Arts-Based Assessment for English Literary Studies

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

Abstract

Academic writing remains prevalent in higher education. The academic essay is the dominant mode of assessment in many university disciplines, including literary studies. Many students struggle with this genre of writing in relation to literary texts. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study of a purposeful sample of 20 participants who were enrolled in a third-year module that forms part of a four-year Bachelor of Education degree at an urban university in South Africa. The research is focused on the use of an alternative assessment, beyond academic essays, in an English literary studies module. The assessment required students to draw a book cover for the text that represented a key concept from a prescribed chapter together with a written explanation of their covers that engaged with the cover and source text. The study is framed by arts-based assessment to advance core skills required in literary studies, such as close reading, argumentation, and the application of disciplinary content knowledge for the study of Markus Zusak's novel, *The Book Thief*.

Introduction

It has been the norm in literary studies to use essays for both formative and summative assessments. Essay writing is a "staple university practice" (Hindley and Clughen 2018, 83) and "the default genre for student writing" (Womack 1993, 43). There are many benefits to essays. They can be "powerful pedagogic tools" (Gibson 2017, 99); they require a "conscious effort" (Shrestha 2020, 8), and students need to think deeply about their arguments. In my experience as a lecturer, there are some limitations to this as students tend to focus more on recounting the plot and surface analysis in their essays rather than critical analysis. Some scholars argue against overusing essays as this could lead towards surface learning (Gibson 2017) and that "essay writing encourages reproduction rather than meaning-making for most students" (De Villiers 2025, 64). De Villiers (2025, 76) maintains that 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 (GAI) challenges the validity of traditional assessment practices (Kizilcec et al. 2024, 1), such as essay assignments, because of the perceived negative impact GAI has on academic integrity and plagiarism (Carolin 2025; Haddley and Ardito 2024, 4). Gibson (2017, 102) argues that essays are potentially effective summative assessments to test students' skills of demonstrating extended original arguments, but that they are less ideal as formative assessments. An additional difficulty is that many students at universities in South Africa lack English proficiency and academic literacy skills to engage sufficiently with the demands of education conducted in English (Ramsaroop and Petersen 2020; Van der Merwe 2018).

I argue that arts-based assessments for the study of literature may be incorporated into literary studies modules as formative assessments that aim to guide students' academic development (Harnisch, Creswell, and Guetterman 2018, 139; Secolsky and Denison 2018, xviii). Arts-based assessment is an assessment practice in which students' artistic works form part of the assessment. This kind of assessment enables the exploration of "possibilities of metaphoric expression, communication and meaning-making with the arts" (Hannigan and Raphael 2020, 89), and "using the creative arts in the process of evaluation evokes different ways of knowing and understanding" (Simons and McCormack 2007, 292). This is because written and oral language can be burdened by cultural or social conditioning (Hannigan and Raphael 2020, 89). Arts-based research presumes that there is a "variety of ways in which the human experience can be documented, reflected on, and understood" (Mulvihill and Swaminathan 2020, 4). Arts-based responses to a work of literature, in the form of drawings, enable students to express their understanding and analysis of the text (Dewa and Genis 2022; Oyama 2022).

This article presents one of the findings of a larger PhD study about alternative assessments in literary studies in the context of primary school teacher education. The research question for the overall study was, "What are pre-service primary school

teachers' experiences of, perspectives on, and demonstrable performance in, alternative forms of assessment in an undergraduate English literary studies module?" In this article, I explore using an arts-based assessment to promote literary analysis skills, such as close reading, argumentation, and the application of disciplinary content knowledge for the study of Markus Zusak's novel, *The Book Thief*, in an undergraduate English literature module that is part of a Bachelor of Education degree at a university in South Africa. I maintain that incorporating alternative forms of formative assessments, such as an arts-based assessment to a literary text, can develop students' understanding, as opposed to only verify what has been learned through memorisation (McDowell, Sambell, and Davison 2009, 2).

Generic Qualitative Research Design

I used a generic qualitative research design and constructivist paradigm, which enable greater flexibility in choosing data generation methods (Holley and Harris 2019, 107), as there are numerous truths and versions of reality and subjective experiences (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 4). 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 (Holley and Harris 2019, 107), in this case an arts-based assessment. Merriam (2009, 23) notes that a qualitative study is interested in "how people interpret their experiences," "how they construct their worlds," and "what meaning they attribute to their experiences." Similarly, the constructivist researcher believes that the nature of reality is constructed socially and that there is consequently no universal reality (Merriam 2009, 8). Instead, there are numerous truths and versions of a single phenomenon (Merriam 2009, 8). The research was conducted with the belief that participants may express varying perceptions and experiences of social "realities" regarding what occurred during the study, rather than a singular truth (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 4). This study explored participants' subjective views and experiences of their learning process and thus the study is underpinned by the idea that the meanings that are attached to social phenomena are created on a continual basis by individuals (Bryman and Bell 2003, 23; Daniel and Harland 2018, 22). Using this research approach, I interpreted the participants' perspectives, experiences, and performance in an arts-based alternative assessment.

Data Generation

The methodological orientation of a constructivist qualitative study is that the data generation should take place in a naturalistic environment. This means that the data is generated in the "field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study" (Creswell and Poth 2018, 43). The aim of this endeavour is to interpret the constructions that participants use to make sense of their realities (Hatch 2023, 29). The reason for using the constructivist paradigm in this study is to interpret how the participants created meaning and how they enacted their understanding of concepts through their artefact designs in a literary studies assessment. I used qualitative data-generation methods in the form of semi-structured individual interviews, focus group

interviews, a written reflection task, and the participants' assessments as artefacts to determine how they experienced and performed in the alternative assessment, as opposed to the traditional essay assessment. 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" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 86). Once all data was collected, I coded and categorised the data into provisional and then final categories and ultimately into the themes of the study. This article presents the theme related to the book cover assessment, which revealed that it facilitated skills of textual analysis and the application of disciplinary content knowledge.

