How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Abolish Exams

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Two parts of the workshop today:

1. Theory: Considering the thinking behind our curriculum redesign, including the abolishment of exams.

2. Practice: A review of the first semester in Year 10 English.
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
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...
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.

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?
What is Literature for?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RCFLobfqcw
Key assessment tasks replacing the exam in 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:
  - Macbeth AND Lord of the Flies;
  - Macbeth OR Lord of the Flies AND a wider reading source;
  - 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 for every 10 English lessons during the first 6 weeks of Term 2 (see timeline p6)

**Term One**

*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 recently enjoyed

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

To do so, you are asked to reflect on the key insights offered in both the novel and wider reading texts 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
- Examine your analysis, for example, “makes us think” or “prepares us for failure” (see Schofield & VW, notes, overview)
- Choose a particular character and offer a detailed, empathetic character portrait, in order to explore their circumstances, failure, admirable attributes, etc.
- Examine or explain how you were personally affected by the text’s details and insights
- ‘Tell’ 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 multimedia presentation (e.g., like the School of Life videos)
- 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 interview on your website or other online resource
- Another form of text that you think will best represent your ideas – consult with Mr J

**Term Two**
Key assessment tasks replacing the exam in 2017

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

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

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

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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?* and *What is an essay?*
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**Term Two**
One student’s journey...

From the beginning of the play, Macbeth is easily influenced by Lady Macbeth, which leads him on a path of destruction. Despite having some good qualities, he is too easy to manipulate. Macbeth shows great weakness when he is questioned as to whether he is a “man.” Lady Macbeth can control Macbeth just by mentioning, “soldier and scolded” because he is meant to be a “worthy” warrior and so when his masculinity is questioned he will go to any great length just to show that he is a man. With the question of his masculinity, Lady Macbeth is able to manipulate him in such a way that it seems like killing Duncan is for self-gain and there will be no consequences. This means that he would destroy himself mentally and physically. In Act 1 Scene 5 Macbeth is too easily convinced within one speech from Lady Macbeth, his mind changes from “we will proudly no further” in the “unnatural deed” to an entity he would carry out the bloody execution from his wife, unable to make up his own mind. Also, he is taking orders from his wife even though those days women were not allowed much freedom of speech.

With Macbeth being so easily manipulated, unable to make a decision, it is inevitable that he would be destroyed. Macbeth was gradually torn apart, inside out, so unaware that he lost the respect from his fellow peers and the “deep damnation” taking over his whole being. With the destruction he caused there was only one way of curing it, to “commit suicide.” Macbeth took off his head on a stick. This was created by the fact that Lady Macbeth had stopped short by Macbeth saying, “Wash this filthy witness from your hand” which meant that he thought there would be no aftermath from his actions. When Macbeth finally realized what he had become and he was facing an enemy against him in Act 5 Scene 3 and with no “friends” to back him up, he was made destroyed so he turned back to the only thing he knew to be right. But at that stage no one would stand him any respect. Following his misguiding he ultimately never followed his own path so he paid the ultimate price for his own path.
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. ...
‘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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