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Improving student learning through inquiry-based reading

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ABSTRACT

Based on qualitative data on students’ approach to reading this paper argues that student learning be significantly improved by facilitating reading to unfold as a method of inquiry. Identifying how students currently orient and interact with texts and further what learning outcomes reading affords we develop the concept of ‘Text-Centred Reading’ (TCR), which contrasts models such as inquiry-based-learning. TCR differs from established concepts in the literature, emphasizing that the interest orienting the reader’s focus is decisive for her learning. In paraphrasing the model of ‘Teacher-centered-teaching’, the concept criticizes the prevailing framing of reading in higher education as outmoded. Drawing on an earlier study of how researchers read and learn through reading, we discuss how students’ learning can improve if reading is taught and supported as a method of inquiry. Finally we suggest that in confronting specific challenges related to this endeavor inspiration can be drawn from ‘Inquiry-Based Learning’ (IBL) frameworks.

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Introduction

Students expend vast amounts of time and energy on reading academic texts, much more than they spend on reading different kinds of empirical documents and data. In fact, for the majority of students in social sciences and humanities, reading academic texts is the primary activity through which they learn their discipline and acquire understanding of its theories and methods. Even so, efforts to teach students how to learn from reading are conspicuous by their near absence from the curriculum. When reading is taught, teaching is typically undertaken by pedagogical consultants as opposed to researchers, and moreover as part of extra-curricular courses on study skills rather than as an integrated part of method curriculum. These courses seek to equip students with a technical skill-set (see Wingate 2006) that covers different approaches to reading varying in degrees of depth, thoroughness, criticality, etc (Jørgensen 2008). Students are not taught how reading academic texts may be practised as a method of inquiry.

From a previous study (Katan and Baarts 2018), we know that researchers approach academic texts through what we termed ‘Inquiry-Based Reading’ (IBR). IBR denotes a specific orientation during reading, namely based on the researcher’s problem of inquiry. When researchers read, they read to further their understanding of a
particular research question, mostly external to the text. In effect, researchers are less interested in what the text itself has to say in its own right, than in what it might enable them to say about their problem of inquiry. Moreover, the criteria of relevance, which decides what parts of the text the researcher engages more thoroughly with, is given by that which may nuance, elaborate, challenge or substantiate her understanding of her object of research. The inquiry-based reader’s focus and interaction with the text thus is consistently guided by the research question. The inquiry-based reader may employ different strategies such as skimming, scanning, surface reading (Best and Marcus 2009), or close reading (Culler 2010; Brookman and Horn 2016; Douglas et al. 2016; Love 2010; Weller 2010; Poletti et al. 2016), (which are not in themselves distinct from what students are taught as study skills). What distinguishes IBR from previously established concepts of reading and learning is not the level of thoroughness or critical scrutiny. It is the consistent and purposeful orientation towards bringing the thinking inherent to the text into dialogue with the reader’s thinking on her particular problem of inquiry, seeking its furthering.

The concept of IBR calls attention to the reading of academic texts as a genuine research practice rather than a supplementary practice undertaken in relation to empirical methods (Katan and Baarts 2018). That is to say, IBR constructs reading as a practice through which knowledge is actively produced (Katan and Baarts 2018), contrasting a conception of reading as a practice through which one merely comes to know about knowledge already produced. This conceptualization of reading as research practice prompts the question of whether students should be introduced to it accordingly.

Based on students’ autoethnographic accounts of their reading practices, this article investigates how students read and what learning outcome reading affords them. Building on the analysis, we develop the notion of ‘Text-Centred Reading’ (TCR) as a conception of how students orient towards texts and what they learn from them. As TCR stresses how the reader is oriented towards the text and not whether her engagement is deeper or more superficial, TCR differs from central concepts of reading in the literature. We discuss how TCR diverges from IBR and address concerns regarding how the latter may be adapted from its origins among researchers to the context of student learning and how this may improve students’ learning outcomes.