Sampling

I selected a purposeful sample of 20 third-year Intermediate Phase students enrolled in a Bachelor of Education degree. Participants were selected based on the varying levels of achievement in terms of their marks in the second-year English module, which ranged from adequate (50–59), to substantial (60–69), and meritorious (70 and above). This purposive sample allows for a variety of participants' perspectives and diverse experiences about the alternative assessment that was used in this study. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

Ethical Considerations

As the researcher of and lecturer for the module that this study focused on, my positionality was as a practitioner researcher. Practitioner inquiry means that the researcher studies their own practice (Fichtman Dana and Yendol-Hoppey 2020, 26). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009, 37) observe that practitioner inquiry demonstrates that the practitioner is the "knower and agent" that can enact change in an educational setting. This means that teacher-researchers are "immersed in their sites of practice, are better positioned to confront their realities, transform their practices, and make the necessary adjustments for improved student learning" (Pringle 2020, 45). As both the lecturer and researcher, I had to ensure that I explained clearly to the participants that I was aware that they may feel pressure to agree to participate because I was the lecturer for the module, but that their participation in the study would not have an impact on their marks for the module. To ensure that I conducted ethical research, I obtained permission from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. I subsequently approached each potential participant to request their informed consent.

Context of *The Book Thief*

The Book Thief served two important functions for this study. The first is that the novel was suitable for students to apply and analyse literary concepts and the second was to teach students about the historical context of World War Two (Peng and Hua 2020, 785–786). *The Book Thief* (2005) was written by Australian author Markus Zusak and is innovatively narrated by Death personified. The title refers to the main character,

Liesel, who is taken in by Hans and Rosa Hubermann. Liesel's foster parents also take in Max, a Jewish man, who hides from the Nazis in their basement. Internal and external focalisation are used to explore specific characters and the broader events of World War Two (Bladfors and Kokkola 2023, 2). It was therefore essential that students understand the historical context of the novel to assist them to interpret the characters, the narrator, and the overall themes and settings of the novel.

Arts-Based Responses as Assessment

There is substantial research on the uses of arts-based inquiry across diverse disciplines, but the research on using creative responses for assessments in literary studies university modules is limited. Notable studies include those by Dewa and Genis (2022) and Oyama (2022). Art as a methodology in research is applied as a "primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies" (McNiff 2008, 29). By using arts-based responses in research, the artistic process itself is used to "gather, explore, analyse, and/or share perceptions and lived experiences" (Casey and Murray 2022, 4). In this study, I used arts-based responses as an assessment to investigate participants' understanding and interpretation of a literary text as opposed to their lived experiences on a certain topic. The book cover assessment used elements of arts-based inquiry, which uses concepts of the creative arts as part of its methodology (Okoko 2023, 41). Engaging in art can draw on students' personal experiences and in sharing the artwork, "stories are voiced and enacted with other people as a way of extending dialogical meaning-making" (Casey and Murray 2022, 2). An arts-based approach to literary studies, I argue, allows for the expression of ideas that go beyond verbal or written language.

Hannigan and Raphael (2020, 89), in their study of the possibilities of arts-based inquiry in teacher education, argue that expression through art allows for communication and meaning-making that depart from the traditional focus on writing and communication in writing. The book cover assessment included an academic writing component in the form of a paragraph that explained the participants' covers. This demonstrates that I agree with Hannigan and Raphael (2020, 90), who posit that the written mode should not be discarded when arts-based inquiry approaches are utilised to enhance communicative and expressive possibilities. Oyama (2022, 176) conducted a similar study to this specific assessment and proposed including visualising aspects of a literary text through drawings created by students. Dewa and Genis (2022) examined Grade 12 learners' arts-based responses to a novel that included learners' poems and symbolic drawings. Oyama's (2022) students were required to visualise, through drawing, certain sections of stories. Oyama (2022, 177) suggests that including drawing in teaching and learning practices makes reading multimodal and that this approach can reveal meanings and interpretations that would not have been articulated otherwise. Multimodality encourages communication through different modes that go beyond traditional reading and writing communication conventions. These modes are the diverse ways to create and convey meaning. From a multimodal perspective, language, or the linguistic mode,

is viewed as one of many resources to make, distribute, and interpret meaning (Early, Kendrick, and Potts 2015, 447). Participants' responses were enriched as they were allowed to respond through various modes, which, in multimodality theory, include linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes, each using its own system of codes to create meaning (Anstey and Bull 2018, 59–60; Cope and Kalantzis 2015, 3). The addition of a visual element may improve students' reading abilities and their understanding of the plot and other literary elements within a story. Dewa and Genis (2022, 65) found that learners' arts-based artefacts showcased deep insights into literature, including themes and symbols from the text and expressed their subjective and authentic responses to the text. The analysis of the data for this study revealed that the drawings engaged participants in critical thought and close reading.

In a study on K-12 education in the American schooling context—which is comparable to the full spectrum of schooling from Grade R to Grade 12 in South Africa—Gulla and Sherman (2020, 209) found that studying narrative works of art, in other words, visual images that display a progression of ideas, advanced English language learners' appreciation of literary elements. The authors argue that images are effective for students to understand literary devices to enhance analysis and to understand the complexities within a text. Art can be used as a point of departure to understand and analyse literature, which students can carry over to written discussions (Gulla and Sherman 2020, 209). In my study, students used their own artwork as a point of departure to understand literary elements that they could then explain in their paragraphs. Oyama (2022, 179) argues that externalising the reader's personal visualisations of a literary work makes that visible which attracted the reader's attention and interest. This externalising can take the form of speaking, writing, or drawing. Dewa and Genis (2022, 49) also note that a literary work can be experienced through a variety of ways that include linguistic features in addition to visual, gestural, emotional, and tactile representations, among others. Oyama's (2022, 183) study also included a written element where students were asked to make comments about their drawings. The addition of the visual mode complements and even enhances traditional, written responses.

The Book Cover Assessment

For the book cover assessment, students were tasked with reading a specific chapter from the novel and with determining the key themes, ideas, concepts, events, or symbols from the chapter. Students submitted a hand-drawn cover for the novel that depicted these elements. The second component of the assignment was an academic paragraph that engaged with the chapter as represented in the cover design. Students provided examples from the text, discussed these examples, and explained the choices they made in drawing their covers. Students explained their choices with reference to the text and incorporated and analysed quotations from the chapter. Drawings enabled students to visually represent their conceptual understanding of the literary devices within a text. Visualising concepts from the text through art encourages students to read and

understand the text in depth without the limitations of relying only on written text and the literal meaning of the words (Oyama 2022, 188).

