Editorial

Editorial:

Where have all the writers gone?

Malcolm Venter

Although editing and compiling Teaching English Today is always an interesting and challenging task, there is one thing that always bugs and frustrates me. And that is the reluctance of teachers and lecturers to write for a publication such as this.

In this issue, we were fortunate to have submissions from a number of authors – for which we are grateful; but we need more.

This situation contrasts sharply with publications one reads from many overseas countries. I envy an Australian friend of mine, Debra Byrdon, who edits a number of journals, including one for principals and one for more general consumption. Each issue is jam-packed with article submitted by teachers, principals and academics. As for South Africa, when I page through old copies of CRUX, a journal for English teachers which was available for many years and was much appreciated by English teachers, I see such useful articles published by teachers and academics.
Where have all the writers gone?

Teachers will say that the don’t have the time. No one would dispute (certainly not myself – I know, I’ve been there) that teachers are very busy people, that they are overwhelmed by curriculum changes, admin loads, extra-murals, marking, marking, marking, and so on. But surely some of those who have been doing extra studies must have ideas gleaned there which they could share with others – possibly even just editing an interesting assignment? Surely teachers are not so busy that they can’t send in even a paragraph – e.g. a teaching tip; something they liked / disliked about the new curriculum; a humorous incident which happened in class? Or to respond – however briefly– to previous articles in TET?

Or is it that our younger generation is so used to blogging – where they can post a two-to-three-line response? If so, TET allows for just that.

Or is it that our teachers don’t believe that they can write? Firstly, I don’t believe that all feel that. Secondly, even if so, remember that we are there to edit if you feel that you are not a great writer. Or maybe you could consider writing with someone else; or ask someone to read your offering and make suggestions for improvement. Or maybe a whole staff / subject department or phase could submit something.

And what about our lecturers and academics – especially those who train English teachers? One sees them contributing to ‘approved’ (or ‘peer-reviewed’) publications, but not to many others. Does this mean that they are only interested in pursuing their academic careers by earning points and kudos by writing for such publications only? There are, of cause exceptions here, such as the prolific (and usually controversial) Professor Jonathan Jansen.

The result of all of this is that the ‘editor’ becomes much more than an editor – more of a writer, compiler, borrower and
beggar.

Do teachers need incentives? Well, we offer up to R400 per article, while the English Academy is contemplating a prize for the best article on teaching English written by a classroom teacher. Let’s hope that more will take advantage of these incentives; but, in the end, the satisfaction of having seen one’s work in print and the thought that one may have contributed even a little to making teachers more informed and competent should serve as its own reward.

As Obama so famously said, ‘Yes, we can’. Yes, you can write. Let your fingers do the tapping on the computer keyboards!

What can we read?

WHAT CAN WE READ? : An Overview of Recent South African Youth Literature (A paper presented at the ISASA School Librarians’
In looking at ways to encourage children and teenagers to read more, it is useful to know what books are available for them to read. South African literature is not publicized as it should be, with few spaces for reviews available. Yet there are many fine books being published which would be good additions to schools or libraries catering for teenagers.

In this paper I will give a brief overview of recent publications, focusing on young adult fiction in English published in the last few years. This will hopefully raise awareness of the books which are available, and highlight some of the authors working in this field. This is not a comprehensive listing of all books published. That would be long and unwieldy, and not very helpful. I will be looking at books published in the past few years, so that they will still
be in print. I will note some of the most significant books, some of the more prolific authors and some themes and trends.

A good way to promote books, for any age, is to link with films. One only has to note the common “film tie-in” covers of many books. There are at least three South African films based on books on circuit.

*Spud* by John van de Ruit needs little introduction. With its sequels, *Spud: The Madness Continues* and *Spud: Learning to Fly* the series has been a publishing phenomenon and shows no sign of slowing down. A film, starring John Cleese, can only add to the excitement. While not specifically marketed as young adult fiction, and appealing to a cross-over market, this is nonetheless a book which is ideal for teenage readers, and has proved itself popular with this group. Set in the early 1990s, each book is a witty account of a year at boarding school, with the story told through Spud’s diary as he reflects on the changing country, his school life and his eccentric family. The books are funny and well written, with one last volume in the series still to come.

*Hanna Hoekom* is an Afrikaans film based on the novel by Marita van der Vyver which has been translated into English as *The Secret Life of Hanna Why*. It is a humorous story of a young girl trying to figure out who she is, and to cope with her unusual family dynamics, a situation complicated when her mother remarries and insists on a family holiday. A flood traps Hanna, her pregnant mother, gay father, test-tube brother, new stepfather and two step-brothers, plus their mother, in their holiday home.

A more serious novel, *Crossing the Line* by Lutz van Dijk, has been filmed as *Themba* (with the novel reissued as *Themba: A Boy Called Hope*). The novel follows Themba’s journey from rural poverty to membership of the national soccer team, while exploring the impact of abuse and the challenges faced by Themba, who is HIV positive. Van Dijk has another novel
dealing with AIDS, *Stronger than the Storm*, with the focus on a young girl, looking at sexual abuse, and the secrecy surrounding AIDS and rape.

There have been several soccer themed books in the past few years, and it is likely that the enthusiasm generated by the Soccer World Cup will encourage people to continue reading sport books. Teenagers and children spend a lot of time playing or watching sport, so this is always a useful link. One of the strongest of the World Cup themed books is *The Billion Dollar Soccer Ball* by Michael Williams. Deo sees his family and village wiped out in Zimbabwean political violence. He manages to save his brother and they flee, with all their money hidden in an old soccer ball. The novel follows their adventures as they seek refuge, eventually crossing illegally into South Africa where they encounter the exploitation of illegal aliens and xenophobia. The boys find themselves caught up in the xenophobic riots in Alex, and Innocent is killed. Deo loses himself in drugs but is finally saved when a youth worker notices his soccer talent and he finds himself part of a programme to prepare for the Homeless World Cup. Through all his trials, his love for soccer sustains him and proves his path to redemption and healing. Williams has written several critically acclaimed youth novels and his latest is well-written, moving and powerful.

Youth literature in Afrikaans, and internationally, is filled with series books yet until recently this has not been a feature of English South African fiction. We now see several authors bringing out books about the same characters, such as the Spud series. Zachariah Rapola has three novels featuring Stanza, a street-wise young man living in Alexandria. Rapola is a television screenwriter, which shows in the fast-paced and somewhat episodic nature of the books. After *Stanza on the Edge* and *Stanza and the Jive Mission* Rapola produced a World Cup themed story, *Stanza’s Soccer World Cup*. Stanza must juggle his delivery work with his involvement in his brother’s
band and his growing obsession with street soccer, or diski. He starts a mini-league, which spreads through Alex, eventually coming to the attention of the powers that be, and raising the possibility of six-a-side matches being curtain raisers at the World Cup. His plans are threatened by a corrupt businessman who is using soccer for match fixing and a cover for illegal activities.

