

**University of Alberta**

**The English 30-1 Diploma Exam: Assessment practices and pedagogy**

by

Tracy Melnyk

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## **Dedication**

For my beautiful daughters, Eden and April...

You are perfect and precious - May you never lose your sparkle!

Love you to the moon and back again xo

## **Abstract**

Across the province of Alberta, in the January 2010 sitting of the Government mandated English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, the average grade for this exam was 62%. Serious concerns erupted because of this drop in mark, concerns that led to my research study.

The purpose of this research was to explore how senior high school English Language Arts 30-1 teachers taught and assessed their English Language Arts 30-1 course, and if the English Language Arts 30-1 final assessment of the Diploma Exam exerted pressures on their assessment practices and pedagogy. The question explored was: “How do English 30-1 diploma exams influence teacher assessment practices and pedagogy?”

My study found that the English Language Arts 30-1 Diploma Exam influenced the way English Language Arts 30-1 teachers teach and similarly controlled the way teachers assess student work in this high-stakes course. This study recommends that the current weight of the diploma exam be reconsidered to benefit the grade 12 students in the province of Alberta.

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## Table of Contents

1. <i>The Inspiration</i>	1
• Personal Reflection	1
• Background on Topic	3
• Purpose of Research	7
• Research Question	8
2. <i>The Education</i>	9
• Review of the Literature	9
3. <i>The Exploration</i>	24
• Methodology	24
• Philosophical Paradigm	25
• Strategies of Inquiry	25
• Description of Method	26
• Participant Selection	26
• Data Collection and Analysis	27
• Ethical Considerations	28
• Reflexivity	29
4. <i>The Interpretation</i>	31
• The Participants	32
• Findings of the Study	36
• Background and Contextual Information	36
• Professional Development Experiences	37
• Pedagogical Issues: Planning and Assessment Practices	39

• Attitudes Towards the English 30-1 Diploma Exam	56
5. <i>The Reflection</i>	71
• Final Thoughts	71
• Conclusion	76
<i>References</i>	78
<i>Appendices</i>	81
• Appendix 1: Interview Protocol	81
• Appendix 2: Letter of Consent	84
• Appendix 3: English Language Arts 30-1 Course Outline	86
• Appendix 4: Assessment Standards and Practices for ELA 30-1	91
• Appendix 5: Personal Response to Literature Assessment	92
• Appendix 6: Critical / Analytical Response to Literature Assessment	94

## Chapter 1: The Inspiration

*“Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.” - William Wordsworth*

### Personal Reflection and Purpose

It was August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010 and the new school year had begun. Thirty-four English Language Arts 30-1 students sat before me, their English Language Arts 30-1 teacher. I was not a stranger to this curriculum, to this class, or to this school and I had taught English Language Arts for 15 years. However that day, the first day of my fifteenth year, was going to be very different.

A few months earlier in April 2010, Alberta’s Minister of Education, David Hancock, wrote these words in one of his blog posts:

...Diploma exams in English Language Arts have shown a serious decline in writing skills (Part A of the exam) over the past five years. Alberta Education staff has investigated this decline with the assistance of experienced classroom teachers, and have found that exam difficulty has not increased over the past five years in a manner that would account for the continual decline in student scores. In other words, the decline in scores is a reflection of a decline in student abilities that we are now working to address (Hancock, 2010, “Are diploma exams fair on students?”, para. 2).

This statement deflated me and my English Language Arts department as we understood Hancock to mean that English Language Arts 30-1 teachers were not preparing Alberta students well enough for the diploma exam. I had been teaching English Language Arts at a small high school with about 340 students in the outskirts of a large Alberta city for the past four years and

never before doubted my competency to teach the ELA 30-1 course effectively. My students usually achieved proficient marks on their diploma exams. I taught the respected ELA 30-1 literature. I taught the necessary and various writing skills needed for specific situations. We read and discussed literature at length and I even integrated the newest technology into my classes. I could not understand how a statement like Hancock's could trouble me so much. I thought I was doing a fine job teaching the English Language Arts 30-1 curriculum; I wondered what other ELA 30-1 teachers thought about his statement and if it bothered them as much as it did me.

Thus, a new English Language Arts 30-1 teacher materialized that semester. As in previous semesters, I was prepared. I knew what ELA 30-1 was all about, and since I had the enviable knowledge of the curriculum and the diploma exam, I embarked on my teaching journey that semester with a much altered English Language Arts 30-1 course outline illustrating different assessment practices that would be implemented. Also that semester, I emerged as a changed teacher with a transformed teaching style. I recall from my personal journal that I began my class with these words, *“Welcome to the business of English Language Arts 30-1 - the most difficult ELA course you will have encountered in your twelve years of English Language Arts education. In January you will write the English 30-1 diploma exam and you'd better be prepared.”* I continued on my rant about the importance of this exam, sharing with the students the units of study, the assessment practices and tools that would be used to grade their work. In short, my class was broken down into three assessment categories: *Personal Response to Texts 20%, Critical Response to Texts 30%, and Reading Comprehension 50%*. That was it. One student put up his hand and asked, *“So, where do the cool things like movies, powerpoints, group presentations and stuff fit into this?”* I responded matter-of-factly, *“They don't.”*



Over the course of the next ten months, I taught three ELA 30-1 sections: two in the first semester and one in the second. I wish I could say that I changed the literature, made things interesting, fun and engaging for my students over the course of the ten months, but I did not. I despised my pedagogical choices. I reflected every day about how I was teaching and what I was teaching to my students and it bothered me. I stuck with it because I needed to raise the diploma results. It bothered me that students were frustrated with the way this class was being presented. It bothered me that the pleasurable part of the subject was sacrificed for potentially higher test scores. And, it bothered me that I was not teaching the way I wanted to. Invariably, those times left me with a sense of confusion and feelings of hypocrisy. I felt that many positive things were happening in my classes, specifically geared toward the diploma exam; however, my delivery methods and subject matter were greatly narrowed and left much to be desired. It was this critical moment that led me on the path of this research.

### **Background on the Topic**

Before I venture further with describing this research, I feel it necessary to offer a brief description of the English Language Arts 30-1 Diploma Exam and its construct. Please note here that the English Language Arts 30-1 class and diploma exam will also be referred to as the commonly abbreviated “ELA 30-1” course and diploma exam intermittently throughout the remainder of this paper to avoid confusion.

The English Language Arts 30-1 is the academic level of English Language Arts created for those students who have plans of attending academic post-secondary institutions in pursuit of a degree. The ELA 30-1 diploma exam is a high-stakes timed assessment that is broken down

into two parts. Part A is securely administered, province wide, to the grade twelve students first, followed a week later by the Part B which is the *Reading Comprehension* portion of the diploma exam. Part A is designed for students to complete within a three hour time frame. It consists of two writing assignments: the first is a *Personal Response to Texts Assignment* worth 20% of the diploma exam mark. Students are given, in the exam booklet, three pieces of text to study. Typically the first text is a poem, the second passage is a prose excerpt from a text, and the final piece is a visual text. These texts are accompanied with a question, loosely based around a theme, which relates to the text prompts. Students are then asked to respond to the question using a prose form of their choice. Similarly, the second written response, *Critical / Analytical Response to Literary Texts*, is a formal written response using a text that the student studied in their ELA 30-1 class. Students must respond to the thematic question posed using their text of choice in the form of a critical essay. This written assignment is worth 30% of the diploma exam.

A week later, Part B of the diploma exam is administered using the same protocol as the earlier Part A. Part B, however, is a bit different as the student does not compose any writing, but rather, reads, deconstructs, and synthesizes unfamiliar text selections and answers 70 multiple choice questions after reading the text selections. Again, this is to be completed within a two and a half hour time frame. This part of the diploma exam is worth 50%. The five and a half -hour English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam carries the same amount of weight as the entire English Language Arts 30-1 course does; hence, the high-stakes exam scenario.

The intended rationale of standardized, high stakes testing is to “promote improved standards of teaching and learning within the systems of education that they are connected to” (Brenan, 2006, p. 2). However, “Little evidence exists to support the claim that these

standardized assessment programs are achieving this goal” (Slomp, 2008, p. 180). Slomp’s research findings suggest that the ELA 30-1 diploma exam is counter-productive in truly assessing the skills Alberta students possess in the area of English Language Arts. And the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) agrees. The history of these high-stake examinations dates back to 1966. The Alberta Teachers’ Association (2005) reported that Education Minister Robert Clark was to replace the mandatory departmental exams with a “*battery of power tests*” in 1970. This proposal was opposed by the Alberta Teachers’ Association’s Annual Representative Assembly (ARA) which resulted in the abolition of these tests in 1973. Thus, in 1974 the department of education, using teachers as developers, worked on its “scheme for systematic assessment of standards of achievement” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2005, pg. 1). An ATA task force developed an interim position on accreditation and evaluation that met with ATA locals and made revisions. Eventually, in January and June of 1974, the first Grade 12 diploma exam for English Language Arts was administered on a sample basis throughout the province. The exam was met with some resistance which ultimately led to the mandatory testing of all English Language Arts students at the 30 level in 1984. The reason behind this push for such high-stakes test was to “monitor the quality of high school programs” (ATA, 2005, pg. 1).

Dr Margaret Iveson (2012) Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta recalls grade 12 Departmental Exams in 1969 being worth 100% of the student’s final grade. She also remembers in 1974 exams at that time were worth 25% and the teacher awarded mark was 75%. It was not until 1985 that English 30 level diploma exams carried a weight of 50% and the teacher awarded marks was also worth 50%. This has been the grade 12 testing situation ever since.

Over the last 15 years or so, we have seen the aforementioned push for accountability – on teachers, students and the education system - resulting in the emphasis on these blanket exams which are used, ultimately, to assess the effectiveness of the teacher, the knowledge of the students, and the successfulness of the schools. Questions still remain as to who is benefitting from these exams. Are the students really receiving a better education because of these exams or are the exams teaching them to be little marionettes, manipulating them into doing what the provincial government desires them to do? Similarly, this approach can be looked at with regards to English Language Arts teaching. Are ELA 30-1 teachers educating more soundly and using more innovative assessment practices because of the diploma examination, or is their pedagogy being stifled because of fear of the exam’s results? The literature within this review supports the latter.

After students write the English Language Arts 30-1 exam, I spend a week in January and June marking these exams for Alberta Education. Together with approximately 120 English Language Arts 30-1 teachers from the province of Alberta, I descend into a downtown office tower, in Alberta’s capital city, to spend seven days assessing approximately 30 000 English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exams. A portion of these students’ educative future rests in our hands; we can certainly feel the stress of this important responsibility.

During one of the past 15 years I was involved in the item writing process, which is an annual gathering, similar to the marking ritual but on a lesser scale, where a committee of ELA 30-1 teachers comes together and composes questions, both multiple choice and written response questions, to appear on the Alberta Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams. These questions are intended to be very challenging for students. “It is true that Alberta's diploma exams are generally more difficult than comparable exams in other provinces, or indeed, elsewhere in the

world...with marks close to the intended provincial mean of 65 per cent” (Hancock, 2010, “Are diploma exams fair on students?”, para. 2). I can say that I agree with Hancock’s statement that our exams are more challenging than most exams because I have sat at the table where these questions have been designed and I fully understand the protocol used.

I still have a great deal to learn about education and my subject area, but one thing that I do know for certain – no two students come to school with the same experiences, nor do they learn in exactly in the same manner. Then why does the government test students as if they should all learn in the same way, and why are these results used to measure the quality of our education system?

### **Purpose of the Research**

Creswell (2009) writes that, “the purpose statement sets the objectives, the intent, or the major idea of a proposal or a study... frames it as a single sentence or paragraph that readers can identify easily” (p. 112).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the construct of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam influenced the way English Language Arts 30-1 teachers taught the English Language Arts 30-1 curriculum and to consider ways in which a teacher’s pedagogical choices may have influenced their students’ successes on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. The strategy of inquiry used in this research included a review of the literature, participant interviews, and a personal autobiographical narrative about teaching English Language Arts 30-1. The participants in this study were six English Language Arts 30-1 teachers who represented varying years of experience: one new teacher with less than five years’ experience teaching English Language Arts 30-1, two veteran English Language Arts 30-1

teachers who have 20 years or more of teaching English Language Arts 30-1, and three seasoned English Language Arts 30-1 teachers who have more than five years' experience teaching English Language Arts 30-1 but less than 19 years. The audio-recorded interviews were conducted in the locations requested by the research participants and lasted approximately one hour in length. Further details of the data collection and interview protocols are discussed in chapter three.

### **The Research Questions**

The central question (Creswell, 2009) of this qualitative study sought to find out the extent to which the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam influences English Language Arts 30-1 teachers' pedagogy. I attempted to find answers to this question by embedding several sub-questions as outlined in the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). Some of the sub-questions I explored were:

- (a) How does the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam affect how the English Language Arts 30-1 course is taught?
- (b) How does the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam influence what materials teachers choose to use in their classrooms?
- (c) To what extent does the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam influence how teachers assess students' work and what work they will assess?

## Chapter 2: The Education

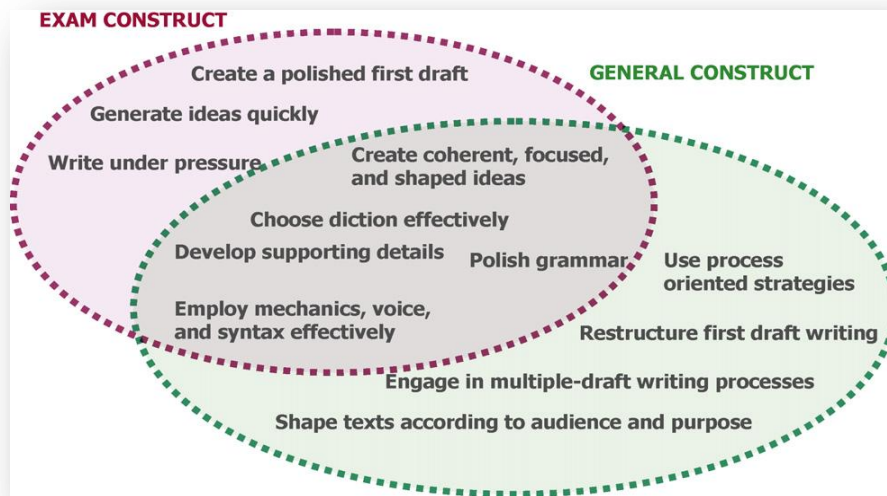
*“Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts.”*  
– Albert Einstein

Because I have a strong desire to improve my own English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam scores and still create an engaging learning space for my students that exists alongside exam requirements, I have been keeping up with literature in field of writing practices and assessment. I have been under the assumption that if I could improve my teaching and my assessment practices, my students’ diploma achievement would improve; I had always equated better learning with higher diploma results. I am coming to the realization that this may not be the case as I research other teachers’ views and experiences and reflect, introspectively, upon my own pedagogy.

It is common knowledge among the English Language Arts Departments across the province of Alberta that the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is designed to assess approximately one third of the curriculum. In David Slomp’s (2008) paper, *Harming not helping: The impact of a Canadian standardized writing assessment on curriculum and pedagogy*, Slomp spends considerable time elucidating what his research found regarding the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam and the negative impacts it has on teachers’ pedagogical choices when it comes to classroom instruction and assessment. He suggests that teachers cannot spend a large amount of time focusing on the broader aspects of the English Language Arts curriculum when most of this curriculum is not represented on the diploma exam, which is worth 50% of the student’s mark. “A comparison of the skills measured by the diploma exam and the skills defined within the Alberta English 30-1 curriculum reveals significant differences between the two” (Slomp, 2008 p.184). To further illustrate this point, Slomp

provides a table (see Table 1) to compare the exam’s construct with that of the English Language Arts 30-1 curriculum’s requirements (Slomp, 2008).

Table 1 Comparison of exam and curriculum constructs



Source: Slomp, 2008 p. 184

As the above table demonstrates, there is a significant difference between what must be taught and what the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam assesses. Slomp (2008) emphasizes that these differences tend to pose problems for teachers who must decide what knowledge and skills to focus on in their lessons - those required by the curriculum or those demanded by the exam. Slomp’s many references to the Alberta English Language Arts 30-1 Curriculum and the Alberta Education English Language Arts 30-1 rubric for the written portion of the exam enhanced his stance. The giant schism between the two is at the forefront of



Slomp's research within this particular paper. To further support his findings, he too, calls upon many well-reputed scholars in the field to aide in the development of his theory.

