

## [De]mythologising school exams

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*SAHETI school in Senderwood has taken a brave - if not daring - step to run an innovative pilot assessment programme at Grade 10 level as a replacement to mid-year examinations.*

Since SAHETI's founding in 1974, the school has been open to innovation in education. Its award-winning buildings were at the time challenging traditional educational environmental models and continue to do so. Like many other high schools, there is a strong focus on driving academics to secure top results for entry into preferred faculties at universities. As such, we structure our academic planning to ensure that we build skills and confidence for formal examinations. We are mindful that over the past 60 years there has been substantial work done globally on different forms and strategies for assessment. Researchers concur that learning is more complex and varied than what we had understood in the past. As such, formal examinations offer one means of assessment that allows us to benchmark performance, but in addition, there are countless new and varied forms of assessment that are as challenging, if not more so.

This year SAHETI undertook to run a pilot programme as a mid-year assessment that tapped into 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. Working from global research, in particular project based learning in primary schools in Australia and Europe, we structured a three-week Subject Assessment Module, which we neologised with the acronym SAM, inspired by Dr Seuss's anthropomorphic cat with no ears. The aim of our SAM project was to inspire pupils to consider topics beyond the curriculum, while tapping into core competencies of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking and research. These skills, we feel, are pivotal in equipping pupils with real-life learning experience and will carry them well into understanding the essentials not only for tertiary studies, but in the workplace too.

In order to afford each pupil sufficient time for research and study, as well as daily contact time with the teacher who facilitated each subject, we took the giant leap of allowing pupils to select only three SAM subjects out of their seven or eight Grade 10 subjects. From our research we understood that keeping groups to between 6 – 14 is optimum to permit close collaboration and monitoring. This required substantial planning, and much to the delight of the Grade 10s, each pupil was accommodated with at least two of their SAM preferred choices.

Our teaching staff certainly stretched the Grade 10s' thinking and enticed them with varied and exciting options such as: script writing and creating a short film in Afrikaans; understanding shadow theatre (Modern Greek); the art of short story writing (English); a CSI-type forensic crime scene investigation (Physical Sciences); running surveys and analysing data for a proposed SAHETI bus service (Mathematics); devising diet programmes (Consumer Studies); creating a virtual art gallery (Art); investigating recycling (Geography); developing and designing a business model (Business Studies) and investing on the stock market (Accounting), to list but a few.

For three weeks, Grade 10s' SAM day comprised of attending feedback sessions, research, collaboration and Socratic seminars. Daily monitoring with rubrics and comments allowed teachers to monitor each pupil's learning and contribution. Group dynamics and teamwork became essential in ensuring success in the SAM subject, and over this period, pupils showed remarkable development. The more enthusiastic adolescent thrived on the quasi university ambience and responsibility, while the reticent learner was drawn into the process. In the last week, each SAM subject culminated in a form of varied assessment which comprised, among other forms of assessment, PowerPoint presentations and feedback.



*SAHETI Grade 10 students testing evidence from their crime scene for a CSI project that formed part of their SAM*

Parents were offered a detailed report of daily progress with rubrics and comprehensive comments. The end of the term arrived with Grade 10s and teachers feeling a sense of accomplishment, although exhausted by the committed and intense approach. A pilot project such as this could only have been possible with the close collaboration of our dedicated teachers. At present we are reflecting on the initiative, and while comments for the programme were, on the whole, mostly favourable with enjoyment and researched learning featuring high on the list, it also met with challenges. Administration was extensive, and while our team of dedicated teachers ensured the success of the programme, the fine balance in time management was taxing. Additionally, there is apprehension for some teachers, parents and pupils that Grade 10s did not write mid-year examinations and that perhaps this will disadvantage them in the year-end assessments.

Of the feedback received from pupils after their SAM experience, one comment echoes in my head: 'Thanks to this, I was drawn to consider a new career'. Such an outcome surely makes any pilot programme worthwhile. Will we continue with it? Our committee will certainly consider the advantages and disadvantages, but most pupils found it to be an excellent learning curve and recommended it for 2017. There is always a 'dare' in innovation, but to place and observe pupils in new and different learning environments

creates an extraordinary experience. There is no harm in this and it demythologises the notion that exams are the only measure of success. Was it not Pablo Picasso who aptly stated: *'I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it'*?



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