African university, argue that historical texts can be useful resources to create coherence between English and history modules. This would mean that students can master the necessary disciplinary skills in both learning areas.[58] Many students' knowledge of historical events is generally limited. Carolin and Bennett[59] note that many pre-service teachers in the Intermediate Phase lack content knowledge of history because it is not a prerequisite school subject to gain entrance into the programme. Genis[60] argues that incorporating indigenous South African poetry into history classrooms can enhance the teaching of history. Godsell[61] argues similarly that using poetry in teacher education is a way of decolonising the teaching of history and provides a point of entry to historical issues that can be enriched with additional texts that serve as evidence.

Students learnt about the historical context of the novel through discussion and online research, because most students did not have sufficient knowledge of World War Two prior to doing the group worksheet assessment. Loyiso said, for example, "*I didn't know much about the historical context before*". Sandile admitted that "*the Holocaust was a foreign concept to some of my group members, including me*". Thembi mentioned that she learnt about the

[55] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history…", *NJCA,* 14, 2023.
[56] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history…", *NJCA,* 14, 2023.
[57] A Carolin and T Bennett, "Using a historical memoir…", *Yesterday and Today*, 27, 2022.
[58] A Carolin and T Bennett, "Using a historical memoir…", *Yesterday and Today*, 27, 2022.
[59] A Carolin and T Bennett, "Using a historical memoir…", *Yesterday and Today*, 27, 2022.
[60] G Genis, "Indigenous South African poetry as conduits of history…", *Yesterday and Today*, 22, 2019.
[61] S Godsell, "Poetry as method in the history classroom…", *Yesterday and Today*, 21, 2019.

Holocaust during the group worksheet discussion, and she was then able to understand the narrator's perspective: "*I understood why Death felt that way during the Holocaust*". When I asked Joseph if he knew what the Holocaust was, he responded that "*even that word, I didn't know it at that time*". I asked Jan if he learnt anything new from the group discussion. He noted that he learnt about the historical context: "*we did not do that much of history in school. So, I didn't have any prior knowledge of that much history*". The Internet and group members were valuable sources of information for most participants. They used search engines to help them understand key concepts and events that were represented in the questions and extracts, such as the definition of the Holocaust and events at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Zanele said that "*we had to Google the history of the Holocaust*". Students synthesised historical information from the Internet to answer the focused questions about specific extracts from the novel for the group assessment. Sandile noted that her group looked at "*some of the pictures that were depicting on Google of what happened during the Holocaust*" and that they had a student in their group who "*explained to us what was happening during that time*". To answer question 3 about Liesel's 'dangerous eyes', Sarah mentioned that they searched the Internet to understand the question before answering it: "*We used what we found from the internet, the characteristics of the German people and the dangerous eyes aspect was because her eyes were not fitting to what Hitler would explain the relevant features to have by that time in Germany. So that's why the narrator actually used dangerous eyes to make an emphasis that that it was dangerous to have.*" Linda mentioned that her group also researched "*the characteristics of Germans*". Joyce revealed that they would "*search something that was related to the question and try to connect with what we already know from the book*". Thandi mentioned that "w*e wouldn't Google the answer exactly, just what we didn't understand, the certain parts that we didn't understand*". Students evaluated and synthesised the information that was available online with their reading and interpretations of the novel. Table 1 indicates that students' paragraphs largely demonstrated that they competently incorporated these sources into their answers.

In addition to using the Internet to help contextualise the extracts, some students also used the novel itself to find answers related to the questions. Loyiso said that his group "*would Google some answers because we didn't know how to approach some certain questions so we would refer to Google or use the book, the novel, to find those answers*". They would read through certain sections of the novel to help guide their answers. Cynthia mentioned that the "*assessment was a little bit difficult, but we did research during that assessment, so I think it also helped with answering the questions*". They could then organise and synthesise the various sources of information to write the answers in their own words. These skills can be

understood in relation to the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy where students can model their comprehension and ability to synthesise information by comparing, contrasting and paraphrasing information.[62] Linda explained how her group had to synthesise information from the Internet to demonstrate their own understanding: "*we checked on what a Holocaust is, and then we tried to explain it in our own words, like instead of taking what was on Google and put it straight out there*". Christina confirmed that they used the information they researched to understand the questions rather than getting all the answers from the Internet: "*When we don't know the answer to the question, we tried our best not to copy. So, like if we didn't know the question we will try to Google it in a way that it does not give us answers, but it help us understand the question.*" Using inquiry-based and collaborative learning, students incorporated information from various sources, such as the Internet, each other and the novel when answering the questions. Students immersed themselves in known and new information[63] as they were authentically and meaningfully participating in their own leaning by building on their experiences.[64]

