

How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Abolish Exams

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Part One: Theory

**If you knew you had a test after this workshop today,
how would that shape your engagement in this 'class'?**

‘Put Understanding First’

(Jay McTighe & Grant Wiggins)

The Long Term Purpose of Schooling

The mission of high school is not to cover content, but rather to **help learners become thoughtful about, and productive with, content**. It's not to help students get good at school, but rather to prepare them for **the world beyond school** — to enable them to apply what they have learned to issues and problems they will face in the future. The entire high school curriculum — course syllabi, instruction, and especially assessment — must reflect this central mission, which we call learning for understanding. Learning for understanding requires that curriculum and instruction address three different but interrelated academic goals: helping students (1) acquire important information and skills, (2) make meaning of that content, and (3) effectively transfer their learning to new situations both within school and beyond it...

(1 of 2)

'Put Understanding First'

(Jay McTighe & Grant Wiggins)

The Long Term Purpose of Schooling

... Unfortunately, the common methods of teaching and testing in high schools focus on acquisition at the expense of meaning and transfer. As a result, when confronted with unfamiliar questions or problems... many students flounder...

... Out of context learning of skills is arguably one of the greatest weaknesses of the secondary curriculum — the natural outgrowth of marching through the textbook instead of teaching with meaning and transfer in mind. Schools too often teach and test mathematics, writing, and world language skills in isolation rather than in the context of authentic demands requiring thoughtful application. If we don't give students sufficient ongoing opportunities to puzzle over genuine problems, make meaning of their learning, and apply content in various contexts, then long-term retention and effective performance are unlikely, and high schools will have failed to achieve their purpose. (2 of 2)

To what extent do you agree with McTighe and Wiggins?

What is the value of examinations?

From a student's perspective:

Melanie Martin is the sort of student who probably would have received an ATAR in the top 10%.

[ATAR = Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank]

She received an A-plus average for all her Year 11 subjects last year, but decided to wave goodbye to the ATAR this year.

The 16-year-old said her whole approach to school had changed.

*"It's more **enjoyable**," she said. "I am **remembering** things, and going **in depth** rather than just skimming the surface and learning facts for school-based assessments."*

From: Henrietta Cook and Timna Jacks, *The Age* newspaper, March 5 2017

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/we-dont-want-this-to-be-a-dirty-little-secret-the-school-ditching-the-atar-20170303-guqbj.html>

From a teacher's perspective:

Is it *best practice* to shape curriculum around summative assessment tasks such as exams?

Is it *best practice* to therefore ask students to focus upon the 'information they need' to perform well in these tasks?

From a teacher's perspective:

Is it *best practice* to therefore encourage a focus on:

'What do I need to know to pass?'

rather than

'What is really interesting here?'

or

'How far might I take this?'

or

'How does this apply to my life?'

Some influential voices on our decisions:

1. Alfie Kohn

‘Schooling Beyond Measure’

- Tests often (1) measure intellectual proficiencies which matter *least*, (2) negatively impact students’:
 - personal goals and enthusiasm/ engagement
 - learning approaches (‘shallow thinking’, avoidance of risk, etc.)
- Better to have students demonstrate proficiency by *doing something meaningful*, rather than by recalling arbitrary facts on demand

Some influential voices on our decisions:

2. OECD: 'The Nature of Learning'

7 principles of **innovative** learning environments (2010):

1. Learners must be at **centre** of what 'happens'
2. Learning is a **social** practice
3. Students' **emotions** are an integral part of their learning
4. Each learner is **unique**; innovative learning environments reflect various experiences/ prior knowledge of each student
5. Students must be **stretched**, but not too much ("sweet spot")
6. Assessment should be **for learning**, not *of* learning (formative)
7. Learning needs to be **interdisciplinary** and linked to '**real**' **world**

Some influential voices on our decisions:

3. Jan Owen AM (CEO, FYA)

Students' future employers increasingly value...