S.I. Brodrick has written a series of books featuring a group of teenagers involved in rock-climbing: *Gap, Rockface* and *Runout*. The sport is the backdrop for stories of friendship, romance and rivalry, and shows the protagonists learning to overcome adversity.

Not quite Young Adult Fiction, but still suitable for, and likely to be of interest to, older teenagers is Fiona Snyckers’ Trinity books. The first in the series, *Trinity Rising*, covers a student’s first year at university where she must cope with moral dilemmas and intellectual challenges. The novel deals with serious issues such as anorexia, sexuality, identity, struggling with studying, yet with an engaging style and quirky humour. If you want to get your older teens reading, this is a good book to have. I have seen students walking down the street nose in book, and heard of lecturers and teachers confiscating copies because they were being read in class. The second book in the series, *Trinity on Air*, is set a few years later and shows Trinity trying to forge a career in radio journalism.

New Africa Books has a particularly interesting series, *Siyagruva*. The books are written by different authors, yet feature the same group of teenagers, linked by their love of dance. Fast paced stories, yet simply written, these are ideal for reluctant readers, or second language readers not comfortable with English. Well-known authors such as Robin Malan, Russell Kaschula and Anne Schlebusch have written stories. Recently published novels include *From Belhar to Bollywood* by Clive Smith, *In the Fast Lane* and *A Mozambican*
Another recent trend is the increasing interest in science fiction and fantasy. While in the past there has been a fair amount self-published, and the occasional speculative fiction novel from commercial publishers, the last few years show a lot more variety of fantasy, magical realism and science fiction being produced.

Young readers are sure to be interested in seeing a book written by one of their peers. Andy Petersen was 16 when his novel *Daniel Fox and the Jester’s Legacy* was published; he wrote the first draft when he was 14. But it is not only for the age of the author that this book is recommended. It is, quite simply, a delightful book, and won the Percy FitzPatrick Award for Youth Literature in 2010. The book starts with the death of the hero who then finds himself in the underworld, at the headquarters of the Elite Lower Lords. This is an unusual and refreshing take on Hell. Daniel must find a way to navigate through this world, to find out who he can trust, and foil a plot by the king to escape from Hell with his demons and take over earth. The novel is interesting and engaging, leaving the reader hoping for a sequel. It is hoped that this is the first in a series, as there are several loose ends that need to be tied up.

*Sidekick* by Adeline Radloff won the Sanlam Award and was shortlisted for the MER Prize for Youth Literature. It features a spunky teenage girl who is the unlikely sidekick to a flawed superhero with the ability to freeze time. K. Sello Duiker’s last novel *The Hidden Star* was published posthumously and is an appealing blend of magic realism, fantasy and African folklore, yet set in a modern township. Featuring a young girl on a quest, this has been marketed as a cross-over novel, blurring the boundaries between teenage and adult fiction. *Arbormoss* by Jens Pieper is an environmental fantasy
where a teenage girl is given powers by aliens to help prevent the destruction of Earth. Other, less impressive, but still worth noting fantasies are: *Children of the Moon* by L.M. Brickwood, *Emily and the Battle of the Veil* by Karen Michelle Brooks and *Jade and the Serpent’s Circle* by Maggie Fikkert.

Of the recent science fiction, the most noteworthy are novels by François Bloemhof, Lesley Beake and Jenny Robson. François Bloemhof’s *City at the End of the World* was originally written and published in Afrikaans, then translated by the author. It is set in 2084, a world where teenagers rule and they all aspire to be called to The City, a mark of success. The protagonist is selected to go to The City, a future Cape Town, where he is caught up in a plot to overthrow the regime. Lesley Beake’s *Remembering Green* also depicts a future Cape Town. Aimed at slightly younger teens, it is set in a future of global warming and environmental devastation where the oceans have risen, drowning cities. A young girl is kidnapped from her rural home in the dry interior and taken to an island city (on the top of Table Mountain) where technology is failing and the Tekkies hope to use her to restore the rain.

Jenny Robson has written two impressive science fiction novels – *The Denials of Kow-Ten* and *Savannah 2117 AD*. *Savannah* is set in a dystopic future where animals roam free in Africa while the people are kept in reserves. *The Denials of Kow-Ten* shows a society where the ideals of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* have been applied, with devastating effect, as the powerful live in enclaves of privilege while the rest of humanity struggles in a wasteland.

Robson has many critically acclaimed books in print. Most explore issues of identity and prejudice. Of the more recent novels *Praise Song* depicts the murder of a teacher when she discloses her HIV positive status, while *Because Pula Means Rain* explores prejudice in Botswana, where a teenager with albinism is shunned by villagers.
Much of the published fiction for teenagers deals with serious issues. In John Coetzee’s *Dance of the Freaky Green Gold*, the focus is on environmental concerns and the power needs of South Africa. Scientific experiments to turn algae into biofuels form the basis of the story, which has elements of mystery and romance, touching on environmental issues, mistrust of strangers, and making a new life after parental divorce. In *Black Swan Down*, Coetzee explores alcoholism, father-son relationships, friendship and second chances. Roy lives with his alcoholic father and must contend with school bullies, social workers threatening to remove him from his home, and uneasy relationships with his father and grandmother. He finds solace in his hand-made canoe on the lake, which is the catalyst for much of the resolution which occurs.

*Shiva’s Dance* by Elana Bregin blurs the boundaries between teenage and adult fiction and is a story about the pain of secrets and the way they alienate us. When a teenage girl finds out a terrible secret about her father it complicates her already fraught relationship with her mother. A visiting Buddhist monk is able to help her to understand her troubled life in a different light.

*Soliloquy* by Stephen Finn is a dark and disturbing novel. Told in the form of a diary of a teenager being tried for the murder of another boy, it gives a harrowing insight into the effects of bullying. *Fuse* by S.A. Partridge also explores school violence, bullying and abuse. The main character is abused at home and bullied at school. When a fellow victim suggests fighting back by blowing up the school he is drawn to the idea, with disastrous results. *The Goblet Club*, also by Partridge, is a darkly gothic tale which embraces magic, mystery and intrigue as a group of students plot to poison their sinister headmaster.

Several novels explore the impact of politics, especially apartheid, on teenagers.
Linzi Glass has two novels set in the recent past. *The Year the Gypsies Came* is set in the 1960s and shows a dysfunctional family in a disturbed society. It covers issues such as police brutality, neglectful parents, abuse and rape as seen through the eyes of a 12-year-old girl. *Ruby Red* is a coming-of-age account set against the background of the 1976 Soweto uprisings and explores first love, anger and courage. It was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal, one of the most prestigious British awards for children’s books.

Gaby Halberstam lived in South Africa until she was 15 and draws on that experience for her novel *Blue Sky Freedom*, which is set in South Africa in the 1970s and inspired by the death of Steve Biko. Against a backdrop of black consciousness and the Soweto uprisings, a young white girl is drawn into the struggle when her childhood friend goes on the run from the police.