A recurring pattern that emerged from the interviews was that some group members did history in high school and were able to help other students answer some of the more contextual questions in the group worksheet, indicating the value of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning enables students to learn from each other's differences in knowledge and that these differences are useful resources.[65] Through the process of arguing with each other, not necessarily in an adversarial way, students are able to develop their positions and knowledge.[66] Participants recalled that some group members "*did history in high school*" (Bongi) and "*they explained what the Holocaust is*" (Zanele). Christina mentioned in the focus group that "*you had to use your knowledge of the Nazis, what was happening then, in order to try and make connections between what you know and what the book was saying*". Bladfors and Kokkola[67] mention that making connections "is a well-established aspect of critical thinking" and noted in their study on *The Book Thief* that their participants "could distinguish history from fiction, but only when their knowledge of history was grounded in

[62] NE Adams, "Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning objectives". *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 103(3), 2015, pp. 152-153.

[63] SM Holloway, "The multiliteracies project: Preservice and inservice teachers learning by design in diverse content areas". *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 16(3), 2021, pp. 307-325.

[64] S Rajendram MV Govindarajoo, "Responding to literature texts through films in English and the L1 within a multiliteracies pedagogy", *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(2), 2016, pp. 56-63.

[65] SKW Chu et al., *21st Century skills development through inquiry-based learning…*, (Singapore: Springer, 2017).

[66] N Rosedale et al., "Online written argumentation…", E Manalo (ed.), *Deeper learning…*, pp. 263-278.

[67] L Bladfors and L Kokkola, "Critical thinking about history…", *NJCA*, 14, 2023, pp. 8-9.

specific, concrete 'facts'". The group assessment facilitated the participants' understanding of the historical context of the novel and they were then able to answer the questions. Sandile, for example, revealed that after they had learnt about the Holocaust, they were able to answer part three of question five, which asked students to describe how the narrator experienced the deaths at the concentration camps. Sandile explained:

"…more than anything, it brought a lot of light into what Death was explaining. Because in that extract, Death explains basically what was happening at the concentration camps and how the Jews were being treated. So, it was directly linked to what Google was telling us about the Holocaust. So, it made it a bit easier for us, as a group, to actually write that question."

This shows that once Sandile and her group understood the historical events and setting, they could discuss the narrator's perspective confidently. Table 1, however, reveals that fewer students were able to analyse the narrator's subjective experience, which meant that this aspect needed to be explicitly taught during lectures.

Textual analysis and disciplinary content knowledge

The group worksheet discussion encouraged close reading of the text, analysis and understanding of literary concepts. Students were able to integrate close reading of the extracts into their responses. Close reading is a detailed analysis of "the language, form, and literary devices inherent to the work itself as a kind of self-contained, autonomous unified artistic production".[68] In addition, close reading promotes critical thinking,[69] comprehension[70] and analytical skills.[71] In this activity, students applied their understanding of symbolic meaning through close reading.

[68] P Jay, *The humanities "crisis" and the future of literary studies,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 133.

[69] KA McCarthy, "The split consciousness required to teach poetry to student teachers in a South African metropolitan university", V Nomlomo, Z Desai, M Mbelani, N Dlamini and J September (eds.), *Masixhase abantwana bakwazi ukufunda nokubhala: Let us enable our children to read and write,* (Cape Town: University of the Western Cape, Faculty of Education and British Council South Africa, 2020), pp. 205-218; SA Rahman NFA Manaf, "A critical analysis of Bloom's taxonomy in teaching creative and critical thinking skills in Malaysia through English literature", *English Language Teaching*, 10(9), 2017, pp. 245-256; NA Shukri and J Mukundan, "A review on developing critical thinking skills through literary texts", *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 6(2), 2015, pp. 4-9.

[70] A Carolin, "What literary studies can offer sexuality education: Pre-service teachers' responses to an animated film", *Transformation in Higher Education*, 7(1), 2022, p. 162; P Duck, "Making sense of close reading", *Changing English,* 25(1), 2018, pp. 14-28; I Lindell, "Embracing the risk of teaching literature", *Educational Theory*, 70(1), 2020, pp. 43-55.

[71] MH Abrams and GG Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learner, 2009).

