

SCHOOL BASED ASSESSMENT: THE NEED, THE REALITY, THE FUTURE

A perspective from the Independent Examinations Board of South Africa

Frances Kerr-Phillips (IEB – Design and Development)

Alex Taylor, the pseudonym for a UK inner-city comprehensive school teacher was quoted in *The Telegraph* of 28 June 2006 as saying “Pedagogically and intellectually, I believe it (SBA) is a worthwhile addition to the traditional final exam”. He went on to say: “Yet I would ban it tomorrow if I could because it leads me and many thousands of other teachers to cheat – not to put too fine a point on it.” Now you can see the need for the pseudonym. Few would deny the validity of Taylor’s first statement. The relevance of his second statement will be made clear later on.

The Independent Examinations Board of South Africa currently assesses about 7700 learners at Senior Certificate or Matric level, almost all of whom attend independent schools. It has been easier for the IEB to introduce, monitor and moderate the introduction of school based assessment than for a bigger organisation such as the national Department of Education which assesses approximately 500 000 candidates at Matric level annually.

SBA assessment in the IEB was first introduced in the early 1990s into English: the traditional writing paper was replaced by a portfolio to show a year’s progress in creative writing as well as to allow for the drafting and revising process involved in such writing. The benefits of this type of assessment were felt to be so positive that one by one other subjects followed suit. Now, in this the last year of South Africa’s current Senior Certificate examination, all subjects except one (Additional Mathematics) have some sort of portfolio of evidence which contributes to the final assessment, covering alternative types of assessment (in other words, to assess skills that are not best demonstrated in a pen and paper situation) and mirroring what students will front up to in the final examination.

2008 sees the introduction of the National Senior Certificate, a qualification that is outcomes oriented. In terms of this qualification 25% of the final mark in all subjects is derived from internal assessment (SBA). From 2008, in all subjects offered by the IEB, the portfolio is split into two equal parts: 50% to mirror the end of year external examinations and 50% for alternative assessment. Umalusi, the quality assurance body for the schooling sector, is thus able to check the reliability of the SBA marks by correlating these against the part of the portfolio that reflects the examination.

Preparing for the transition from the old to the new seemed to be an apt juncture at which to investigate views of teachers at the coalface concerning SBA. I interviewed History and Geography teachers at 5 different IEB schools to ascertain how they felt about the use of portfolios for internal assessment. The alternative assessment component of both the History and Geography portfolio involves research. The schools selected covered single sex and co-ed institutions. All the schools were very well resourced. The teachers varied considerably in terms of years of experience from relatively new to the profession to someone not far short of retirement. One of the teachers interviewed is the Portfolio moderator for History and has thus first hand experience of SBA from many IEB schools.

All the teachers spoken to were adamant about the need for SBA. Reasons they cited for this were as follows: SBA gives more accurate evidence regarding a student's ability than an exam, since an exam can assess only certain skills; SBA allows for different types of assessment which provides students with an opportunity to perform to their strengths; SBA allows for the incorporation of Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences; a pen and paper exam can negatively affect performance if students suffer from "exam fright"; lazy students can sneak through the cracks if there is no SBA and an SBA component can provide students with a sense of confidence prior to their examinations as they know a certain percentage of their final mark is "in the bag", so to speak. One teacher felt that SBA provides external accountability for what is happening in the classroom. Another comment was that SBA forces assessment to happen during the year and therefore students have a clear idea of what type of things they will face in the final examination.

The teachers were well versed in the current dialogues in educational circles about the need for SBA and some reasons for it, indicating professionals who are actively engaged with the issues around assessment and who do not merely follow directives in a blinkered fashion.

Significantly, however, no mention was made of the potential of SBA to feed back into the system to improve the quality of teaching, learning and, indeed, assessment for future cohorts. This aspect of SBA makes it such a powerful tool in South Africa as a whole at present. Did teachers fail to recognise this benefit of SBA as they do not perceive that their practices need improvement?

Whilst SBA was seen by all as essentially a solid practice in terms of assessing different skills and providing learners with a number of different opportunities to give of their best, the general feeling was that it is open to abuse of various types and this abuse is increasingly evident. Alex Taylor's comment about the cheating of teachers indicates that this problem is not peculiar to the IEB or to South Africa.