*Dancing in the Dust* by Kagiso Lesego Molope depicts the teenage experience in the townships in the 1980s, a period of school boycotts, struggle politics and soldiers in the townships. Molope gives a woman’s perspective on the struggle years, as well as a welcome account of the coming of age of a young black woman. Her second novel, *The Mending Season*, shows a young girl attending a formerly white school, where a racist incident shows how much work still needs to be done on race relations.

*Afrika* by Colleen Craig shows a teenage girl accompanying her South African mother when she returns to cover the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The hearings open her eyes to the tragedy and brutality of South Africa’s past and shed light on her own troubled family history. Nokuthula Mazibuko’s *Freedom Song* moves between 1988 and 2008 and shows teenage activists who are recruited into MK. They are reunited in 2008 where they work together to uncover corruption in a government department, and rekindle their romance. *Bua, Comrade!* by Thiathu Nemutanzhela is set in the 1980s and shows a rural
youth who moves to Alex to further his studies but is drawn into political activism.

Beverley Naidoo has written several novels dealing with apartheid and was the South African nominee for the IBBY Hans Christian Andersen Award in 2010. Her more recent books have looked at the impact of other African conflicts on children and teenagers. Burn My Heart is set in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s, while The Other Side of Truth and its sequel Web of Lies follow two Nigerian children who flee to England as refugees after their mother is killed in political violence.

Dianne Hofmeyr has several recent novels exploring the distant past. Eye of the Sun is a historical adventure set in ancient Egypt, where a young girl uncovers a plot to kill the prince and steal his throne. The story is continued in Eye of the Moon. The Waterbearer, set in the distant past, follows a young man’s adventures as he sails down the east coast of Africa in a dhow and is captured by warriors from a great inland kingdom. Fish Notes and Star Songs touches on the power of San rock art and the story of Sarah Baartman, as three teenagers pass through a cave wall into the past. Peter Slingsby’s classic novel The Joining covers similar terrain, with teenagers travelling into the past and entering the world of the San. Long out of print, The Joining has been reissued in English and translated into Afrikaans, Sesotho, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

Take Me to the River by Russell Kaschula, a coming-of-age story set in the rural Eastern Cape, was written in English and isiXhosa and published simultaneously in both languages. Mama, I Sing to You, also by Kaschula, shows a young man torn between tradition and modernity. Alternative Realities by Jackie Nagtegaal, written in Afrikaans when Nagtegaal was 16, has now been translated by the author and is an account of a weekend in the life of a rebellious teenager.
Poverty, homelessness and crime are concerns which affect many teenagers, and many novels depict this harsh reality. *Written in Water* by Becky Apteker and *City Kids* by Merle-Anne Braithwaite focus on street children while *Secret Celebrity* by Deborah Ewing deals with human trafficking. Sello Mahapelesta’s *Tears of an Angel* and *When Lions Smile* explore crime, poverty and gang violence. *The Boy with the Guitar* by Mabonchi Goodwill Motimele looks at xenophobia. *Ill Colleen Court* by Mogamat I. Davids is the story of a young girl growing up on the Cape Flats where she experiences poverty, crime and gangsterism, but also friendship, family and community.

In some stories crime is the backdrop but the novels have a more gentle tone.

*Sharkey’s Son* by Gillian D’Achada is a gentle but well-written tale of a 13-year-old boy living in a fishing village on the west coast. When his father vanishes he goes on the run, trying to find his father and evade the authorities, as well as some criminals who are also looking for him. *Jesse’s Story* by Fiona Macgregor is a story of family, first love and crime, showing the impact on a boy’s life when he is mugged. *Katy of Sky Road* by Dianne Case and Yvonne Hart depicts a teenage girl’s quest for independence and romance and was written to portray a more positive view of life on the Cape Flats.

*The Summer of Toffie and Grummer* by Edyth Bulbring deals with serious issues such as alcoholism and anorexia, yet they are handled with humour. When her mother goes into rehab, Beatrice must spend the summer holiday with her grandmother in a small west coast village. She reluctantly makes friends with a local boy, Toffie, and embarks on a matchmaking quest to find the perfect man for her recently widowed grandmother. *Pops & the Nearly Dead* again shows a teenager spending time with a grandparent. In this case a young boy must spend three months with his grandfather in an old age complex. *Melly, Mrs Ho and Me* follows a teenage girl as she adjusts to the divorce of her
parents, a new school, and figures out who she wants to be. Bulbring also has a fantasy adventure for younger children, *Cornelia Button and The Globe of Gamagion* as well as an adult novel, *The Club* (originally written for the teenage market, but reworked for adults) and is a name to watch.

This brief introduction shows that there is no shortage of South African fiction for teenagers. What is needed is for teachers, librarians and parents to make this material available. It is hoped that reviewers will write about these books, libraries will stock them, and teachers will use them in the classroom. And that teenagers will read them.

**Select Bibliography**


Brodrick, S.I. *Rockface*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press,


Kaschula, Russell H. *Mama, I Sing to You*. Cape Town: Bateleur


NEWSFLASH: PUTTING A CAP ON THE CAPS

NEWSFLASH: PUTTING A CAPS ON THE CAPS

Malcolm Venter

Editor: Teaching English Today

It has been noted that there are some provincial departments of education which are going beyond their brief and authority in adding to the CAPS and in making things mandatory which are not. This is contrary to the spirit of the CAPS and the instruction of the Minister of Basic Education to allow for flexibility.

One of the reasons for drafting a new curriculum was that provinces had added ‘layers’ over the years, making additional demands, and insisting on certain procedures and practices which were optional. Two examples in particular have come to light:
• Insisting that schools follow the **sequencing** set out in the weekly planners. The CAPS clearly states that this is only a suggestion. Where schools are floundering, it may be advisable for them to use this as their teaching programme; but to demand that all schools do so is to insult the professional integrity of the teacher.

• Insisting that schools use **standardised tests** rather than their own. These are designed to help struggling schools and teachers, not those who can cope on their own.

So teachers in those provinces must not allow the officials to put a cap on the CAPS!

---

**Short, Sharp, Snappy plays for schools to be launched**

**Short, Sharp & Snappy**

*by Robin Malan*

(This article first appeared on the LitNet website [www.litnet.co.za](http://www.litnet.co.za) )

‘If I see another modern adaptation of a fairy tale, I’ll
Teachers who have to do with school theatre have been having it tough lately. Why? Well, no one wants to inflict on school students the ‘hoary old chestnuts’, those dreadful one-act plays like The Monkey’s Paw and The Bishop’s Candlesticks that seem to have been around for centuries. Nor, it seems from the heartfelt cry of one teacher, endless sub-Thurberesque ‘hip’ updates of old fairy tales.