As far back as 1975, noted English composition scholar, James Britton, demonstrated through his research that, in fact, high-stakes testing contributes to a narrowing of pedagogical focus. Slomp (2005) calls upon Britton's research to add fodder to his own findings. According to Britton, "Teachers who were preparing students to write the high-stakes tests understood what knowledge about language the test was valuing and what knowledge it was devaluing; they tailored their instruction accordingly" (as cited in Slomp, 2005, p. 144). Even though this research was conducted in 1975, slightly shy of 40 years ago, this practice is still in place in classrooms across this continent - teachers, like myself, continue to teach to the test because we feel the pressure - if the results are not good, the teaching must be lacking. This is common speculation by parents, students, administrators, and was even supported by Alberta's Minister of Education at the time this research was conducted. "Ultimately, discussion about diploma exams and teacher-awarded marks comes down to two issues: whether diploma exams are an appropriate assessment of all the attitudes, skills and knowledge that students are expected to learn; and whether teachers' assessment of the same is consistent across the province. I believe we need to improve on both counts" (Hancock, 2010, "Are diploma exams fair on students?", para. 3).

In his more current research, Slomp (2007) conducted a mixed-methods study to see if his theory was valid. In his dissertation, *Trapped between paradigms: Composition pedagogy in the context of a twelfth grade standardized writing assessment*, Slomp carried out case studies of three English Language Arts 30-1 teachers from across the province of Alberta. He profiles the first teacher in the following way:

Anne has been an ELA teacher for eight years. She teaches English Language Arts 30-1 in an overcrowded classroom of 34 students. She does not have problems with classroom management. Anne teaches in a rural school approximately 40 minutes from a major city. Anne's school boasts 'higher than provincial levels' on assessment. Anne's students scored an average of 20% below provincial average her first year. Since then, Anne has been acutely aware of the pressure to ensure that her school and her exams scores are satisfactorily aligned with one another (Slomp, p. 155).

While navigating through Slomp's document (2007) I found that I could easily be "Anne".

All three teachers involved in Slomp's study acknowledged the importance of writing within the English Language Arts 30-1 curriculum but admitted that they rarely engaged their students in a writing 'process' approach - which the curriculum mandates - due to exam pressure, time constraints, assessment practices, and teaching to the exam. Each of the three teachers felt that the exam was hampering their creativity and the pressure of the exam dictated how and what they would instruct and assess. Again, Slomp's research illustrates the significance of the English Language Arts 30-1 exam's influence on pedagogy. His findings demonstrate the extent to which each of the teachers is 'trapped' between the exam and the curriculum in terms of their writing pedagogy. Slomp's research asking for others in the field of English Language Arts 30-1 to continue the inquiry in to this area was influential in encouraging my interest in conducting my own study.

In the field of writing assessment, there is a long tradition of writing instructors who have, and still are, challenging the validity and effectiveness of standardized testing. Scholars such as Elbow (1973), Murray (1968), Rosenblatt (1938), Britton (1975), Leggo (1999), and Yancey (1999) trace this history. In her article, *Looking back as we look forward: Historicizing*

*writing assessment* Yancey (1999) reports that in the 1960s and 1970s North American students' writing abilities were often measured by using multiple choice assessments – testing the written theory instead of the skill. Composition teachers challenged this assessment practice and felt because they were assessing students' writing that an actual assessment of writing should be collected. A reform of the writing assessment did come about in the 1980s, Yancey documents, where students were assessed on their written word via standardized assessment. Again, like Slomp, Yancey speaks to the whole reliability and validity of standardized tests. Because this discourse comes up frequently in the literature, I feel it necessary to include a definition of the terms being raised. Yancey (1999) declares that: “Writing assessment is commonly understood as an exercise in balancing the twin concepts validity and reliability. Validity means that you are measuring what you intend to measure, reliability that you can measure it consistently” (p. 486). Within the construct of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, Slomp (2008) suggests that the tests do not meet these criteria of validity and reliability, as they are poorly designed and are not a true representation of what the students actually do know.

In his article, *Fighting back: Assessing the assessments*, Hillocks (2003) captures the frustration of writing teachers. He proposes that it is not enough for stakeholders to sit around and complain about the unfair and negative assessment which exams much like our English Language Arts 30-1 diploma hold. Complaining, according to Hillocks, accomplishes very little. His suggestion is then, “for teachers to research the unconstructive effects these exams are having on teaching and learning and how educators can better prepare students for the tests” (Hillocks, 2003 p.66). Hillocks also mentions that teachers need to engage in work that will help shape this policy of the standardized testing experience. Teachers' frustrations are not sufficient, nor credible enough, when it comes to informing the standardized testing issue. The aim of my

own research is to help expose some of the glitches with this process. I hope to assist in moving this debate forward to a point where we – teachers of English Language Arts 30-1 and Alberta Education Diploma Branch - may be able to share a common goal of fair and reliable assessment practices that meets the needs of all involved and attempts to bridge this schism between what is to be taught and what is being tested. As Slomp (2005) suggests:

We must engage with assessment specialists and we must assist them in understanding what knowledge and skills we value, and for what reasons. We must also assist them in developing methods through which these skills and knowledge can effectively be measured (p.153).

History has taught us that when it comes to assessing students' writing, our assessment practices have not been productive. I recall, back in my own school days, the red ink streaming across the pages, reminiscent of a sacrifice, calling out all of the writer's imperfections. There was not much nurturing and encouraging the writer using this evaluation tool; if anything it frightened the writer and seemingly sucked the soul out of the writer's message. Leggo (1999) suggests that too often evaluation is perceived as a way to order and categorize and compare. Evaluation should be done for the good of the person being evaluated, and for no other reason. Leggo's proposal is a prime example of the large push within our schools to implement the practice of *Assessment for Learning* which is a new way of assessing our students, used to assist them to learn from previous work, where teachers provide meaningful feedback without assigning a percentage. The hope of this thrust is to provide students with a positive learning experience so they may grow and learn from the experience. This is a very different theory from our standardized assessment exams which we still continue to use to qualify our students, teachers, and school districts across Alberta. Teachers, above all, want students to learn better;

however, large scale assessments such as the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam do not foster this sentiment. A well-known researcher in the assessment for learning field Anne Davies (2010) suggests that “Large-scale assessments are designed to assess what students know and can do in relation to what is to be learned, but they do not collect enough information to give a valid picture of what individual students know and can do in a given subject area” (Davies, 2010 What is assessment for learning? para. 3). Davies’ research is noted for being cutting edge on assessment practices in general, and her findings make a great deal of sense to me and to many other educators; however, by the time students go to write the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, this type of assessment is contradictory when compared to the exam’s current assessment practices.

Elbow (2007), Leggo (1999), and Slomp (2007) have all researched the topic of high-stakes writing and assessment practices and have shared personal stories of their own early experiences with writing at an academic level. Peter Elbow claimed in a 2007 clip on You Tube that after only a semester and a half of graduate school, he was kicked out for poor academic standing which was based on his inability to write well. He shared his frustrations with the writing process and how difficult it was to get anything written on paper without making multiple drafts of writing. The process of producing such drafts is not possible in a 2.5 hour high-stakes exam situation. Peter Elbow is currently a distinguished professor of English at the University of Massachusetts.

Similarly, Carl Leggo (1999), Professor of Language and Literacy at the University of British Columbia, suffered the same criticism regarding his writing from his high school English teacher:

I frequently call myself a wounded writer. Even now in middle age, I can still hear my grade 11 English teacher say, ‘You'll never be a writer’, and I can still hear other teachers and professors declare that my writing was mediocre, awkward, incoherent, faulty, loose, and fragmented (p.4).

Finally, David Slomp (2007), professor at the University of Lethbridge, shared his experience with the frustration of the assessment process that his writing would undergo in his senior high school years. He wrote:

I learned more about how to write from my father than I did from my high school English teachers. My high school teachers were very much old paradigm writing teachers: They assigned topics to write on, they gave time in class to plan our assignments, and asked for final drafts to be handed in for grading. They seldom discussed the processes of writing, they rarely ever conferenced with us, and they focused their grading mostly on correctness. Papers were returned after a week or two with a few comments, a range of corrections, and a mark. The mark was always out of twenty or twenty-five; it did not come with a scoring guide or anything that provided explanation or justification. The mark itself appeared, as if out of nowhere (Slomp, p. 4).

Each of these scholars have been criticized and frustrated, at one time, with their writing skills and the assessment practices applied to their writing. Even for the most talented of writers, the writing process proves to be a knotty procedure.

Elbow (1973) advocated in order for students to become confident writers, English Language Arts teachers should encourage the use of “*freewriting*” techniques in their classrooms. The “*freewriting*” process assists students engaged in the writing process by

allowing a no-risk writing environment which encourages the thoughts and ideas to flow fluidly, while putting the grammar, syntax, and diction on the back burner for the time being. Further, Elbow argues that, “Editing, in itself, is not the problem. Editing is usually necessary if we want to end up with something satisfactory. The problem is that editing goes on at the same time as producing” (p. 5). Elbow suggests that when writers do the editing as they write, it ultimately interferes with the flow of ideas, which is really the heart of the writing. Specifically, “It is an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they’re the right words” (Elbow, 1973, p. 5). This is certainly true in a high stakes exam situation. The first category students will be assessed on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is “*Thought and Understanding*”. Given the allotted time the students are allowed, this would seem palpable—just get it down, worry about the technical stuff later. Here lies another fault: *There isn’t enough time to do it all and to do it well*. Elbow’s text, although several years old, certainly holds impressive merit in an English Language Arts class today where time and pressure do not impede writing; however, I see a problem which he does not address in his literature. How can teachers implement this method with the weight of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam bearing down on them? How could Elbow support this method in this situation today? If the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam went under revision, this could certainly be a possibility for our students and teachers today.

Not only does the constant editing become cumbersome as one tries to write an essay in a limited time, it becomes a huge source of writer frustration. I have seen how many times my students have sat down to write and have struggled with ideas, grammar, diction et cetera. As Elbow’s literature (1973) suggests, we know that a “good” piece of writing takes time to work itself out. The reality of an “excellent” piece of writing being generated in a three hour time

frame is highly unlikely. Our recent English Language Arts 30-1 diploma results are proof of this mismatched expectation having a provincial average of a mere 5% of our students able to achieve that category.

Donald Murray (1968), a well-respected teacher of writing implied that “the most important goal of a writing instructor is to help students develop confidence and independence in their writing, to wean them off their dependence on the teacher, and to help them become more reliant on themselves and their peers” (p. 7). In theory, this may sound contradictory to what I am trying to explore; however, it needn’t be. Murray suggested that it is necessary that “the writer cannot build a good, strong, sturdy piece of writing unless he [sic] has gathered an abundance of fine raw materials” (p. 6). To encourage “good” writing practice, shouldn’t we allow these students to have sufficient time to build a repertoire of experience to use on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam and then embark on the assessment of the students’ writing skills?

Standardized tests can narrow the curriculum and reduce the overall quality of teaching. Such tests can become an excuse for a lack in differentiation in teaching methods. Assessments and reporting need to be broad enough to keep the curriculum diverse and challenge the quality of teaching. Standardized tests are to improve the quality of education in Alberta, but when teachers teach to the test, learning can be undermined (McInnis, 1997, p. 7).

As the above quote illustrates, not only do standardized tests fail to meet the needs of the student, McInnis suggests standardized tests impinge on the quality of the teacher’s ability to provide a meaningful learning opportunity for the students and for her or himself. “Standardized



tests assess skills in a decontextualized manner and do not allow for the assessment mastery of a whole activity” (McInnis, 1997, p. 4). The teacher becomes trapped and tends to just try to instill knowledge rather than promote learning moments which also hampers the teacher’s own learning experience. “Further, educators will not know if lack of success is an indication of lack of ability, lack of testing knowledge or lack of interest” (McInnis, 1997, p. 4). McInnis’ (1997) study focuses on the notion that any form of high-stakes testing garner much attention. Ultimately, his study reiterates what many other scholars are exposing; standardized tests create barriers for learning (McInnis, 1997). Within this study, McInnis challenges educators to suggest alternative forms of student assessment and examine what is working within other educational systems.

The focus of the literature chosen supports the theory that high-stakes testing, specifically the grade 12 English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, constricts innovative and current methods of pedagogy and does not align with the skills and knowledge promoted by the Alberta English Language Arts program of studies.

Louise Rosenblatt, pioneer in the field of teaching and understanding literature, and academic hero for many ELA teachers, even today, established the “transactional theory” of literature stating that literature is a “reciprocal” relationship between reader and text. Rosenblatt advised that the true understanding of literature does not come from the reader or the text itself, but rather how, “each reading is a particular event involving a particular reader and a particular text under a particular circumstance,” (Rosenblatt p.17) thus suggesting that literature is changeable, variable, and different for every reader especially within the confines of a diploma examination situation.

My own engagement with Rosenblatt’s (1938) *Literature as Exploration* was an experience that helped remind me why I chose to teach in the first place. Now, I realize that

perhaps my teaching has fallen short because of the diploma exam. We teach in a time of testing; this is our reality and I often think using methods which Rosenblatt presented in her text may not adhere to the teachings of a teacher in a high-stakes situation. Many English Language Arts teachers, like myself, repudiate “time wasting” opportunities for students to express themselves creatively and “find” themselves in the chosen texts. I would argue that the English Language Arts 30-1 class has no room for this creativity; however, Rosenblatt (1938) states that if we do not allow students to have a lived experience, the text is just words and means nothing without the students’ experiences; we are inhibiting true literary living. For Rosenblatt (1938) it is the human communication that is at the heart of the literary transaction. She argued that for meaning to occur with the literature, we need to focus on students’ interactions with the literature. Does the current ELA 30-1 diploma exam foster this pedagogy?

As teachers, it is our job to provide students the opportunities and the courage to approach literature personally and to let the literature *mean* something to the student who is engaging with it. Students should be made to feel that their personal interaction with a text is worth expressing whether we, teacher or diploma exam markers, would agree with them or not. Rosenblatt suggested in her text , “When students feel the validity of his own experience, he [sic] will cease to think of literature as something that only a few gifted spirits can enjoy and understand in an original way” (Rosenblatt 1938, p. 64). However, the first category on the ELA 30-1 diploma bedsheet for critical analytical response to a literary text assesses “Thought and Understanding” in which the marker must consider how effectively the student’s ideas relate to the assignment, and secondly, the quality of the literary interpretations and understanding. The situation these students are in, at the very moment they are engaging with the literature on the diploma exam, certainly limits the range of experiences students are encountering with the text -

the diploma exam has surfaced as the inhibitor of the *true* meaning of literature for many, if not all, of our students.

Although it is clear that Rosenblatt aimed to make explicable that the understanding of literature certainly should be a democratic process, once again, the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam does not allow for such a democracy. In Part A of the diploma exam - *Personal Response to Texts* assignment - students are given an unknown and pre-selected visual, poem, and short prose piece and then a question to respond to using one of the pieces as a jumping off point to write on. This is probably the most democratic assignment on the diploma exam as it allows the student to respond in any form of prose they wish. However, the second written response on the Part A of the diploma exam, the *Critical /Analytical* essay is slightly different. Students are given a general thematic question, and using any text studied throughout the course of ELA 30-1, are able to respond to that question via a critical analysis. By nature, people are passionate people and this translates into passionate English Language Arts teachers and diploma markers as well. Perhaps a diploma marker may not agree with one student's analysis on *Hamlet*, and therefore penalizes the student for an incorrect interpretation. Undoubtedly, this is a bold statement; however, diploma markers will understand this statement as it can and does happen. I will admit, it has happened to me.

The prescribed interpretations based on a piece of literature not only happen on the Part A portion of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, they also are prevalent on the Part B – reading comprehension multiple choice portion of the diploma exam. This portion, by far, is the most autocratic process of the entire English Language Arts assessment procedure in place. Students are to read shorter, unfamiliar literary pieces and then answer a selection of multiple choice questions by choosing the best answer that fits the question based on the exam's answer

key. Assessments like this go against Rosenblatt's relativist perspective on literary interpretation. While it is clear that Rosenblatt was an advocate for a text to be interpreted in multiple ways, specific to the reader's experience, we can surmise that the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam does not follow this egalitarian appreciation for literature or its interpretations as a "fixed standard" (p. 130).

Rosenblatt argued that as readers of the text continues to engage with the text they are experiencing, they are creating an understanding of the text based solely on their own personalities and experiences along with their background knowledge and philosophy on life. It is through these diverse lenses that readers create their own understanding of the text and what that text means to them. Through this theory of Rosenblatt it is to be understood that a text naturally will evoke multiple interpretations; however, she cautions that some interpretations will be more valid than others. She states, "The work must carry its own message to each of us. Nevertheless, the student should be led to discover that some interpretations are more defensible than others... The student must take into account elements that are present, and must not add to the literature elements that are not present" (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 135). We understand that texts largely have intended meanings and multiple interpretations are expected but those interpretations come from human experience and not the text. How can teachers of the English Language Arts 30-1 course take students' interpretations of texts and assess them fairly without fully understanding the students' experiences with the text? This is one of the problems with high-stakes standardized tests like the ELA 30-1 diploma exam. The diploma exam, both Part A and Part B, is largely an interpretative assessment and how can markers of this exam truly understand and appreciate students' responses based on students' lived experiences with the text?

