

Showing Pictures in Guyana

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, in August, projecting an image of my Nova Scotia classroom onto a wall in Guyana. I had no idea it would prompt so much discussion. In the room were instructors and professors involved in a teacher education project sponsored by the government of Guyana. The project was intended to improve teacher education and my role was to offer workshops about classroom assessment. I had spent a lot of time planning these workshops and I was intrigued when simple and unceremonious photos of my day-to-day life in the classroom raised a lot of discussion and side-tracked my workshop preparation. These discussions, in turn, helped me to reflect on classroom practices and expectations that are so close to my daily experience that they might easily be overlooked or left unexamined.

I teach in a rural high school. These photos are from an Advanced English 11 class.

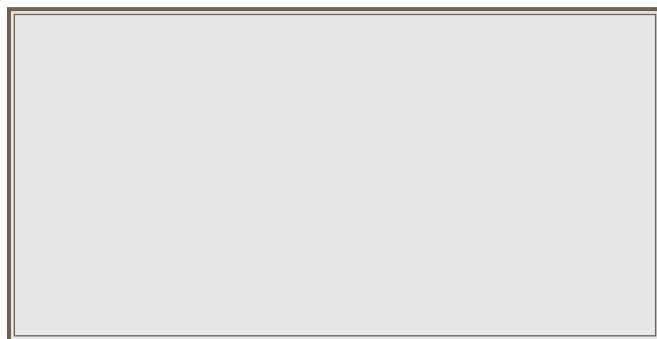


Photo 1

There are ten students included in this photo. They are in a class of 28. You can see about one-third of the classroom. In the foreground are five students sitting together with binders, pencils, and a critical essay about a common text (a novel) that they have all read. One student is using a pencil to point to a specific paragraph in the critical essay. Two students are looking down at the essay while the other three students are looking at each other. The student who is pointing is also speaking.

Behind this group of five is a pair of students, sitting beside each other each reading different texts. They have bookmarks with explanations and examples of various reading strategies. They stop and discuss what they are reading, sharing the reading strategies that they are using to understand their own texts. In the photo, they are not talking; they are reading intently.

In the background of the photo you can see four computers along the back of the room with two shelves

of books above them. Two students are sharing one computer and they have swiveled their chairs to face each other. They each have a copy of the same text and a website open on the computer monitor. One student is talking, while the other student is looking at the text. Another student sits at a computer on his own, with a book open on the computer desk in front of him. He is researching the context of the historical fiction that he is reading.

This photo shows a blend of paper and digital resources; of focused faces and smiles; and of small groups, pairs, and individual work. It takes some time to think about the teacher planning that is involved to organize such student groupings, tasks, texts, and talk.

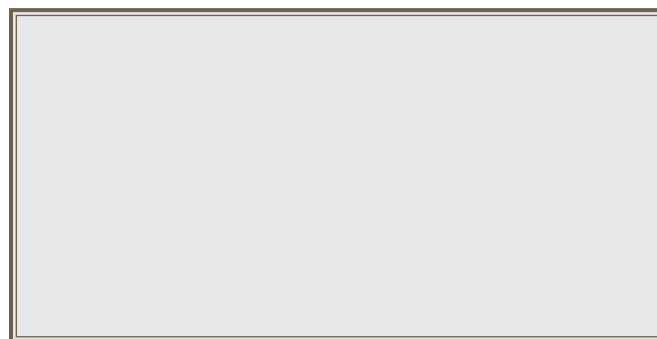


Photo 2

There are six students visible in this image. They are all standing. One student is standing behind a small desk, speaking to a semi-circle of four students on the other side of the desk. The students in the semi-circle all have clipboards; two of them are making notes, one is looking at an artefact on the desk, and one is looking at the boy who is speaking. In the background, you can

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see a student who is paying attention to someone else. In fact, there are six simultaneous student presentations occurring in the classroom, although the photo only captures one such presentation.

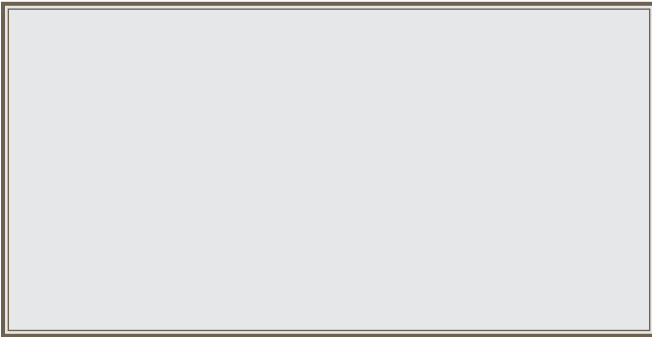


Photo 3

There are 16 of the 28 students in this image. Some are standing, some are seated, and some are leaning on chairs. It takes a moment to figure out that they are not positioned randomly, but rather around desks that have been clustered together so that chart paper can be placed on top of the desks. The students are configured in pairs and groups of four and they are carrying markers. I can count five smiles, four people in mid-sentence, and seven students focusing on the chart papers.

The student in the foreground has his index finger touching the chart paper on the tables in front of him. He is pointing at a bridge over a winding road that crosses the paper. It is a metaphorical journey of a character from a novel and the students are adding to the map to show the choices and decisions that this character made throughout the text. Students move about the room in pairs, adding onto the various kinds of metaphorical graphic organizers that are being developed on the chart papers.

It is not the differentiated instructional approach that catches the attention of the Guyanese instructors and professors. Nor is it the variety of physical arrangements of desks and students in the room. Nor is it the students’ interactions, the print and digital resources in the room, or the obvious focus of the students in their

tasks. I am asked, “Where is the teacher?”

“I am their teacher, and I was taking the photo,” I replied. I couldn’t help but think that much of my work is invisible. The preparation for our classes is unseen by students. When students are engaged in the activities I’ve designed, my role is changed from being a guide to being a supporter as well as an observer. I have to watch carefully, paying attention to who needs additional skill practice, who needs encouragement, who has mastered a skill, and how I could change or adapt the activity for other students.

Discussions about these pictures continued with the Guyanese teacher-trainers and professors. From the images, they talked about the underling assumptions about learning, about learners, about teaching, and about teachers. The glimpses into my classroom raised questions about classroom resources, class size, pedagogical stances, and the importance of collegial support and professional development. Broad notions about the aims of education came under scrutiny by looking at how I structured student interactions in my classroom. The conversation—like many conversations that intrigue me—oscillated between micro and macro perspectives; it shifted back and forth from the details of the images to the larger concerns about schools in today’s world.

As I write this, I have just attended our NSTU Provincial Conference Day and it is easy to make connections between the conference conversations and the dialogues I experienced in Guyana. The workshops that teachers put together provide glimpses into Nova Scotia schools and classrooms; our NSTU Professional Associations allow us to share snapshots of our professional practices. This is an opportunity to look into other schools and classrooms and learn from our colleagues. If you had three pictures of your common classroom practices, what would they be?

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