The brief for the book cover assessment was as follows:

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. This assignment consists of two parts:

2. Design a cover for the book

- Write a paragraph of between 250 and 350 words.

- Read the chapter titled "The Gamblers (A Seven-Sided Die)" from *The Book Thief*.

- Design a hand-drawn cover image for *The Book Thief* that represents a main idea, concept, event, or theme that is reflected in this chapter. Remember that the cover of a book should also contain the author's name and the title of the book.

- You may use a combination of media and colours, such as pencil, pen, crayons, highlighters, etc.

- The image must be hand drawn and it must be original. Do not use any computer or online tool when preparing this book cover.

- Write a well-structured academic paragraph in which you explain your image. You must support your explanation with close engagement with the prescribed chapter. You must include quotations from this chapter as part of your paragraph. This should be typed.

- Submit a photo/scan of your A4-sized cover with your paragraph on BlackBoard. You may submit the photo/scan and the paragraph as separate documents at the same time.

Mark composition for your cover:

Effort and creativity when designing the cover	20
Content: demonstrated by coherence between paragraph and the cover, including clear selection and discussion of quotes and events from the chapter to motivate for the cover	50
Language, structure, referencing, expression	30
TOTAL	**100**

Textual Analysis and Disciplinary Content Knowledge

The book cover assessment required students to demonstrate their skills of textual analysis and their disciplinary content knowledge, which encompass knowledge of key literary concepts and terms in the study of literature. As a method of textual analysis, close reading enables students to discover literary elements in a text and makes readers aware of how language is used to create meaning because a text is also made up of words that describe things that take shape in readers' minds (Greenham 2019, 31). Close reading makes students aware of how language is used to convey meaning in addition to the literary devices that are used in the text (Greenham 2019, 31–32). Participants were aware that they had to analyse the novel carefully to draw the book cover and to find relevant examples from the novel to substantiate their arguments. Christina, for example, said that she "had to look at the chapter as a whole and not just pick one situation but read the chapter and then understand what the chapter is about" (Christina, Interview), adding that "in order to do the cover, you need to fully understand what the chapter was about" (Christina, Interview). Thandi expressed a similar view, stating that "I really had to read the novel and the chapters and understand them in order to create this cover" (Thandi, Interview). Oyama (2022, 185–186) mentions that visualisation (in the form of drawing) encourages students to visualise and materialise elements of the text. The process gives students an opportunity to read the text closely, giving a stronger sense of the aesthetic (textual) qualities of the text, which means that students must use their visual sense to realise their own reading (Oyama 2022, 185–186). This is evidenced by Sandile, who remarked that "I had to critically think about what I want to include in my book cover because I couldn't just include anything, and whatever it is that I included had to be linked to the chapter that we were given" (Sandile, Interview). Lucky noted the coherence between what the student reads and what is then created: "you have to read, you have to understand so that you can draw" (Lucky, Interview). Sam mentioned that the book cover assessment "was by far the best in extracting meaningful explanations of how the title/theme of the novel relates to the cover. It invokes critical thinking while tying it to art" (Sam, Reflection). Participants expressed the important link between the meaning in the text that they extract and represent in their drawings.

Most participants were able to identify appropriate evidence from the novel to support their analysis of their chosen concepts in the cover design. Many participants were able to make inferential observations about the novel in their images and paragraphs. Close reading was therefore a key skill that most participants applied and demonstrated in their paragraphs. Participants identified that the chapter's title, "The Gamblers," is an allusion to the risks involved in hiding Max in the Hubermanns's basement. Sarah noted that the title is a metaphor "to outline seven events that are the consequences of this gambling" (Sarah, Paragraph). Referring to the imaginary boxing match between Max and Hitler that is described in the chapter, Sarah commented that "the boxing ring is used as an image to show the conflict between Hitler and the Jews. The crowd by Hitler's side shows how people's minds were manipulated by him" and that this dream

sequence is "a metaphor of the actual events that were happening, that is, the Jews being under persecution and people mentally adopting to what Hitler has instilled in them" (Sarah, Paragraph). The student used the symbolic fight between Hitler and Max to visually represent and to comment on the larger issues. Additionally, Joyce analysed the scene in which Max paints over his copy of *Mein Kampf*, which "is filled with the worst kind of anger and ugliness, but Max covers it up by telling a lovely tale of his friendship with Liesel" (Joyce, Paragraph). Through these examples, it is evident that the participants demonstrated their inferential comprehension skills focusing on the symbolism in relation to the novel.

Drawing the image for the book cover assessment helped students understand literary concepts such as themes, symbolism, and setting in the novel. Jan felt that designing the cover image "really got to give one more engagement into the concepts of the book" (Jan, Interview). Sandile remarked that "when you draw and you're putting your imagination into paper, it makes it easier for you to understand the book and it makes it easier to interpret actually what is happening in the chapters of the book" (Sandile, Interview). Thembi also commented that designing your own cover makes "you think carefully of the things that you want to include there and in a way, you understand the story better" (Thembi, Interview), indicating that the student applied textual analysis to develop her content knowledge. Joyce noted that the cover task "gave me a deeper understanding of that chapter" (Joyce, Interview). Oyama's (2022, 187) study also found that there is a recursive relationship between students' images and the text they were studying, increasing their awareness of how language is used. Greenham (2019, 31–32) additionally notes that becoming aware of how language is used to convey meaning is an important aspect of close reading. Zanele mentioned, in this regard, that the cover task "made me realise one of the themes of the book, like the power in words, the power of words" (Zanele, Interview). The student thus analysed the theme of "the use of words as weapons" (Zanele, Paragraph) in the novel and cited relevant textual evidence from the novel to support her argument:

> The concept of words and their power is also reflected in Liesel's verbal abuse of Frau Hermann […] [W]e see that Liesel "sprayed her words directly into the woman's eyes" […] [T]his could be likened to how a gun sprays bullets, leading to aftermaths as those described in the book which are ones a person would have after being harmed by a dangerous weapon. (Zanele, Paragraph)