Loyiso wrote in a reflection task how, "*during the group discussions, I learned more about some ideas which are central to the plot of the story told in The Book Thief. The discussions were really important to my analysis approach to different extracts that were featured in the task*". Loyisa further writes about different literary elements that he learnt about from the discussion: "*analysis included talking about how the colour grey is used as a symbol in the narration of the book and how the writer used Death to tell the story, with reasons for why this was significant*". Loyisa mentioned that the discussion included elements of fiction, such as the symbolic meaning of colours and the narrative perspective and why these elements were used in the novel. Linda revealed that "*I did learn a few things, and by that time I didn't understand Death's perspective of narration. But then after that, I was clear on how death was the narrator and its different perspectives*". Many participants also noted that the extracts themselves informed their answers to the questions: "*When I read the extracts, I got an insight into what was going on during that historical time*" (Sandile). Mpho felt that the extracts "*gave us an idea and answering the question and supporting our points*". The extracts were also found to explain the historical background of the novel: "*you get a historical background of what the novel is talking about*" (Thembi).

Discussing the questions in groups improved some participants' understanding of symbolism, thus, contributing to their disciplinary content knowledge. James said that the questions "*made it possible for me to symbolically understand the content*". The group assessment helped Christina with "*how to analyse the symbols [because] when you're reading, don't just look at the obvious. Look at the hidden themes or hidden symbols that were used there in order to interpret the book*". The lively discussion led Thembi to a new understanding of how different literary concepts work in the novel: "*after the fighting and arguing, I came to a new understanding, and I understood the story better than I did in the beginning. I got other views, new ways of looking at the story, new ways of how symbols, symbolism in the story was used*". By applying close reading and discussion, students' interpretation of the novel was enriched.

In addition to the literary element of symbolism, close reading of the extracts also helped students understand other elements, such as setting. The symbolism in the extracts, such as the colour grey and the red Nazi iconography, foregrounds the bleak and destructive setting and themes of the novel. When participants were asked if the extracts helped them with understanding the setting, Sarah said that it did and "*it created a picture in a way of how it looked like during that time, but more than how it looked like, it was the use of symbolism. I think on the atmosphere of how it felt like to be cause grey is not really like a bright*

colour to present like a good time; it represents like dull moments". Most participants were able to analyse the quotations in the questions and extract meaning about the symbolism in relation to the setting. This is significant because students used the extracts and contextual information together to enrich the understanding of both. Participants mentioned that the group worksheet discussion "*helped me understand the setting better*" (Loyiso) and Lucky used the extracts "*to figure out the setting*". For Linda, the extracts "*showed us the setting of the time as well*". Mpho noted that "*the extracts helped in understanding the historical context of the novel [and] it gave us insight of the spatial and time setting of the novel*". The group worksheet discussion, therefore, enabled students to learn about the history, which assisted them in analysing the literary techniques in the novel and what these techniques reveal about the characters, plot, and themes, as evidenced in their written assessments (Table 1).

Participants used textual evidence from the novel to settle disputes of what to write down for the group assessment. Participants were asked how they dealt with divergent opinions from their group members and Zanele noted that they would ask "*a person to explain their answer more and we'll find similarities in our answers then we'd use that*". In the focus group, Lucky remarked that they had to "*argue points where you have to give opinions. You had to judge [and] support your arguments*", revealing a particularly strident insight about the relationship between textual analysis and argumentation. Loyiso noted that when disagreements came up during the discussion, they would require group members to support their "*arguments with evidence from the book*" and "*to resolve the arguments, it meant us having to find evidence in the book*". The participants used Bloom's concept of evaluating, which involves making judgements about the text based on certain criteria[72] to settle the disputes they had about the correct answer to a question. Zanele revealed in the focus group that "*by evaluating, we got to maybe choose which idea is best*". Sandile mentioned that using the novel and extracts to substantiate arguments meant that "*whatever we include in our writing has weight*". Sandile emphasised the need to have sufficient textual evidence to support a position. James also stressed the importance of using extracts to add weight to an argument: "*we were able to see which of the points we said had weight. The kind of points that could be backed up by what happened in the story*". He also reflected on the group worksheet in the reflection task and wrote that the discussion "*helped to consolidate multiple perspectives, where I got to learn that one idea can be branched into multiple theories. Essentially, group discussions introduced the idea of understanding literature through different perspectives*". The

[72] G Fonseca Amorin, PP Balestrassi, R Sawhney, M De Oliveira-Abans and DL Ferreira da Silva, "Six sigma learning evaluation model using bloom's taxonomy", *International Journal of Lean Six Sigma*, 9(1), 2018, pp. 156-174.

collaborative nature of the group assessment facilitated learning about the novel's context, while also enhancing skills of textual analysis and developing students' disciplinary content knowledge.