In so doing, this study contributes both to the field of higher education and Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL). Based on the fundamental notion that neither theory nor methods can be learned in isolation, IBL curriculum aims to integrate both through students’ active participation in processes of inquiry (Magolda and Marcia 1992; Levy and Petrulis 2012). Hence, this curriculum emphasizes facilitating experiences of how both disciplinary knowledge and methods are context dependent and dynamic. Even so, reading academic literature has not yet been included in the IBL curriculum. In fact, reading-based knowledge production remains largely unattended in the IBL literature and by this omission it is implicitly construed as merely a supplementary activity. Referring to the concept of IBR we will argue that reading is a method of inquiry in its own right and that IBL comprises a curricular approach well suited to facilitate students’ conception of and learning through reading as a research practice. We further suggest that facilitating student reading to become more inquiry-based can vastly improve the learning outcome.
Background

Inquiry-based learning

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is a concept derived from a field of educational studies concerned with a reframing of students’ learning situation that aims to engage them as creative and capable participants in the construction of knowledge (e.g. Baxter Magolda 2009; Levy and Petrulis 2012). It is a student-centred approach that emphasizes students’ interests and learning objectives as the starting point for the learning process. Just as the concept of student-centred learning is subject to considerable dispute (Farrington 1991), so are conceptions of IBL (Levy et al. 2013). Conceptions vary (Levy and Petrulis 2012), and moreover the term IBL frequently is used interchangeably with other concepts such as research-based, discovery-based or problem-based learning etc. Variations among the different conceptions address questions such as whether students partake in actual processes of research or their activities instead mimic research; whether students participate fully in processes or only partially and whether inquiry is an educational end or a means (e.g. Abd-El-Khalich et al. 2004; Elton 2009; Healey and Jenkins 2009; Levy et al. 2013; Major and Palmer 2001; Wyatt 2005). Moreover, conceptions differentiate along the lines of the quality of knowledge outputs – whether knowledge is new in an absolute sense or merely new to the student, which can also be phrased as a distinction between knowledge construction and knowledge building (Bereiter 2002).

General agreement is that as a pedagogical and curricular approach to teaching, IBL represents a move away from teacher-centred learning, where content and methods of teaching are typically determined by the teacher’s activities (Trigwell and Prosser 1996). In this capacity, IBL represents a stark contrast to and criticism of the passive role of students in traditional transmission-based learning, such as the ‘fill-up-the-tanks model’ (Biggs and Tang 2007, 136). This does not imply, however, that IBL excludes as a matter of principle practices associated with rote learning. Activities such as collecting, recalling and reproducing disciplinary principles and perspectives, typically linked to passive absorption in contrast to active meaning-making, may be part of IBL (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998, 17) to the extent that they are integrated as a partial means in a process of developing understandings of the problem of inquiry (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998; Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse 1999; Duffy, Lowyck, and Jonassen 1993).

The conception of IBL we employ in this paper has at its heart the integration of disciplinary theory and practice. That is, it facilitates students’ coming to know about research perspectives and results in their discipline by means of personal experience with the practices through which these perspectives and results have been achieved (Levy et al. 2013). Further, in the analysis we appropriate the traditional concept of teacher-centred learning as we develop the concept of Text-Centred Reading (TCR) to describe a relationship between student and text with similar characteristics. As a mode of reading TCR denotes the attempt by students to comprehend and absorb the knowledge contents presented by a text. Accordingly, students are focused on the interests and intentions reflected by these contents and their original contexts instead of appropriating and adapting the contents as a means of furthering the students’ own purposes and interests. In the discussion IBR furthermore is presented as an alternative to TCR, proposing that this mode of reading may form a basis of IBL, hence possibly
enhancing the learning derived from the vast amounts of time and energy that students already invest in reading.

**Approaches to reading**

*Deep approach and surface approach* form a conceptual couple widely used within educational studies. The concepts derive from the seminal work of Marton and Säljö (1976), in which a group of Swedish university students were requested to read substantial passages of prose and subsequently were asked to recount the meaning of the passages and how they had set about reading these texts. Differences in the conceptions of content among the students pointed to two distinct approaches to learning. Students who adopted a ‘surface’ approach focused on memorizing parts of the text in order to be able to reproduce or recite them. In contrast, those who adopted a ‘deep’ approach to reading engaged in an active search for meaning, seeking to understand the inherent logic, e.g. of a theoretical argument or concept. In this article, we use these concepts of learning to investigate what kind of learning approach is reflected in the students’ reading practices.