In Rosenblatt's later work, she reinforces the suggestion that we must relinquish the need for one correct interpretation of a selected text. She argues:

We must indeed forego the wish for a single "correct" or absolute meaning for each text. If we agree on criteria for validity of interpretation, however, we can decide on the most defensible interpretation or interpretations. Of course this leaves open the possibility of equally valid alternative interpretations as well as alternative criteria for validity of interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 382).

Rosenblatt proposes that we welcome more than one correct interpretation of a text. I find this information quite fascinating as our subject is titled "English Language Arts" and the word "Arts", to me, means that we are free to create and interpret texts and ideas as "literary art" which encourages a degree of freedom in expression.

The purpose of this study is not to criticize, analyze, or demoralize the purpose, reliability, and validity of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, but rather to understand the impact such an exam imposes upon the teachers to teach this course. There are teachers, such as those in this study, who believe that the exam is a solid assessment tool, but yet still find themselves tailoring their pedagogy to adhere to the diploma exam and the standards such an exam imposes. We are taught by theorists like Rosenblatt (1938), Elbow (1973), and Murray (1968) that assessments such as the diploma exam do not truly benefit the student; yet, we cannot find the time to embrace these teachings, because the reality is: The English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam exists, it is mandatory, results are published, and it is not going away. Teachers will do what they have to survive it at any cost.

### Chapter 3: The Exploration

*“We work in our own darkness a great deal with little real knowledge of what we are doing.”*

– John Steinbeck

#### Methodology

Creswell (2009) asserts that qualitative procedures demonstrate a different approach to scholarly inquiry than methods of quantitative research. Qualitative researchers gather data in the field where they conduct their research, in a natural setting, while engaging in face-to-face interaction with their research participants. Creswell (2009) also suggests that data is collected by the researcher themselves through interviews, observations, or examining documents while keeping focus on learning the meaning that the research participants hold regarding the research question(s). Unlike most quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers are the ones who actually gather the research information, review the data, organize and code the data into themes for analysis and do not rely on statistics, surveys etc for data. Because qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry (Creswell, 2009), in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand, their interpretations cannot be separated from their own backgrounds and understandings. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that qualitative research involves an *interpretive and naturalistic* approach: “This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Qualitative research is inherently multi-method in focus; however, the use of multiple methods, or triangulation:

Reflects an attempt to secure and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question.

Objective reality can never be captured. We know a thing only through its representations... The combination of multiple methodological practices... then, as a strategy adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry (p. 5).

As mine is an exploratory research inquiry and the research is specific to the study of how the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam influences assessment practices and pedagogy, a qualitative research design is the best methodology for this research inquiry.

### **Philosophical Paradigm**

Creswell (2009) suggests that although the philosophical ideas remain hidden in research, they undoubtedly inform the practice of research and must be identified. Because my research took the shape of a qualitative design, and my goal of the research was to rely as much as possible on my six participants' views of the research questions as well as reflections on my own experiences, I decided that a participatory paradigm would best inform my research. I also recognized that my own lived experiences shapes my interpretation and I have positioned myself within the research to acknowledge how my interpretation fits in with the research. My intent was to make sense of the data that I collected and to interpret the meanings others have about the world. By conducting my research with semi-structured open-ended questions, I hoped to make sense of how others see the world of teaching English Language Arts 30-1. Unlike the post-positivists, I had no theory to begin with, hence the participatory approach to the research.

### **Strategies of Inquiry**

In addition to this qualitative research design guided by a participatory view of the research, I utilized a research inquiry that provided a specific procedural direction for the research. Creswell (2009) states that “narrative research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more of the individuals to provide stories about their lives” (p. 13). The information that was gathered from the six research participants' interviews enabled me to tell the story that I was seeking in order to gain insight

into the lived experiences of the participants, and in the end, I was able to combine the participants' views with my own views to result in a collaborative narrative.

### **Description of Method**

This qualitative research project gathered data by way of audio-recorded interviews based on six ELA 30-1 teachers' answers to the 21 semi-structured research questions stated within the interview protocol (See Appendix 1). Coupled with this interview process, I also drew upon my own personal narratives and field notes as an experienced ELA 30-1 teacher and reflected on my years as an ELA 30-1 teacher to determine to what degree the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam has influenced my pedagogy.

### **Participant Selection**

The search for participants for this research inquiry was limited to those who teach English Language Arts 30-1 in the province of Alberta. Initially, I planned on only interviewing four English Language Arts 30-1 teachers for this study; however, while I was on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma marking floor, a few other teachers wanted to be included in my research. I interviewed these teachers in addition to my original four, and thus, my study has evolved from its original structure.

I have included the views of a first year English Language Arts 30-1 teacher's experience and also included the views of a veteran English Language Arts 30-1 teacher who had a minimum of 20 years' experience. I also felt it necessary to include the views of four other English Language Arts 30-1 teachers, with varying teaching experience (between 5-19 years of ELA 30-1 experience). My participants were both male and female: two female and four



male. In this selection of participants, I hoped to have covered the range of English Language Arts 30-1 teachers from first year to veteran. While this predetermined diversity does not mean the participants represent the voice of the majority, the goal was to allow dialogue on the subject of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam and its influences on pedagogical approaches to teaching the course. This participant selection provided a wide range of responses to the interview protocol questions. It found it interesting to compare the first year ELA 30-1 teacher's responses to that of the veteran ELA 30-1 teacher's responses and also to examine how the responses differed between gender, experience, and geographic location of the participants in this study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews based on the 21 questions within the interview protocol (See Appendix 1). As previously stated, each semi-structured interview lasted between 45 minutes to one and a half hours in length. The interview focused on the English Language Arts teachers' teaching experience pertaining to the ELA 30-1 course, their experience with the Alberta English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, the impact the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam had on the classroom and the assessment tools and practices used within the English Language Arts 30-1 course. The purpose of this interview was to begin to collect information regarding the English Language Arts 30-1 teaching participants' backgrounds, contexts, and perspectives about the ELA 30-1 course and the diploma exam and to compare these findings with my own.

Upon completion of the six participant interviews, I transcribed these interviews verbatim. Transcriptions from all six interviews totaled 41 single spaced pages in length. It

should be noted that although I did follow the interview protocol in place for this research, I am reporting on the observations and opinions of the six teachers interviewed. I did not question or critique what they said; rather, I gave the participants the opportunity to speak and share in their own voice. Transcriptions were submitted to the participants for review and comment. Each participant had the opportunity to change any information they did not agree with in the transcriptions. Each interview was analyzed and coded for general themes such as: background and contextual information, professional development experiences, pedagogical issues such as planning lessons and assessment tools implemented, and attitude towards the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. This thematic structure provided an opportunity to find commonalities and differences between the research participants within this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because the English Language Arts 30-1 community of teachers is a rather small one, it was paramount that all personal identifiers be withheld from the research document. The six research participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, the school where they work, and the school district or board which employs them. I assured participants that confidentiality would be respected at all times. Because this research was carried out through audio-recorded interview, the electronic files of the interviews have been stored safely on a portable hard drive and locked in a filing cabinet. Nothing will be stored on my personal computer at any time. All word documents and transcriptions were removed from my personal computer and stored on a portable hard drive as well. All documents were stored and locked when not in use. After a period of five years, all data associated with this research inquiry will be destroyed.

## **Reflexivity**

As already mentioned, qualitative research is an interpretative research framework with the researcher being directly involved with the research participants for a period of time. This methodology will carry its strategic and ethical implications and biases. With this in mind, I must briefly state my position within the research.

As a member of the NCTE (National Council for Teachers of English), ELAC (English Language Arts Council) of Alberta and a current English Language Arts 30-1 teacher and diploma exam marker, I have engaged in a professional dialogue regarding the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam for many years. It has been the source of great controversy in the province of Alberta, specifically with the former Education Minister, Dave Hancock, and has also created tension within many ELA Departments in high schools across the province. What we are expected to teach is not fully reflected on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam as Slomp's (2007) Table 1 would illustrate. Similarly, iconic literature such as Rosenblatt's 73 year old text about literature being a transactional medium to Elbow's more current "freewriting" process approach to writing, debunks the theory behind the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. This literature suggests that the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam's construct is not congruent with good pedagogical practice about learning to write.

I think if you ask anyone who has spent a significant amount of time on the English Language Arts 30-1 marking floor, they will tell you that the papers awarded the "5", the category of excellence, are those that do not simply represent a regurgitation of the format given by a teacher, but that show true creativity and depth of meaning for the student. Allowing students to articulate their experience in discussions, and to come to an understanding that some

interpretations are more defensible than others is an essential way of practicing the test situation. This is where I feel I need to venture with my pedagogy. My study has been a way of exploring other English Language Arts teachers' stories, perceptions and experiences of teaching English Language Arts 30-1 and their insights into the diploma examinations and reflecting on these alongside my own.

## Chapter 4: The Interpretation

*“All history becomes subjective; in other words there is properly  
no history, only biography.”* –Ralph Waldo Emerson

Mabry (1999) writes:

See this box of laminated rubrics? That is the rubric used to score this test. I also score the writings of my students in this class with it. Sometimes I have students use it to score each other’s papers. They [students] have to justify the scores they give, so they are familiar with this rubric. They know what they have to do today when they take the test (Mabry, p. 673).

Mabry’s (1999) statement could easily be my voice today in 2012. The English Language 30-1 Personal Response to Texts rubric and the Critical Analytical Response to Literary Texts rubric used to assess the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is regarded as “bible” in my ELA 30-1 class. From the beginning of the semester until the end, this is the tool used to assess writing in my English Language Arts 30-1 class. After conducting my research with the six other ELA 30-1 teachers, I find that I am not alone.

In order to fully understand this study and the participants involved, I will offer introductions to my participants and will examine their respective situations before moving directly into the teachers’ impressions of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam and the impact it has on instructional pedagogy. This section is particularly valuable in that it will provide a background and insight of the six English Language Arts 30-1 teachers. Each participant has been given a pseudonym to respect their anonymity.

## **TheParticipants**

### **“Laura”**

Laura has been teaching English Language Arts for three years and is currently on a sabbatical leave from her school board to complete a Master’s degree in education. Laura teaches ELA in a large urban high school in a fairly affluent area. The high school serves over 2000 students, including a large population of ESL students (English as a second language) and international students as well. In her three years of teaching, Laura has taught three courses of ELA 30-1, although not in her first year. Along with teaching the ELA 30-1, Laura has also taught ELA 10-1, ELA 10 & 20 IB (International Baccalaureate) World Literature 35 and ELA 20-2.

Although Laura is relatively fresh to the profession of teaching, she possesses a great deal of professional development in the area of English Language Arts. Laura is a member of ELAC, the English Language Arts Council in Alberta, and also has had an experience marking the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exams in 2010.

### **“Byron”**

Byron has been teaching English Language Arts 30-1 for twelve years at the same school. Byron teaches at a large composite high school minutes outside of a major city. It serves a middle to upper class, primarily Caucasian, student population. Byron is currently still in the classroom where he teaches English Language Arts: 10-1, 20-1, 30-1, English IB, English Theory of Knowledge, English World Literature and the Extended Essay.

In Byron's years of teaching, he has been a regular marker for the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. He would like to be more involved in other areas such as item building or standards confirming, but he has never been invited. Although he is a member of the English Language Arts Council (ELAC) he admits that he, "*does not have the time to devote to that*". Byron also has taken some graduate courses at a local university and "*flips through*" scholarly journals when he has time.

"Susan"

Susan has been teaching English Language Arts since 1992, but has been teaching English Language Arts 30-1 for eight years. Susan teaches in a very small rural farming community that serves a population of 120 students from grades 7-12. Susan's ELA classes are often blended due to enrolment. For example, her English Language Arts 30-1 and 30-2 classes were taught jointly and had a total of seven students.

Because Susan is the only English Language Arts teacher in her school, she "*is the English department*". She values professional development opportunities and seizes any opportunity she has to attend. She attends the ELAC conventions regularly and attends various other conferences that pertain to writing. Along with Susan's extensive "conventioning", she is a regular marker on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma floor. Like Byron, she has never been invited to be a part of any other involvement with the diploma exam such as item building, standards confirming, or test validation, despite her regular applications. She would welcome the opportunity if given.

## “Tom”

Tom has been teaching since 1976. He began his career in a remote mountain town teaching junior high language arts and social studies. In 1980, Tom moved several hours away to teach English Language Arts in a larger urban school in the southern part of the province. Tom has been teaching in that community since his move and is currently serving his last year as an English Language Arts teacher before retiring. In addition to teaching many years of English Language Arts 30-1, Tom also teaches English Language Arts 30-2, English Language Arts 10 and 20 IB.

Because Tom is heavily involved with the IB (International Baccalaureate) program, he has done extensive professional development in this area. He was sent down to Montezuma, Mexico for training in the IB program. The IB program provides an international standard for students in six core areas, one of which is English. The IB program prepares students for higher academic learning. Many universities give students credit for their involvement in the IB courses. Tom is very passionate about teaching the IB English program. In addition to this professional development, Tom has been an English Language Arts 30-1 diploma marker since the exam's inception in 1984. Tom has also been involved in item building, test validation, and standards confirming for the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. Tom has also written several rationales for the exemplar papers used to train the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma marker.

Even though this is Tom's last year of teaching before retiring, he attended his very last ELAC conference before coming to mark his last set of English 30-1 diploma exams. Tom is a teacher who values his professional development opportunities in his subject area.



“Vince”

Vince has been teaching English Language Arts 30-1 since his very first year as a teacher. He began his career in 1996 in a smaller rural community. He currently teaches ELA 30-1 and 30-2 at a larger urban Catholic high school which serves a population of approximately 950 students. Vince teaches only grade 12.

Vince’s professional development in the area of English Language Arts is limited to the experience with the English Language Arts 30-1 and 30-2 diploma exams. Although he has been a member of ELAC at one time, he did not find it useful. His experience marking and item building for the ELA diploma exams are what he values in professional development. Vince says the best opportunity for quality professional development is “*strolling through Chapters* (national bookstore chain) *and picking up a good book.*” Vince also values what his students are able to teach him. That is where he garners most of his ideas. Structured professional development in the area of English Language Arts is not for him.

“Sam”

Sam has been teaching English Language Arts 30-1 for eight years. He focuses most of his instruction on British literature because he feels that students are overexposed to the American school of thought. Sam currently teaches English Language Arts 30-1, Latin, and Advanced Placement European History. Sam is also the head of the English department at his school which is a large urban Catholic school which is primarily home to middle, upper class Caucasian students.

Sam’s professional development in the subject of English Language Arts is rich with regards to the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. Originally, he was interested in

marking the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma only to receive some grounding in the subject so he could better serve his students. Later, he admits, that it is excellent professional development to help him refine his ideas of assessment. Sam also enjoys the opportunities to network with other ELA 30-1 teachers. In addition to marking diploma exams, Sam also is a table leader on the exam floor, has had opportunities to item build for the diploma exam and he has been on the Standards Confirming Committee for the last two years.

Sam is a member of ELAC and has interactions with its members. He uses this as a way to network and exchange ideas with other ELA 30-1 teachers. Sam does admit that he is fortunate enough to have a large English department at his school so they are able to engage in professional dialogue about methodology, assessment, and new units and lessons during department meetings or on lunch break. Sam states that, *“most of my real, meaningful PD comes from my time marking diploma exams and spending time with my colleagues just talking.”*

## **Findings of the Study**

### **I. Background and Contextual Information**

The accumulated experience of the six teachers interviewed for this study is 91 years of teaching English Language Arts and 73 years teaching English Language Arts 30. The teachers range from two years' experience with English Language Arts 30-1, to 31 years of experience in the subject. At the time of this study, all teachers were currently teaching English Language Arts 30-1 with the exception of one teacher, Laura, who was on sabbatical to pursue graduate studies.

All six teachers interviewed for this study have marked the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exams; five of the six teachers mark on a regular basis, although this was the last time for one of the teachers, Tom, as he retired after this interview took place. Tom has marked the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam since its inception in 1984. As well, three of the six teachers have been involved with standards confirming, item building and test validation over the years.

The demographics of the six high schools at the time of my study varied considerably. Two of the six high schools accommodated more than 1800 students while the smallest of the high schools served 120 students. Each of the participants was asked to describe their particular high school in terms of demographics. Two of the high schools were Catholic with primarily Caucasian students and from fairly affluent families. The four remaining high schools were public schools. Susan's high school was from a rural farming community two hours away from a major urban center and Tom responded that, "*...my school has quite an interesting demographic. We have a lot of blue collar families because of our location in the industrial side of the city. We have some new housing developments which are quite elite which results in a very diverse school population. In addition to that, we are the only school in our area of the province that offers the IB program.*" Lastly, Laura reported that her public school also had a diverse population with a large ESL (English as a second language) and international student population.

