

a text per candidate. Better yet, each candidate would need to select his or her own text. It would be the only way to guarantee that absolutely no candidate would be offended by the prescribed work, and could identify fully with the text. This would create problems in terms of both teaching and assessment, however. At the teaching and learning level, teachers would lose the opportunity to guide learners in how to use a text to engage themselves in meaningful introspection, since the capacity for challenging and uncomfortable discussions, and therefore discussions that facilitate growth and discovery, would be diminished. In short, the purpose of literature study would be lost. There would be issues at the level of assessment, too. Even if meaningful assessment tools could be constructed to cover the range of selected texts in a way that ensured parity, the task of assembling a panel of markers familiar enough with every possible text, in order to be able to assess engagement at the level of sophistication demanded by the NSC, would be – simply – impossible.

Fortunately, the responsibility of making meaning from a text through meaningful personal and critical engagement, is not the responsibility of the text alone. And it is fortunate indeed, for no text could meet such exacting expectations. The critical roles in making meaning from texts are not played by the texts themselves, but by the readers – the teachers and the learners. As long as the texts are treated as ends in themselves, however, the positions adopted by the texts and the positions those texts attempt to compel the readers to adopt, will go unquestioned. So long as the prescribed texts are regarded as bearers of truth rather than the means of conveying a truth, every text will be problematic.

If the study of literature is considered desirable within an educational system – and we are fortunate in South Africa that this is the case, as it ought to be: since the earliest times, humans have discovered and shaped themselves through stories – then the practicalities of conducting meaningful assessment require that at some point specific texts be prescribed. These choices will always be applauded by some and offensive to others. Either of those extremes is potentially academically dangerous: if we identify too closely with something we often have no incentive to think critically; if we cannot identify at all, our sense of indignation can curtail our willingness to embrace the fact that we are active agents, not passive recipients, in the meaning-making process.

This is why, at the IEB, we will continue, at the Grade 12 level, to look for ways to make those who act as navigators in the meaning-making, the teachers, the primary agents in determining which texts are selected. Teachers are encouraged to use the link on the IEB website to motivate their suggestions for prescribed texts.

In lower grades, where teachers have the freedom to select texts that will meet the educational aims of their individual schools, they should be encouraged to select texts that challenge learners (and, indeed, teachers), rather than selecting comfortable texts, where the deconstruction is an end in itself rather than a means to explore the limits of learners' world views, and where the ease of access to study guides might discourage authentic engagement.

As far as is possible, in Grade 12, the texts selected by the IEB will espouse a world view that is not so extreme as to allow the inescapably provocative nature of art to unnecessarily hinder learners' abilities to engage with the world views the texts present and to speak back to them. And so, in assessing literature studies, we will never prescribe only one interpretation of a text. What will be assessed through literature will not be *what* learners think, but *how* they do so. When we demand that learners engage with a text, we will not demand that they think in a certain way about it, that they find *the* meaning of a text. Rather, the critical skills to master will be the ability to listen to a text, even one with which the reader might profoundly disagree, to understand how that text presents the world and endeavours to shape the reader's response, and then to frame a thoughtful reply.

Embracing diversity does not mean finding one voice that speaks for all. It means recognising that no one voice can. Teaching literature in a classroom that embraces diversity means treating the text not as a sage, but as just another participant in the conversation. And while that voice may be a provocative one, and while it may be the centrepiece of the exchange, it remains just that: a voice. The power it has in shaping us is determined by the freedom we give it to do so, and that is in individual choice.

Peter Ruddock  
Assessment Specialist: Official Languages and the Arts

## Online marking makes successful local debut in IEB schools

CSX Customer Services, a Metrofile Holdings company in specialist solutions and support, piloted a project for the Independent Examinations Board (IEB). The project, which was successfully completed in July 2017, incorporated online marking technology for the marking of the Life Orientation (LO) Common Assessment Task, written by 11 500 matric learners countrywide.



Anne Oberholzer, CEO of the IEB, is satisfied with the outcome of the pilot and says it is an excellent example of the role that the IEB plays in South Africa: "As an independent assessment body we have the flexibility to create new and imaginative assessments or approaches that challenge both teaching practices and the way our learners process information. Furthermore, we are able to explore new initiatives in the approach to examinations in South Africa with minimal disruption to the main system. By investigating the online marking system, the IEB has implemented a project that improves the reliability of marking and benefits teachers and learners alike."

Oberholzer says that online marking has long been utilised by both the Americas and the United Kingdom as well as some countries in Africa and the Caribbean. The opportunity presented to the IEB by CSX was well timed and opportune for both parties: "CSX had successfully completed an online marking project in Namibia and was looking for a South African educational institution to evaluate the approach. As an assessment body, always looking to innovate and introduce global approaches in South Africa, online marking was a great opportunity to explore and experiment using a methodology that could fundamentally benefit our South African system as a whole."



## SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

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CSX Managing Director, Mario Martins says that the project was the first of its kind in South Africa and was a resounding success: "Not only did the pilot run exactly as expected, it has provided the IEB with an important opportunity to innovate and provide assistance to both teachers and learners in the often daunting task of marking."



He says that the online marking methodology assists the management of the marking process and has the potential to reduce the time of marking considerably. "In the IEB project, printing and scanning were done at CSX's secure facility, and scanning of the 11 500 examination papers took only one day. We marked and scored all the examinations in five days and presented the results and statistics on the sixth day."