Contemporary studies of students’ reading practices show that students often approach reading in instrumental ways (Weller 2010; MacMillan 2014; Maclellan 1997; Stokes and Martin 2008). Students’ instrumentalized encounters to some extent reflect the concept of ‘surface approach’. While engaging in a process of interpretation through which they either adopt or reject the views of the text (Weller 2010, 93), students are not entering into a critical dialogue with the text that integrates multiple perspectives and conceives of the text as multilayered (Weller 2010, 94). In a notable study by Stokes and Martin (2008), they address the perceptions, expectations and realities of reading lists in higher education and show how they focus on ‘main books’, ‘essential texts’, ‘key texts’ or ‘useful books’. In this regard, the students clearly demonstrate a ‘means to an end’ approach and an absence of any learning journey through wider reading (Stokes and Martin 2008, 119).

**Students’ learning through reading**

The assignment of pre-class reading is a common practice in higher education. Typically, the purpose of this kind of reading is to expose students to disciplinary methods or knowledge useful in upcoming classes or assignments. An implication of students’ using instrumentalized or surface approaches may be that learnings from each text are isolated as reading becomes a series of separate monologues in which critique primarily takes the form either of dismissal or acceptance of contents (Weller 2010, 93–95).

In contrast, educational studies have found causal connections between deep approach and transformative learning (e.g. Biggs 1987; Ramsden 2003). Transformative learning (Mezirow 1997) denotes processes through which knowledge is not merely gathered as in forming a collection of concepts, for instance. Rather knowledge is embedded in the learners’ experiential conceptions, thereby changing their perspective on a given subject and making them become socially responsible autonomous thinkers (Mezirow 1997, 8). We know from Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956) how learners advance in steps and how remembering and apprehension precede analysis and employment of
theoretical concepts, the latter pertaining to the creation of new knowledge. Contrasting this model, IBL engages students at all levels in processes of learning: simultaneously acquainting themselves with research results and engaging in processes similar to those through which these results are produced. In this respect IBL integrates the taxonomy’s lower steps with the higher. What our empirical data on students’ ways of reading suggests is, moreover, that the distinction between deep and surface approach might not suffice to describe the conditioning of students’ engagement to Bloom’s highest level, at which passages from the texts they read are employed in inquiries into matters potentially separate from the texts themselves. We address this empirical challenge to the concepts of deep and surface approach in this paper.

**Method**

The data on students’ reading practices and experiences connected to reading originate in a course offered in the fall term of 2015 at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Twenty students either finishing their bachelor’s degrees or midway through their master’s programs enrolled for the course, *Reading, Thinking, Writing – Autoethnographic Explorations, Literary and Theoretical Perspectives*. The authors of this article taught the course throughout eight weeks. The course description stressed that the course was part of a research project and that students provided data in this respect. The course introduced students to autoethnography and both literary and theoretical perspectives on reading, writing and thinking. The students used autoethnography as a method of exploring their own study practices whilst entering into a dialogue with perspectives from literature and theory. They explored their engagement in processes of reading, thinking and writing and how they learned through these processes. During weekly class meetings the students gathered for three hours to participate in a mix of workshop activities, plenum and small group discussions, as well as short lectures. In between classes, they wrote take-home assignments based on guided self-observation. These auto-ethnographic accounts provide the empirical data used for this study. A full-day conference based on a final paper by each student concluded the course.

Students wrote assignments 1–2 times a week using an autoethnographic approach to observe and reflect on their own practices preparing for other courses they followed that same term. Their observations and reflections were guided by questions formulated by the authors. Not wanting to assume that we already knew the students’ practices, questions were open-ended. Thus, whilst guiding their focus onto specific aspects of their practices, the questions also allowed them to communicate those issues most relevant to their particular experiences and in the style of writing they felt captured this best.

Students handed in their papers in time for the authors to read them before formulating questions for next week’s assignment. Like in a semi-structured interview this empirical method allowed us both to cover aspects of the students’ practice that we deemed important beforehand and to pursue unforeseen insights or topics of interest turning up in students’ successive accounts. In subsequent assignments, students were, therefore, often both prompted to elaborate or critically review their prior writings or to shift their focus on as-yet unexplored aspects of their practices.

As the students’ approach was autoethnographic, the material is narrative in kind and generally very rich. It consists of descriptions of the different ways students read, how
they prepare for reading, how they relate to the texts they read, how they rationalize these ways of relating, what kinds of learning they hereby achieve, etc. Descriptions are on a manifold of levels ranging from very concrete step-by-step descriptions of reading episodes to very abstract meta-reflections.