## **II. Professional Development Experiences**

Part of the interview consisted of questions regarding professional development in the area of English Language Arts. The participants' answers revealed some convergence of views

but considerably more divergence. All six of the teachers are, in some way, associated with ELAC (English Language Arts Council) of Alberta. All of the teachers are members of ELAC, or have been at one time. Each one of them has attended an ELAC conference at some point of their careers. Each of the six teachers interviewed agreed that marking the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is the best form of ELA teacher's professional development. However, only half of the six teachers interviewed, Laura, Susan, and Tom said that they were actively involved in presentations and workshops, along with researching and keeping informed via scholarly journals. The remainder of the participants felt that structured professional development opportunities such as conventions or conferences, in the subject of English Language Arts, are not the most efficient use of professional development time. Vince stated, *"...No. I am not a "team player" by any stretch of the imagination. It is not my cup of tea. I do my own thing and everything that I do is about the student. I don't believe, maybe it is my ego, I have been around a long time. I honestly don't believe that anyone can teach me what I already know and yeah, that's about it."*

Interestingly enough, Byron also added:

*Although I am a member of ELAC, I do not have time to devote to that. We (the school) subscribe to the National Council of Teachers of English publication. I will look through the articles, but I do not find them especially helpful. I do not find them well written. I find people who write these articles have a great deal of ambition behind them but lack true pedagogical practices. Sorry for being so cynical, but that is what I see a lot of in this writing.*

The last teacher, Sam, believes:

*The best professional reading I do is quality fiction (too many English teachers are not reading for professional reasons, only recreationally, which is a damned shame) ranging from the classics to emerging literature. The classics particularly stretch my capacity for understanding and enjoying prose and end up teaching me that English can be a lot of things, including an anthropological peek into another culture or a time-traveler's glimpse at our own past. In addition I read articles on the philosophy of education, neuroscience and education, and some methodologies outside of the mainstream.*

It is evident that these six teachers are experienced professionals who, in their own ways, are committed to understanding the English Language Arts subject, and growing as educators while keeping their students' needs, and their own, in mind, even though they do so in very different ways. Their knowledge and expertise on the subject of English Language Arts and the diploma exam are further explored in the later part of this study.

### **III. Pedagogical Issues: Planning and Assessment Practices**

The theme of pedagogical issues, those associated with planning and assessment, definitely emerged from interviews with all the six teachers. Each of the six teachers reported that their English Language Arts 30-1 semester is laid out in a very structured fashion. Four of the six teachers agreed that teaching ELA 30-1 by genre is the best way to approach the subject in preparation for the diploma exam, while two of the teachers reported that it did not matter too much; they did a bit of both: teaching by genre and theme. All four teachers stated that they begin the semester with short texts to allow the students to “*get their feet wet*” before delving into the greater canonical pieces. However, only three of these teachers agreed that they

purposely end their course with the short story in recognition of the written assessment that appears on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. Susan shares her literary practices in the interview:

*I end with short story and film because the bigger pieces will have a lasting impact on them more so than the shorter pieces. People will remember Shakespeare, they will remember the plays. Short stories are fresh in their mind and if they choose to write on a short story for the diploma exam they've just studied the structure of it so they will have a pretty good understanding of it. They tend to remember stories better if they choose to write on them and the film is visual so they tend to remember that anyway. My stronger students will go back and review a piece they really liked, my weaker ones tend to remember something they have just read or just seen. In a way, I guess, it is preparing them for the exam. Strategically, this is why I teach it this way.*

Analogous to Susan's interview, Laura echoes the importance of ending her semester with the short story and, similarly, dissuades her students from writing on larger pieces like Shakespeare and the novel:

*The way I structure my semester is based on timing; timing being the biggest variable...at the end of the term, during the couple weeks before the exam, I tend to encourage students to study their short stories really well – usually over their Shakespeare pieces and the novel. Short stories are condensed...much easier to review...Shakespeare is too big for most students to do well on the exam.*

Clearly, Susan and Laura both design their semesters with the ELA 30-1 diploma exam in mind. They structure the teaching of literature so the students will write on the last things they remember. Therefore, they teach what they would like the students to use as the literary text for their critical piece on the diploma exam near the end of their course. This is a similar trend in the research that was conducted for this project as all six of the teachers interviewed for this study agreed that they purposely end their semester with the piece of literature that they hope the students will write on, whether it be the short prose piece or the modern day drama. Each one of the six teachers also report on teaching Shakespeare in the middle of their course for fear of students using it on the diploma exam. This is what Sam had to say about his approach to teaching literature in preparation for the diploma:

*I begin with short fiction, move immediately to the novel study, then Hamlet, then a modern play (Man for All Seasons by Robert Bolt this year) and ending with some poetry and a taste of Dante... The short prose allows me to kick start the semester and focuses more on essays than short stories, not only to study good essays but to establish that the essay is a respectable literary form. Pride and Prejudice is next because it exhibits the British character I want my students to get used to. I can begin it with some historical and cultural teaching for scaffolding purposes, partly through lecture and lively discussion and partly through a viewing of Master and Commander (followed by film study and a written response.) Hamlet I leave for the middle because it takes some time, tides me over for a while, but is early enough that the students tend to not write about it. I don't actively discourage students from writing on Hamlet for the Diploma but I know they tend to write on the last thing they study. A Man for All Seasons, aside from being complex, is a fine cap to the semester and is a bit meatier, so the students have hopefully*

*grown a bit and learned about England a bit to prep them for it. It's also what I'm hoping they write about. Poetry? I can teach poetry, enjoy it, expand or contract a unit, based on how much time I have left. This is sad, but if I have to cut my poetry unit in half to get through A Man for All Seasons, I'll do it.*

In Sam's interview he made it clear that if he does not have time to complete a poetry unit, he will "*cut it in half*" to focus on diploma worthy literature. It was the consensus throughout this interview process that all six of the teachers would sacrifice teaching some part of the English Language Arts 30-1 curriculum, if they had to, in order to prepare the students for the critical essay component of the diploma exam. Three of the six teachers openly admitted that if they missed certain outcomes from the Program of Studies (the curriculum) they do not worry about it; the exam was the focus of their teaching.

Thinking of my own classroom and pedagogical approach, I can relate to these statements. When it comes to the question of the organization of my semester, I had never paid it much attention until I began this study. Because I teach both the English Language Arts 30-1 and 30-2 courses, I am teaching the diploma courses for both streams; however, they are by design set up very differently. My ELA 30-2 course (the non-academic course) is generally taught thematically. This, I have realized, is because I am not as pressured to "perform" for these students. These students are not dependent upon a high grade 12 average to get into competitive post-secondary institutions. On the contrary, the ELA 30-2 students basically want a high school diploma to graduate, to get out into the work force and get a job. Yes, they still have to write a diploma, but I am not as worried about the results. I teach this way for them because it is more interesting, engaging and relevant. We take our time in this course, we investigate and



explore and treat it less like “business”; we have fun. With the ELA 30-2 class, I clearly place a larger emphasis on creativity, based loosely around the diploma exam.

Contrary to my pedagogy for the ELA 30-2s, my ELA 30-1 course is a polar opposite. I tend to have a more traditional focus on literary criticism and analytical response to literature. Instead of having fun and being exploratory with the literature we are studying, as we are in 30-2, there is an air of “*This is what you have to know about the literature...this is what I want you to know about the literature...*” instead of, “*...what did you learn from the literature...*” I feel like it is my duty to tell the students how they should be interpreting the literature rather than allowing them to grapple with what they have read on their own. Because these students are in pursuit of higher academic learning, I feel obligated to provide a learning environment that is conducive to a more sophisticated level of learning; therefore, I am a very rigid planner based heavily in genre with an immeasurable focus on the diploma exam. I, too, teach literary texts that have the potential to be excellent pieces for the ELA30-1 diploma exam, with the exception of *Hamlet*. A Shakespearian text is mandatory, and what more can the student offer about a piece that is 450 years old that has not been stated already? I choose texts with extreme care keeping in mind always ... *how well will the students will be able to write on these texts?*

The literature that was chosen by the six research participants, and by me, for the ELA 30-1 course is clearly a strategic move due to the diploma exam. By nature, teachers want their students to perform well on this exam; therefore, the English Language Arts 30-1 teachers will approach this course with deliberate prudence. One of the teachers interviewed for this research said:

*I feel bad for my 10's and 20's; my 30's seem get all of my attention and energy. I wish it wasn't this way, but it is my reality because of the diploma. I teach whatever literature is in the book room and I use the same tired teacher resources. I don't have as much time to devote to unique and insightful approaches as I make with my 30's. Let's face it, the truth is they are more important at this point. I'll catch up with them next year.*

Evidently, even though all teachers are bound by a government mandated curriculum, it is clear that not all teachers will approach every class with the care and thoughtfulness they do when having to teach a diploma course. Many teachers I know purposely do not want to teach a diploma level course for this reason – and for other reasons such as stress, scrutiny, and imbalance with other courses. The stress and scrutiny that is placed upon the ELA 30-1 teacher is stand-alone evidence that certain pedagogical approaches are manipulated because of the diploma exam and the pressure it places upon the teacher who teach these particular diploma level courses.

Each of the six teachers has experience when it comes to the diploma exam and the assessment practices in place to grade the students work. Also, the six teachers know what literature appears on the diploma floor, giving them an idea of the pertinent literature that should be taught. The choice of literature and the time it is taught within the semester is crucial, almost as crucial as the term assessment practices in place to grade the students' written work. In the next part of this study, I will examine the assessment practices used by each of the six English Language Arts 30-1 teachers.

How the six ELA 30-1 teachers assess the students' writing in the ELA 30-1 class is completely analogous with each other. One of the questions within the interview protocol for

this study asked teachers to comment on their assessment practices in place for students' written assignments. All six of the teachers stated that they use the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma bed-sheet that is provided by Alberta Education to mark the written portion of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. Sam stated in his interview that he will always use that assessment tool:

*Absolutely. The breakdown of categories and descriptors is very well thought out and is the result of quite a few of our colleagues giving their time and wisdom in the form of committee work. It has become, over the past few years, a pretty finely honed thing. The diploma exam could disappear and I would still use this document.*

Vince also stated that he would continue to use the English Language Arts 30-1 scoring guide even if the exam was not in existence anymore:

*I use the bed-sheet from the diploma – straight up! Always have, always will. Why would I use anything else? It is an accurate tool for assessing writing. People have gone over this government exam time and time again, it is vetted. You know it will work.*

Although Sam and Vince use the ELA 30-1 diploma exam bed-sheet to assess their students in-class writing assignments, they use it because they believe in the tool as a valuable assessment piece, not because they feel they have to or because they should use it to net better diploma marks. The four other teachers, Susan, Laura, Byron and Tom use the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma rubric, but for very different reasons. Susan made a comment in the interview about the use of the English Language Arts 30-1 rubric in her classroom:

*Yes! I GIVE my students the rubrics, my student KNOW the rubrics. I just started doing a new assignment this year. Our division is on the critical thinking bandwagon, so one assignment I give them has nothing to do with writer's craft per se – they are to take an exemplar from the Standards of Writing Alberta Education puts out, mark it based on the rubric and describe why it got what it got on the rubric. Then they are to get together with a group and agree or disagree. So it has nothing to do with what they themselves wrote; it has to do with defending the score they gave a random piece of writing on the rubric.*

Susan's comments suggest a tension within her approach to pedagogy as seen in her emphasis on the words "give" and "know" in her interview. While the English Language Arts 30-1 bed-sheet certainly is a valuable tool in assessing students' writing, it would seem that Susan's ELA 30-1 class is being shaped by the assessment tool used on the diploma exam resulting in the acute awareness of the bed-sheet but not in the way Alberta Education intended its use. Susan is doing what she feels will benefit her students on the diploma exam: empowering her students with the knowledge of the assessment tool used to grade their writing.

Interestingly, the three teachers who teach IB English, Tom, Byron, and Laura, all agreed that they use the diploma bed-sheet to assess written responses in their classes to some extent, but do not spend a great deal of time emphasizing its importance. Tom states:

*Just to clarify, I do use the exact rubric, I just don't make a big deal about it. In my school, we have adapted or 'dumbed-down' the English 30-1 rubric to fit our 10's and 20's, so in that sense, the students are already aware of the assessment practices we employ at our school. It is not a big deal.*

Similarly, Byron is of the same school of thought when it comes to the English Language Arts 30-1 bed-sheet, “*Yes, I use it (laughs) it just depends on the assignment of course, but I use it for the analytical essays most definitely. I do use it to mark SOME of the personal responses, but not all. I do not want the students to pigeon hole their writing to try to fit some rubric.*”

Laura also stated in her interview that she does use the rubric in her ELA 30-1 classes, but she mentioned it was for her benefit being a newer teacher to the course:

*Yes, I like it [the bed-sheet]. I do point out the E’s [Excellents] to the students, but for the most part I think it is a good guide and I want to be consistent as much as I can. I think it is a better guide for me, and not necessarily the students, because I don’t think they understand it completely.*

Behind my desk, taped up on the wall, are several large yellow file folders labelled, “ENGLISH 30-1 CRITICAL ESSAY” and “ENGLISH 30-1 PERSONAL RESPONSE”. This is where my assessment tools live. In my own classroom, like the six colleagues I have interviewed, I also utilize the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma marker’s bed-sheet for all of the aforementioned reasons. It is a vetted tool already in place that my students will be assessed against. It makes perfect sense for me to use it. I use it for every critical and personal response that I assess in my class. From the moment my students set foot in my classroom, they are aware of the diploma and the rigorous assessment practices that go along with this course. I, too, teach the English Language Arts 20 students and our English Language Arts department has developed a similar assessment tool based on the diploma exam similar to the one Tom was mentioning in his interview. Every teacher’s guide has a section of assessment material embedded in the back, so why do we not use those pieces? Because they are not modelled after the diploma exam;

therefore, some teachers, like myself, find them a waste of time. Alberta Education has gone to great lengths, as Sam and Vince have mentioned, to ensure a sound assessment tool that covers a portion of the ELA 30-1 curriculum; therefore, I use it. But most importantly, I use it because it will be the tool used to assess my students. I also agree with Laura's statement that the ELA 30-1 diploma scoring bed-sheet promotes equity among our students and having something as structured as the bed-sheet in place certainly holds me accountable for the marks I award. I do not have to say I like or agree with this; however, it is my truth.

While I understand that the Part A - written portion - of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is not the sole assessment on the exam, it has certainly been proven to significantly shape the English Language Arts 30-1 teacher's pedagogy as the above research has demonstrated. However, there is another part of the ELA 30-1 diploma exam that is equally as important: Part B – Reading Comprehension, worth an additional 50% of the student's mark. This part of the exam comes approximately a week (7 to 10 days) after the grade 12 students have written the Part A - Written Response to Literary Texts. The Part B – Reading Comprehension Exam is a collection of shorter prose, visual, and poetic texts accompanied by 70 multiple choice questions to coordinate with the selection of visuals and readings.

All six of the research participants in this study were asked questions pertaining to the Part B – Reading Comprehension portion of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. The teachers were asked if they prepare for the Part B portion of the exam as they do with the Part A. All six of the research participants interviewed unequivocally agreed they do use old ELA 30-1 diploma exams to prepare their students for the Part B – multiple choice portion of the diploma exam; however, four of the six teachers reported that if this part of the diploma exam did not

exist, they would never use assessment materials like these in their classrooms because they are, “prescribed, subjective and oppressive” as one teacher stated. Susan expressed in her interview, when asked about the Part B portion of the exam and how she prepared her students for it:

*Part B definitely! I do reviews of Part B (long breath and sigh) so I have a hard time when English teachers are teaching students to find their own voice, create their own piece, no opinion is ever wrong...then we have a multiple choice exam that tells them that their opinion is wrong... For example, this is what happens if you don't teach to the test: I had a student three years ago that got 100% on his written and did very poorly on his multiple choice. When I gave him a practice test, he would write all over the exam and say “this is probably what you want but this is more right...” He would deconstruct the exam and then write his answer on the page but it wouldn't fit one of the multiple choice answers. I always question if that exam really testing the reading and the understanding of the reading or is it testing their ability to read the question and understand the multiple choice exam. That is my stumbling block as a teacher is trying to teach my students instead of being wide open and seeing and connections to metaphors instead of looking for something that is a forced choice as opposed to something that is written specifically. My wish would be that we would have the essay component and that the Part B would consist of selections of questions that they answered to show their understanding and their knowledge as opposed to picking a correct multiple choice answer. I know that would mean a marking nightmare, but I feel that would be a better indicator on the student's complete understanding of a text instead of mastering the format of a multiple choice exam.*

This statement from Susan is an explicit indicator of the coercion this exam has over her pedagogy. She also mentioned in this interview that this type of assessment has no place in any of her other ELA courses; it only exists in her ELA 30 levels because of the diploma exam. Susan made it clear that the Part B diploma exam was changing the way in which she taught her 30 level English classes, resulting in the resentment of her profession as an English Language Arts teacher.

