

# Developing a pathway for authentic learning and assessment

*By Jennifer Sargeant*

**W**riting in the last edition of FYI, Mary Manning addressed the critical role teacher-librarians can play in making a positive contribution to the challenge of assessment in the areas of personal learning and interdisciplinary learning. She wrote: “By working with teachers to build assessment into their learning activity design, we are encouraging the use of formative assessment. This most productive form of assessment can be described as assessment for learning, for when students evaluate their own learning they are more engaged and therefore more likely to take steps to improve that learning” (Manning 2006, p.7)

Authentic assessment, or assessment for learning, does not stand alone, however. It relies on a curriculum driven by authentic outcomes and on students being engaged in meaningful tasks which allow for the construction of knowledge, involve disciplined inquiry and the demonstration of understanding, and have value beyond the classroom.

Teacher-librarians have always actively promoted and supported, through collaborative planning and modelling, the development of authentic learning and assessment activities which nurture the growth of self-guided independent learners. These are the learning tasks which are characterised by a focus on relevance and student interest. Such tasks provide opportunities to

develop learning that is transdisciplinary, maximise choice within a well-constructed learning environment and meaningfully engage and extend student skills and thinking.

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) explicitly recognises these elements of authentic learning in the Interpersonal Development and Personal Learning Domains. The Interdisciplinary Learning Strand identifies a range of knowledge, skills and behaviours which cross disciplinary boundaries and are essential to ensuring students are prepared as active learners and problem-solvers for success at school and beyond. This Strand focuses on ways of thinking, communicating, conceiving and realising ideas and information (VCAA 2005).

## **The Independent Research Project**

The Independent Research Project (IRP) is a Year 10 curriculum unit developed at Toorak College in response to our questions, “What do students today need to know?” and “What is the nature of the learner at this stage?” These questions are fundamental to our curriculum focus and our planning for learning, as the development of authentic learning and assessment tasks essentially relies on an understanding of the nature of the learner at different ages and stages.

Developed collaboratively by Jenny Sargeant (Head of Information Services), Anne Dwyer,

(Head of Year 10 in 2000, now Head of Learning and Teaching) and Maree Duivenvoorden (Head of ICT in 2000, now Head of Year 9), the IRP was introduced into the curriculum in 2000. It has been regularly reviewed and refined since then to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of the learners and maintains a focus on curriculum outcomes. The most important information we have to inform us in the review process is gathered from the assessment data. The use of a range of formative assessment tools provides us with the evidence we need to fully evaluate the unit and establish to what extent the outcomes are being achieved.

The IRP is designed to accommodate learning needs now described as 'Developing Pathways' in VELS at the Year 9 and 10 stages of learning. The learner in this instance is identified as one who is:

- developing greater independence of mind and interests
- seeking deeper connections between their learning and the world around them
- exploring how learning might be applied in that world
- needing to experience learning in work and community settings as well as the classroom
- beginning to develop preferred areas for their learning.

The focus of the IRP is the development of an independent research project as a means of understanding the research process and developing information literacy and technology skills as defined in the Toorak College Statement on Learning and Information Literacy. The goal of the unit is for the student to demonstrate the ability to propose and examine a personal intellectual challenge, carry out the investigation project, and present results competently. The projects have a research component, with the methods and modes of inquiry being determined by the student. Students work in an area of their choice, and projects may fall into any of the subject disciplines, but the process involves students integrating many different aspects of the curriculum.

The teacher acts as a mentor/coach in guiding the student through the process, helping identify sources of support and information, helping identify experts and locate mentors, overseeing the development of the research portfolio, ensuring checkpoints are reached, facilitating and/or delivering compulsory workshops, establishing assessment guidelines and evaluation process, and assessing student achievement.

## Assessment

Assessment for an independent learning task, as for any authentic learning task, is challenging and requires that we use a range of assessment tools which effectively evaluate students abilities to apply their skills and demonstrate their understanding. As Griffin (1998, p.4) notes: "Inquiry and problem solving approaches to teaching and learning will change the role of assessment and reporting, and our roles within these processes. Assessment . . . needs to be more of an exploration that includes processes and products of learning".

Guidelines for assessment, founded on research about learning and authentic assessment, require that we use assessment tools and strategies which:

- are linked to context and content, ensuring that they effectively address the planned outcomes
- are formative and continual, that is, they focus on both the final learning and the process so that we measure the student's ability to 'do' as well as to 'know', through interim and final assessment strategies
- offer students creative ways to demonstrate their learning through the development of an information product which requires the student to make connections
- involve reflection and engage students as critical assessors, through strategies such as self-reflection and peer assessment
- apply qualitative measures based on collaboratively developed criteria, such as a class-developed rubric which addresses the criteria of the task

- provide teachers with evidence for evaluation, review and development of teaching strategies.

Based on these guidelines, the Independent Research Project incorporates a range of tasks through which the individual, the group and the teachers offer formal and informal assessment. In this way:

- students assess their progress against personal goals established at the beginning of the project
- assessment criteria is clearly established for every stage of the project, and involves the individual student and teacher assessing based on pre-determined rubrics
- students are required to satisfactorily complete all set work requirements and to complete a formal self-assessment of their project
- students keep an electronic portfolio, which is a purposeful collection of material that exhibits their effort, progress and achievements throughout the task.

The electronic portfolio includes a logbook, which documents the student's research, reflections and observations. The logbook is a means of embedding the understanding that everything done through the process of the IRP will be viewed, evaluated and assessed, and it helps the student make connections from lesson to lesson and to recognise the process of their learning. The portfolio, furthermore, allows students to keep all their research materials in one location. Items such as project details, timelines, research plans, working bibliographies, articles, notes, information organisers, skill trackers, outlines, drafts and final presentations should all be part of the portfolio.