The student essays amount to approximately 600 pages. We used NVivo qualitative software to manage data. The student essays were coded into broad categories deriving from the questions posed in the written assignments, e.g. ‘reading practice’, ‘highlighting’ and ‘margin notes’. We then identified subthemes within these categories, such as ‘definition’, ‘key concept’ and ‘important’, without determining any fixed coding themes beforehand. The main aim of open coding is to ‘open inquiry widely’ (Berg 2001, 251) with the purpose of identifying themes that are important to the further analysis. In a second step, we bundled the subthemes together thematically in categories such as ‘deep approach’ and ‘transmission’. This analytical strategy enabled us to generate more generalized thematic areas (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2000).

Analysis

The following analysis is organized into subsections that mimic a general chronology beginning by the student’s first encounter with assigned readings, progressing through the preparatory approach to reading, the actual processes of reading, the learning experience and finally the students’ own reflections on reading as an educational practice. In the analytical descriptions two terms become central. ‘Orientation’ and ‘interaction’ both concern manners of relating to the text, and although we do not want to conceptualize, a few points to distinguish them is necessary. We use orientation to refer to the provisory assessments students make about the importance of different texts, as well as different components within texts. These assessments then direct the student’s attention in specific ways and become decisive to the time and energy she allocates to different texts on her reading plan, as well as particular passages within the texts. In this regard, students’ orientation clearly impacts interaction with the texts during reading in terms of different reading strategies employed. In this sense, orientation can be thought of as the background against which the student approaches the text, whereas interaction is expressed in actual acts of reading, e.g. speed and thoroughness, level of critical engagement, sustained interpretation, underlining and note-taking of varying kinds. Actual reading may, however, obviously also lead the student to adjust her initial orientation, as acquaintance with the text’s contents may reveal themselves to be more important than first expected.

Orientating prior to reading: assessing the importance of texts

Students’ reading lists are long. Therefore, students need to prioritize their time and energy between texts they will read more thoroughly and those they may not even look at. Prioritizations are an early expression of students’ orientation towards different texts. In some cases, a lecturer has emphasized the prominence of one or more texts, which then guides the students to give those priority. In most cases, however, one title on the reading list means as much as another to the students. In
order to prioritize when a lecturer has not offered suggestions, students make rather brief
discernments of different features defining the texts:

I briefly assess, by skimming the first page, whether this is a demanding or an accessible text.
It’s typically the language and difficulty of the text that I assess. After that I skim to find out if
it’s a text with many concepts, because that would require me to take notes on my computer.

First, I noted that it’s a long text. Therefore, I can’t imagine that I’m intended to read every-
thing in detail, and it probably contains (long) passages where I won’t need to underline
anything. The text is divided into paragraphs, and several of these have a small introductory
text, which states what it’s about.

Students begin to assess a text’s importance by discerning features indicating the type
of text. They look for features such as length and density, style of formatting and typo-
graphical guidance, degree of theoretical or empirical orientation, and abundance of con-
cepts or examples. As such, students’ early assessments of a text’s importance pertain
more to the kind of text than to the research or thinking it represents. As if by
default, students tend to give priority to texts that appear to contain concepts or
clearly outlined theoretical perspectives, disregarding the particular qualities of these
components. We find that the students’ individual objectives or interests generally do
not play a role in their assessment of texts’ importance or relevance. In other words, per-
sonal or disciplinary interests formed prior to reading do not serve as the reference point
for students when they are making preliminary assessments of the importance of
impending reads. The principal starting point for students’ approach to the texts on
their reading plan is rather a presumption that all are important to them as students
of a specific discipline. In this sense, the concept of importance used by students to
orient when prioritizing between different texts is a depersonalized and generalized
one. Moreover, the prioritizations reflect a tendency among the students: The students
generally presume that among all the knowledge contents made available to them in
the texts on the syllabus, they should orient themselves most importantly towards theor-
etical perspectives and concepts.