Byron had the same feeling about the Part B portion of the exam, although he did not place any summative assessment on the outcome of his students' experiences with old Part B diploma exams. In the interview, Byron let out a burst of loud laughter when I asked him the question about how he teaches the students about the Part B multiple choice portion of the exam. He stated:

*It is ridiculous! Reading a text, any text, is not for anyone to decide what I get out of it. My interaction with the literature is my moment to become personally connected with it. The only way to assess that is to have me write on what my interactions and experiences are with the text I have just read. Don't make me pick one of the four answers; that is simply ridiculous. As far as how I prepare my students, I photocopy old exams, make them available with the keys, have students work through them independently and leave it at that. I do not discuss the old exams because it would be unprofessional and I would say something that would surely drop me in it!*

It is clear that Byron does, to some degree, prepare his students for the Part B portion of the exam. He does so in a way that allows the students to have some exposure to the exam's construct and it also prepares students for what the exam will look like and what the students will



be expected to know. It is most important to note here that Byron did not use any of these marks for reporting student's assessment. Byron states that he would be a "hypocrite" if he did use these marks for assessment purposes and should be accused of "malpractice" if he did.

Interestingly enough, Tom saves the Part B – reading comprehension multiple choice portion of his teaching - until the last week of classes, after the Part A written portion of the diploma exam is over. Tom says in his interview that it is the most "frustrating and difficult" part of the course for him to teach – he despises it. In the interview he stated:

*Well, it is very difficult to prepare them for that part of the diploma because it changes so much from year to year and you never really know what you can expect. The reading questions that actually require synthesis I find are the most difficult ones for the students to do because it requires the students to hold vast amounts of information in their heads when trying to answer questions based on 2 or 3 selections from the exam. This is very difficult to do given the situation these guys are put in during this exam. In order to prepare them for this part of the exam, one of the things we noticed in our department while going through this exam, was how heavily based this exam is in vocabulary. So what we actually do is we spend an intensive bit of the last part of the course doing vocabulary work. I have this thing called "7 Months to a Better Vocabulary" which we cover in 7 days (laughs).*

While discussing Part B of the exam with Tom he deliberated on the thought that Part B of the test perhaps is modeled more on an IQ test rather than a reading comprehension exam. The fact that the test, both reading selections and test items, are heavily embedded with wordy vocabulary that is not familiar to most grade 12 students is somewhat ambiguous for the student

who is not gifted with finer diction. Tom feels this is far too demanding for the average grade 12 student. He feels Part B is less like a reading comprehension exam and more like an exam on the English vernacular. This is why Tom implements the “7 days to a better vocabulary” smash unit; what should take the equivalent of seven months is compressed into the final seven days of the course. That is the extent to which Tom goes to prepare students for the Part B multiple choice exam. Nonetheless, even though it is only seven days of preparation, it still narrows Tom’s pedagogy while teaching the English Language Arts 30-1 course. Tom also said that if Part B did not exist, he would never implement such a mediocre and stale unit into his long range plans for ELA 30-1. Hence, further evidence the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam ordains Tom’s teachings in English Language Arts 30-1.

Similar to the aforementioned teachers, Laura’s experiences are no different when it comes to Part B of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. When asked in the interview if Part B of the diploma exam is emphasized in her ELA 30-1 classes as much as Part A, she responds:

*I feel like our course is based more on the written portion so, by its very nature, I think writing is emphasized more. Writing is more assessable; reading is harder to assess at our level. Yes, we have reading comprehension exams, those are harder to make. The reliability and validity of them make it difficult. That said, I do teach reading comprehension strategies right from the beginning of the course. I usually do reading comprehension strategies, like I did in Role of the Artist Unit, annotating a text, color coding, and with each poem I taught, I presented a different reading comprehension strategy that they [students] can use... They [students] have to put a little portfolio together as to which strategy they used and discuss which ones they think are better for*

*them and discover which ones they might need to work on. We do spend quite a bit of time at the beginning of the year really focusing on that, but then, most of the assessments I do are based on the written assignments... In the first two days of the course I have always given them reading comprehension quizzes and have the students look at and discuss the exams... The mid-terms at the school which I taught were practice reading comprehension exams, to prepare for the mid-term. We do this again in preparation for the diploma at the end of the semester as well.*

It is very clear, throughout the interview with Laura, that Part B also commands her English Language Arts 30-1 lessons and teaching as it did with the other teachers. Laura mentioned in her interview that she teaches reading comprehension strategies to her students from the very beginning. She stated in the interview, on the very first day of the semester in ELA 30-1, she administers a reading comprehension test to her students based on old diploma exams. This identical pattern follows through to her mid-term assessments and finally to the closing days of the semester before the Part B reading comprehension portion of the diploma exam is to be administered province wide. The fact that Laura distributes old ELA 30-1 Part B exams throughout her semester can be interpreted and understood that the ELA 30-1 diploma exam possesses a certain authority or guidance over Laura and her pedagogical choice. The knowledge that the diploma exam exists is enough pressure for Laura to ensure all strategies are taught when it comes to reading comprehension. Laura mentioned that even though this is a literature based course, and students are meant to struggle with a text and understand the texts meaning, the Part B portion of the exam certainly narrows that skill.

Conversely, of the six teachers interviewed, two teachers, Sam and Vince, have a different opinion regarding the Part B portion of the ELA 30-1 diploma exam. Even though they

used old Part B diploma exams, they do so out of need and not out of pressure. Both teachers do admit to using old diploma exams to teach and prepare their students; however, they both present a different reason why they use the old Part B exams in their classes. In the interview with Vince, he stated:

*I am not sure about my lesson and unit planning. I mean obviously, at the 30-1 level, and even at 10 and 20, the bulk of what they are assessed is on what the diploma exam is. The diploma exam incorporates all of the curricular goals with the exception of the loosey goosey ones like “did they work well in a group” or “do they have a better appreciation for their society” (laughs). Those ones were never meant to be measured to begin with. I know because I helped write this curriculum. In a nut shell, all of my assessment comes directly from the diploma exam.*

Clearly, Vince appreciates the need for the Part B portion of the English 30-1 diploma exam. In further discussions with Vince about the diploma, he shared with me that his English department has binders compiled of old Part B reading comprehension exams from previous diploma exams and they are used on a regular basis to assess the students. They are all categorized into genre based tests. For example, he showed me a binder that was devoted to Elizabethan script; all tests within that binder were of previous English Language Arts 30-1 Part B diploma exams and are used to assess his students as they complete their unit on Shakespeare. His assessment for his *Hamlet* unit is as follows: A critical essay question from an old English 30-1 diploma exam and a few Elizabethan text selections from old Part B diploma exams. All of his assessments are based on old English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exams. This practice continued for his units on poetry, short story, modern drama, the novel, and the essay.

Sam also echoed Vince's beliefs regarding the English Language Arts 30-1 Part B reading comprehension diploma practices. At his school, binders of Part B multiple choice exams were a reality and he valued their worth. Like Vince, Sam used these former exams to measure students' knowledge pertaining to a specific genre that he was teaching. When I asked Sam to comment on his thoughts about the Part B portion of the diploma exam, he stated:

*Given that this is the case, "teaching to the test" in this case is a fine way to trick the kids into being careful in how they read (excerpts as well as questions are reading exercises) and thoughtful in how they write. Last year I told the students that the following unit was purely to prepare them for the Diploma and as a result they learned the basis of Platonic philosophy by accident. I love that the exam is there, both to level the playing field between how I mark and how some too generous colleagues might mark students from other jurisdictions as well as the leverage it presents to encourage students to learn great stuff.*

Both Sam and Vince agreed that Part B is a fantastic assessment tool for their students and even if Alberta Education decided not to use the multiple choice materials on the Part B reading comprehension portion of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, they would still implement these assessments at their school level.

Regardless of the divergent opinions and teaching styles of these six teachers, it is clear that the Part B multiple choice reading comprehension portion of the exam, once again, shaped the teachers' pedagogical and assessment choices to some degree.

## **Attitudes towards the English 30-1 Diploma Exam**

By the end of the interview process with the six English Language Arts 30-1 teachers, I had a very good idea of how the last theme of “Attitude towards the English Language Arts 30-1 Diploma Exam” would factor into this research. I felt that all six teachers were very honest in their responses to the questions posed to them in this interview. Body language and tone of voice were strong indicators in assisting me in analyzing teachers’ responses. However, I wanted a concrete response from each teacher about their opinion on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam; therefore, I explicitly asked each teacher to answer three questions at the end of the interview:

1. How do your students feel about the ELA 30-1 diploma exam?
2. How do you feel about the ELA 30-1 diploma exam?
3. Do you feel the ELA 30-1 diploma exam is a valid form of assessment?

It was not a surprise that all six teachers agreed that students are, to some degree, frightened of the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam; both Part A and Part B. In her interview, Laura brought up an interesting point that should be explored. She suggested that it is her higher academic students who are, ironically enough, more afraid of the exam than the average scoring English student. I asked her to comment further on this and she said it is because the higher academic students have more to lose. Students rely on this mark to gain entrance into post-secondary institutions and they do require a high average, but is this completely fair to base this on one final exam worth 50% of the student’s final grade? For that reason, it is completely understandable that the students are frightened of it.

Similar to Laura's thoughts about her students' feelings regarding the ELA 30-1 diploma exam, both Tom and Byron agreed that the students feel the weighting of the exam is a little excessive. Tom mentioned in his interview that his students would even embrace a change of the value it holds; instead of a 50% weighting, he suggested that moving it to hold a value of 30% would alleviate most of the anxiety and stress that such an exam can impose. In Byron's interview, he also suggested this change, but further added that all ELA 30-1 diploma markers should be required to write the exact test under the same circumstances and have it graded, just as the students do, before they have the opportunity to mark these exams. Byron felt this would be, *"illuminating for the markers to actually put themselves under the same amount of pressure the student is in. Perhaps they would be a little more sympathetic. Wouldn't that be awesome? (laughs)"*

Susan, Vince and Sam all agreed that the students view the exam as a *"necessary evil"* as Susan shared with me. The students know the diploma exam exists and that it is not going to go away. Susan also mentioned that her students, *"buckle in and get ready for the ride of their lives. It is a six hour ride so they better embrace it."* Both Sam and Vince also shared the same thoughts with reference to how their students view the diploma. Both teachers concurred that the students are stressed about it to some degree, but see its necessity to gain entrance into post-secondary institutions. Sam stated:

*The students understand that it exists as a reason and that it is actually better than the all-or-nothing approach of the SAT. They know that it exists because enough teachers in some corners of the province inflate class marks enough that it presents an unfair*

*advantage to those students when applying for post-secondary institutions and scholarships.*

Sam suggested that his students were more willing to embrace the exam because it would help level the playing field for them [the student] and that would be a valuable tool in place to make it fair for all students who are applying to post-secondary. Sam told his students that it is a good exam and a fair exam and that his students should not worry about it too much because they are prepared. Similarly, those are also the shared thoughts of Vince's students; however, Vince also added that his class marks aligned very close to the marks students are awarded on their diploma so his students are not too worried about the diploma exam because they already have an idea of how well they will do on the exam. He attributed this to all of the diploma preparation he does with his students from day one. *“Yes, to some degree they are stressed, it is a natural bodily response, but they are confident about the exam, they know what to expect, they have been doing this since day one. Honestly, they are ok with it for the most part.”*

The above responses would suggest that students are affected negatively by the ELA 30-1 diploma to some degree. All teachers interviewed stated that their students were stressed and scared of the exam to some extent. However, students did see the exam as a reality and, for the most part, were able to cope with the stressful situation. Four of the six teachers also suggested that if the exam weighting was changed from the current 50%, to a more reasonable 30%, students would most likely have a more positive outlook toward the diploma exam, possibly even score better because of the lowered stress level a drop in weighting would fetch. Perhaps this is a possibility worth exploring in the future.



Although the students' views, according to their teachers, were quite parallel with one another, the teachers' views regarding the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam were quite disparate. That being said, there was one commonality among all six teachers, namely that teachers felt the pressure to net good results on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. From Laura, the relatively new teacher, to Tom, the soon-to-be-retired veteran, all agreed that the pressure was evident as a teacher of the English Language Arts 30-1 course to obtain high marks. In his interview Byron mentioned:

*I think all diploma teachers feel pressure and if they don't they are lying...I think any self-respecting teacher would like his or her students to do well and I think as a matter of professional pride you certainly assume that the marks your students achieve will somehow reflect on your teaching practices. But as we all now, that is not necessarily the case.*

Byron's statement suggested that teachers feel a sense of personal satisfaction when their students achieve high scores on the diploma exam and it reflects well on the classroom teacher. However, he implied that just because a teacher's ELA 30-1 diploma results are high does not mean that the teacher is exceptional. He continued with his interview and stated:

*Sometimes we all do a shitty job of teaching something and you may have a number of really brainy kids and the exam results would make it look like you were an exceptional teacher when that may not necessarily be the case. On the contrary, you may be given a large number of students who are just average, or perhaps below average, and you really succeed and bring them up 5% -10%, but overall it doesn't look like you've accomplished much; however, in actuality, you really did something great but that does not show on the*

*exam results.*

Byron advocated here that exam results are what everybody looks at and places great value on, but it really is only the clichéd “snapshot” of what that student can achieve. Just because a student does not achieve excellent marks on the diploma exam does not equate to the student not growing and learning in class that semester. Nobody notices the student who raises their mark 10% in class – this to Byron is a far better indicator of teacher success than an evaluation of a student’s skill set via a government mandated diploma exam. Far too much emphasis is placed on the exam results which have placed undue pressure and scrutiny on the classroom teacher.

Laura’s interview continued on for awhile as she answered this particular question from the interview protocol. She had a very strong opinion about the diploma exam and how it is perceived by teachers:

*I don’t like that the diploma exam often dictates what we do as teachers, or that people perceive that it needs to dictate what we do. It comes from Administration and they have a lot to do with that. I have heard stories about colleagues being called into the office because their diploma exam marks and their class marks are so discrepant. In reality I give my class multiple opportunities to redo things because I want my kids to learn. On the diploma exam, they don’t have multiple opportunities to do things because it is a final thing. Of course their marks are going to be discrepant. The marks in my class show that the kids have learned and have grown and have developed and start to do different things on their own and the curriculum is not about those two things the diploma tests. So it is very frustrating to hear these stories about people being called down to the office to make sure their marks are closer aligned because I think they should be very different,*

*not 40%, but different. There are different tasks, therefore different marks and skills. Teachers also feel it as this big weight hanging over them but students also feel it too. They question why they have to do something if it is not on the diploma exam. I think that is the biggest problem about the diploma exam that students stop thinking that learning is for learning. That is my ultimate goal, I want the students to learn and think in my class and if that means doing something that is not on the diploma exam, I am going to do it. Sometimes that does mean the kids won't buy into it because it is not going to help their engineering average. Because the exam is weighted so high, I think that is what shapes attitudes.*

In this part of the interview, Laura certainly became passionate about the ELA 30-1 diploma exam and how it limits teachers and students from doing other tasks that are not linked to the diploma exam per se. Laura is a very keen and enthusiastic teacher and she wanted to transfer this attitude to her students; however, it was met with great controversy because some of her students felt that if the task was not going to be measured on the diploma exam, then what was the point of completing it? Laura was clearly frustrated with this attitude and she felt that the exam did inhibit what she was able to teach within her English Language Arts 30-1 classroom.

A teacher like Susan who “*is the English department*” in her small school felt, without question, a need for her students to perform well on the exam. Because Susan was the only English Language Arts teacher who taught English 9-12, those results, she felt, are “*her results*” and that she was being evaluated by these results to determine if she was doing an adequate job as an English Language Arts teacher. There was no hiding from the inspection of her students’

results. The stress the diploma exam placed on her was enormous. No matter how hard she had worked to help her students grow through the semester, similar to Byron, she said this would never be seen on the diploma exam. The only results people wanted to see are those results posted by Alberta Education.

Vince had a very different opinion on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. He agreed that there was pressure teaching ELA 30-1; however, it was the pressure he placed on himself. Vince, like all of the other teachers in this study, felt a moral obligation to make sure his students succeeded. However, he felt that the exam was a very fair and valid form of assessment and he felt that it fitted the curriculum perfectly. And because of this reality, all students, if taught well, should be able to “pull it off”; therefore, the pressure was not from anyone else except himself. Vince did not care for what his Administration thought of his results because his results were always fine. He viewed this pressure as healthy competition with himself and how far he could get his students to come during the course of a semester.