The trouble is: no one in the professional theatre is writing plays that are that short anymore. The idea of three short plays making up a ‘Triple Bill’ of one-acters for an evening’s entertainment is completely outdated now. Every bit as much as the ‘well-made play’ of three acts and two intervals. Nowadays very few plays have an interval at all, and plays generally last about 70 to 90 minutes at one stretch and then they’re done!

So what do teachers do when they have to suggest short 20-minute plays suitable for their students to do for events like the inter-house play competition or inter-school play festival or just a short class reading? Where do they go to find them?

I still have a strong interest in school theatre and I go and see schools’ play festivals. And I’m struck (sometimes struck dumb) at the banality of the texts they have to work with. So, I decided Something had to be Done. And Junkets Publisher would do it.

Of course, Junkets Publisher is me. A one-man operation (with an admin assistant coming in twice a week).

I put out a call in 2010 for short plays suitable for performance or rehearsed reading in high schools. The brief was wide-open. I specified the play had to be no shorter than 1 500 words and no longer than 4 500 words. The writer needed to be ‘a South African or a member of a SADC country or a person living or working in Southern Africa’. I said nothing
at all about what the play should be about; all I said was that the plays should be ‘suitable for reading or performance by high school students, i.e. teenagers between the ages of 13 and 19’.

Astoundingly, 57 plays were submitted. Of these, a few disqualifed themselves by being over the word-limit or inappropriate to the specified age-group.

I enlisted the help of a long-standing friend and colleague Colleen Moroukian – when I say ‘long-standing’, together we directed *Iphigenia in Taurus*, the first Greek play to be staged on the Jameson Hall steps at the University of Cape Town, in 1960, when we were both students. Colleen agreed to become my co-compiler of the *Short, Sharp & Snappy* collection, and we started working our way through the plays submitted.

The standard was so high that we decided that there was material easily good enough for two volumes. Junkets Publisher is now publishing the two volumes in The Collected Series, as *Short, Sharp & Snappy 1* and *Short, Sharp & Snappy 2* at the same time, with publication-date 1 December 2011.

So who are these 24 playwrights whose plays were selected for publication? They range from experienced writers for the stage (such as Ashraf Johaardien, Omphile Molusi and Peter Krummeck) to those for whom this is their first play.

In age they range from 16 to 77. Margaret Clough, an ex-physical science teacher, is the oldest, enjoying her retirement both by walking her dogs on the beach and by writing – she has just had her first collection of poems *At Least the Duck Survived* published by Modjaji Books. The youngest are three 16-year-old students from King David High School Victory Park – Dean Salant, Gav Rubin and David Wein – who, together with their drama teacher Renos Nicos Spanoudes, wrote *Child’s Play*. Just one year older than they are is Caitlin Spring, author of *The Search*, which she directed last
year at Fish Hoek High School.

The authors come from a wide spread of places in Southern Africa, from Kwekwe (Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala) and Harare (S M Norman) to Simon’s Town (Caitlin Spring) and Bonteheuwel (Barry Morgan); and from Olievenhoutbosch (M Andries Phukuntsi) to Schoenmakerskop (André Lemmer); and many other places besides, like Itsoseng (Omphile Molusi) and McGregor (Suenel Holloway) and Voëlklip (Renée Muller).

These are definitely plays that young players can get their teeth into. The plays concern a wide variety of themes and issues, including

§ bullying in schools (both Omphile Molusi’s For the Right Reasons and David Stein’s The Goliath Project)

§ life in a small South African town (David and Bruce by Martin Hatchuel)

§ an abandoned baby left in a window (Rob K Baum’s The Opening)

§ slave stories (Samson, the Storyteller by M Cassiem D’arcy) and a traditional African folk tale (André Lemmer’s Thabo and the Tar Man)

§ dysfunctional families (Gisele Turner’s Woof Woof and Renée Muller’s HOP-House Dance)

§ blossoming love despite difficult situations (Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala’s Faith in Love, M Andries Phukuntsi’s Love Secondary and André Lemmer’s Playing in the Park)

§ dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace (Tariro on Top by S M Norman)

§ drug abuse (the four-author Child’s Play)

§ HIV teaching in schools (Monti Jola’s play The New
Struggle, workshopped with The Lost Voices group of students from New Crossroads and Phillipi)

§ caring for children with disabilities (Cassandra Puren’s To Care for You Always and Kirsten Miller’s Remember Joe); or infected by HIV (Ashraf Johaardien’s Miracle)

§ the hazards of having a bicycle (Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala’s The Bicycle Thief)

§ … and even ghosts in a supermarket (Margaret Clough’s Ghosts in the Supermarket).

The plays are often raw, gritty, even uncomfortable. Whether worked through in fierce realism, or played out in jaunty comedy, or handled through images more abstract and symbolic, these are plays for young actors to tackle, and – above all else – find the reality, the truthfulness, of these scattered shards of life lived at this time in this place.

Clearly, these two volumes will prove valuable to everyone involved in drama, theatre arts and performing arts in all high schools and teacher-training institutions. School libraries, university libraries and public libraries will be very interested in acquiring them.

These two volumes will be sent out into the waiting world with a launch on 1 December 2011, World Aids Day, with The Lost Voices student drama group performing an extract from their play about HIV in the classroom, The New Struggle by Monti Jola, and with Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala reading his poem ‘Xavier’s Lament’ about a young neighbour of his who died of Aidsprelated illness.

It makes sense, in the context of the pandemic that is ravaging the lives of so many young people in our country, to temper our celebration with some sober reflection. What Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala and The Lost Voices are saying in their work is that attention must be paid to those who have
succumbed to the pandemic, to those who are living with the virus, as well as to those who are living with those who are living with the virus. At the same time, we should be mindful of the work done by those who have found ways of managing the disease and those who are working towards finding a lasting cure.

It will be interesting to see if all teachers react to these new Southern African plays as one teacher in Cape Town did, just on hearing about the *Short, Sharp & Snappy* volumes: ‘This is a brilliant idea and something needed by us at school.’

To order and for further information, please contact Junkets Publisher at info.junkets@iafrica.com or on 076 169 2789.

Robin Malan

Junkets Publisher

2011

---

**Putting the daily newspaper to work**

**Putting the daily newspaper to work**
What can we do about the incidence of reading retardation and reluctance to read in so many of our classes? How can we quickly redress the balance and pull some of our chestnuts out of the fire? How can those of us who have not actually been trained to teach beginning reading teach children the basic reading skills – how to decode running words, as opposed to words in isolation?

Firstly, all reading (lessons) in school should motivate children to read out of school, omnivorously and voraciously.

Secondly, we must ascertain where children are at, and accept where they are at; and thereafter we should give them what they need rather than what we need to give them!

Fourthly, if there is a dearth of suitable reading material in your classroom, material that children both want and are able to read, why not contrive your own reading material, starting with the daily newspaper? Many parents buy a daily newspaper – or children can get them from their neighbours, or English
teachers can ask other teachers to bring newspapers to school.