Reading the text: orienting towards different components

Part of students’ preparation for reading is occasionally to look up secondary infor-
mation about the writer or the specific text they are to read. Making use especially
of online resources, they seek to identify central components of the text, its theme
or methodological tradition, and how these aspects have been interpreted elsewhere.
Sometimes this information directs the students’ focus prior to reading, guiding
their attention towards specific contents. At other times, students use secondary infor-
mation as a means of confirming in retrospect; that is, to check that they have been
paying attention to the right components in the text and further to support that the
understanding they have developed of these components is correct. Occasionally a lec-
turer gives the students instructions on how to focus during reading, which then
orients the students’ attention. However, when they are not oriented by suggestions
from either secondary resources or a lecturer, students exhibit a strong tendency to
orient, almost as if by default, towards concepts, methodological categorizations,
definitions, theoretical concerns, etc.:
I’ve learned to look for theories, methods and methodological considerations. This has helped me to develop a filter which sorts the relevant from the irrelevant.

I’m on the lookout for categorizations, definitions and keywords when I highlight an academic text. […] I make two kinds of notes: If I find important quotes, I write ‘IMPORTANT’ or ‘VERY IMPORTANT’ in the margin. I draw a box around the quote in question. The other kind of notes I make are for categorizations or definitions. This kind, I really enjoy making. I get satisfaction from categorizing the concepts.

When asked to describe what they look for during reading when they have not received prior guidance, students reply with words such as ‘the central’, ‘the essential’ and, not least, ‘the important’. Wordings like ‘the interesting’ or ‘the fascinating’ are also present in our material, but much less frequently so. The differences in what all five words designate are not consistently distinguishable. However, when the students explain which aspects of a text they reference with any word, they generally point to those components of the text that they consider to be important or central to its own argument. Hence, also in this regard, we find that students’ orientation is detached from personal disciplinary interests or purposes. The concept of importance that guides their attention while they read thus again is conveyed as a generalized one, defining concepts, definitions and categorizations as important, regardless of their specificities and relevance in relation to what might be a student’s own ends.

**Interacting with texts: learning from reading**

A lot of the time when students are working conscientiously, they derive from the texts what they assume others intend for them to learn. Besides highlighting and underlining, students spend time and energy composing short summaries of those texts and chapters they have assessed as important. They may also make an effort to paraphrase theoretical concepts and perspectives, draw line-systems to depict interrelations between particular points in different parts of a text and so forth. Engaging with the contents of texts through these forms of writing, students work pertinaciously both to understand core aspects of the texts and to commit these to memory. Their interaction suggests a ‘deep approach’ to learning from the texts they read. They are focused on grasping and understanding the intentional content of the text and its vantage point on principles or problems, for instance (Marton and Säljö 1976, 7ff). Accordingly the students’ approach reflects a relationship of perseverance to the research or thinking in the texts. Meanwhile a relationship between the thinking in the texts and the students’ own thinking on issues external to them, which characterize IBR, is (in the best case) postponed.

Very few texts affect me in a way that I manage to make their points and arguments part of my own thoughts during and immediately after reading. I’m scarcely able to process a text in a way that makes me able to reproduce parts of it or all of it during or immediately after having read it.

[…] like I mentioned in an earlier assignment, I (and I’m most likely not the only one) expend immense amounts of energy faithfully familiarizing myself with the text and it’s not until just before the exam that I’ll attempt to generate some new knowledge in my writing.
Students’ interaction with texts revolves around an ambition to retrieve understanding of the texts’ argument or thinking in its own right. That is to say, students read to understand what a text has to express in itself. Meanwhile a potential exploration of how this can be used to say something about a topic different from the text’s own is postponed for a later exam paper. Again we see the expressions of a generalized concept of importance, where learning from reading is not oriented by a specific inquiry or the interests of the individual student. Instead of being attentive to how the text may further their own particular interests, students adopt the interests of the text as the centre of their attention. In this sense students’ engage with a deep approach, but their interaction with what they read resembles the relationship between teacher and student in traditional transmission-based learning – only here a text and not a person is transmitting its knowledge to the student. Another parallel can be drawn to the contrast between ‘student-centred’ and ‘teacher-centred learning’ (Murtagroyd 1980; Trigwell and Prosser 1996; Healey and Jenkins 2009) depicting the effects of how students orient. That is, students interact and learn from texts based on what we want to conceptualize as ‘text-centred reading’, where the intent of the author determines relevance and focus. This differs from what could have been termed ‘student-centred reading’, having ‘student’ represent the pursuit of individual interests or inquiries that then determine focus and learning objectives, similar to the researcher’s in IBR. We elaborate our conceptualization of ‘Text-Centred Reading’ in the discussion.