Tom shared the same opinion as Vince with regards to his view point on the ELA 30-1 diploma exam, but he had not always felt this way. Because Tom was retiring that year, he did not seem to care as much about the standards in place for the ELA 30-1 diploma exam as much as he used to. Over the years Tom felt that the diploma exam has gone downhill. When I asked him about how he felt about the diploma exam, he spoke with strong conviction:

*My concerns which I mentioned to you earlier, are that there has been a ‘dumbing-down’ of the diploma exam and the standards that the students are expected to rise to, and for that I feel partially responsible. I feel that it is a sad day for Alberta Education – they used to throw all kinds of money at the exam and recruit quality teachers to write and*

*mark the exam, however, that has all gone by the wayside. It seems anybody gets to do this job now. Standards have suffered.*

It was clear that these days Tom did not feel any external pressure to have his students perform well on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. Like Vince, the only pressure he had was the pressure he placed on himself to ensure his students were receiving the best education they could be given before they hit post-secondary. It is to be understood that Tom felt that the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam was not the calibre of exam that it used to be, and for that he was regretful. He was happy to be retiring so he would not continually be frustrated by the exam's lack of standards.

Finally, when I spoke with Sam about his feelings regarding the ELA 30-1 diploma exam, he was similar in thought to Susan and Byron in that he felt a certain amount of pressure to have his students do well. He stated that his pressure mainly came from the Board Office within his school division:

*Our diploma results can be very solid, much higher than provincial average and yet we are still expected to submit plans to coordinators as to how we plan to improve performance. It is very frustrating. There is some pressure from the students and their parents, but I don't mind because it is a mild competitiveness that I share and enjoy.*

Sam, to some degree, felt pressured to have his students perform well on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, but mostly the pressure came from the Executive Administration. Perhaps it was because he was the Department Head and was expected to ensure his English department was doing all in their power to score high marks. However, when I spoke with Sam

about this, he never mentioned the pressure of being an English Department Head and, in hindsight, I should have inquired.

It should be noted here that all six of the teachers in this interview indicated that the English Language Arts 30-1 students under their tutelage were not disadvantaged as a result of the teachers doing whatever they could to ensure student success on the diploma exam. All six of these teachers spoke of how the ELA 30-1 diploma exam preoccupied their pedagogical approach and assessment practices while teaching and planning for the subject.

The final question in this research study asked the teachers whether they felt the ELA 30-1 diploma exam was a valid form of assessment. All six teachers agreed that there was a need for standards, no question; however, to what degree? It was the “degree” which is mildly discrepant within this study group.

Two of the six teachers, with great sincerity, agreed that the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam was by far, the best cumulative assessment in place for the grade 12 English Language Arts students in Alberta. Two other teachers believed the exam was in place because the Government of Alberta had to have some authority when it came to education and it was a way to hold teachers accountable for what they taught in their classrooms. Finally, the last two teachers felt that the ELA 30-1 diploma exam has its place, but needs to be modified to allow the students to benefit from a true and relevant educational experience.

Both Sam and Vince concur that the current English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam was one of the best assessments in the country, perhaps even the continent. When Sam had the opportunity to address this question, he became very passionate:

*The Part A consists itself of two parts. The first, a personal response, actually allows the student to tailor the exam to his or her strengths. They do this first by choosing what piece(s) they wish to respond to, poem, prose, or picture (according to which the student responds to most strongly.) More, they then choose the prose form with which they will explore the topic. Given that any prose form is allowed, from creative fiction to formal analysis to stream of consciousness, the student actually chooses which curricular outcomes get more weight. Not many people consider this when they criticize the exam. The student also writes a formal response, but is allowed to choose which text is being used to answer the question. Last, the Part B is a fine assessment tool because it covers a wide range of outcomes (including critical thinking) and is so thoroughly analyzed, field tested, etc that it is just. I believe we are the only jurisdiction in North America that uses such a costly, two-and-a-half-test model.*

Clearly, Sam found the exam to be of immense worth and said he would ensure he does the best job possible preparing his students to do well. It should be noted here again that Sam possessed much experience with the ELA 30-1 diploma exam, working in various departments as marker, standards confirming, and item builder; therefore, he was very confident when teaching ELA 30-1 because he was intensely aware of the skills necessary for students to do well. There was no doubt why Sam felt the ELA 30-1 diploma exam was a valid form of assessment.

Throughout the interview, Sam made it clear that the exam must be in place to “*level the playing field*” and to make it fair for all grade 12 students, even the students who are affected by teacher inflated marks. Not all teachers mark with the same standards and this is why Sam fully supported an assessment such as the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam.

Echoing much of what Sam previously stated, Vince also agreed that the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam was a superior assessment and he made his opinion very clear that the exam covered every outcome that was meant to be assessed in ELA 30-1. It again should be noted that Vince was part of the committee in 2003 that wrote the revised English Language Arts curriculum. Vince also stated in his interview the reason most ELA 30-1 teachers are afraid of the diploma exam was because they were not doing a good enough job teaching the curriculum. He stated:

*For all of the reasons that I stated above, I believe this is a very valid exam that correlates with the ELA curriculum nicely. I don't want to seem arrogant in any way, but the reason why I think many teachers are afraid of this exam is because it is a way of double checking on what they are teaching or if they are actually teaching in the classroom. And a weak teacher will always be afraid of that assessment. A strong teacher who gives it their all will never be afraid of that because no matter what happens, even if you have weak students, your marks will still align with the diploma marks. We don't judge anybody here based on their marks most of the time, (laughs) we judge them based on how well their marks align with the diploma. We have had students go into their diploma with a 95% from some teachers and then score a 43% on the exam. Wow – we are going, that is a 50 % discrepancy, what is going on in there? Now of course, admin is not going to do anything about it because they don't want to talk about it, but we do amongst ourselves, right, and that is why the diploma is necessary. It keeps everybody honest – there is no downside to it. I don't care what anybody has to say about it, you know those clichéd saying, "It is one exam, a snapshot exam..." well yeah but my marks coincide with that exam so then there shouldn't be an*



*issue. If there is a 10% discrepancy between those two marks, that is still very reasonable given the circumstances. I have had kids go in with a 60% and score a 70%, well sure that will happen – it is a snap shot of one day, it should happen near the end of the course. Remember my marks are an entire semester’s average and kids are usually weaker at the beginning than they are at the end, naturally. That is why this exam is so valid.*

In Vince’s response, and his previous responses throughout this interview, he strongly conveyed the importance of the exam and the validity, he believes, it holds in assessing the curricular objectives; but, he also saw its worth in keeping all teachers honest. Similar to Sam, Vince believed that teachers inflate marks and having a standardized assessment such as the ELA 30-1 diploma exam in place curtails these “*ridiculous*” marks. Vince’s statement mimicked Sam’s standpoint on “*levelling the playing field,*” keeping the competition for post-secondary and scholarships fair for all.

Both Susan and Tom had powerful feelings about the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam as well. When I posed this question at the end of the interview process, Tom was excited to talk about the topic (It is to be noted again that Tom is going to be retired at the end of this interview after have more than three decades teaching English Language Arts). When I asked Tom if he felt that the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam was a truly valuable assessment tool, he stated with great confidence that he believed the only reason such an exam existed was because the Government of Alberta needed a way to have some credibility with the public in saying that they provided a good education for all students across the province; they needed a reason to exist. Tom continued on to say in his interview:

*The fact that we have five different strands in ELA and the exam really only covers a couple of them, maybe three if you stretch it a bit. Even though our exams are being touted as the ultimate throughout many countries, and some countries have adopted this type of exam, I still don't feel it is the 'be all and end all' of the ELA curriculum. I think the individual teacher knows much more about evaluating the whole student than this exam will ever tell Alberta Education.*

Tom was a believer that the ELA 30-1 diploma exam was politically motivated so as to appear to have commonality among the students and support standards that Alberta Education had in place.

Susan also agreed with Tom because she felt that the ELA 30-1 diploma exam, or any form of standardized testing, was a way for the government to “*hold teachers accountable for the decisions that are made.*” Although Susan had made it clear that she would love to be a teacher who teaches students to write authentically and take risks, the reality was that on the fringes of her course, the diploma exam loomed and she was not willing to take that great of a chance with her students, or herself, given the high stakes of the exam. Contrary to what the ELA 30-1 curriculum stated, “*Students integrate and synthesize their findings, and in the course of managing ideas and information, they formulate generalizations and conclusions and develop personal perspectives* (Alberta Education, 2003a p. 39). Susan believed this to be a way in which Alberta Education appeared to be progressive and appeared to foster authentic student writing; however, Susan felt the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam proved otherwise. It had been her experience, as was noted earlier, that students who do take risks on these exams are met with failure. She did not believe that the exam existed for the student, but rather, for the government to keep a watchful eye on the teachers who teach these subjects.

Byron and Laura, the two teachers who both felt the ELA 30-1 diploma exam must have a place within the assessment process of the grade 12 students across the province of Alberta, felt that it is assessed the wrong way. Both teachers agreed that there must be standards, but to what degree? Byron suggested in his interview that if Alberta Education dropped the weight to 30%, he was convinced that the student average would rise. Laura also agreed that if the current 50% weighting was dropped, students would be less stressed, less anxious and possibly more willing to take the risks in their writing which aligned with Rosenblatt's (1938) theory that literary interpretations are unique to each individual. It is to be noted that earlier, Laura, liked the idea of the diploma exam because, as a new teacher, it gave her something to teach toward; it had standards and guidelines to help her know what to teach. This is not the dispute for her; the exam was a good tool for teachers, but not the best assessment to gauge student learning.

It is interesting to note here the great divergence in opinions between the English Language Arts 30-1 teachers in this interview and their feelings about the ELA 30-1 diploma exam. Two of the six teachers defended everything about the diploma exam; however, the other four had their own opinions about how to create a better educational experience for our Alberta students; they agreed with a mandatory assessment, but the current nature and structure of the exam was the concern here. The one constant all six of the teachers agreed with was the fact that there must be a standard, but this idea begged the question, what was that standard and what would it look like?

This was the end of the professional dialogue with the six teachers regarding the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. Based on the interview responses of these six experienced ELA 30-1 research participants, I can conclude that the ELA 30-1 diploma exam does shape English Language Arts 30-1 teachers' assessment practices and pedagogy in the classroom. It is

to be noted here that the nature of this study does not provide provincial generalizations about teaching English Language Arts 30-1, and is only based on the views and responses of the six study participants and myself. The remainder of this study is devoted to the personal amalgamation of the information that was presented within this research coupled with my own introspection regarding the English 30-1 diploma exam.

## Chapter 5: The Reflection

*“My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way.” – Ernest Hemingway*

### Final Thoughts

Conducting this research has taught me many things; however, to say that my understanding of this topic is complete would be far too presumptuous. Although I am an English Language Arts 30-1 teacher with several years of experience, I felt removed from, but still somehow involved, much like an omniscient viewer, while this research was taking place. All six of these teachers allowed me into their teaching lives and shared some of their most honest truths with me about teaching English Language Arts 30-1, a high-stakes diploma course; truths which resonated, yet frustrated me. As I listened over and over to the interview transcripts, I realized that we English Language Arts 30-1 teachers have succumbed to an English Language Arts 30-1 “diploma-esque” form of assessment and have ultimately allowed the ELA 30-1 diploma exam to shape our lessons, assessments, and pedagogy. The “frustration” component of this research lies within the understanding that I have accepted this form of assessment and have not challenged it. This is why: Hillocks (2002) represents the ambivalences surrounding high stakes testing when he describes the complaints, anger, and frustration that stake-holders: students, parents, teachers, and administrators, convey regarding the role of testing in schools. Simultaneously, with this sense of frustration runs a sense of pride, if of course, your students achieve well on the diploma exam, then we (stake-holders) condone such narrow, high-stakes assessments. Ironically we English Language Arts 30-1 teachers tend to discount the validity of the diploma exam on one hand, while judging student achievement and our “pedagogy” on the other. It is a paradox; an evil paradox. This theme echoed in most of

what Byron stated. The question continues to be left unanswered: How can we remedy this inconsistency within our practice? Perhaps this question has potential to be explored for future research.

Until this point of my research, I suffered a disconnect within my teaching. I was following my curriculum, but was a minimalist when it came to high exam results. My students generally did adequately on the diploma exam, satisfactory and/or proficient, but just being okay just was not good enough for the senior administration. I deliberated many times on how I could improve my diploma exam results. Finally, it came to me when Alberta's former Education Minister Dave Hancock stated in his press release that across the province all English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam scores were low; this was my sign that I needed to investigate what it was that ELA teachers were doing in their classrooms across this province. What I learned from this research was that ELA 30-1 teachers involved in this study were doing the same thing I was; just trying to teach our students to love and appreciate various genres of literature and write about them in insightful ways while adhering to the confines of the diploma exam. The term "confines" alone connotes restrictions and parameters. These confines certainly do not appear in my grade 10 classes and are only mildly present in my grade 11 classes; however, my grade 12 classes are enveloped by these "diploma-esque" confines.

To further illustrate the aforementioned point regarding pedagogical limitations the diploma exam impinges upon teachers, Abrams et al. (2003) states that:

While teachers reported generally positive views towards their states [sic] curricular standards, particularly troubling was the substantial majority of teachers in both high and

low stakes states that reported the state test has led them to teach in ways that contradict their own notions of sound educational practice (p. 27).

The effect of such an exam on the teachers' pedagogy involved in this study has certainly been uncovered. For further fodder, the vignette below explicates the changes such an exam makes to a teacher's pedagogy.

In the fall of 2010, a reformed English Language Arts teacher emerged and tailored her teaching to ensure that high test results would be a reality for her this semester. That teacher prepared her students for the ELA 30-1 diploma exam, changed her assessment practices and tailored all assignments to model the diploma exam. It could be said that her students became "*stats*" instead of "*learners*" from that moment on. The results, however, were a surprise. In her class of 34 students that semester, six students reached the '*standard of excellence*' category on the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam. That is 18% compared to the provincial average of 5%. The teacher was in shock as her principal called her into the office to commend her on a "*wonderful success*". Yes, the students achieved well. Yes, the exam results were raised. Yes, the school looked great in the eyes of the Board Office. But... Yes, the teacher did not get through her curriculum. And a final yes, the teacher taught to the test. Is it any wonder the students did well?

The semester consisted of six critical essays (one for each unit), six personal responses (one for each unit) and six reading comprehension multiple choice exams (old diploma exams, one for each unit) and that was it. There has to be some truth to the trite and aged cliché, "*practice makes perfect*". That was what it took to raise her school's ELA 30-1 diploma results. If she knew that was what it took, she would have been less innovative, less

differentiated and more robotic in her teaching years ago. It could be argued that she had a stellar group of students that semester, but as the semesters kept passing, she continued on her journey of netting great test results because of her pedagogical alternative and narrowed assessment practices.

You may have realized that I am the above teacher, and it is still who I am. In retrospect, I embarked on this journey trying to find an enhanced and more effective way to teach my English Language Arts 30-1 students to have success on the diploma exam. I wanted to learn what others were doing in my practice to obtain fine results. I succeeded on the “stats” portion of my job by obtaining and maintaining respectable results over the last few semesters, but part of me is so bitter because of what I sacrificed to obtain these results. I did not become an English Language Arts teacher because I wanted to be in pursuit of high results. I became an English Language Arts teacher because I loved literature and teaching students to embrace beautiful language and read and write simply for its own sake. For me, to forfeit the pleasure that a course such as English Language Arts 30-1 can evoke on a personal level, in pursuit of higher test scores is ironically, unreasonable.

Teaching English Language Arts for me was previously a process course – how to get the writer to that polished final product – but as demonstrated via this research, the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam assessed the student on a final product in the absence of the process, given the time constraints imposed by this exam. It is to be understood and noted that I agree with the evaluation of a finished product and being selective in how much I help the writer grow; however, there must be a place for this process within my classroom as Elbow (1973), Leggo (1999), Murray (1968), and Rosenblatt (1938) have suggested. The challenge lies in how much process do I teach and how much product to I assess. I do know now that I do not want to



lose my process approach within my classroom. Recently, I have adopted an “*all or nothing*” approach to teaching English Language Arts 30-1 and there must be a happy medium, I just need to find it. In the interview I asked Byron how he teaches his students to be better writers. He stated, “*I can teach the students the process of writing, I can show them the final products they are after but I cannot teach them creativity. Creativity, they either have it or they don’t. It is simple as that.*” While I agree with Byron for the most part, I do believe that there is a way to enhance a student’s creativity; I just do not know how to execute it yet. This is an area I need to learn more about which could assist me in locating that “happy medium” I am in search of.