The student's paragraph indicates that she was able to read the prescribed chapter closely and identify a central theme from it, which was the power of words. This analysis is reflected in her drawing (Figure 1), thus indicating coherence between the paragraph and the image. The student mentioned that "in my drawn image, I displayed a weapon that uses words as its power" (Zanele, Paragraph) and that the assessment helped her "get the idea of hurting someone using words" (Zanele, Interview):
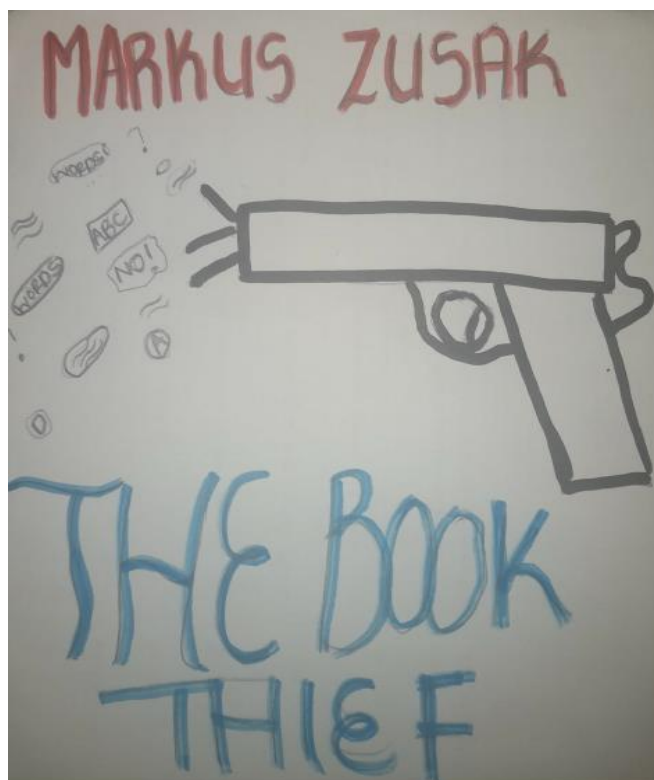
Figure 1: Zanele's drawing

Zanele explains further how "by reading the book, I saw her words had power […] I took the idea of words having power and the idea of guns and wars, so I combined that and came up with the idea that Liesel uses words as her weapon" (Zanele, Interview). It is evident that the student was able to express her content knowledge of themes through textual analysis and her drawing. In one of the focus group discussions, I asked participants what they thought of a cover image that depicts a gun shooting words. Thembi responded that such an image "engages more with the novel because it represents what is happening in the novel: the hurtful words, guns, war" (Thembi, Focus Group). Thandi added that "the one with the gun and the words is more cognitively engaging with what's happening in the book, because it uses more symbolism and you have to think deeper about what it could represent" (Thandi, Focus Group). Sarah mentioned that a figurative book cover "challenges my expectations because I don't want to look at the book cover in the most obvious way" (Sarah, Focus Group). These views express the idea that literary analysis requires depth and sophisticated readings of the text.

Participants' covers demonstrated that they could visually depict more advanced aspects of theme and symbolism, which are core aspects of disciplinary content knowledge in relation to literature. James noted that the assessment supported his "understanding of

symbolism" (James, Interview). He also wrote in his reflection that "designing a book cover expanded my thoughts of creativity and further supported my learning of literature through symbols I initially did not appreciate" (James, Reflection). James's cover image and paragraph depict and describe "two overarching themes which are in contrast: the powers of literacy and propaganda" (James, Paragraph). Like Zanele's discussion of the theme of the power of words, James demonstrated advanced skills of analysis. James explained how literacy and propaganda are diametric opposites of the influence of words for either good or evil and the student represented these opposing ideas in his cover image (Figure 2).
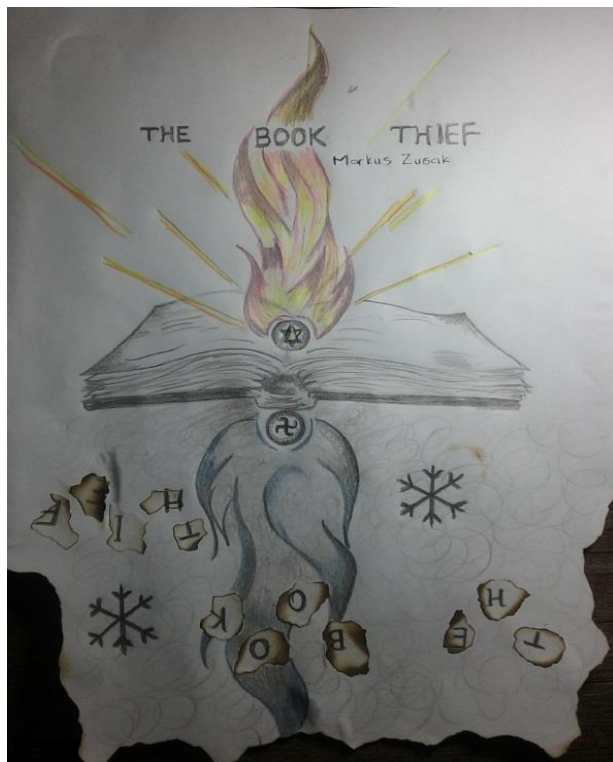

Figure 2: James's drawing

James confirmed that the assessment "afforded me to understand things in terms of symbolism. So, when it comes to the propaganda, all of those, and I try to reflect that using symbols" (James, Interview). The student was able to integrate the themes of literacy and propaganda in his cover and the written paragraph, making interesting observations about the novel's overall theme of resistance against oppressive narratives:

> It is through her thievery that she breaks out of the walls of propaganda that is imposed by the dictator's leadership, affording her the power of literacy. On the bottom half of the page, a dark flame, emanating from the swastika, is shown; this flame, on the contrary, is the kind that burns and destroys. (James, Paragraph)

The student's cover demonstrates the enlightenment of reading and literacy through the bright yellow and red flames, contrasted with the dark blue flame accompanied by burned letters that make up the title of the novel, a reference to the book-burning scene that occurs in the novel. James's cover and paragraph, therefore, demonstrate advanced understanding not only of the concepts such as themes and symbolism but also their insightful application in relation to the novel itself.