Moreover, as the students’ approach to learning from texts does not generally involve the process of relating what they have read to (their) understandings of phenomena external to the text, their reading produces rather isolated experiences of learning (see also Weller 2010). To put it generally, the experience of the students in this study is isolated, first in the sense that their reading-based learning assumes a discrete beginning, where the text itself begins, and a discrete ending, where the text itself ends. Second, when students approach knowledge contents as important in their own right, rather than relevant to the extent that they produce meaning in dialogue with other disciplinary or lived understandings, then texts are implicitly construed as isolated capsules of knowledge. Because they are not connected to a more enduring process or interests of the students, the interaction with texts tend to form closed, self-referential circuits of knowledge; they are meaningful only to the extent that students find acquiring knowledge meaningful, solely because it is designated by the course plan as part of their education. Attaining the knowledge of texts in this sense is a more passive, externally motivated endeavour rather than an active, internally and personally motivated one. Thus, even though students employ a deep approach in their pursuit of discerning the text’s argument our findings echo those of Stokes and Martin (2008). This means that their approach does not imply the kind of active dialogue in which they could have students experienced how the text advances their ability to think and inquire into subjects already of their interest. In other words, the learning experience is not transformative.

**Exploring issues beyond the text through reading**

Besides observing their contemporary approaches to reading whilst preparing for other classes the students also recounted how their reading and learning experiences changed during exam periods. Exams at the faculty of social sciences are mostly designed as
miniature research projects in which the students apply relevant literature and theory from syllabus in pursuit of exploring a typically self-chosen subject. In their accounts, we saw how their reading-based learning changes in these periods. Instead of being oriented towards those parts of the text most central to the interests or argument of the text itself, students now make their own inquiry the reference point of their focus. Accordingly, students’ concept of relevance shifts. An effect of the students’ inquiry, directing their focus, is that even peripheral remarks in a text may become the centre of their attention, given that these remarks help the students further their understanding of the problem in question. Moreover, students begin to integrate perspectives from different texts to produce explanatory devices or discuss diverse views on their subject matter. In the following quote, a student recounts how riding her bike and trying to think of a topic for her bachelor’s thesis triggers a process of bringing together separate perspectives and methodological stances to form an explanatory approach to the problem she is interested in.

 […] in my mind [I] play with methodological approaches, theories, library queries (at this point I’ve dismounted the bike) and notice how pieces fall into place. It’s as if I’m making connections to practice. That those things I’ve learned earlier at undecided points in time fall more into place. I learn right there on the bike, I think.

As students’ reading is framed by the question they seek to answer in their exam, they begin to interact with texts in a manner that closely resembles ‘Inquiry-Based Reading’ (IBR) (Katan and Baarts 2018). Their focus shifts from what the text in itself has to say to what it enables them to say about an external subject. The texts they read advance them towards a better understanding of their problem and texts are no longer approached as repositories of knowledge to be comprehended in isolation. As the students integrate perspectives from different texts into a complex lens through which they view their problem, the separate texts transform into stepping stones for the students’ journey towards a more elaborated and deep understanding. Moreover, through this explorative development of their understanding of the problem in question, the students develop also their understanding of the dissimilar qualities embodied by diverse perspectives from different texts.

The students recount this kind of interaction with reading-based knowledge as gratifying experiences of genuine learning: As they explore contents from different texts, integrating these with the inquiry they are pursuing, they become aware of the knowledge and understandings they have obtained during reading. They also notice their advanced abilities to conceive the explanatory potential of theoretical perspectives and how these work in combination. In this way, the students observe their own development as thinkers in their discipline. In short, when they approach the texts with their inquiry as the starting point, they experience the outcome of their efforts as transformative. Thus, how and what students learn from texts during exam period diverges significantly from their reading-based learning throughout the term.

**Conceptions of reading**

In spite of the students’ experiences with transformative learning based on IBR in relation to their exam papers, they tend to stick to ‘Text-Centred Reading’ throughout
the term. One student recounts an episode that occurred in preparation for a class and reading a text by Hobbes on social contracts. Prompted by something he reads in the text, the student finds his mind begins to wander away from the conceptual boundaries of the text to a current dilemma in his personal life:

I read that a contract agreed upon at a specific point in time is effective before a contract agreed upon later on. Like accepting your grandmother’s birthday invitation, when afterwards you receive an invitation to your pal’s gigantic garden party with a free gin and tonic bar and coloured lamps hung from the twisting branches of an old oak and under the roof of the pavilions. And music – a super cool sound system and perfect sun plus mild evening, but you have to turn down all this because you told mom yes first and if you withdraw your yes you’ll get mega yelled at by mom, and dad will stand behind her and hum along. ‘Well done, Hobbes!’ I thought, ‘you envisioned a social code anno 2015’. And, to myself I thought: ‘You are seriously losing your concentration’! I got up, rolled down the blind, because the sun was irritating, turned a few pages forward, then backwards again, and began the reading anew.