- **Enterprise skills:** creativity/ innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, project management, globalism, digital literacies, confidence/ resilience/ agency
- **Presentation skills,** including strong oral abilities, engagement, empathy

Entrepreneurialism & innovation seem crucial

**How does your class/subject/school
afford boys opportunities to build
'enterprise skills'
or to pursue *interests*?**

So, why did we get rid of exams?

To prioritise questions of *why* and *how*
over *what, who, when*

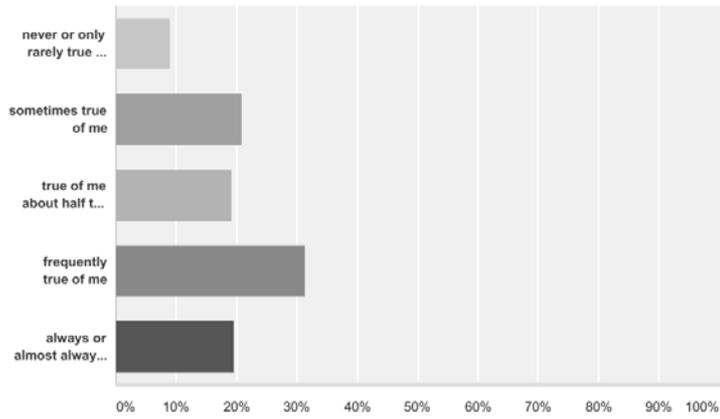
To allow our assessment to be more rigorous and relevant

As part of a wider plan to encourage a focus on
Creativity, Engagement, Ownership

Part Two: Practice

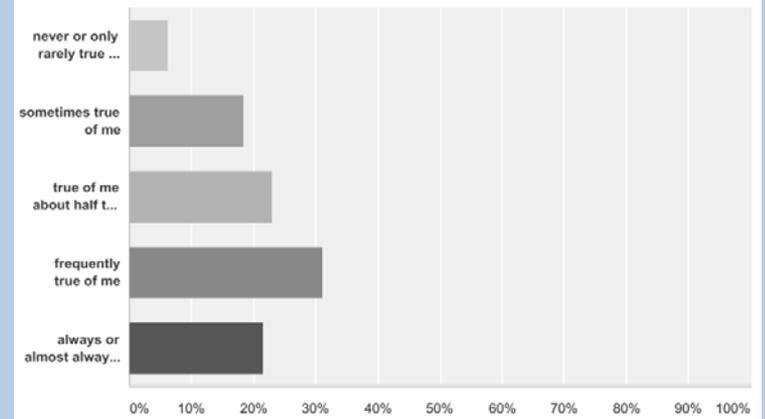
Q3 I am discouraged by a poor mark on an English test and worry about how I will do on the next test.

Answered: 322 Skipped: 0



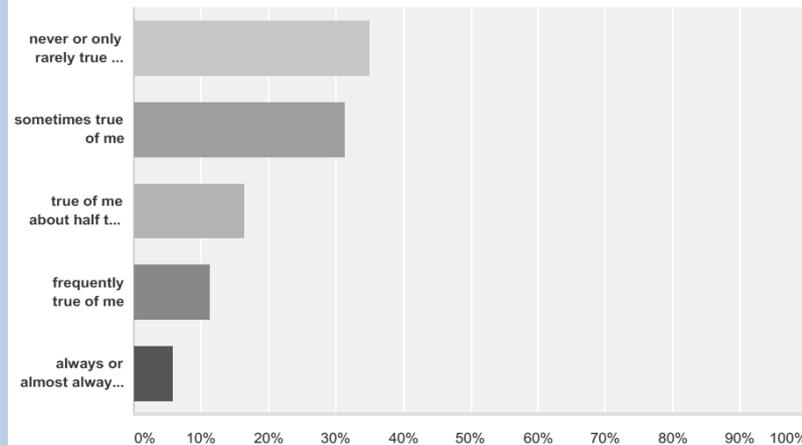
Q7 Even when I have studied hard for an English test, I worry that I may not be able to do well in it.

