



So there I was, on Wikipedia, again. I was preparing for my Grade 12 English class and conducting a basic internet search for an author study in December. We would be studying selected works of Dr. George Elliot Clarke, who is currently working at the University of Toronto, but was originally born in Windsor in the Annapolis Valley, where I am presently working at a high school. In September, I had applied to the *Writers in the Schools Program* through the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia. This program, and my principal's support, allowed me to arrange for Dr. Clarke to meet with my students. Dr. Clarke had visited my classroom twice before in the last ten years, and I remembered him telling me that he proudly owned land in Three Mile Plains. My internet research about Three Mile Plains was how I ended up on Wikipedia.

The only description available about Three Mile Plains was a geography stub that simply stated, "Three Mile Plains is a small community in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, located in The Municipality of the District of West Hants in Hants County." This description on Wikipedia, typical for most small places in Nova Scotia, was not helpful for students interested in learning more about the communities surrounding our school. I was inspired.

The first thing I did was contact Dr. Clarke to ask if he would be willing to meet with my students in a location of his choice in Three Mile Plains, rather than

in my classroom at the school. I was interested in place-based learning, where students develop an appreciation of local places by connecting their learning with experiences in the community. He suggested the Windsor Plains Baptist United Church as a meeting place. My students agreed to his suggestion and I contacted the pastor. The students had planned – or rather ordered – a lunch and invited her to join us.

I started to share our idea of "class trip" with other people. At the Remembrance Day ceremony held in Windsor, I bumped into a Department of Education official. When he learned what we were up to, he wanted to attend. News spreads quickly in a small place, and I received an email from a local visual artist. Previously, she had incorporated Dr. Clarke's words into her painting. She requested to meet my students at school as well as attend the meeting with Dr. Clarke in Three Mile Plains. Then, the winner of the African Nova Scotia Music Association's 2009 "Rising Star" award, Pat Watson, phoned the school to ask if she could attend, and asked if she could sing for us! Could she ever! She will be recording musical interpretations of Dr. Clarke's works in the spring of 2011. And so, it continued; several other community members found themselves joining my English class' trip to Three Mile Plains.

In early December, I made the necessary arrangements to transport the class to Three Mile Plains. It was sunny and windy when we met Dr. Clarke. I remem-

*Students develop an appreciation of local places by connecting their learning with experiences in the community.*

ber that because the church door would blow wildly whenever someone tried to enter or exit. Dr. Clarke had sent the class some additional readings for us to consider. One of his longer poems – an excerpt from an epic poem he is currently writing – was interpreted by students in preparation for his visit. Students annotated key lines of this text and shared their interpretations with other classmates by posting their annotations in a wiki in our class Moodle. When we met with him, Dr. Clarke read this entire selection, and it was exciting for me as a teacher to have students follow along in their own marked-up text as he read. Students had struggled with understanding his work and had prepared questions to ask him about specific lines, specific poems, and about their unique inquiry question. Later in the month, each student would be responsible for writing an academic paper that responded to an individualized question that the student created and had my approval. I have been using this approach to studying a common set of texts within a class and it has allowed for a wide range of exploration:

- What writing strategies does Dr. Clarke use to sustain his readers' interest?
- How does Dr. Clarke's work appeal to various audiences?
- In what ways does Dr. Clarke use flower imagery in his poems?
- In what ways does Dr. Clarke use religious references to engage the reader and change the importance of the writing?
- In what ways does Dr. Clarke express rural life?
- In what ways does Dr. Clarke represent cultural background through his writing style, choices, and content?

After lunch, the students were surprised with books from the Department of Education. Then, Dr. Clarke answered students' questions, he read, and Pat Watson sang. My students had prepared a gift for Dr. Clarke – something that we called "Potluck Poetry." Students

wrote mash-up poetry by rearranging lines from multiple poems written by Dr. Clarke to create new meaning. We bound the students' poetry into a small book and presented it to him. I hope he was impressed with the ways in which students thought carefully and creatively about his words. We parted, smiling. It took only ten minutes to get back to the school, but it felt as though we were a world away.

Back in class, on the worldwide web, Three Mile Plains was much harder to find. My students made an effort to change this. Using a wiki in our Moodle, the students wrote a brief description of Three Mile Plains, about Five Mile Plains School, and about prominent community members. A wiki, by nature, is intended to be community-edited information. It was our hope that we would start a conversation in Wikipedia and that others will contribute to the description of Three Mile Plains. An unintended yet pertinent learning that occurred was brought to my attention when I overheard one of my students explaining to a student in another course that, "Wikipedia is a starting point for internet research, but it's not all that reliable. I mean, *our class* even put information on Wikipedia!"

Last year, following a similar process, my Grade 12 English class studied the work of Alden Nowlan, who was from the community of Stanley, a 20-minute drive from our school. If you look up "Stanley, NS" on Wikipedia, you'll see that my students have been there too. I can't help but wonder what other Nova Scotia communities, places, events, monuments, prominent figures, or authors are not yet described on Wikipedia. There are plenty of opportunities for teachers and classes across the province to participate in creating, distributing, challenging and updating online material. Either as readers or as writers, it won't be long before my students will be on Wikipedia, again.

---

Dr. Steven Van Zoost teaches at Avon View High School, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.