Here is a report taken from The Natal Mercury:

**TAKEN FOR A R1 000 RIDE**

CAPE TOWN – An 18-year-old girl who hired a taxi from Durban to Cape was sentenced by Mr H.A.J. Swart to three months’ gaol suspended for three years in the Magistrate’s Court here yesterday for not paying the taxi fare of R1 000.

Jennifer Coetzee, no address given, pleaded guilty to the charge of failing to pay the cost of the trip and further expenses to ‘Flash Taxis’ in August this year.

Coetzee said in evidence that she thought she was pregnant and wanted to tell her boyfriend, who was a sailor on a Greek ship that was docked in Cape Town. She hired a taxi and said that she would pay on arrival in Cape Town. After arriving she then told the taxi driver that the captain of the ship had the money for the fare.

The taxi driver waited for two days before he realised that the fare was not going to be paid. Coetzee was arrested soon afterwards. – S.A.P.A.

This is how I would handle it in a 30-minute period with a ‘diminished group’ of 10-year-olds:

1. Put the following words on the board:

   t_x_; _a_e;  _g_l_y;  _p_eg_t;  _al_o_;  m_ny_;  a_es_d;
   bu_l_r;  l_x_ry;  _s_ap_;  st_ng_r;  c_a_lty.

2. Read the article aloud to the children, simplifying if/where necessary, and omitting the headline. Before you begin, tell the pupils: ‘Listen to this report and see if you can pick out the words which I’ve put down on part of the board.’

3. ‘Now, who can complete one of the words on the board?'
Good, Sam, that’s the word, and you’ve spelled it right (Sam has come up to the board to complete it himself, of course). Now, who can complete another word? Fine, Jane, the word is “guilty”. Say it to the class. (You can get them to chorus it, too, if you want to reinforce the word.) ‘Can you use “guilty” in a sentence, Mike?’ And so on until all 12 words are completed orally in a variety of contexts.

3. ‘Now, which of these words were used in the story?’ Underline and discuss with the class.

4. ‘Who can use three (or more) of these words in a little story for us? Let’s all try to write out a little story in rough (in pairs or individually)’: You work with the children for about five minutes.

5. Five or six stories are read out at random round the class. Pupils vote for the best story. The winner, Jenny, writes out her story on the board, underlining the three (or more) words she has used.


7. ‘Now, what headline should we give the original story?’ Write two or three headlines on the board, plus the headline used in the paper. ‘Which is the best? Why?’

8. ‘Now tomorrow I want you, Muriel, to bring a story from the newspaper. You will read it to the class …’.

9. At the end of the month, take down, collate and bind the stories on the Daily News board and ‘publish’ in a monthly magazine format, any non-readers in the group doing the illustrations.

Who knows, you might even end up by getting the children voluntarily to read interesting news items to their parents!
In her submission of this poem Natalie wrote as follows:

The Glosa form of poetry might be of interest to English teachers (merely to inform about the existence of such a poetic form). I tried my hand at writing one and it was a fascinating exercise. It was used by the poets of the Spanish court, dating back to the 14th and early 15th centuries. The poet, P.K. Page, enjoys using this form.

[The poet, P.K. Page, describes the glosa thus: “The opening quatrain, written by another poet, is followed by four ten-line stanzas, their concluding lines taken consecutively from the quatrain; their sixth and ninth lines rhyming with the borrowed tenth. Used by the poets of the Spanish court, the form dates back to the late 14th and early 15th century.”]

“Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
The fire-fly wakens: waken thou with me.”
(The Princess, vii: Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

The prison casts its turret shadow long,
Beyond the walls that guard its ancient keep.
A stranger stops to contemplate the gloom,
Then hastens past the tower t’wards his home.
Unseen, fair Danaë watches from the grille –
Scans the red sky in softly waning light.
A nightjar fluffs its feathers on the bough;
Shifts from its roost to greet the twilight hour.
Now sinks the sun to herald in the night;
Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white.

Now slips away the zephyr from the glade.
No ripple stirs the pond within the close;
Nor in the palace precincts can be heard
The muted hooting of the evening bird.
No passer-by breathes in the scented rose.
And in the stillness of the wooded park
Entwining branches spread their leafy shade.
Wistaria droops from ghostly colonnade –
No flutter from its blossoms on the stalk;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk.

No welcome light pervades the iron bars,
Save heaven’s off’ring in the distant stars –
The firmament too far – the beams too faint.
Unhappy maid turns to her narrow bed
To seek the arms of Morpheus, mortal’s friend.
In wistful dreams, bold lovers come to haunt
The sleeping damsel on her restless couch.
Like ghosts they go, no comfort in their touch;
Nor gleams the moon its dreamer to enchant;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font.

A lightning streak! No watchers to behold
The silent meteor in shining gold
That showers the sleeping Danaë with its gleam.
The voice of Zeus penetrates her dream:
Draw closer, lovely maid; I’ve chosen thee;
A myriad stars embrace thee – sleep must flee.
Thy name throughout the ages will be blessed.

Our valiant son will suckle at thy breast.

My shimmering cloak enfolds thee; sets thee free.

The fire-fly wakens: waken thou with me.

Another species endangered!

Another species endangered

Hoang Vi Bui

English teacher, Hochiminh City (formerly Saigon), Vietnam
Today many species are being endangered with extinction; their names can be found listed in a book called the *Red Book*. In some sense of the word, the *Teacher of English Grammar* today should be added in the list, too. The mere difference between the two cases is that whereas the former means species *being hunted*, the latter – *being chased away*, to near extinction.

If you are going to be interviewed for a teaching job at an English Center like those in Saigon, where I am now living, it is well advised that you not confess you are a grammar teacher even if you are a very smart and devoted one. Yes, you can just say you enjoy teaching listening or speaking (which is always heartily embraced by any school owner), or reading (which is also welcomed with open arms), or, at least, writing (which may be encouraged with a smile), but not grammar; no, never, unless you enjoy being sympathetically frowned at and then tactfully put in the waiting list until some other… century, perhaps.

The school owners’ principle is quite simple: If they need to keep the tuition fee unraised (in this deluge of inflation) so as not to discourage their students’ parents (who would decide how much it seems reasonable to pay for their child’s today’s most fashionable need – the English language), the first thing to be cut down on should be the money paid to the teachers, and the first teacher to be pointed at should be the most (though just apparently) unpractical one – the grammar teacher, exactly.

However, even if you are lucky enough to survive the school owner’s philosophy, it does not mean you will survive your co-workers’. One of mine, a young American who teaches speaking in our school, once claimed that he did not see any point in teaching (English) grammar to the students, as his classes were still well alive “without” grammar at all. Virtually all the others, present there and then, native or non-native
English speakers, enthusiastically chimed in with him more or less at the same time.