On the basis of unintended associations, students occasionally establish connections between the contents of a text and something obviously external to it. We believe that instances like the one recounted do indeed reflect aspects of IBR. That is, whilst the mind wanders in this unstructured and unsystematic manner, the student is nonetheless engaging in an investigation of the explanatory efficacy of Hobbes’s contract philosophy. Moreover he explores and potentially expands a range of possible understandings of social norms besides those of his own immediate surroundings. Nevertheless, this student, like other students recounting similar episodes, interrupts his wandering mind in order to get himself back on what he considers to be the ‘right track’. Students in general express awareness that there are different ways to orient towards and interact with texts. One common understanding of reading echoes the concept of IBR, whilst another refers to ‘Text-Centred Reading’. Aware of these different modes of reading, the students stick with the latter whilst tending to view as untimely digressions those events during which they find themselves practising the former. Similar to Levy and Petrulis (2012), we find that students demonstrate a prevailing understanding that the objective of their reading – in terms of learning – diverges from that of researchers. That is, they ‘perceive themselves to be recipients of research-based knowledge rather than authors in its production’ (Levy and Petrulis 2012, 88). Consequently, their descriptions almost perfectly echo the traditional fill-up-the-tanks model, which asserts that declarative knowledge must be built up before application can follow (Biggs and Tang 2007, 136; see also Brew and Wright 1990). A student explains:

[...] Namely I think that it’s the lot of the student to investigate what each text can teach you in relation to your development [as a student], rather than to investigate how it may play a role in a forthcoming inquiry.

The general conviction is that absorbing the theory and methods of one’s discipline is a prerequisite for practising a more inquiring kind of reading, which can only come later.

**Discussion**

Students’ interaction with the texts they read for exams indicates that the question of whether they read in a text-centered or inquiry-based manner is not a matter of ability
or inability and thus not a matter of impending Bloomian advancement. Rather, in line with explanatory models emphasizing the impact of institutional context (e.g. Biggs 1987; Entwistle and Ramsden 1983; Marton and Säljö 1976), we suggest that the students’ manner of reading needs to be explained with reference to contextual matters such as curricular framing of reading. Curriculum is not a neutral. Besides the explicit instructions conveyed by pedagogical consultants and lecturers, the way lecturers demonstrate disciplinary interaction with texts – how they treat contents in lectures – strongly influences students’ conceptions of reading and their approach to learning from texts. If the lecturers’ treatment demonstrates a thinking about rather than a thinking with the text, then they are implicitly promoting a text-centred approach to reading.

Nevertheless, because our argument entails recognizing the benefits of transformative learning as related to inquiry-based reading, we believe that this approach to texts should neither be postponed until exam periods or postgraduate study nor left to occur only randomly and unintentionally. In many disciplines reading is the most extensive activity through which students learn and it is commonly agreed that transformative learning is both purpose and means of higher education. Given this, seeking ways to develop curricular frameworks that facilitate students’ reading to take on modes that provide richer learning outcomes and experiences represents a vast potential for improving their learning in general. We believe IBR embodies one such mode.

IBR diverges significantly from the mode of reading currently most dominant among students, ‘Text-Centred Reading’. Whereas the latter is oriented towards those components in the text that are central to the author’s argument or intent, IBR is oriented towards those components in the text that may further the reader’s understanding of her designated topic of inquiry. IBR involves the active work of decoupling components from their original context in the text in order to employ them creatively to develop the reader’s understanding of her own topic. Thus achieving a continuous advancement of the understanding of a topic of inquiry persists as the reader’s objective throughout the reading of different texts. This does not mean simply that texts combine as stepping stones for the reader’s journey towards understanding; beyond this, engaging with the same problem through an extended process of learning is likely to elaborate not only the reader’s conception of possible answers to her problem but also, importantly, the multilayered questions implicated by the problem.