Although others in our profession acrimoniously concluded that this attitude may signify these teachers, including myself, “*teach to the test*”, this would be an unfair statement. All of these teachers, including myself, felt it was our professional obligation to make certain our students are prepared for the diploma exam and if that means we taught the acute skills necessary to write a good diploma exam, we did that. All six teachers, and I, were conscientious and professional teachers who attributed great value and importance to the discipline of English Language Arts. We all are aware of the peripheral matters, such as the diploma exam, that must be dealt with as part of teaching the subject of English Language Arts 30-1 and we dealt with these matters as pragmatically as we could. It is inevitable that there will be pressure with a test of this magnitude; that is our reality as teachers of a diploma course and it will remain that way for us, in this province, to continue to teach to the test and be under constant scrutiny with our results.

Much of what I plan to work towards changing with my own teaching is, in fact, the thing that which distresses me most about teaching English Language Arts 30-1 – *teaching to the test*.

I feel more at ease pursuing these changes because of the professional discourse I have shared with my six participants regarding their feelings about the diploma exam, their teaching philosophies and strategies specific to teaching ELA 30-1, and their assessment practices. Of course these changes will not occur overnight and the ELA 30-1 diploma exam will continue to exist as a reality in this course, perhaps influencing and affecting my teaching in a positive way, or not – the jury is still deliberating. Ultimately, what I set out to have accomplished with this study was to, at the very least, shine a light of understanding of the impact the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam has on the teachings that occur in English Language Arts 30-1 teachers' classes and how it creates a prescribed pedagogy in what could be one of the most creative classes taught in high schools across the province of Alberta. Similarly, this study was also intended to provide a professional venue to engage with other fellow English Language Arts 30-1 teachers to assist me in making sense of my pedagogical struggle between teaching and embracing the joy and passion of my calling as an English Language Arts educator. The study raised the question whether or not I should suppress my pedagogy and be sent into “exam purgatory” where I remain trapped and have to wait for the final judgement regarding my semester's exam scores. Am I going to rise above or will I be sent down below?

## **Conclusion**

The central questions regarding this study sought to find out to what extent the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam influenced ELA 30-1 teachers' pedagogy and assessment practices. In an attempt to find these answers, my research helped me to discover a plethora of information about our practice as English Language Arts 30-1 educators from speaking with my research participants and from my own reflections. While writing and analyzing this research over the past months, the myriad of writings on the subject of high-stakes testing narrowing

English Language Arts 30-1 teachers' pedagogy has certainly solidified the theory that it does inhibit English Language Arts 30-1 teachers' instruction and assessment. The literature seemingly suggests that standardized exams, such as the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam, unquestionably have an impact on educational innovation and progress. We need to remind the public that the education system is much broader and deeper than that of a canned exam given in two parts, lasting three hours each. Children's education is so much more than a diploma exam, and my hope is, at the very least, to continue to carry this professional dialogue forward on this subject.

Whether we are conscious of the aforementioned notion that the diploma exam is not a true indicator of a student's true knowledge, in the eyes of the public the English Language Arts 30-1 diploma exam is a testament of good teaching. Philosophically, I reject this statement. Could implementing Rosenblatt's (1938) 73 year old ideas lead to an improvement in English Language Arts 30-1 diploma test scores if teachers are willing to take the risk? This is another study worthy of future attention.

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## Appendices



March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Dear *Research Participant 'A'*,

I am a graduate student from the University of Alberta, studying under Dr. Ingrid Johnston, while pursuing a Master's degree in Secondary Education with a focus in English language arts. I am looking for potential research participants to take part in my research work dedicated to finding out if the English 30-1 diploma exam informs teachers' pedagogy and assessment practices. I am inviting you to be a part of this qualitative research project. In order to determine your views on this topic, I am hoping you will volunteer to participate in an interview process with myself to discuss the topic of the English 30-1 diploma examination.

The project called *The English 30-1 Diploma Exam: Assessment Practices and Pedagogy*, will gather feedback from experienced English teachers, like yourself, in the following areas:

- i. Your English teaching background and professional development
- ii. How your English 30-1 semester / year is organized (*units, lessons, assessments etc...*)
- iii. Your view on the English 30-1 diploma examination

This study involves an interview only. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. It will be a personable interview with myself at a location of your choice. I will be audio recording this interview for research purposes only. This interview is strictly confidential and your identity will be protected. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the interview data. After the interview is over, I will transcribe the audio-tapes and will share a transcript of the interview with you for your verification. You will be free to make any changes, you deem appropriate, to the transcript.

The interview questions are as follows:

1. Tell me about your English 30-1 teaching experience?
2. How long have you been teaching the English 30-1 course?
3. Tell me about your current teaching assignment?
4. Have you ever had the opportunity to mark the Alberta English 30-1 diploma exams? If yes, why did you choose to mark?
5. Have you ever been involved in any other areas regarding the English 30-1 diploma exams? *Ex: Item writing, test validation, standards confirming.* Anything along those lines?
6. What is the impact it has on your classroom?
7. Tell me about your professional development in the area of the English Language Arts? Do you belong to any councils or professional organizations? If so, what made you choose these specific organizations?

8. Do you do any professional reading in the field of English? For example, scholarly journals, curriculum innovation... etc.
9. Talk about how your English 30-1 semester is organized? (*units, themes, core activities...*)
10. Why do you structure your semester this way?
11. Do the English 30-1 diploma exams, both Part A and Part B, have an impact on your lesson, unit plans and assessment?
12. Do you feel you tend to emphasize the Part A instruction of the Personal Response to literature and the Critical Response to literature over Part B, reading comprehension? Why or why not?
13. How do you go about teaching writing in your classroom?
14. Share with me your assessment practices, specifically the written assessment?
15. Do you use what Alberta Education trains the Diploma Markers to use to assess writing? If so, why? Do you feel this is a useful assessment tool?
16. How do you teach the skill of reading comprehension to address Part 'B' of the diploma exam?
17. How do the students in your classroom feel about the diploma exam in general?
18. As a teacher of the English 30-1 diploma exam, do you feel pressured to perform? Why or why not?
19. How do your English lessons change in June compared to January?
20. What would change in your classroom if there were no English 30-1 diplomas at the end of the semester?

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you will receive no benefits for your participation and no penalties will apply should you choose not to participate. You are free not to answer any of the questions or to withdraw from the study up until two weeks after I have returned the transcripts to you – after we have reviewed them, you have made any changes and approved of the final version. If you choose to withdraw, any information that you provided in this research will be destroyed and will not be used, in any way, with this study. Withdrawal from this research project, at any time, will not result in any repercussions nor will your withdrawal be revealed to your school district or any persons of interest.

It is not expected that any harms or risks will result from your participation in the study. If you experience any discomfort or stress from any of the questions or you feel fatigued you can choose not to answer any questions or stop the interview at any time.

Choosing to participate or not in this study is a personal and private matter. No other participants linked to this research will know of your decision; you will remain completely anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used to guarantee anonymity and any means of identifying you (ie. School, school district, city, etc...) All documents used within this study will be handled and securely stored directly by me for 5 years and then destroyed.

The research gathered from this project will be used solely for the purposes of understanding if, in fact, the English 30-1 diploma exam has an effect on teachers' pedagogy and assessment strategies. The information you provide will be used in my master's project document, for teaching purposes, and may be used in academic publications or presentations. All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. If you agree to participate in this research, please sign one of the following consent forms and return it to my office via the postage-paid envelope enclosed before May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. The other form is to be kept by you for your own reference.

If you would like a copy of the final report please contact me at the address provided and allow 7 days for the request to be processed.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension, Augustana and Campus Saint Jean Research Ethics Board (EEASJ REB) at the University of



Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEASJ REB c/o (780) 492-2614. Please feel free to contact myself or my supervisor using the below information with any questions or concerns you have with this study.

Tracy Melnyk, (Graduate Student, Researcher) Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta,  
780-903-0152 [tmalloy@ualberta.ca](mailto:tmalloy@ualberta.ca)

Dr. Ingrid Johnston (Supervisor - Professor and Graduate Coordinator) Department of Secondary Education,  
347 Education South, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2G5  
780.492.4599 [Ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca](mailto:Ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca)

Thank you for your consideration.

Tracy Melnyk, B.Ed.



# UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

I, \_\_\_\_\_, consent to be a participant in the research project titled, *The English 30-1 Diploma Exam: Assessment Practices and Pedagogy*. This project is led by Tracy Melnyk under the direct supervision of Dr. Ingrid Johnston at the University of Alberta, and involves an interview based on your views of the English 30-1 diploma exam and how it affects your pedagogy and assessment practices.

I understand the task that I will be asked to participate in is:

1. an interview of approximately 45 minutes duration and that I will receive no privileges for my participation.

I understand that:

1. I will be asked to participate in an interview comprised of 20 open-ended questions regarding my views on the English 30-1 diploma exam.
2. The interview will be audio recorded and a transcript will be sent to me for my review and approval – at which time I can make any changes.
3. All data will be kept confidential and the data that I approve will be kept secure for a period of five years, after which the data will be destroyed.
4. I may be contacted by e-mail or phone for further clarification.
5. I may or choose not to answer any questions or withdraw from the research project, at any time up until the time that I have approved the transcripts, without repercussions or penalties of any kind.
6. All data collected will be dealt with securely and confidentially while protecting my anonymity.
7. The data collected will be used for compiling reports and/or articles to improve the teaching practice regarding the English 30-1 diploma exam – including the researcher's master's project document and possible academic publications and presentations.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I am interested in participating in the interview

The researcher will provide two copies of the letter and consent form, one to be signed and returned, and one for the participants to keep for their own records.

Contact person in case of concerns, complaints or consequences:

Researchers:

Tracy Melnyk, (Graduate Student, Researcher) Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta,  
780-903-0152 [tmalloy@ualberta.ca](mailto:tmalloy@ualberta.ca)

Dr. Ingrid Johnston (Professor and Graduate Coordinator) Department of Secondary Education,  
347 Education South, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2G5  
780.492.4599 [Ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca](mailto:Ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca)

Ethics:

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension, Augustana and Campus Saint Jean Research Ethics Board (EEASJ REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEASJ REB c/o (780) 492-2614

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Signature of participant

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Date signed

## English 30-1 Course Outline

**Teacher:** Mrs. T. Melnyk    email: [tracym@eics.ab.ca](mailto:tracym@eics.ab.ca)

**Room:** 109

**Block 2:** 9:56-11:20

**Weighting: 5 Credits (the student must pass this course with a grade of 50% or higher to receive credits in English 30-1)**

### Program Rationale:

English 30-1 is a five credit course designed for those students wishing to go on to post-secondary institutions after graduation.

“There are two basic aims of the senior high school English language arts program:

- to encourage, in students, an understanding and appreciation of the significance and artistry of **literature**.
- to enable students to understand and appreciate **language** and to use it confidently for a variety of purposes, with a variety of audiences and in a variety of situations for communication, personal satisfaction and learning.”

### Expected Outcomes:

“The general outcomes are interrelated and interdependent; each is to be achieved through a variety of **listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing** and **representing** experiences . . . to:

- explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences
- comprehend and respond personally, critically, and creatively to literature and to other texts in oral, print, visual and multimedia forms
- manage ideas and information
- create oral, print, visual and multimedia texts, and enhance the clarity and artistry of communication
- respect, support and collaborate with others.”

*Program of Studies, 2009*

### Assignments:

**English 30-1** is designed to help you explore the literary world and will afford you the opportunities to study various types of literature. This course will also assess your ability to read and respond to these various literary forms. This is a “*process*” course which means that each skill builds upon the other and continues to be used throughout. Your understanding of genre, literary devices and techniques, personal interpretation, and writer’s purpose will continue to be assessed. Critical reading and thinking skills, appreciation of human experiences, and values reflected in literature will be reflected in your written assignments. Writing and editing skills continue to be integrated throughout this course.

The characteristics of each genre will be studied and selections from the listed texts (as well as other sources) will be analyzed. Assignments will include formal and informal essays – in class only, written response: personal, critical, & analytical, reading response, tests, and quizzes. Specific details will be supplied prior to the commencement of each unit.

In preparing you for your **Diploma in English 30-1**, I will be providing you with strategies and suggestions for both the ***Reading Comprehension and Written Response*** portions of this exam. In doing this, I will provide you with many opportunities to succeed, PROMISE! ***Breathe—Don’t sweat it!***



### Proposed Units:

Poetry  
The Short Story  
Shakespearean Drama – *Hamlet*  
Modern Drama – *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller  
Novel Study - *Monkey Beach* by Eden Robinson  
Feature Film Study – *Shawshank Redemption*  
Exam Preparation and Review

### Basic and Recommended Texts:

*Inside Stories – Senior*  
*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare  
*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller  
*Monkey Beach* by Eden Robinson  
Thesaurus

**Required Course Supplies:**

3 ringed binder

Loose-leaf paper

Blue or black ink pens for all written assignments

*\*Absolutely no assignments are to be handed in written in annoying colored inks: yellow, green, red etc....Blue or black will suffice! Thanks ☺*

Hi-Liters

**Course Evaluation:**

You will be assessed using a dual system of assessment: ***Formative & Summative Assessment***

1. **Formative Assessment:** The student will have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of concepts on assigned work. This type of evaluation can be used on homework assignments, group work, oral contributions, practice quizzes, etc... These assignments will be marked as **INSUFFICIENT, BASIC, PROFICIENT OR EXCELLENT**. Some assignments will have comments only, (descriptive feedback) the purpose is to direct student learning. Formative assessment is advantageous as it gives the student an opportunity to check their understanding of concepts learned and adjust as needed.
2. **Summative Assessment:** The student will receive a mark/grade on their performance. This can be used on written assignments, projects, quizzes, projects, Unit Exams and the Final Exam.

**Both formative and summative evaluations will be recorded in PowerSchool. All students and parents can access this information at any time.**

The final grade for English 30-1 is a combination of the Provincial Diploma Exam mark and course work

- **Diploma Exam = 50% of the final grade.**
- **Course Work = 50% of the final grade.**

Personal Response – 20%

Critical Response – 30%

Reading Comprehension – 50%

**Total – 100%**

**Class Mark – 50%**

**Diploma Exam – 50%**

The Diploma Exam consists of two parts:

**PART A** (Written Portion) - **Tuesday, June 12<sup>th</sup> 9:00 – 11:30 am**

**PART B** (Multiple Choice) – **Monday, June 18<sup>th</sup> 9:00 – 11:30 am**

**Some Expectations and Guidelines:**

1. Attendance, readiness and participation:

- Please arrive to class on time with your text, binder and other supplies, and be prepared to work and to participate positively in class discussions. 😊
- Please make sure that **“excusable”** absences and lates are phoned into the office.
- Absences and lates which are not accompanied by a phone call or note will be recorded as **“unexcused”**.

2. If you fail to plan, you plan to fail:

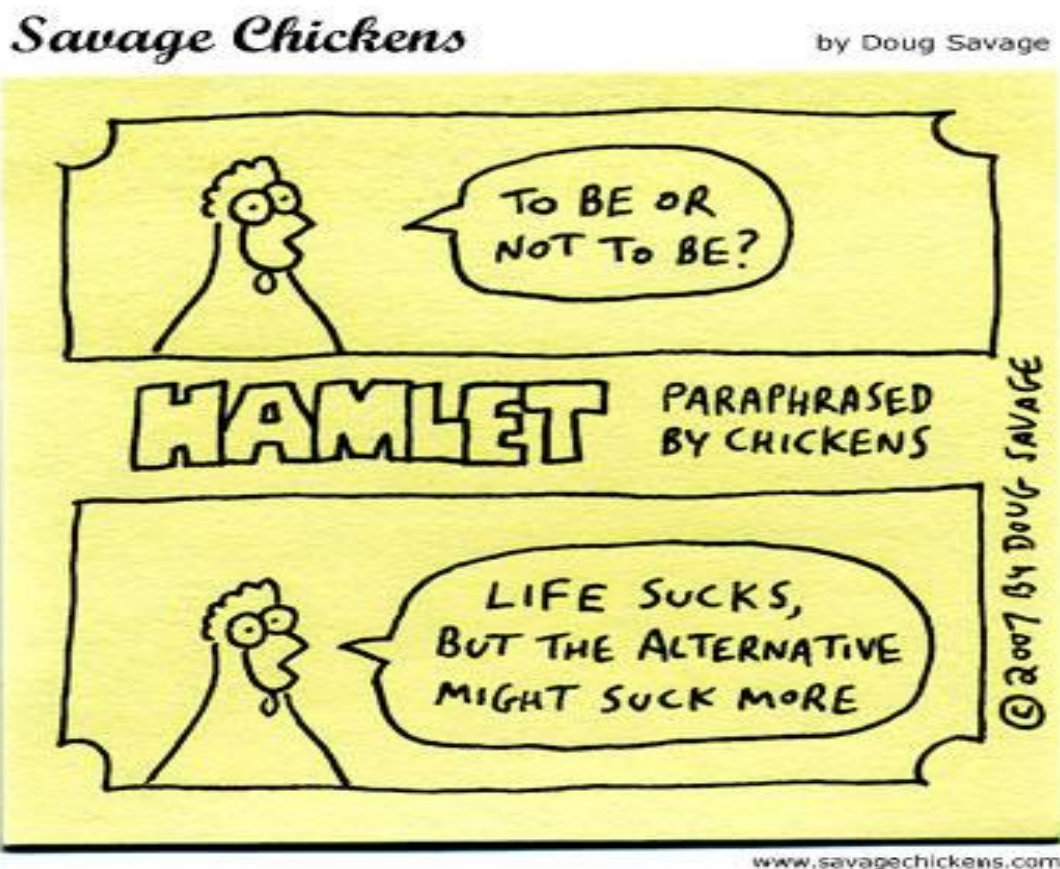
- Get started on your assignments early to avoid being penalized. Hand in all assignments at the beginning of class on the due date.
- Quizzes and in class assessments missed due to an **“unexcused”** late or absence will result in a **grade of zero**.
- **Assignments that are not submitted on the due date will be penalized 10 % per day, for up to three days, after which time a grade of zero will be awarded. I will not chase you for missed assignments. It is your responsibility to account for your missed assignments. This is how we roll we roll in grade 12!!!**
- Reasonable allowances will be made for students experiencing serious illness or confronted by unexpected circumstances of an emergent nature. I am very flexible if you come and see me early enough to negotiate something more suitable for you, within reason of course! 😊
- Please note, if you are absent, then your assignment must be submitted upon your return to school. Again, I will not hunt you down – it your responsibility!
- It is your responsibility to collect any assigned work during your absence. If you plan to be absent (appointments, holidays, etc.), please see me beforehand for information about the lesson/assignment. Please ensure that your **“buddy”** (someone in the same class) will collect missed work for you when you are absent.