Sam also demonstrated his understanding of the themes and symbols in the novel in his cover and paragraph. His image depicts "the scale of justice [which] represents the unfairness and the risks associated with the gamble of the die. The scales are tipped towards the danger represented by the swastika (a Nazi Germany flag) and what carries less weight is the Jewish star of David" (Sam, Paragraph). The image (Figure 3) depicts the power imbalance between Nazi Germany and the Jewish population quite powerfully:
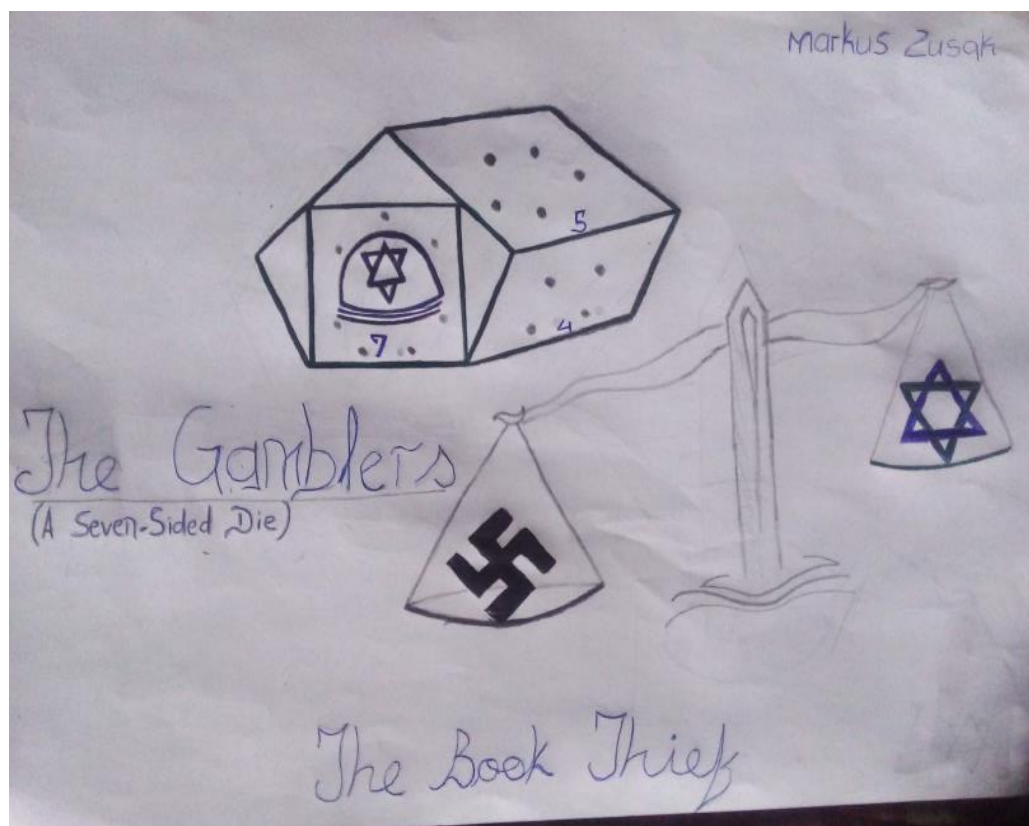

Figure 3: Sam's drawing

Suzie reflected on the setting of the Hubermanns's basement, a key location in the specified chapter, where Max, a young Jewish man, is in hiding from the Nazis. Suzie noted that "the basement walls in the Hubermann home hold the memories, secrets, dreams, hopes and even the pain of Rosa and Hans Huberman but more especially those

of Max Vandenburg and Liesel Meminger" (Suzie, Paragraph). Sarah also mentioned that designing the cover "required us to use the context of the book and the events that were happening to actually create the book cover" (Sarah, Interview), which suggests that the student was able to incorporate her contextual understanding into her analysis and drawing. Oyama (2022, 188) argues that drawing "part of a narrative requires a different kind of *reading* from one adopted when only the writing is read" and that visualising could lead to kinds of questions and observations that would not have been recognised otherwise. Figure 4 shows how interconnected the walls of the basement are with the characters' experiences in Suzie's drawing:
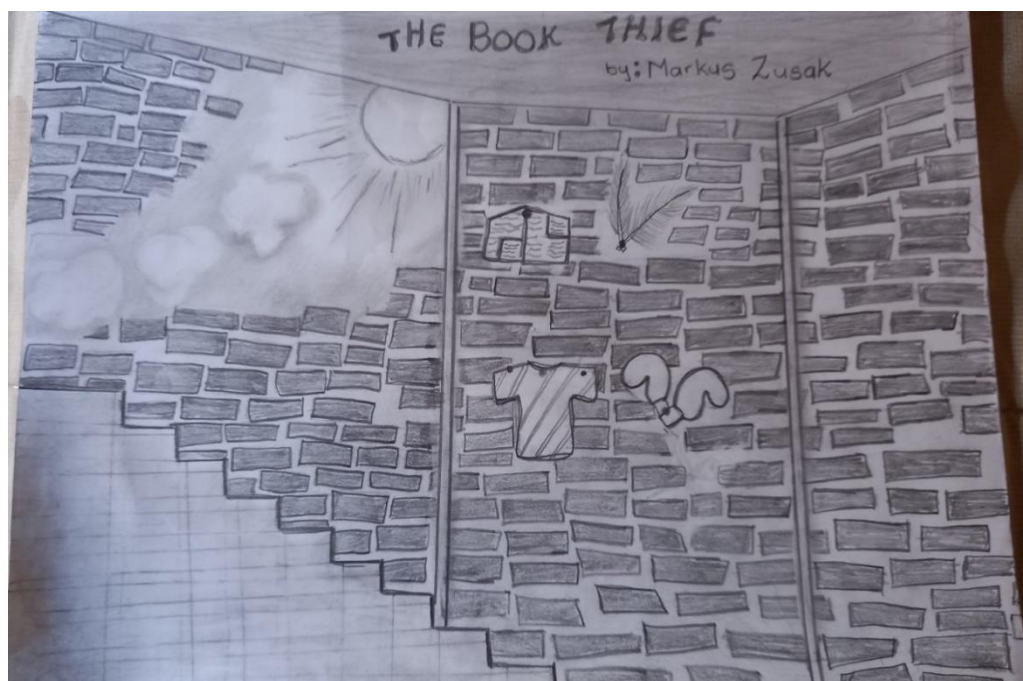