As mentioned, a different way of orienting towards texts prevails in the studying practice of students in this research. We conceptualize this orientation as ‘Text-Centred Reading’ (TCR). TCR’s primary characteristic is that it is oriented on the basis of the text and towards those components central to the authors’ argument or intent. In various respects, the way of relating to and learning from text typical of TCR resembles the relation between teacher and student in traditional models of transmission-based or teacher-centred learning. Contrasting IBR, the work with those components found to be relevant in TCR most often consists of decoding, synthesizing and memorizing contents in their original form, postponing their use for a possible later eventuality. TCR, therefore, is likely to produce a series of isolated learning experiences, where every text represents a new search for understanding primarily of the text’s contents without necessarily linking the learning to phenomena or knowledge outside of the text. The outcome of TCR thus tends towards an expansion of the reader’s knowledge of facts without deepening or nuancing what she might already know. In other words the
learner is *not* experiencing how reading, by intersecting with the knowledge and experience she already has, can develop her thinking and ability to conceive more complex understandings of various phenomena – in other words transformative learning (Mezirow 1997).

The concept of IBR has its origins in a study of how researchers read (Katan and Baarts 2018). Certain features describing the basis on which researchers practise IBR, however, challenge a direct transference to the educational practice of students. Referencing the concept of ‘scientific intuition’ [the authors] (2018) describe how researchers bring their accumulated academic experience and knowledge into play, whence they conceive the idea that orients their subsequent reading. Besides identification of a problem, researchers’ ideas involve both theoretical and methodological assumptions about how to reach answers, plus presumptions about what these answers might be. Researchers practicing IBR thus are oriented very specifically towards identifying and exploring those components that they already anticipate in the texts they read. As such their learning processes largely are characterized as processes of challenging, furthering and substantiating their preliminary ideas of how to reach understanding of their subject matter, both with regards to methodology and actual findings.

Bowden and Marton (2000) distinguish a number of crucial differences between the learning processes of students and researchers respectively. One is the evident fact that most researchers have a longer record of learning than most students and thus more experience and greater familiarity with academic methods and theory on which to base new explorations. Another difference concerns the breadth and narrowness of the range of theories, methods and topic areas that students and researchers engage with. Researchers often work in a specific field for extended periods of time, whereas students usually need to acquaint themselves with a broad range of subjects each term (Bowden and Marton 2000). The relative permanence of the researchers’ engagement allows them to cultivate a vast, yet highly specialized knowledge of the field in which they will probably also identify their next research problem. In contrast, students’ basis for defining a problem of inquiry will be both more fragile and more fragmented between different subject areas and methodologies. This means that students cannot be expected to conceive ideas of the same composition as researchers. Consequently, as it is the idea that guides IBR and the very process of learning, many students will need assistance from a more experienced peer or staff member. The literature on IBL contains concepts of scaffolding, teacher support and conceptual preparation, which may partially bridge the gap between students’ and researchers’ competencies that otherwise could challenge the applicability of the concept of IBR to educational contexts. More specifically we recommend that lecturers begin teaching by actively performing their own example of IBR as they lecture about text. Moreover, IBR should be actively employed as approach to class-discussions of texts, thus establishing a practice framework for students own attempts at the method with guidance available. In addition, method syllabus should contain chapters and classes dealing explicitly with reading as a research method. Finally, we recommend that scholars of education begin to consider the learning potentials of reading as a practice of inquiry and explore how IBL might provide curricular frameworks and pedagogical approaches that facilitate more of student reading to become inquiry-based.
Conclusion

In this paper, we have described how students orient towards and interact with the texts they read and developed the concept ‘text-centered-reading’ (TCR). When reading to prepare for class, students’ reading is text-centred, meaning that students orient not according to their own interests but towards the intent and argument of the author. Although text-centred reading (TCR) can imply a deep approach, learning is seldom transformative. Occasionally students’ reading becomes inquiry-based, especially in relation to writing their exam papers. When students’ reading is inquiry-based, reading becomes an event of transformative learning. In spite of such experiences students tend to normatively maintain a text-centred approach to reading during the term. We argue, nonetheless, that students’ term reading should also be inquiry-based and that inquiry-based reading (IBR) can vastly improve their learning outcomes. We suggest certain challenges pertaining to altering students’ interaction with text to become inquiry-based, as well as pointing to IBL as a curricular and pedagogical approach to confront these.

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