Answered: 322 Skipped: 0



Q8 As long as I feel I am doing enough to pass, I devote as little time to studying English as I can. There are many more interesting things to do.

Answered: 322 Skipped: 0



To put our situation into context...

2016 and beforehand:

- Exams at the end of Semester 1 and 2 for Years 8-10
- Unit plans built with these exams in mind

As of Semester 1, 2017:

- No Yr 8, 9 exams; only end-of-year exam at Yr 10
- Substantially re-shaped Year 9 & 10 courses to accommodate new aims
- Further review and reshaping of Yr 7/8 to come...

Our goals:

- Overhaul Yr 9/10 to create more room for extended research/ projects, sustained electives, choice, wider reading opportunities.
- Replace examinations with more meaningful:
 - 1) extended writing/ speaking tasks
 - 2) feedback

We wanted this overhaul to increase emphasis on:

- **formative assessment:** immediate, ongoing, qualitative feedback on individual progress;
- **writing as process:** planning, drafting, re-drafting after *initial* feedback, proof reading, submission, *further* feedback, reflection, etc.;
- **student agency, creativity:** choice, in every term, regarding direction and focus of learning and assignments/ assessments;

We wanted this overhaul to increase emphasis on:

- **independent study, ownership of learning:** note-taking; research & thinking skills; plagiarism/authentication; deadline management;
- focus on **big ideas** and **key questions:**

Year 9, Term 2:

- *How is the idea of discrimination, explored in Of Mice and Men, relevant to my world?*
- *How might I best persuade Scotch College parents to take public transport more regularly?*

Year 10, Term 1:

- *What is Literature for?*
- *What is an essay?*

A focus on Year 10, Semester 1 2017...

Our Year 10 Semester 1 Exam 2016:

Section ONE: Macbeth Essay

Section ONE = 20 marks

Begin your answer to this section on a NEW SHEET of paper. Write your STUDENT NUMBER, TEACHER'S NAME and the TOPIC NUMBER at the top of EACH PAGE.

TASK: Write a **WELL-PLANNED, CLEARLY STRUCTURED** and **CLEARLY EXPRESSED** essay of about 700 words on **ONE** of the following topics. Your essay should contain an introduction, three body paragraphs and a conclusion, and evidence (including quotations) to support your main points.

Marks are awarded for accurate expression, so allow time to **PROOF READ** your answer.

EITHER

1. *"And be these juggling fiends no more believed
That palter with us* in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope."* Macbeth - Act 5 Scene 8 (* "palter with us" means mislead us)

"The Macbeths deceive others as much as they deceive themselves." Discuss.

OR

2. "Macbeth's murders, culminating in the slaughter of Macduff's wife and children, ultimately banish any sympathy we may feel for him." Do you agree?

Compare with our focus for Year 10 Term 1 2017:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RCFLobfqcw>

What is Literature for?

Key assessment tasks replacing the exam in 2017

What is literature for?

Creative assignment

Over the next few weeks you are being asked to respond, in a creative and original way, to ONE of the following sources:

- *Macbeth*
- A wider reading text you have recently enjoyed

I am asking you to respond to the question...

What is [my chosen text] for?

To do so, you are asked to reflect on the key insights offered in both the *School of Life* video (see over) and the article from *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 'A deeper connection', and to use one or more of these insights as the basis for an exploration of what you think your chosen text offers readers.

You might...

- focus on a particular theme and explore its complexities
- Explain how your text, for example, 'makes us nicer' or 'prepares us for failure' (see *School of Life* notes, overleaf)
- Choose a particular character and offer a detailed, empathetic character portrait, in order to explore their predicament, failure, admirable attributes, etc.
- Show or explain how you were personally affected by the text's details and insights
- 'Sell' the text to your peers by emphasising its greatest strength/s or literary value
- Combine two or more of the above, or do something else which reflects your personal response to the text – consult with your teacher

Your response might take the form of...