Figure 4: Suzie's drawing

The boxing gloves represent Max's imaginary fight with Hitler in a boxing ring, and the feathers represent his withering hair from the trauma of living in hiding and fear. The sunshine breaking through the walls represents his friendship with Liesel who is his only connection to the outside world. The drawing thus connects important events from the chapter and depicts these events symbolically on the basement walls, which form a confined setting owing to the social circumstances in which the characters find themselves. Suzie wrote that the "moments would forever be hanged on the wall of the basement" (Suzie, Paragraph). She was able to isolate these elements of the story and show how they are meaningful in relation to the broader themes of the book. Loyiso also commented on how he integrated the setting of the novel into his design, and he mentioned that he "designed the walls and the steps to have something like cracks representing the poverty or the economical state of the people residing in this setting" (Loyiso, Interview). Jan similarly demonstrated his disciplinary content knowledge of

setting and characterisation in his discussion of the basement in the novel, stating that "the basement was transformed into a refugee camp, salon, restaurant, and hotel for Max, as indicated by the cover, chapter, and the novel" (Jan, Paragraph). The student discussed how the confined setting represents Max's entire world during the period in which he remained hidden. Jan also described how his depiction of the dilapidated basement represents how the Jewish neighbourhood was vandalised, as described in the novel. Max is therefore a symbol for how Jewish people were treated during this time. These images represent the participants' demonstrable abilities to make connections among the different literary elements that they extracted from the novel (such as the figurative meaning of certain concepts) which they incorporated in their covers. The students' paragraphs largely showcased both their intellectual competence (Elstein 1993, 247) and intellectual independence (Gibson 2017, 101), which is what academic writing can facilitate when supported by visual representations. The skills of close reading, interpretation, analysis, drawing, and argumentation were interrelated in this assessment to allow students to express their ideas in relation to the novel.

Another powerful image created by one of the students was Mpho's drawing (Figure 5), which depicts death as a looming presence over the scene unfolding in the drawing. The image additionally depicts the towering influence of the Nazi regime over individuals and especially over the Jewish population. The student explains her cover in her paragraph:

> The cover image I created for the book *The Book Thief* depicts the extended metaphor of the 7-sided dice, which describes the emotions and events that occurred because of Hitler's manipulated Germany crowd as his supportive force against the Jews. The height difference of the buildings drawn with raised Nazi flags show the different levels and reasons of support that Germans had in Hitler's ideology and his leadership skills, which correlates to the crowd's support that Hitler received during the boxing match after he was beaten up by Max. (Mpho, Paragraph)

The drawing uses colours effectively, with red representing the Nazi colours and the bloodshed of the Nazi regime. Red is imposing and dominant in the drawing and overpowers Max's small yellow star that he wears on his shirt, evoking the yellow Star of David that Jewish people were forced to wear. The student's use of colour to convey these specific meanings shows how the visual mode uses colour to convey meaning. Even though Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020, 10) note that visual signs (such as colour) do not have a pre-existing meaning but that the sign-maker has a meaning that they want to convey using these signs, it is interesting to observe how the student used the "pre-existing meaning" and associations of red (Nazis) and yellow (Jews) in the historical context of World War Two to show the power dynamics between the oppressed and the oppressor. This not only shows the student's understanding of the historical setting, but also her skilful use of visual elements in her drawing.

Figure 5: Mpho's drawing

Lucky (Figure 6) interpreted the basement as both Max's home and a prison, writing that "[t]he cover carries the idea that the Jew saw the basement as his home but at the same time, as a prison" (Lucky, Paragraph). He included a small window in the basement that allows only a small amount of daylight to penetrate the space to underscore the idea of the basement as a prison (Lucky, Paragraph). Lucky quoted from the novel to substantiate his artistic choice and argued that "the little light can also be a symbol of hope" for Max (Lucky, Paragraph). His understanding of the novel's symbolism was confirmed in the interview where he said that the light gave Max "a little light so that was figuratively, but I put it in a literal way" (Lucky, Interview). Lucky's description of his understanding of the figurative meaning of the text and his literal representation shows that traditional writing and art do not necessarily work in isolation but contribute to the whole (Anstey and Bull 2018, 61; Jewitt 2008, 247). The two elements of the assessment (cover and paragraph) function together to show the student's conceptual understanding of the novel, thereby also showing his disciplinary content knowledge in terms of the literary devices he chose to depict.
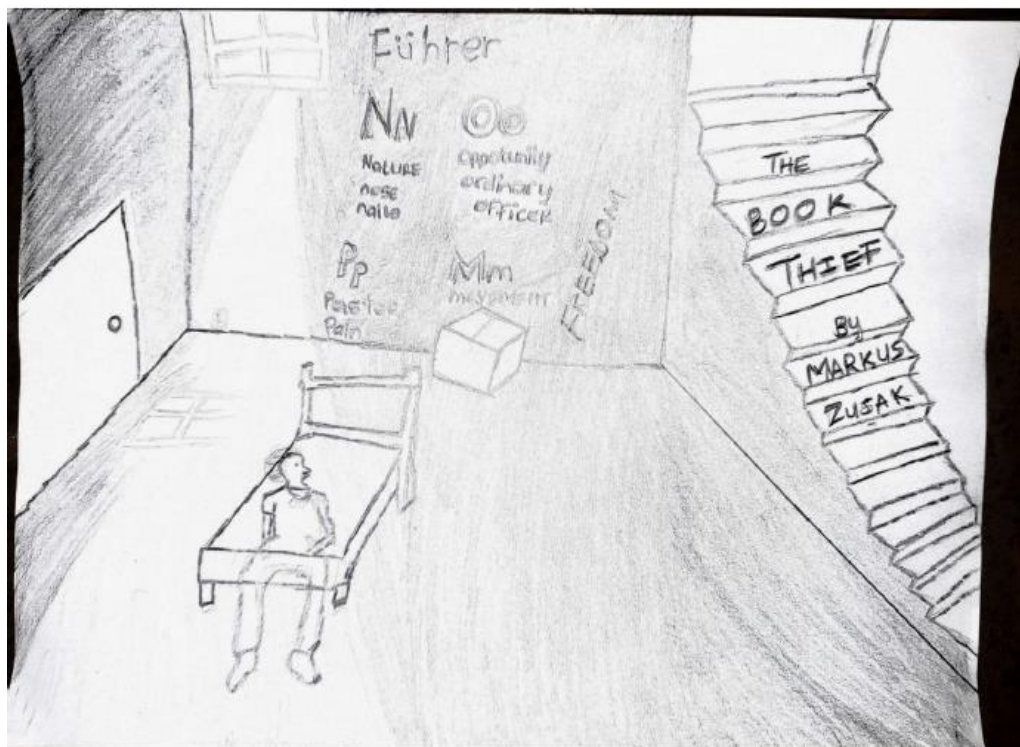

Figure 4: Lucky's drawing

Lucky's paragraph also demonstrated his understanding of the symbolism in the novel. He noted that "the basement and the contents in it were deliberately shaded grey as a reflection of Max's situation, emotional state, and his garments. His feelings were reflecting on the basement. Since he was abandoned, dull, gloomy, lonely, and sad

which are emotions that can be closely represented with the colour grey" (Lucky, Paragraph).