One person commented that SBA is no longer about a credible reflection of a student's ability but how a better mark can be achieved through manipulation of what the teacher has control over. Some heads, concerned about pass rates and what that translates to in terms of student numbers and school fees, exert pressure on their staff to ensure that the best possible marks are awarded for the portfolio. Even at the first level of moderation, outside the school, the cluster level (at which teachers of a particular subject from a small number of schools in a particular geographic location, meet to moderate one another's portfolio work) teachers can manipulate the system. Rather than being a genuine attempt to debate standards and regulate task types and degree of difficulty, cluster moderation was felt by the teachers interviewed to be too often a mere formality, with teachers relying on the end of year external moderation committee to pick up problems.

A common concern was the issue of the increase in instances of plagiarism. The stress of having several research assignments to do (owing to subject choice) may be a contributing factor – and this is an internal school planning issue - but the sheer availability of tasks and research essays on the internet is a great temptation. Both the History and Geography teachers at one school felt that since they taught their students for the last 3 years of high school they knew them too well to miss attempts

to plagiarise. They also acknowledged that the number of learners taking History and Geography in Grade 12 (currently 27 and 17 respectively) meant that it was a relatively easy issue for them to address. Clearly in larger classes and larger schools this would not be so straight forward.

It was felt that in some instances teachers themselves do not fully understand what constitutes plagiarism and are not sufficiently computer literate either to teach their students about such things as hoax sites or to ascertain if and from where work has been taken.

The teachers reported a growth in the selling of research projects: this takes place both between schools, across years within a school and even across education systems. Parental collusion in this activity was reported.

The IEB has been proactive in trying to combat plagiarism, sending suggested practices to schools regarding how to reduce attempts to plagiarise in research or project work. Firstly, the task set should be framed as a question, so that the learner has to internalise whatever research has been conducted before the question can be answered in a way that demands individual application rather than regurgitation. Some schools have taken this further by limiting the number of internet sites that may be used. All material downloaded from websites must be submitted with the final product. In Geography, schools with limited access to resources such as the internet or libraries due to poor resources or remote location have got their learners to research a real issue pertinent to their particular context. This is an approach that all schools should be encouraged to adopt. Tasks that acknowledge the availability and value of finding out what others know before using it in a prescribed context seem to combat fraud best.

Secondly, schools need to track both the process and the product of the research task. Those schools that had a series of deadlines that had to be met in terms of what the teacher needed to see as evidence of progress had fewer instances of plagiarism. This approach has the added benefit that if a learner is going off track he/she is able to be re-directed before it is too late.

In History an oral component was introduced into the research task (a transcript of which was included in the portfolio) in order to verify whether the student had done the research for the investigative project him/herself; now it serves as a good check on the extent to which the student has understood the issue researched.

Plagiarism and other fraud issues are not the only difficulties facing the successful implementation of SBA. "Is it for marks?" students ask in order to ascertain how much effort they should bring to bear on a task. With the introduction of SBA this has become "Is it for the portfolio?" A task being "for the portfolio" used to mean "Do it to the best of your ability and on time". Teachers have been urged by the IEB not to submit any zero marks for components of the portfolio but rather to do all in their power to get the particular piece of work out of the student. One school reported that some students were capitalising on this reluctance to give zero to gain extra time for themselves with respect to deadlines. Out of 34 Matric students, only half of them had, by mid-July, handed in their research assignment due at the end of April. Such

was the strain that the teacher felt from chasing the portfolio pieces, that she was keen to abandon the concept of a research project altogether.

A number of those teachers interviewed suggested that it would be worthwhile introducing several smaller standardised tasks in both History and Geography in which individual tasks were not so loaded. Such tasks could be researched at home but the final product should be completed under controlled conditions. For example, in History there could be a prescribed set of sources on which a standardised test could be set. This would also feed into the teaching and learning process in terms of different ways of using sources. Some subjects in the IEB have a Common Assessment Task (CAT) to help standardise SBA. This is an option currently being considered for History and Geography.

The History and Geography teachers at the five schools visited have made it clear that quantitative research of a comprehensive nature is needed in order to get a complete picture of attitudes to and experiences of SBA, as well as ideas concerning the way forward within the 150 or so schools in the IEB fold. This would enable informed decisions to be made with regard to task setting and task writing policies as well as to the weighting of tasks within the portfolio.