Whereas our school owners’ wisdom is simply economy-oriented (or money-inspired, actually), our well-learned colleagues’ is far more academically founded; that is, “they would refer to Noam Chomsky, the great American linguist, who maintains that children are born with an innate ability to learn a language, that they intuitively extract the rules from the data to which they are exposed”; in other words, our students should learn English “by hearing and using it, not by learning explicit grammar rules”.

You as a grammar teacher are then found in a least hopeful situation. On the one hand, you cannot, on your school owner’s behalf, get his students’ parents convinced that grammar is the very face, the very soul, the very beauty of a language, and nothing is worth studying without its “beauty” introduced first, and that even if we ever happen to get our memory lost, the only thing to remain will still be our (knowledge of) grammar! On the other hand, how can you have all the others, who do not teach grammar, recognize that your job is neither less noble nor less important than theirs? By reminding them that, by learning explicit grammar rules, one can save really enormous amounts of time, energy, and money, which would otherwise be paid for hundreds of 2-period classes “simulating” total exposure, or total immersion, in an EFL environment like ours? Or that one can, even with grammar, listen, speak, read and write poorly, yet no one can do well any of those things without grammar? Why should they, who are quite satisfied with their classes being well kept safe and sound “without” grammar at all, listen to you, after all?

“The truth should side on the majority”, we should admit, in the end, enjoying it or not. And, since English has become an international living language (i.e. it is the most “highly” subjected to changes), and since Eastern countries (like ours) always outdo Western ones in population, you can expect that
one (near) day we will hear a very Englishman complaining, “Last day a England people say a English different more than this day very many!”, instead of “Yesterday an Englishman spoke a very much different English than today!” And, in that near future, the English Grammar Teacher will sure enjoy being caressingly excavated, together with those unlucky species whose names will already have been listed in the by-then Black Book.

---

Tips on building your vocabulary

Tips on building your vocabulary: Advice to learners
Mastery of the vocabulary of the language is essential to become a good writer. Good writers are obsessed with words, which are the tools of their trade. These are a few things you can do to build your vocabulary:

- Rally all your senses to the cause of building a rich vocabulary. Keep your eyes wide open and your ears pricked up and enlist your senses of smell, taste and touch, whenever necessary. Does a word you do not know try to flit past your eyes in your reading? Do not give it a chance. Chase it to the dictionary and apprehend it. Keep a dictionary, both at your reading desk and by your bed.
- Read a lot, read slowly, and read different genres of books. The benefit of reading a lot is manifold and goes far beyond helping you build your vocabulary. It is where you learn how to string words together and come up with a story. The right time to learn a new word is when you find it in your reading. Do not let that word escape you. Adopt the policy of zero tolerance.
- Reading is not a running competition; it is a quest for knowledge. It should not be a sprint. Read slowly, savouring each word. Keep a notebook handy when you read, and write a new word or way of saying you learned. And take time out to reread your notes.
- Be a glutton for words. You cannot afford to discriminate among words. Hoover up every new word that you may encounter. Learn the precise meaning of words whether you intend to use them or not. When you want to clothe an idea with a word they will all rush and jostle to be chosen, that is the only time for you to pick and
choose.
- Do wordpower, grammar and spelling tests. It does not matter how much you scored the first time round. Learn where your weakness lies and work on it.

---

Stepping off the Treadmill for a Change

Stepping off the Treadmill for a Change –

A focused diagnostic analysis of literature exam scripts

John Goodall

*Former teacher, currently an adviser in the DBE in PMB*

Introduction
This article describes a method of analyzing Grade 12 English Home Language literature exam scripts with a view to pinpointing a manageable number of academic skills that underperformers may need to master in order to perform at their level of competence.

This analysis focuses only on literary essays written by KwaZulu-Natal Grade 12 candidates for the November 2008 English Home Language literature exam paper. It focuses purely on performance rather than on the question paper itself. This selective approach aims to produce not only a manageable teaching agenda, but one that serves as a check-list against which one can note results.

The analysis could be described as an example of action research because it is conducted during the course of one’s normal schedule of duties. It displays what I believe to be the limitations of action research; namely, an absence of any literary review on the subject; limited resources; i.e., raw material available for analysis, and a breadth of analysis circumscribed by the amount of time available. In addition, results from this qualitative analysis of a small number of sample texts are not supported by evidence that is statistically significant.

On the other hand, I believe teachers will find both the method of this study and its results a productive resource against which to compare academic skills that under-achievers in their classes may need to learn.

The problem stated
Traditionally analyses of data from exam scripts reflect performances of learners across the performance curve. This means that data will coincide with performance descriptors across all ranges of a marking rubric. As a result, examiners’ reports tend to change very little year to year.

The following examples of examiners’ reports illustrate this:

- Candidates need to be reminded that paraphrasing or quoting sections of text does not constitute critical analysis unless it is supported by critical comment. (Comment from 2003 English Home Language performance – on the Higher Grade. Reference: KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Circular 32 of 2004.)
- Most candidates had difficulty writing a critical response to poetry and paraphrased the poem instead. (Reporting on performance in the 2008 National Senior Certificate English Home Language (Paper 2 – literature) Exam. Reference: Minutes of KwaZulu-Natal English (home language) subject advisers’ meeting of 22 January 2009.)

Given the graph of performance in an exam, one would be surprise not to find such comments for any literature paper. One can conclude from this that a rubric serves as much as a marker’s guide to placing performance in ranges, as it serves to predict the content of an examiner’s report on any given literature exam.

So why is there no improvement in candidates’ performances? How do we tell if there is an improvement?
I contend in this article that, while the desire for improvement motivates writers of examiners’ reports, these aim rather to comment on the curve of the performance graph — a broad description — rather than to plan improvement. Examiners’ reports generally do not select particular areas where improvement can be expected from a particular range of candidates, from whom this improvement can be expected. Traditional examiners’ reports desire improvement but cannot be said to plan it.

The analysis in this article focuses on two performance ranges and aims to make comments that will assist in teaching “the next thing” that some of the learners in these ranges need to focus on in order to improve their performance. Where, for example, a teacher finds that top-performing learners tend to bunch within a range, say, for example, rating code six (symbol B), and that an unexpected low number achieve scores in the next range, this article may well assist such a teacher in identifying the feature that appears to prevent at least some of the candidates in this range from producing a rating code seven (symbols A or B) performance. This article pinpoints academic skills, which if mastered, will probably enable these candidates to break through to the next level of achievement.

The approach used

Three stages summarise the way that the problem was dealt with:

- Analyse responses to essay questions from candidates with rating code seven (symbols A & B) scores, and with rating code five (symbol C) scores. (Focusing on the
literary essay allowed a speedier global analysis of responses from a greater variety of works than an analysis requiring reference to marking memoranda for contextual questions.)