Oberholzer says that LO was selected based on its subjective nature, which presents challenges for managing the marking effectively. 131 teachers from across the country marked the examinations from a central marking centre provided by CSX and its sister company Global Continuity: "There were several considerations before embarking on this project and IT infrastructure was one of the most important challenges. By utilising the CSX hardware, the IEB did not have to invest in any hardware or technology, which was a major consideration for us."

Martins says that the system was also able to work offline in the event that the internet was down and there were also generators available if power was cut. The information is encrypted and is being stored at Global Continuity for a period of six months or more, as necessary to assist with any remarking requests.

According to Oberholzer, pedagogically the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. By utilising the online marking system, the IEB is able to monitor the marking process as it unfolds: "As an examination body we were able to track markers, efficiencies and errors far more

proficiently. There is also an internal email system, which enables a marker to log a query or communicate directly with the team leader or chief examiner at any time. They also have access to the marking guidelines that include a full rubric for the essay question while marking."

Importantly, it is virtually impossible for any examination answer scripts to be misplaced as, once scanned, they are in the system automatically. The reliability of the marking has also improved based on the support provided by the marking system. "We are also able to deliver detailed feedback based on the ability of the system to extrapolate meaningful information from the data. For examiners and moderators, the question-by-question data enables them to detect immediately and exactly where a problem has occurred, if that is necessary. We can now give teachers useful feedback regarding the learners' level of knowledge and skill based on their answers to specific questions," says Oberholzer. She says this is an important aspect for her as the IEB believes in encouraging learners to think out of the box and constantly challenge their level of understanding. Meaningful feedback into the teaching and learning cycle is a fundamental aspect of good assessment.

Following the successful completion of the LO pilot project, Oberholzer says that they will embark on a second phase at the end of the year. This will entail online marking for another three subjects: Economics, Design and IT Theory: "We are excited to test the system by running an online marking session for three different subjects in one marking centre."



Martins says he is pleased to have another project through the IEB and is confident that the system will perform as well as it did with the initial project: "We have developed solid methodology with a robust IT system and infrastructure to support the project. Assisting the IEB in introducing a globally comparable online marking

system is a privilege and we look forward to building and growing the project into a widely accepted and valued marking approach."

Oberholzer says the project is not initially a cost saver, although it may well be once it has been implemented fully. However, it is an opportunity for the IEB to introduce a globally accepted standard of online marking to South Africa, which, if it proves possible to implement in the state system, will ultimately benefit the education sector as well as the learners: "We believe that a good educational foundation with valid and reliable assessment will equip South Africa with responsible citizens who are global thinkers, have good ethical practices and strive to support and develop South Africa, and indeed Africa. This project is one way in which we strive to achieve this vision and play a positive role in our country and continent."

Nicola McGowan  
METROFILE

## Confronting our rigid refusal to look at ourselves

The gulf between our dream and the realities that we live with is something we do not understand and do not want to admit. It is almost as though we were asking that others look at what we want and turn their eyes, as we do, away from what we are ... This rigid refusal to look at ourselves may well destroy us, particularly now since if we cannot understand ourselves we will not be able to understand anything. (James Baldwin, "Lockridge: 'The American Myth'", 1948)

In a world that is becoming increasingly aware of the diversity of its population and sensitive towards the uniqueness of the norms and values not only of specific groups of people, but of the individuals who comprise those groups, selecting prescribed texts for literature courses is an increasingly complicated process.

Ideally, one would like to select texts that are not offensive to any particular group, and more than that, texts within which each individual learner could find himself or herself affirmed rather than denigrated. That would certainly be the ideal and it is something to which every learner ought to be entitled. If only it were that simple.

The truth is that even within cultural or religious or gender groups, people are not homogenous. The strengths of the ties and the degrees of

commitment that young people have to their various cultures or religions or sexes differ. It is not enough to choose a text, for example, that would resonate with black learners, or with Christian learners, or with female learners, because "black" and "Christian" and "female" are not homogenous groups. While there may well be a significant base of common experience, individuals respond differently to those experiences and interpret how those experiences shape their identities in sometimes radically divergent ways. There is no one text that could possibly affirm the world views of every individual, even within loose social categories such as race, religion, or gender.

This is compounded by the fact that art – and literature is a form of art – is never neutral. It is frequently created with the express purpose of justifying or challenging (or both) certain paradigms, and repressing others, and often does so by offending the sensibilities of those it regards as opposing the world view the artist espouses. Art tends to use offence to shock people into introspection. When confronted with any given piece of art, therefore, *somebody* is bound to be offended.

That is not necessarily a bad thing. Very often, as long as we are comfortable with things as they are, we refuse to look at ourselves, as Baldwin notes. Sometimes the most meaningful progress, the most profound learning, is born in a place of deep discomfort.

Teaching literature is, in many ways, teaching young people the art of navigating discomfort in a way that is life-affirming. After all, we do not study the texts as ends in themselves; we use texts as tools to learn about ourselves – who we are and who we are not, and who we would like to be. We use texts as tools to sharpen our critical skills – to analyse how art objects position themselves and how they attempt to position us. Because texts are tools, we are free to question the legitimacy of those positions, just as the texts question the legitimacy of the positions we advocate. Texts will speak to us, but it is not a monologue. It behoves us to speak back.

It is always more pleasant (though not always more profitable) to enter into a discussion with those with whom we agree. If we were to attempt to shape the educational environment in this way, if we were to attempt to prescribe texts that affirmed the position of every individual, with their unique perspectives, we would need to prescribe