Once the SBA requirements have been met in the schools the IEB has procedures in place to moderate what has been done. Moderation of SBA within the IEB system has two compulsory levels to it. The first is at cluster level. The teachers interviewed had varying experiences of the effectiveness of cluster groups which are required to meet a minimum of twice a year. As mentioned previously the purpose of the first meeting is to review one another's learning programmes in an attempt to standardise types of tasks and set the degree of difficulty. Appropriateness and the relevance to outcomes are also considered. The second cluster meeting is to moderate a computer generated random sample of students' portfolios from each centre as well as each teacher's portfolio. A minimum of six portfolios or ten percent of candidates' portfolios are selected. At the marking centre at the end of the year, portfolio committees moderate a further sample from each centre which includes one or two portfolios from the initial random sample.

Some clusters have been working superbly, whilst others have been dysfunctional. Therefore, this year, the IEB decided to run a series of regional workshops to discuss quality assurance of learner achievement. The workshops addressed the need for and the means to get effective clustering.

The IEB was aware of the reasons for poorly working clusters and these were echoed by the teachers in the schools visited. They include logistics (time and distance), matters of professionalism and anxiety, either about being told one is not up to standard or that one needs to tell a colleague he or she is not up to standard. The logistical and professional issues need to be addressed primarily by school managers.

In terms of quality assurance, the teacher's portfolio needs to be of the correct rigour and to show compliance. The teacher's marking of the learner portfolios will illustrate whether the correct standards are being applied consistently. After discussion of quality assurance, the need for it within the system and the collective responsibility of

teachers to ensure that not just they, but all teachers in their cluster are “getting it consistently right”, the regional workshops then split into subject groups. Teachers were asked to design two forms. One form to be used to ascertain whether a teacher’s portfolio has quality. The other to determine whether a learner’s portfolio has quality: in other words if the teacher claims it is a C, is it indeed a C? Teachers discussed what criteria would be used to determine quality. The suggested criteria dealt with the aforementioned issues of compliance and rigour; the latter looking at each subsection of the portfolio. The portfolio requirements for the National Senior Certificate commencing in 2008 were used. The regional workshops generated a number of forms which the relevant portfolio moderator analysed and adapted in order to come up with definitive moderation forms.

The portfolio moderators could simply have been told to develop the necessary forms straight away, but it was felt that the involvement of and consultation with teachers would enlist their buy-in. It also forced teachers to engage with the issue of what constitutes quality. If the forms are “tight enough”, the IEB believes that they will help to de-personalise the cluster moderation so that one is no longer judging a person but rather judging a portfolio according to criteria on a form. The response of teachers to this initiative was generally very positive.

The IEB believes that if, through the new tool, there is a very clear idea up front of how teachers will be judged, there will be fewer problems at both the cluster and final end of year moderation. In other words, the new tools could go a long way to pre-empting teacher error. In the past, with a loose moderation form, any errors that the teacher made in the construction and contents of the portfolio were picked up too late for that cohort of learners, the external moderation feedback only reaching schools at the beginning of the next academic year. It will be interesting to investigate whether teacher error is indeed reduced.

Whilst the teachers interviewed felt there was value in the development of new moderation forms and, indeed, several of them were active participants in the process, several remained sceptical about how far cluster meetings could be improved. The functioning of a cluster was felt to be dependent on the cluster leader and the personalities in the group. The issue of the lack of time in an afternoon meeting to carry out thorough moderation was also a concern. Schools that are physically distant from those in their cluster tend to meet on a Saturday morning in order to make the meeting of value. Saturday mornings would not be popular amongst the teaching community at large. It would require principals to fully commit to the necessity for and value of quality assurance and to recompense their staff accordingly for their time.

Continued growth of the IEB and the concomitant increase in the number of portfolios to be moderated at the end of the year has necessitated a review of the logistical systems for 2008 and beyond. Portfolio moderators will be appointed for each subject in each region. Each moderator will be allocated a number of schools to visit and moderate. Feedback can then be given to teachers in a face to face discussion after the moderation. The teachers interviewed had a positive response to these plans. One teacher made a comment that portfolio moderation at one’s school combined with the personal involvement and immediacy this brings might have a spin off of making teachers take the earlier cluster moderation more seriously as they may have

to discuss or account for the evidence of cluster moderation (or lack thereof) in their students' portfolios.

The IEB, together with its clients, the schools, continues to explore ways to reach an SBA model that is fair, reliable, valid and authentic. Further research of a quantitative nature will be needed in order to ascertain to what extent this has been achieved in the eyes of students, parents, teachers and the examination board itself and in what direction further modifications are required.

Frances Kerr-Phillips
IEB
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