This assessment also revealed gaps in understanding that a minority of students demonstrated. Cynthia's image (Figure 7), for example, represents friendship, according to the student's paragraph. However, the paragraph does not explicitly explain the symbolism of the image and its connection with the novel, which demonstrates limited, disjointed, and superficial engagement with this theme.
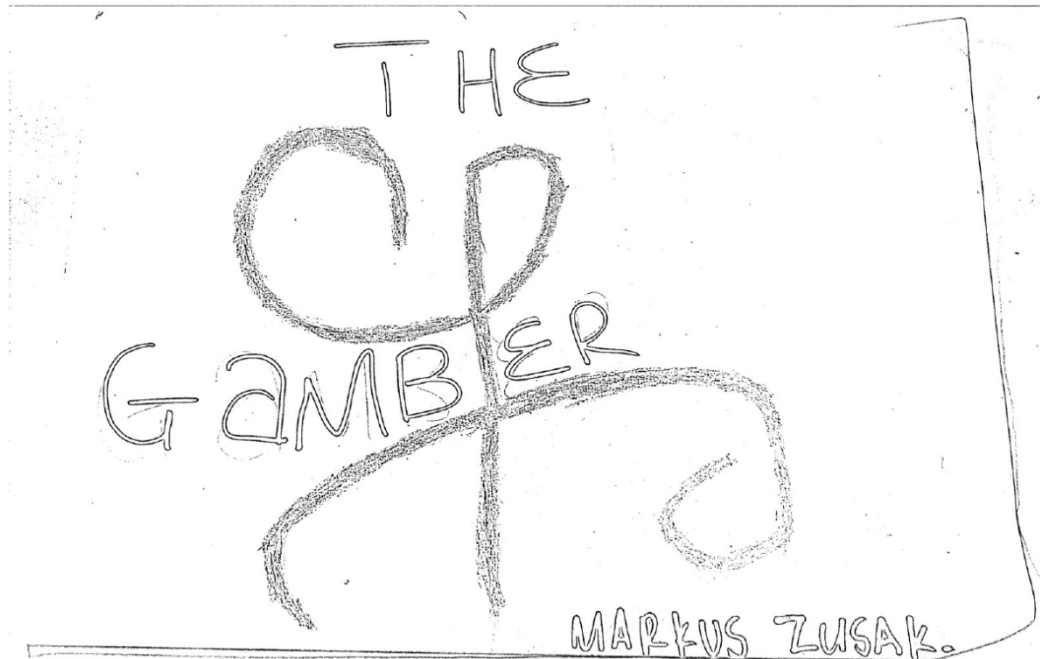

Figure 7: Cynthia's drawing

These images represent the majority of students' abilities to make connections among the different literary elements that they extracted from the novel, which they incorporated into their covers. The skills of close reading, interpretation, analysis, drawing, and argumentation were interrelated in this assessment to allow students to express their ideas about the novel.

Conclusion

The dominant assessment mode in higher education, and in literary studies specifically, remains the written mode in the form of essay assessments. I maintain that there is a need for educators to equip students with the necessary skills to successfully create meaning in various modes. Providing students with opportunities to practise and widen their literacy practices and skills would make them more competent to participate in a variety of discourses (Fajardo 2019, 178), which they are increasingly required to do in

the workplace. We should acknowledge that the written mode is one of many resources to make meaning (Early, Kendrick, and Potts 2015, 447). I argue that integrating multimodal elements with existing foundations of learning may enrich students' experiences of learning in general and assessment in particular. Additionally, a multimodal teaching approach prepares educators to develop innovative teaching of various topics and disciplines (Holloway 2021, 307). It would be beneficial to expose pre-service teachers to multimodal ways of teaching, learning, and assessment to prepare them to teach in the primary school while also contributing to their disciplinary content knowledge. The findings of this study show that the use of alternative forms of assessment in literary studies modules beyond text-based assessments can enrich students' disciplinary content knowledge, close reading, and argumentation. I propose that the addition of a visual element in relation to a literary text enhances these skills.

References

Anstey, M., and G. Bull. 2018. *Foundations of Multiliteracies: Reading, Writing and Talking in the 21st Century*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315114194.

Bladfors, L., and L. Kokkola. 2023. "Critical Thinking about History: Swedish Teenagers Read Holocaust Fiction." *Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics/Barnelitterært forskningstidsskrift* 14 (1): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.18261/blft.14.1.1.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Bryman, A., and E. Bell. 2003. *Business Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carolin, A. 2025. "ChatGPT Poses an Existential Threat to Universities and the Integrity of Degrees." *Daily Maverick*, May 2. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2025-05-02-chatgpt-an-existential-threat-to-universities-integrity-of-degrees/.

Casey, B., and M. Murray. 2022. "Arts-Based Research in the Social Sciences." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design*, edited by U. Flick, 517–534. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529770278.n32.

Cochran-Smith, M. and S. L. Lytle. 2009. *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Cope, B., and M. Kalantzis, eds. 2015. *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Learning by Design*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137539724.

Creswell, J. W., and C. N. Poth. 2018. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Daniel, B. K., and T. Harland. 2018. *Higher Education Research Methodology: A Step-By-Step Guide to the Research Process*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315149783.

De Villiers, R. 2025. "Transgeneric Assessment: Modernist Affordances for the Student Essay." In "Transfers and Traversals: Translation, Interdisciplinarity, and the Arts," edited by M. P. Rossouw, special issue, *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 39 (1–2): 62–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2023.2177690.