- A short film or multimodal presentation (e.g. like the *School of Life* video)
- A creative narrative – short story, interior monologue from a character's perspective, etc.
- A dramatic performance from the perspective of a character
- A persuasive speech
- A literary review for a student magazine
- An interactive website or other online resource
- Another form of text that you think will best represent your ideas – consult with Mr J

The only rule is...

- Your piece is original, creative, imaginative – push yourself to do something challenging, engaging and inventive
- You include a written component of at least 700 words (a voice over for a film, a video script, a story, a speech transcript, an explanatory statement connected to a dramatic performance, etc.)
- You aim to teach the rest of the class something specific and interesting about your text.



Term One



Year 10 English 2017

Major Project: Independent Research & Comparative Essay

*Macbeth, Lord of the Flies
and Beyond...*

The Task in a Nutshell

You are required to produce an extended comparative essay, which is...

- between 1500 and 3000 words in length
- shaped by one of the following combinations:
 - o *Macbeth* AND *Lord of the Flies*;
 - o *Macbeth* OR *Lord of the Flies* AND a wider reading source;
 - o *Macbeth* AND *Lord of the Flies* AND a wider reading source.

- a chance to experiment with **personal voice**, on a topic shaped by (1) **personal interest** – your choice – and (2) our **two key questions**:

'What is literature for?'

'What is an essay?'

- driven by **independent research**, conducted at home and in 3 of every 10 English lessons, during the first 6 weeks of Term 2 (see timeline p6)



Term Two

Key assessment tasks replacing the exam in 2017

What is literature for?

Creative assignment

Over the next few weeks you are being asked to respond, in a creative and original way, to ONE of the following sources:

- *Macbeth*
- A wider reading text you have recently enjoyed

I am asking you to respond to the question...

What is [my chosen text] for?

To do so, you are asked to reflect on the key insights offered in both the *School of Life* video (see over) and the article from *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 'A deeper connection', and to use one or more of these insights as the basis for an exploration of what you think your chosen text offers readers.

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The only way forward...

- Your piece is original, creative, imaginative – push yourself to do something challenging, engaging and inventive
- You include a written component of at least 700 words (a voice over for a film, a video script, a story, a speech transcript, an explanatory statement connected to a dramatic performance, etc.)
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Two student responses to the task:

<https://rb3820.wixsite.com/whatisliteraturefor>

[Lord of the Flies Parody](#)

Term One

Key assessment tasks replacing the exam in 2017

Week (T2)	Independent research	Drafting and feedback
Week 1: Wed 19 – Fri 21 Apr	1. Define the task – Finalise topic/question & confirm with teacher (see approval sheet) 2. Locate information – Start conducting preliminary research	1. Planning – Conduct initial brainstorm
Week 2: Mon 24 – Fri 28 Apr	2. Locate information – Continue conducting research 3. Select resources – Start refining readings & other research sources (keep a record!)	1. Planning – Continue brainstorm, take careful notes, keep track of ideas & questions for further inquiry
Week 3: Mon 1 – Fri 5 May	3. Select resources – Continue to refine readings & research sources (keep a record!) Submit research readings list – discuss quality & relevance	1. Planning – Start formulating outline of essay (possible arguments, sections, etc.)
Week 4: Mon 8 – Fri 12 May	3. Select resources – Continue to refine readings & research sources (keep a record!) 4. Organise notes – Discard irrelevant readings & start arranging ideas	2. Drafting – Start writing essay, section by section/argument by argument
Week 5: Mon 15 – Fri 19 May	4. Organise notes – Continue arranging ideas & developing/ refining arguments 5. Present the ideas – Complete first draft, submit for initial submission & teacher feedback	2. Drafting – Continue writing essay, start organising sections 3. Initial feedback – Submit draft to teacher for feedback
Week 6: Mon 22 – Fri 26 May	5. Present the ideas – continue to draft & refine writing on basis of teacher feedback	4. Refinement/Re-drafting – Make changes in light of feedback
Week 7: Mon 29 May SUBMISSION	5. Present the ideas – Submit final proofread copy for assessment (NB: Consult checklists) 6. Evaluate work – Reflect on feedback, essay strengths/weaknesses, Essential Questions	5. Final Submission – Consult checklists 6. Reflection