- Use the current rubric for marking essay questions for a novel and drama as the basis for comments on candidates’ responses. (This rubric came as part of the Department of Education’s (2009) Guidelines for the Setting of Grade 12 Examinations in Languages.)
- Determine a teaching and learning agenda for current matric candidates with ratings similar to those in the sample, and particularly for candidates who might be expected to push their performance to the next level of achievement.

It is noted that because of the limited time available to complete this study, and the number of scripts available, this analysis can at best be described as illustrative rather than comprehensive. However, the approach could serve as a template for teachers to conduct their own analysis.

Procedure

1. Select essays from the whole range of prescribed works from candidates with rating code seven (symbols A & B) scores, and with rating code five (symbol C) scores. (These rating levels are referred to as 7A, 7B, and 5C respectively, in the tables below.)

2. Read each selected essay and write notes on each candidate’s performance in from one to three lines. Use the rubrics as a prompt for these comments.
3. Compare essay scores with each candidate’s overall score for the literature exam paper.

4. Once all essays have been analysed and comments made, use these to articulate common tendencies, especially tendencies that could point to the next step in the candidate’s learning, and tendencies that are likely to result in an improved performance.

Results: Comments on Performance

The November 2008 literature paper asked essay questions on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, and Marguerite Poland’s *Shades*. (Note that the ‘Notes’ in the table below are the comments on the markers.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments for 7A and 7B candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total out of 80 &amp; % for Paper</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immediate observations: 1 – 5: sprinkling of lang errors, or awkward wording probably result of writing under exam conditions. Why did some not get 100%? All do one essay only. [Should more be considered possible?]

: 90s: not much that needs to be improved in this range, and considering a variation of 5% allowed in scoring, there is little difference between 95 and 100%. A seemless sense of continuity

: 80s: evidence that concentration not as sustained as 90s. Explores by commenting on details, but less succinct (than 90s) & more likely to repeat statements

Observation on rubric re: “understanding of genre”. How does one measure this? What signs demonstrate this? – [put these in rubric]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total out of 80 &amp; % for Paper</th>
<th>Question selected</th>
<th>Total out of 25 &amp; % for essay</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5468%</td>
<td>5.1Hamlet</td>
<td>1768%</td>
<td>Good points – clear packaging of ideas in paragraphs – loses focus half-way through, e.g., 5/13 par on Claudius. Tends not to link comments to Q; viz., not good at tracking ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5468%</td>
<td>4.1Shades</td>
<td>1456%</td>
<td>[I would not have given this more than code 3/E, 40+% – faulty paragraphing &amp; prior planning]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5366%</td>
<td>5.1Hamlet</td>
<td>2288%</td>
<td>Concise – [I would not have given this 88%] – not get all points required – [I would say, top 60s] – tends to lose focus after half-way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5366%</td>
<td>5.1Hamlet</td>
<td>2080%</td>
<td>Way too much time on essay Q – not succinct – [I would have given this 65%] – 2x lapses in logic, e.g., points juxtaposed rather than linked. – paraphrasing lapse – reliance on story line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5366%</td>
<td>3.1Nervous</td>
<td>1872</td>
<td>Too much prep detail – has clarity of argument &amp; lots of detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5265%</td>
<td>4.1 Shades</td>
<td>1560%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Misses large part of Q – not see an alternative view – marker’s comment, “Writes well when on topic.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5164%</td>
<td>5.1 Hamlet</td>
<td>1248%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Too short by half a page – discussion on-the-line – a 60-percenter who is poor at essays [odd!]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5063%</td>
<td>5.1 Hamlet</td>
<td>1664%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Does order ideas using paragraphing – some fatuous comment (“Hamlet is a play with deep meaning”) that does not advance an argument + dubious/ incorrect/ unconvincing conclusions (“Hamlet’s religious beliefs began to change”) – tends to lose focus on Q + argument – good prep notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4961%</td>
<td>5.1 Hamlet</td>
<td>1456%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Useful rudimentary introduction – too much detail on prep – essay a bit short [ran out of time?] – Picks up on the theme and character details but not able to articulate these – tends to repeat unnecessarily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments for 5C candidates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 4860%</td>
<td>5.1 Hamlet</td>
<td>1664%</td>
<td>Bit short maybe – not all the points [could plan &amp; tick once done?] – tends to use rambling (rather than subordinated) sentence structures – lapses in logic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 4860%</td>
<td>5.1 Hamlet</td>
<td>1352%</td>
<td>Pretty glaring lang &amp; spelling errors (relegion for religion) – on-the-line discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immediate observations: candidates 1 – 7: some need for general spelling remediation. Comments with “tends to” or “lapses in” could indicate area for this grouping of candidates (especially under-performers in the range) to work on to move up to 70s. Planning = time on Q; too much detail in plan; not all required points responded to. Considerable ability, but performance compromised by fairly technical features – spelling, planning. The capacity for clarity could advance the score to the 70s even with faulty lang usage.

Results: Whole Paper and Essay Question Scores Compared

Columns on the left reflect percentage and raw scores for the whole of paper 2 (literature). Columns on the right contain the percentage and raw scores for the essay question.
When one compares the relative performance (measured in percentages) in the essay and in paper 2 as a whole, one finds that five candidates’ scores for the two lie within a range of 5% of each other. (For these candidates there is little difference between the essay score and their performance in the literature paper as a whole.) The six remaining candidates achieved a percentage score lower on their essay than that achieved for the whole of paper 2.
When one compares the relative performance (measured in percentages) in the essay and in paper 2 as a whole, one finds that six candidates’ scores for the two, lie within a range of 5% of each other. (For these candidates there is little difference between the essay score and their performance in the literature paper as a whole.) Of the five remaining candidates, three scored a higher percentage on the essay than for paper 2 as a whole, and three scored a lower percentage on the essay than for paper 2 as a whole. (This point is commented on later in the article.)

**Summary of comments and conclusions for teaching: 90s and 80s ranges**
As indicated earlier, expressions such as “tends to …” and “lapses in …” may well point to features for candidates to focus on in order to improve their performance. Secondly, the collection of the comments for the selected range of candidates provides a general profile of their performance. In the main this profile will form part of the rubric. A likely difference between rubric descriptors and a marker’s comments is that the latter will include common tendencies in addition to those described in a rubric.

Candidates in the 90s range invariably presented a seemless sense of continuity; possessed a clarity of argument and expression, and were likely to articulate more than one view of a situation. They were likely to see two sides of an argument. Preparatory notes appeared to be a feature of this range. (While some exam scripts showed evidence of preparatory notes, one can assume that some candidates used their question paper – rather than script – for preparatory notes.) Another feature of this group was evidence of reading over responses to questions. This evidence came in the form of corrections and changes to their essays.

The 80s group shared the capacity for detailed exploration of the subject with the 90s group. However, the former group tended to be less succinct and more likely to repeat statements. It seems as though this group is less able to sustain concentration.