The participants' written assessments demonstrated that most were able to identify the connection between the setting of the novel during World War Two and the symbolism of the colour grey, as is evident in the following quotation from a written response from Loyiso's, Sarah's and Jan's group to question 1:

> *"The idea of grey implies a morbid atmosphere. Europe is plagued by death and destruction at this time. Colours signify prosperity and joy, whereas the "grey air" symbolises decline and mourning in Europe. "The day was gray", this suggests this particular day was dark and unhappy. Something tragic happened on this particular day. Gray is a colour that is between black & white. This suggests that Europe is going through a transition phase between peace and war."*

Participants interpreted the symbolism of grey with the morbid and tragic atmosphere of Europe during World War Two.

Collaborative learning in literary studies

By collaborating, participants focused on inquiry-based learning by doing research, reading, and discussing issues to solve the problem, which was the question based on literary elements such as plot, themes, setting, narrative perspective and characterisation in the novel. The absence of language and structure criteria in the group assessment encouraged a focus on students' ideas. Candice, one of the two tutors for the module, observed that this "*eased them from a lot of pressure*" and also mentioned the limitations of academic structure: *"I think it helped them not to worry about structure and everything else, but to just focus on the question itself. So, I think that that really took off some pressure from the students."* This idea was confirmed by Sandile who mentioned that "*it didn't put a lot of pressure on us*". Suzie stated that it "*was less stress*". Zanele provided two reasons why she experienced this as a good thing. Firstly, Zanele noted that "*it was fair because with the time that we're given, we wouldn't really have enough time to edit our work"*; and secondly, "*it was good not to have us assessed on language because it's different people writing the same thing, so it [the ideas] wouldn't really flow*". Loyiso felt that "*it might have helped us in a way of not being focused on the language and structure of that, just be focused on the idea and how we unpack it*". Linda also said that "*it's easier for one to express their ideas fully and not worry about the language*" because "*when we are assessed on language structures, it brings an anxiety*". Sam noted that

"*it was a relief; helped me express ideas more*". This sense of collaboration and learning from each other was felt strongly by the participants and having to focus on language structures would have distracted from the ideas that were being shared. Many university students arrive at university and do not have the requisite academic language competence to succeed at university.[73] This is because the vast majority of students at South African universities do not speak English as their first language,[74] which impacts their ability to read and process information at a tertiary level.[75] Most participants felt positively about not being assessed on language and structure, using sentiments such as "*freeing*", "*liberating*", "*relief*", "*positive*", "*helpful*", "*comfortable*" and "*made me happy*".

Conclusion

Writing about group work in literary studies, Hutchings and O'Rourke[76] posit that such activities could "enable students to approach their individual reading and research with a clearer focus" about the issues they must investigate. The findings of this study indicated that the participants learnt about the historical context of *The Book Thief* through discussions, research, close reading, and argumentation. Participants were able to integrate the historical context of the novel into their textual analysis of the literary devices in their discussions. The assessment enabled collaborative learning where students learnt facts from each other during the discussions when answering the questions, while also advancing their close reading of the extracts. As an alternative assessment to traditional academic essays, I argue that group work discussions as assessments are underutilised in literary studies modules and enable collaborative, inquiry-based and problem-based learning. The dominant, and often exclusive, use of essays in higher education[77] limits the possibilities that alternative assessments, such as group work, can offer literary studies and history education.

[73] D Ayliff, "Little learning; Less grammar: Observations on curriculum for English as a first additional language", *Per Linguam: A Journal for Language Learning*, 28(1), 2012, pp. 49-58.

[74] A Van Zyl, G Dampier and N Ngwenya, "Effective institutional intervention where it makes the biggest difference to student success: The University of Johannesburg (UJ) Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI)", *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 8(2), 2021, 59-71.

[75] L Du Plessis and D Gerber, „Academic preparedness of students - An exploratory study, *The Journal of Transdisciplinary Research in South Africa*, 8(1), 2012, pp. 81-94; P Moodley and RJ Singh, "Addressing student dropout rates at South African universities", *Alternation Special Edition*, 17, 2015, pp. 91-115.

[76] B Hutchings and K O'Rourke, "Problem-based learning…", *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 1, 2002, p. 82.

[77] I Bruce, "Constructing critical stance…", *English for Specific Purposes*, 42, 2016; S Godsell et al., "Against colonial residues, towards decolonising assessment…", *Cogent Education*, 11, 2024; D Hindley and L Clughen, "'Yay! Not another academic essay!'...", *JWCP*, 11, 2018; U Wingate, "'Argument!'…", *JEAP*, 11, 2012.