

“Mind the gap”

[Independent Education](#) | Oct 29, 2013 | [Comments 0](#)

By Joanne Wood

Taking a gap year after school is relatively common practice overseas, and South Africa is starting to follow this trend. American journalist Sue Shellenbarger explains the phenomenon: “Burnout from the competitive pressure of high school and a desire to find out more about themselves, are two of the top reasons students take gap years.”¹

Gap years are perceived as opportunities to buy young adults more time to make career decisions, while gaining some work and life experience. Many scholars experience anxiety when it comes to deciding what to do after school and taking a gap year can be a helpful option, depending on whether or not it is positively viewed by their parents.

The role of life orientation (LO) teachers

The decision of whether or not to take a gap year is a highly individual one and there is no single correct answer that applies to all scholars. LO teachers play a pivotal role in supporting and facilitating scholars’ career development, particularly in terms of their decisions regarding what to do after school. Before making a choice, scholars first need to improve their self-understanding.

Many students consider a gap year as being a short break between school and university, but they must consider realistically whether they will have the self-discipline to return to pursue tertiary education and apply themselves to their studies after a gap experience. LO teachers can help facilitate this decision-making by incorporating self-awareness activities into LO classes. There are numerous exercises that are useful in a classroom setting, from straightforward questionnaires to more creative activities such as creating collages.

Brenda Sara, head of LO at St John’s DSG, states that “all of our girls are strongly encouraged to apply to a tertiary institution, regardless of whether or not they actually intend on studying during their first year after school. They do a project that involves researching bursary and sponsorship options and calculating their APS (Admission Point Score). This gives them a good idea of the likelihood of their acceptance and reduces the anxiety of having to do it during their gap year. It is particularly important that they write the NBTs before embarking on a gap year overseas, as they can complete university applications online but are required to write the NBTs in person.” Some quick internet research will provide an LO teacher with several options.

Actively researching gap year options is another important aspect of making an informed decision. Another activity that LO teachers can promote is encouraging scholars to engage fully in the process of applying to study further. It is useful to have written the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs),² completed application forms and investigated funding providers before embarking on a gap year. Most universities will defer applications to the following year and it means that a scholar does not incur the stress of having to do these things during their gap year.

Structuring a gap year

We hear repeatedly that a gap year is deemed to be effective if proactively organised and structured, with specific goals in mind. LO teachers can help scholars to articulate these goals and to structure their gap year accordingly. Generally speaking, employers value the experienced gained during a gap year and appreciate the impact that it has on maturity.

However, this is only true if a young adult is able to illustrate how they were proactive during their gap year, and invested effort and energy into ensuring that it was well structured and resulted in the development of key skills such as leadership, communication and problem-solving skills. Today’s employers expect curriculum vitae (CV) to include mention of meaningful community development, and therefore it is advisable to structure some volunteer work into a gap year.

Full year not the only option

Taking a ‘gap’ for a full year is certainly not the only option available. Many students decide to incorporate their equivalent of a gap year

into their university studies. Andrew Morphew, Rhodes University graduate and entrepreneur, is an example: “I wanted to go straight to university after school, but at the same time, I didn’t want to miss out on the travel and growth opportunities that a gap year provides. I used the long December university holidays to go to Aspen, Colorado, in the USA and worked in the ski resorts as a waiter. The work was menial but it enabled me to travel, experience a different culture, develop interpersonal skills and learn how to ski. Importantly for me, it meant that I didn’t have to take an entire year off studying or work to achieve the benefits of a gap year.”

Another way of incorporating a gap year into one’s studies is via an exchange programme, an option that many South African universities offer. According to graduate Megan Mackenzie: “Rhodes University in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape has a fantastic exchange programme, which enabled me to spend six months of my undergraduate PPE (philosophy, politics and economics) degree at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, in the US. The experience was made affordable by the fact that I was only required to cover the cost of my flight and spending money. My overseas studies were included in the fees I had already paid to Rhodes South Africa.”

Local options

Gap years have traditionally been associated with costly overseas options. However, there are a plethora of local options enabling adolescents to stay closer to home. According to Brenda Horner from the Gap Academy in Pietermaritzburg,³ “a local gap year is becoming more and more popular. It provides young adults with an alternative to potentially costly overseas options and also means that they are able to be closer to home.

Our focus is on using the year productively to develop key skills such as CV compilation, interview skills, photography and financial management, to name a few. The year comprises four structured work experience weeks, which expose the students to various career options and enable them to make a more informed career decision at the end of the year.”

Overseas options

Overseas options are perennially popular for those who can afford the experience and are willing to take the risk of going far away from home. Michelle Pearson, an occupational therapist, was able to fund her flight overseas and her initial living costs by waitressing during her matric year. “This was stressful, as I had to balance a heavy matric workload with my waitressing duties, but was worthwhile.”

There are many organisations that assist in facilitating this process and often add value in terms of assisting with visa requirements and work placements overseas. According to Jenny Patrick from the OVC,⁴ there are a variety of extremely popular overseas options, ranging from au pairing or working at a summer camp in the USA to working on a kibbutz as a volunteer in Israel.

Plan that gap well The growing popularity of gap years is indicative of the value that young adults are experiencing from the process. Not only does it provide them with a sense of independence, but it provides the opportunity to develop key skills that employers value. However, the experience proved to be worthwhile only when well-planned and structured to achieve specific aims, such as exposure to different career fields and work experience. LO teachers can provide valuable support in terms of facilitating the structuring of gap years and exposing scholars to reputable gap year organisations and young adults who can provide first-hand feedback regarding their experiences.

Founder of Achieve Careers, Joanne Wood, a career development coach and employability specialist, authors the Decisions career development manuals and programme for life orientation teachers and Grade 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 scholars, currently implemented by 24 schools in South Africa.

For more information, please visit www.achievecareers.co.za or contact Wood at cellphone: + (27) 82 300 0493.

References: 1. Shellenbarger, S. (2012) ‘Delaying college to fill in the gaps.’ Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203513204576047723922275698.html>. 2. See, for example, www.nbt.ac.za and <http://www.maties.com/admission/national-benchmark-tests-1.html>. 3. See www.gapacademy.co.za. 4. See <http://www.ovc.co.za>.