Consequently, for an under-achieving learner in the 80s range, or for a learner at the top end of this range expecting to score in the 90s, the following may well be features to focus
on in order to achieve this goal:

- The candidate needs practice in writing succinctly (at both the initial writing and editing/reading over stages).
- This range of learners needs to seek out and correct any repetition of points while drafting and editing work. Practice in tracking the progress of their argument by ticking points in their preparatory notes may achieve the same goal.
- After having driven home a point of view, or an argument, the candidate needs to consider using expressions such as “However, ....”, or “This having been said, ....”, because they will alert the candidate to an alternative view, or another side to an argument.

Summary of comments and conclusions for teaching: 60s range

This range comprises learners whose considerable ability is often undermined in the exam by technical inefficiencies. This study finds that most of these technicalities relate to planning. Academic skills to do with planning need to be “sold” – particularly to under-performing candidates who score between 65 and 69%, because they probably have the most to gain from using these skills. These candidates need both to set and adhere to time limits in tests and exams. A candidate who includes too much detail in preparatory notes for a response clearly signals the need for better planning skills. Some scripts reveal that the candidate spent far too much time on a particular question. This appeared to have left them insufficient time for completing other parts of the paper. Observations made here on candidates’ ability to focus and to concentrate may also point to the need for improved planning.
within an exam, or test. Candidates, for example, write preparatory notes, but then fail to use them in their essay. The marker’s comment, “Writes well when on topic” characterizes the dilemma common to this range of learners; namely, that the candidate’s ability to learn is often compromised by faulty performance. It is interesting to see that there are both positive and negative comments relating to the clarity of argument in this group, as well as positive and negative comments on the use of paragraphs. Difficulties in using paragraphs successfully, and in developing clarity of argument may well be connected to the ability to use preparatory notes effectively.

For under-achieving learners in the 60s range, or for learners at the top end of this range expecting to score in the 70s, the following agenda for learning may well assist in achieving this goal:

- These candidates need practice in setting time limits for writing preparatory notes (both for assignments and in tests), and they need to practise jotting down these notes within this time limit. (Initial plans for an assignment could be written down within a time-limit appropriate for a test. Learners could then discuss the efficacy of a sample of these.)
- Candidates need practice in writing out time limits for an entire (sample, or past) exam question paper. (It may be useful to have some form of discussion on ideas that are presented.)
- Candidates would benefit from practice in analysing questions so that all aspects of the question are included in preparatory jottings.
- Learners in this performance range should practise keeping to the plan, and practise checking that items
have been included in the essay. (Tracking the use of items in a plan is difficult to teach. However, having learners design a *post hoc* flow chart, or concept map on a given essay, and then comparing notes, is one way of achieving this. Heather Meyer (2005) reports success in this method of teaching writing.

**Conclusion and Further Questions about Performance in Exams**

A small number of exam scripts (22 in all – 11 of the highest ranges and 11 for the 60 percent range) were analysed with a view to determining an agenda for best items to learn in order to improve scores. Three key items were suggested for learners in the top 80 percent range, and four key items were suggested for learners at the top of the second range. Clearly a teacher would need to confirm that the comments mentioned here apply to candidates scoring within these two ranges at his or her institution.

When one considers comments such as “concentration not as sustained as 90s” one wonders at which point a candidate scoring, for example 86%, is achieving optimally for his or her ability, and is not likely to be a candidate for improvement. While teachers often have an unerring sense of candidates achieving to their ability and also those who do not, how does one test this instinctive sense? A description of demonstrable characterizing features could be used to confirm a teacher’s instinctive opinion. Such a list could be as motivating for a learner capable of improving on performance as it would for those who perform optimally. One wonders whether a teacher’s knowledge of learners is solely responsible for determining these features, or whether indicators could be identified independently by viewing test,
exam, or assignment scripts.

A final question. Given the generally rough correlation between essay scores and overall exam scores for the middle order (60s range), one wonders whether comments for this range of candidates provide an equally useful guide on their performance in contextual questions in a literature exam.

A final comment. While only the readers of this action research article will judge whether findings (expressed in diagnostic comment) are accurate or not, and whether conclusions for a teaching agenda prove successful or not, I am of the opinion that a focused approach to analysing performance in exam scripts is likely to produce a focused knock-on effect in teaching. In addition, readers may find that the model of analysis used here is easily replicable for other ranges of scores and consequently may open a door to progress for under-achievers in these other ranges. By seeking an alternative to the generic examiner’s report, one finds oneself inevitably stepping off the treadmill of current exam reporting practices. In doing so, one is probably more likely to find clearly articulated and manageable ways of directing the way learning can be achieved – a rewarding experience for any teacher.

References


Assisting teachers to teach effectively

ADVERTORIAL

Assisting teachers to teach effectively

Giving credit where credits are due

To support our educators in classroom practice, the Kaleidoprax Institute offers a Short Course, “Classroom Tactics”, to assist teachers in the interpretation of CAPS and other, much-needed information to confidently interact with
prescribed administration and assessment practice. Not only will the teacher be equipped with an ‘everyday-use tool’ to plan lessons and integrate assessment activities, but also with a supporting electronic or paper-based system to record plans and assessment activities.

**Goal of the course:**

The goal of this Short Course is the empowerment of the educator in his/her own subject matter. The learning approach is mostly workshop-style: teachers bring their own content and experience to the learning platform. Step-by-step, the crucial issues are demystified to provide a platform from which the approach for the design and facilitation of learning and resulting assessment should be taken.

By the end of the course, teachers are able to:

- Integrate teaching and assessment successfully
- Develop suitable learning materials and assessment instruments
- Integrate language usage into instructional technique
- Optimise learning in the classroom
- Record assessment results in departmental prescribed departmental format to reduce administrative burdens.

**How it works:**

Classroom Tactics is offered on electronic platform in combination with contact sessions. The mix in combination is determined by the remoteness of location, number of participants in an area, and the availability of internet connectivity.
**Duration:**

Learning is done in own time at own pace, although contact sessions require sections to be completed for optimal participation.

A six month participation period is advised.

**NQF Alignment:**

This learning experience is aligned to three registered NQF unit standards:

- US 10231: ‘Plan a learning event’
- US 117871: ‘Facilitate learning using a variety of given methodologies’
- US 115753: ‘Conduct outcomes-based assessment’

A practical guide to collect evidence of competence not only presents a valid portfolio of assessment to award the competent teacher a total of 33 NQF credits at level 4 and 5, but also serves as a mentoring process to ensure effective and fit-for-purpose application back in the classroom.

**Why should teachers take the course, “Classroom Tactics”?**

- It will lead to effective and enriched teaching
- It will give teachers the tools to plan their lessons and assessment activities in an organised manner
- It is highly practical in nature
- It will help teachers to cope with administrative burdens
- The way in which the course is structured, will give the teacher a chance to interact with highly skilled and experienced educators
- The course will give a teacher 33 extra credits which
will assist such a teacher to find posts and advancement