The folder also contains detailed criteria for assessment so that students are clear from the start about how their IRP will be evaluated.

### Planning framework

A planning framework which clearly states outcomes, defines content, and describes learning contexts and activities and assessment strategies is

an essential tool for the development of authentic learning and assessment tasks (see table page 7). A consistent and sequential planning process ensures that assessment tasks are relevant and manageable. The final planning framework developed for the IRP shows how the assessment tools and strategies are integrated and connected to the outcomes and learning activities.

The opportunities to achieve significant student outcomes and 'authentic achievement' are maximised through this combination of meaningful content, quality collaborative planning and teaching, and the integration of authentic assessment tools which allow students to perform meaningful tasks, make decisions and choices about how they learn and evaluate their own work.

### References

- Griffin, P. 1998, 'Profiles and Reporting in a Developmental Assessment Framework', *IARTV Seminar Series*, 75.
- Manning, M. 2006, 'Thinking: It's essential!', *FYI*, 10 (1) pp. 4-8.
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2005, *Victorian Essential Learning Standards: An Introduction*, viewed 6 March 2005, <<http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/crp/velsintrojan2005.ppt>>.

### Further reading

- Murdoch, K & Wilson, J. 2004, *Learning Links: Strategic Teaching for the Learner-Centred Classroom*, Curriculum Corporation, Carlton Vic.
- Prendergast, D & Bahr, N. 2005, *Teaching Middle Years: Rethinking Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW.
- Stripling, B. 1999, 'Expectations for Achievement and Performance: Assessing Student Skills', *NASSP Bulletin*, March, pp. 44-52.
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## Planning framework for authentic learning and assessment

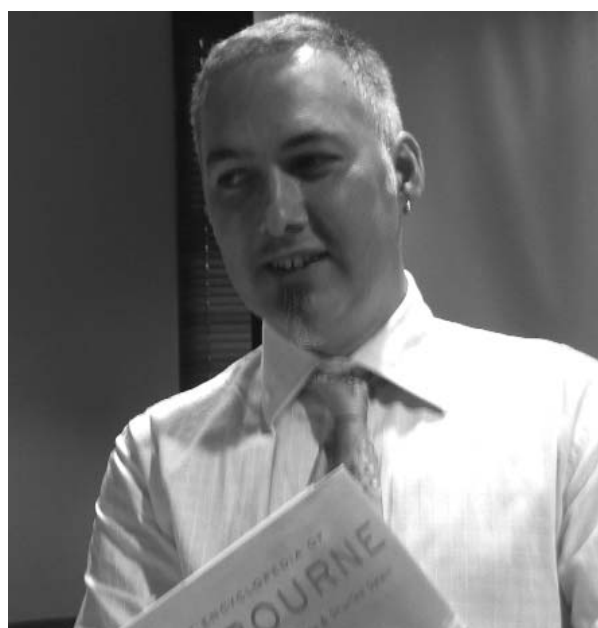
Learning outcomes/ Skills and processes	Content	Contexts and learning activities	Assessment methods
<p>Students should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>search the literature efficiently and use the literature to frame a research project proposal</li> <li>plan and carry out a research project from concept development through to presentation and report writing</li> <li>use appropriate research methodologies, such as interviews, surveys, observation, questionnaires</li> <li>frame a report which communicates clearly and concisely an integrated analysis of the research, using relevant terms and appropriate graphics</li> <li>present information from a range of perspectives and sources</li> <li>establish and adhere to a timeline</li> <li>effectively use print, electronic and human resources</li> <li>apply the information process to personal project</li> <li>research factual background to provide an objective perspective other than opinion</li> <li>maintain focus and motivation while working through the process of researching over an extended period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing research questions</li> <li>Developing a research plan</li> <li>Research methodologies</li> <li>Ethical considerations</li> <li>Note- taking</li> <li>Referencing</li> <li>Annotating a bibliography</li> <li>Presenting research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Background research on selected area</li> <li>Selection of appropriate qualitative and/or quantitative research methodologies</li> <li>Oral presentation on progress</li> <li>Completion of set tasks, e.g. ethical agreement, annotated bibliography, research questions and research plan</li> <li>Presentation of project</li> <li>Exhibition of projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oral presentations at mid-point and end of project</li> <li>Completion of set tasks</li> <li>Observation in class time</li> <li>Rubric for final project</li> <li>Teacher and self-assessment based on Likert scales, predetermined rubrics and personal comments and reflections</li> <li>Assessment tools provided at the commencement of the 9 week unit</li> <li>Exhibition of projects, including a celebration where mentors are invited to attend</li> </ul>

### SLAV Soirée

Did you know that about 8000 people filed through the morgue to view the corpse of an unidentified woman found floating in a yellow box in the Yarra River in 1898? Or where the gigantic Father Christmas that stood on the corner of Bourke and Swanston Street went between Christmases?

Andrew Brown- May recounted these and other anecdotes at the SLAV Soiree and PD launch on 9 March. Andrew, editor with Surlee Swain, of *The Encyclopedia of Melbourne* (2005) revealed that the volume took 10 years to produce. It is a time capsule of Melbourne with over 450 contributors providing entries that capture the ‘spirit’ of Melbourne.

In an enjoyable and stimulating address Andrew discussed the work of the encyclopaedist, the need to commission new research for the encyclopedia and the process of deciding which topics



would be included and determining the hierarchy of topics.