Dewa, F., and G. Genis. 2022. "The Re-Remembering of Literary Bodies in the Zimbabwean Classroom." *Scrutiny2* 27 (1): 48–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2023.2211745.

Early, M., M. Kendrick, and D. Potts. 2015. "Multimodality: Out from the Margins of English Language Teaching." In "Multimodality: Out from Margins of English Language Teaching," edited by M. Early, M. Kendrick, and D. Potts, special issue, *Tesol Quarterly* 49 (3): 447–460. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.246.

Elstein, A. S. 1993. "Beyond Multiple-Choice Questions and Essays: The Need for a New Way to Assess Clinical Competence." *Academic Medicine* 68 (4): 244–249. https://doi.org/10.1097/00001888-199304000-00002.

Fajardo, M. F. 2019. "Cohesion and Tension in Tertiary Students' Digital Compositions: Implications for Teaching and Assessment of Multimodal Compositions." In *Multimodality Across Classrooms: Learning About and through Different Modalities*, edited by H. De Silva Joyce and S. Feez, 178–193. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203701072-12.

Fichtman Dana, N., and D. Yendol-Hoppey. 2020. *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn through Practitioner Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.

Gibson, J. 2017. "Beyond the Essay? Assessment and English Literature." In *Teaching Literature: Text and Dialogue in the English Classroom*, edited by B. Knight, 99–114. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-31110-8_7.

Greenham, D. 2019. *Close Reading: The Basics*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203709979.

Gulla, A. N., and M. H. Sherman. 2020. *Inquiry-Based Learning through the Creative Arts for Teachers and Teacher Educators*. Creativity, Education and the Arts. Cham: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57137-5.

Haddley, J. A., and C. G. Ardito. 2024. "Generative AI in Assessment: Towards Understanding the Student View." *MSOR Connections* 23 (1): 4–14. https://doi.org/10.21100/msor.v23i1.1515.

Hannigan, S. M., and J. Raphael. 2020. "'Drawing out' Understandings through Arts-Based Inquiry in Teacher Education." *Qualitative Research Journal* 21 (1): 87–100. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-03-2020-0021.

Harnisch, D. L., J. W. Creswell, and T. C. Guetterman. 2018. "Mixed Methods Specialists in Action: Linking Mixed Methods Research to Learning and Classroom Assessment." In *Handbook on Measurement, Assessment, and Evaluation in Higher Education*, edited by C. Secolsky and D. B. Benison, 128–144. London: Routledge.

Hatch, J. A. 2023. *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings*. New York: State University of New York Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438494623.

Hindley, D., and L. Clughen. 2018. "'Yay! Not Another Academic Essay!' Blogging as an Alternative Academic Genre." *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* 11 (1): 83–97. https://doi.org/10.1386/jwcp.11.1.83_1.

Holley, K. A., and M. S. Harris. 2019. *The Qualitative Dissertation in Education: A Guide for Integrating Research and Practice*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351044837.

Holloway, S. M. 2021. "The Multiliteracies Project: Preservice and Inservice Teachers Learning by Design in Diverse Content Areas." *Pedagogies: An International Journal* 16 (3): 307–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2020.1787172.

Jewitt, C. 2008. "Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms." *Review of Research in Education* 32 (1): 241–267. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X07310586.

Kizilcec, R. F., E. Huber, E. C. Papanastasiou, A. Cram, C. A. Makridis, A. Smolansky, S. Zeivots, and C. Raduescu. 2024. "Perceived Impact of Generative AI on Assessments: Comparing Educator and Student Perspectives in Australia, Cyprus, and the United States." *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 7: 100269. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100269.

Kress, G., and T. Van Leeuwen. 2020. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099857.

McDowell, L., K. Sambell, and G. Davison. 2009. "Assessment for Learning: A Brief History and Review of Terminology." In *Improving Student Learning through the Curriculum*, edited by C. Rust, 56–64. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

McNiff, S. 2008. "Arts-Based Research." In *Handbook of Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, edited by J. G. Knowles and A. L. Cole, 29–41. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452226545.n3.

Merriam, S. B. 2009. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mulvihill, T. M., and R. Swaminathan. 2020. *Arts-Based Educational Research and Qualitative Inquiry: Walking the Path*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315143361.

Okoko, J. M. 2023. "Arts-Based Inquiry." In *Varieties of Qualitative Research Methods: Selected Contextual Perspectives*, edited by J. M. Okoko, S. Tunison, and K. D. Walker, 41–45. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04394-9.

Oyama, R. 2022. "'Reading' Literature through Drawing: A Multimodal Pedagogic Model for the EAL University Classroom." In *Multimodality in English Language Learning*, edited by S. Diamantopoulou and S. Ørevik, 176–189. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003155300-13.

Peng, M., and Y. Hua. 2020. "Who Has Stolen Their Childhood?—A Comparative Study Between *The Book Thief* and *Grave of the Fireflies* from the Perspective of Trauma Narratives." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 10 (7): 785–790. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1007.09.

Pringle, R. M. 2020. *Researching Practitioner Inquiry as Professional Development: Voices from the Field of Science Teaching*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59550-0.

Ramsaroop, S., and N. Petersen. 2020. "Portraits of Primary School Pre-Service Teachers at a South African University: Implications for Nuanced Student Support." *Journal of Education*, no. 81, 82–98. https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i81a05.

Schwartz-Shea, P., and D. Yanow. 2012. *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203854907.

Secolsky, C., and D. B. Denison, eds. 2018. *Handbook on Measurement, Assessment, and Evaluation in Higher Education*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315709307.

Shrestha, P. N. 2020. *Dynamic Assessment of Students' Academic Writing: Vygotskian and Systemic Functional Linguistic Perspectives*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55845-1.

Simons, H., and B. McCormack. 2007. "Integrating Arts-Based Inquiry in Evaluation Methodology: Opportunities and Challenges." *Qualitative Inquiry* 13 (2): 292–311. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406295622.

Van der Merwe, D. 2018. "Aspects of Academic Language Proficiency of Intermediate Phase Teacher Education Students." *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 8 (1): a555. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v8i1.555.

Womack, P. 1993. "What Are Essays For?" *English in Education* 27 (2): 42–48. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-8845.1993.tb01101.x.

Zusak, M. 2016. *The Book Thief*. Anniversary Edition. New York: Penguin Random House.