3. If you have a valid reason for being absent **“excused”** on the day of a quiz, exam, or in class assessments, a **“make-up”** assessment will be taken asap upon your return according to school policy. **You fail to do that, your grade is zero.**

4. Keep neat, ordered and concise class notes. You will need them to study for the Diploma examination. Utilize your student agenda to record important information (due dates, test scores, etc.).

5. If you are having any difficulty in this class, then please ask me for help. I am willing to help anyone who is willing to work hard. I am usually available any lunch hour and also am in the Student Centre for block 1 & 2. Please inform me of your concern and to meet at a mutually appropriate time.

6. You will be issued a number of texts and novels for this class. Please ensure that you do not damage, deface or lose them or you will be charged at the end of the term.





***Assessment Standards and Practices for  
English Language Arts 30–1***

Weightings	The <b>diploma examination mark</b> and the <b>school-awarded mark</b> each constitute <b>50%</b> of a student’s final mark in English Language Arts 30–1.	
Examination Format and Weightings	The English Language Arts 30–1 Diploma Examination is made up of two parts: <b>Part A: Written Response (50%)</b> and <b>Part B: Reading (50%)</b> .	
<i>Part A: Written Response</i> Assignments, Scoring Categories, and Weightings	<b>Personal Response to Texts Assignment (20%)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideas and Impressions      10%</li> <li>• Presentation                      10%</li> </ul>	<b>Critical / Analytical Response to Literary Texts Assignment (30%)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thought and Understanding      7.5%</li> <li>• Supporting Evidence      7.5%</li> <li>• Form and Structure      5.0%</li> <li>• Matters of Choice      5.0%</li> <li>• Matters of Correctness      5.0%</li> </ul>
<i>Part B: Reading</i>	The <b>Part B: Reading</b> component is an assessment of students’ abilities to read a variety of literary texts closely. Critical reading and thinking skills; understanding of vocabulary; appreciation of tone, figurative language, and rhetorical devices; understanding of the purposes and effects of writers’ choices; and appreciation of human experience and values reflected in literature will be assessed. <b>Text types</b> include excerpts from <b>extended texts</b> —novel, book-length nonfiction, modern and/or contemporary drama, and Shakespearean drama—and <b>shorter texts</b> —poetry, short story, visual texts, persuasive, personal, expository, biographical, and autobiographical essays, and popular nonfiction. Some questions will be <b>linked</b> to more than one reading selection; that is, they will ask students to consider two or more readings connected by technique, context and/or theme.	
Examination Writing Time Allowed	Both the <i>Part A: Written Response</i> and <i>Part B: Reading</i> components were developed to be completed in <b>2 ½ hours</b> ; however, <b>an additional ½ hour</b> is allowed for students to complete each component.	

**Scoring Categories and Scoring Criteria for 2010–2011 Personal Response to Texts Assignment**

**Ideas and Impressions** (10% of total examination mark)  
 Cross-Reference to the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* 2.1 2.2 2.3 4.1

**When marking Ideas and Impressions, the marker should consider**

- the student’s **exploration** of the topic
- the student’s **ideas and reflection**
- **support** in relation to the student’s ideas and impressions

Because students’ responses to the *Personal Response to Texts Assignment* vary widely—from philosophical discussions to personal narratives to creative approaches—assessment of the *Personal Response to Texts Assignment* on the diploma examination will be in the context of Louise Rosenblatt’s suggestion:  
*... the evaluation of the answers would be in terms of the amount of evidence that the youngster has actually read something and thought about it, not a question of whether, necessarily, he has thought about it the way an adult would, or given an adult’s “correct” answer.*

Rosenblatt, Louise. “The Reader’s Contribution in the Literary Experience: Interview with Louise Rosenblatt.” By Lionel Wilson. *English Quarterly* 14, no.1 (Spring, 1981): 3–12.

Markers will also consider Grant P. Wiggins’ suggestion that we should assess students’ writing “with the tact of Socrates: tact to respect the student’s ideas enough to enter them fully—even more fully than the thinker sometimes—and thus the tact to accept apt but unanticipated or unique responses.”

Wiggins, Grant P. *Assessing Student Performance: Exploring the Purpose and Limits of Testing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993, p. 40.

<b>Excellent</b> <b>E</b>	The student’s exploration of the topic is insightful. Perceptions and/or ideas are confident and discerning. Support is precise and aptly reinforces the student’s ideas and impressions.
<b>Proficient</b> <b>PF</b>	The student’s exploration of the topic is purposeful. Perceptions and/or ideas are thoughtful and considered. Support is specific and strengthens the student’s ideas and impressions.
<b>Satisfactory</b> <b>S</b>	The student’s exploration of the topic is generalized. Perceptions and/or ideas are straightforward and relevant. Support is adequate and clarifies the student’s ideas and impressions.
<b>Limited</b> <b>L</b>	The student’s exploration of the topic is vague. Perceptions and/or ideas are superficial and/or ambiguous. Support is imprecise and/or ineffectively related to the student’s ideas and impressions.
<b>Poor</b> <b>P</b>	The student’s exploration of the topic is minimal. Perceptions and/or ideas are undeveloped and/or irrelevant. Support is lacking and/or unrelated to the student’s ideas and impressions.
<b>Insufficient</b> <b>INS</b>	<b>Insufficient is a special category. It is not an indicator of quality.</b> Assign Insufficient when <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the student has responded using a form other than prose <b>OR</b></li> <li>• the student has written so little that it is not possible to assess Ideas and Impressions <b>OR</b></li> <li>• there is no evidence that the topic presented in the assignment has been addressed <b>OR</b></li> <li>• there is no connection between the text(s) provided in the assignment and the student’s response.</li> </ul>

*Scoring Categories and  
Scoring Criteria for  
2010–2011  
Personal Response to  
Texts Assignment  
(continued)*

**Presentation** (10% of total examination mark)  
Cross-Reference to the *Program of Studies for Senior High  
School English Language Arts 30–2* 3.1 3.2 4.1 4.2

When marking **Presentation**, the marker should consider the effectiveness of

- **voice** in relation to the context created by the student in the chosen prose form
- **stylistic choices** (including quality and correctness of language and expression) and the student's creation of **tone**
- the student's development of a **unifying effect**

**Consider the proportion of error in terms of the complexity and length of the response.**

**Excellent**

**E**

The voice created by the student is convincing. Stylistic choices are precise and the student's creation of tone is adept. The unifying effect is skillfully developed.

**Proficient**

**PF**

The voice created by the student is distinct. Stylistic choices are specific and the student's creation of tone is competent. The unifying effect is capably developed.

**Satisfactory**

**S**

The voice created by the student is apparent. Stylistic choices are adequate and the student's creation of tone is conventional. The unifying effect is appropriately developed.

**Limited**

**L**

The voice created by the student is indistinct. Stylistic choices are imprecise and the student's creation of tone is inconsistent. The unifying effect is inadequately developed.

**Poor**

**P**

The voice created by the student is obscure. Stylistic choices impede communication and the student's creation of tone is ineffective. A unifying effect is absent.

**Scoring Categories and Scoring Criteria for 2010–2011**

**Critical / Analytical Response to Literary Texts Assignment**

Because students' responses to the *Critical / Analytical Response to Literary Texts Assignment* vary widely—from philosophical discussions to personal narratives to creative approaches—assessment of the *Critical / Analytical Response to Literary Texts Assignment* on the diploma examination will be in the context of Louise Rosenblatt's suggestion: ... *the evaluation of the answers would be in terms of the amount of evidence that the youngster has actually read something and thought about it, not a question of whether, necessarily, he has thought about it the way an adult would, or given an adult's "correct" answer.*

Rosenblatt, Louise. "The Reader's Contribution in the Literary Experience: Interview with Louise Rosenblatt." By Lionel Wilson. *English Quarterly* 14, no.1 (Spring, 1981): 3–12.

Markers will also consider Grant P. Wiggins' suggestion that we should assess students' writing "with the tact of Socrates: tact to respect the student's ideas enough to enter them fully—even more fully than the thinker sometimes—and thus the tact to accept apt but unanticipatable or unique responses."

Wiggins, Grant P. *Assessing Student Performance: Exploring the Purpose and Limits of Testing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993, p. 40.

**Thought and Understanding** (7.5% of total examination mark)  
Cross-Reference to the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* 2.1 2.2 4.1 4.2

When marking **Thought and Understanding**, the marker should consider

- how effectively the student's ideas relate to the assignment
- the quality of the literary interpretations and understanding

**Excellent**

**E**

Ideas are insightful and carefully considered, demonstrating a comprehension of subtle distinctions in the literary text(s) and the topic. Literary interpretations are perceptive and illuminating.

**Proficient**

**PF**

Ideas are thoughtful and considered, demonstrating a competent comprehension of the literary text(s) and the topic. Literary interpretations are revealing and sensible.

**Satisfactory**

**S**

Ideas are relevant and straightforward, demonstrating a generalized comprehension of the literary text(s) and the topic. Literary interpretations are general but plausible.

**Limited**

**L**

Ideas are superficial or oversimplified, demonstrating a weak comprehension of the literary text(s) and the topic. Literary interpretations are incomplete and/or literal.

**Poor**

**P**

Ideas are largely absent or irrelevant, and/or do not develop the topic. Little comprehension of the literary text(s) is demonstrated.

**Insufficient**

**INS**

**Insufficient is a special category. It is not an indicator of quality.** Assign Insufficient when

- the student has written so little that it is not possible to assess Thought and Understanding and/or Supporting Evidence **OR**
- no reference has been made to literature studied **OR**
- the only literary reference present is to the text(s) provided in the first assignment **OR**
- there is no evidence of an attempt to fulfill the task presented in the assignment.

*Scoring Categories and Scoring Criteria for 2010–2011 Critical / Analytical Response to Literary Texts Assignment*

**Supporting Evidence** (7.5% of total examination mark)  
Cross-Reference to the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* 2.3 3.2 4.1 4.2

When marking **Supporting Evidence**, the marker should consider

- the **selection** and **quality** of evidence
- how well the supporting evidence is **employed**, developed, and **synthesized** to support the student's ideas

**Consider ideas presented in the *Personal Reflection on Choice of Literary Text(s)*.**

**Excellent**  
**E** Support is precise and astutely chosen to reinforce the student's ideas in a convincing way. A valid connection to the student's ideas is efficiently maintained.

**Proficient**  
**PF** Support is specific and well chosen to reinforce the student's ideas in a persuasive way. A sound connection to the student's ideas is capably maintained.

**Satisfactory**  
**S** Support is general, adequate, and appropriately chosen to reinforce the student's ideas in an acceptable way but occasionally may lack persuasiveness. A reasonable connection to the student's ideas is suitably maintained.

**Limited**  
**L** Support is inadequate, inaccurate, largely a restatement of what was read, and/or inappropriately chosen to reinforce the student's ideas and thus lacks persuasiveness. A weak connection to the student's ideas is maintained.

**Poor**  
**P** Support is irrelevant, overgeneralized, lacks validity, and/or is absent. Little or no connection to the student's ideas is evident.



*Scoring Categories and  
Scoring Criteria for  
2010–2011  
Critical / Analytical  
Response to Literary  
Texts Assignment*

**Form and Structure** (5% of total examination mark)  
Cross-Reference to the *Program of Studies for  
Senior High School English Language Arts 2.2 3.1 4.1 4.2*

When marking **Form and Structure**, the marker should consider how effectively the student's organizational choices result in

- a **coherent, focused, and shaped** arrangement and discussion in response to the assignment
- a **unifying effect or a controlling idea** that is developed and maintained

**Excellent**

**E**

A judicious arrangement of ideas and details contributes to a fluent discussion that is developed skillfully. The unifying effect or controlling idea is effectively sustained and integrated.

**Proficient**

**PF**

A purposeful arrangement of ideas and details contributes to a controlled discussion that is developed capably. The unifying effect or controlling idea is coherently sustained and presented.

**Satisfactory**

**S**

A straightforward arrangement of ideas and details provides direction for the discussion that is developed appropriately. The unifying effect or controlling idea is presented and maintained generally; however, coherence may falter.

**Limited**

**L**

A discernible but ineffectual arrangement of ideas and details provides some direction for the discussion that is underdeveloped. A unifying effect or controlling idea is inconsistently maintained.

**Poor**

**P**

A haphazard arrangement of ideas and details provides little or no direction for the discussion, and development is lacking or obscure. A unifying effect or controlling idea is absent.

*Scoring Categories and Scoring Criteria for 2010–2011 Critical / Analytical Response to Literary Texts Assignment*

**Matters of Choice** (5% of total examination mark)  
Cross-Reference to the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts 4.2*

When marking **Matters of Choice**, the marker should consider how effectively the student's choices enhance communication. The marker should consider

- **diction**
- choices of **syntactic structures** (such as parallelism, balance, inversion)
- the extent to which **stylistic choices** contribute to the creation of **voice**

<b>Excellent</b> <b>E</b>	Diction is precise. Syntactic structures are effective and sometimes polished. Stylistic choices contribute to the creation of a skillful composition with a convincing voice.
<b>Proficient</b> <b>PF</b>	Diction is specific. Syntactic structures are generally effective. Stylistic choices contribute to the creation of a considered composition with a capable voice.
<b>Satisfactory</b> <b>S</b>	Diction is adequate. Syntactic structures are straightforward, but attempts at complex structures may be awkward. Stylistic choices contribute to the creation of a conventional composition with an appropriate voice.
<b>Limited</b> <b>L</b>	Diction is imprecise and/or inappropriate. Syntactic structures are frequently awkward and/or ambiguous. Inadequate language choices contribute to the creation of a vague composition with an undiscerning voice.
<b>Poor</b> <b>P</b>	Diction is overgeneralized and/or inaccurate. Syntactic structures are uncontrolled and/or unintelligible. A lack of language choices contributes to the creation of a confused composition with an ineffective voice.



*Scoring Categories and Scoring Criteria for 2010–2011 Critical / Analytical Response to Literary Texts Assignment*

**Matters of Correctness** (5% of total examination mark)  
 Cross-Reference to the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts 4.2*

When marking **Matters of Correctness**, the marker should consider the correctness of

- **sentence construction** (completeness, consistency, subordination, coordination, predication)
- **usage** (accurate use of words according to convention and meaning)
- **grammar** (subject-verb/pronoun-antecedent agreement, pronoun reference, consistency of tense)
- **mechanics** (punctuation, spelling, capitalization)

**Consider the proportion of error in terms of the complexity and length of the response.**

**Excellent**  
**E** This writing demonstrates confidence in control of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. The relative absence of error is impressive considering the complexity of the response and the circumstances.

**Proficient**  
**PF** This writing demonstrates competence in control of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. Minor errors in complex language structures are understandable considering the circumstances.

**Satisfactory**  
**S** This writing demonstrates control of the basics of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. There may be occasional lapses in control and minor errors; however, the communication remains clear.

**Limited**  
**L** This writing demonstrates faltering control of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. The range of errors blurs the clarity of communication.

**Poor**  
**P** This writing demonstrates lack of control of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. Jarring errors impair communication.