Year 10 English 2017

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- a chance to experiment with **personal voice**, on a topic shaped by (1) **personal interest – your choice** – and (2) our **two key questions**:
‘What is literature for?’
‘What is an essay?’
- driven by **independent research**, conducted at home and in 3 of every **10 English lessons**, during the first 6 weeks of Term 2 (see timeline p6)



Term Two

Two further student samples...

“I dare do all that may become a man” : An insight into the different ways major characters in *Macbeth* and *Lord of the Flies* attempt to conform to masculine stereotypes.

... It's clear that Macduff tries to be the textbook definition of masculinity, but has reservations about ditching his morals entirely. In Act 4 Scene 3, Macduff is confronted with news of the death of all his “pretty chickens and their dam” in “one fell swoop”. Here, Malcolm suggests to Macduff that he should “Dispute it like a man” suggesting that he should fight back against Macbeth due to the grievance caused. Fighting fire with fire, as Malcolm suggests, is something a ‘conventional’ man would seemingly do. And although Macduff replies that he “shall do so,” indicating he will heed the advice given, he adds that he “must also feel it as a man”, a clear deviation from the medieval masculine archetype; men are meant to be emotionless when faced with these kinds of tragedies. ...

Two further student samples...

'Lying there in darkness, he knew he was an outcast.'

A study into isolation and its effects on mankind according to Golding and Shakespeare.

Have you ever felt lonely? Unwanted? Depressed? Defeated? We've all felt this utterly disconnecting and tear jerking feeling that leaves you pretty uncomfortable. Loneliness and isolation are not always chosen; they creep up on us, like a tiger tracking its prey, and then suddenly we are engulfed by the feeling. How long will it last ...? It differs - but one thing is for certain: it makes a lasting impression.

A 2008 study conducted by Sir Ian Robbins into the effects of isolation on humans found that, after only 48 hours of complete seclusion, the participants experienced elevated levels of anxiety and paranoia. In addition to this, the mental functioning of multiple participants had severely deteriorated and their ability to provide logical and verbal reasoning was almost non-existent – hardly surprising with nothing to do for 48 hours! It is a situation like this that the Scottish king in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* experiences. His detachment from the entire world around him has clear consequences, which results in the ultimate demise of his decision-making capabilities just like those of the participants in Robbin's study. ...

Problems...

From students:

“Not enough time...”

“I didn’t know what I wanted to do until too late in the unit... I did most of my writing in the weekend before it was due...”

“It was too hard...”

“I’d rather do an exam...”

“What about practice for Year 12 exams?”

From teachers:

Are we expecting too much from the students?

Are we giving them the requisite time and scaffolding?

Do we have the time to assist 25 individual students with this challenging task?

Are we giving students the practice they need to write under timed conditions?

Benefits...

From students:

“I liked being able to come up with my own topic... [pursue] my own interest...”

“I thought it was good that we didn’t have to just focus on remembering stuff...”

“I feel like my writing is getting better...”

“I’ve never written that much before...”

From teachers:

Seeing evidence of real student growth across ability levels

Though some students struggled and some had rough patches, students were *engaged*

Assessing work that better reflected student ability, effort, thinking and engagement (versus examinations)

Overall quality of thought and writing was a vast improvement on the 2016 mid-year Year 10 English exam

So, again, why did we get rid of exams?

Creativity, Engagement, Ownership

- Transfer of understanding over ‘content stuffing’
- Deep thinking over ‘hurdle jumping’
- More formative assessment – regular in-class writing tasks; immediate, ongoing feedback
- Student agency, choice, creativity
- Student responsibility: note-taking, handwriting, folios, wider reading log, etc.
- More authentic writing/ speaking tasks

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