So There I Was…

Teaching for Nova Scotia Virtual School

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, on camera, teaching for Nova Scotia Virtual School (NSVS). Two students had missed our class "eChat" discussion due to school closures and I was meeting with them to re-do this specific lesson. They were interviewing each other about their communities; one student was in Baddeck and the other in Upper Kennetcook. The course they were taking with me was Advanced English 12.

The course involves 84 lessons and a final exam. Students log in to Moodle (an online content management system) to find their daily lesson, including readings and assignments, and they log in to VIA (an online video conferencing tool) to find other students and of course, me. I have online office hours where students can converse with me on camera or chat with me in the Moodle environment. Most often, I receive emails when a student is seeking clarification about a task or needs help. The online course is as challenging as the one I teach in a brick and mortar classroom.

As you can imagine, I'm in front of a screen more than I ever dreamed when I first began my teaching career. I'm certainly not alone in experiencing this increased screen-time. NSVS enrolment is growing at an incredible rate. This semester, 70 of the 79 secondary schools in Nova Scotia have students enrolled in Nova Scotia Virtual School. In the 2013-2014 school year, 12 teachers will have NSVS as their full-time teaching assignment with their school board for either one or both semesters, offering 48 courses to students across the province.

The course offerings are impressive to me as a first-time NSVS teacher. Students who attend small high schools are able to enrol in courses that are not otherwise available to them. I would be remiss to suggest that these are the only situations that lead students to take online courses. Sometimes, students are enrolling in NSVS courses because of scheduling conflicts

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or ongoing medical issues including anxiety. However, online learning requires particular kinds of learning strengths and teaching supports.

As you probably know, online courses are quite different from correspondence courses. Typically, in a correspondence course, it has been the student who sorts out when they will complete the assignments and submit them to a teacher. In an online course, students are required to log in and complete daily lessons on a class schedule. Students are only supposed to be enrolled in one NSVS course per semester, and they need time in their daily class schedule to complete the online course work. This also requires that students have access at their schools to a computer, appropriate Internet connection, a camera, and a headset with a built-in microphone designed for online conversations. This requires a space and supervision for the students taking online courses. Students enrolled in NSVS courses have a contact teacher in their school who is there to help with equipment and space requirements. These issues are significantly different from correspondence courses and school boards have to sort out staffing and supervision challenges as well as technology resources and support for students taking online courses in their secondary schools. Extra funding for equipment and technical support for students enrolled in online courses has been provided to each school board by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

When I first began teaching for NSVS I was frequently asked how I liked teaching online. I replied euphemistically, "It is very cutting edge!" Learning about best practices for online teaching is exciting to me. You might think that the Internet would provide students with an even greater selection of texts to read in their English program. In some ways this is true. However, Google doesn't easily provide links for texts written recently by Canadians with high school readers in mind. Not all of the resources I'm used to using in my brick and mortar classroom are available digitally, but this, I suspect, will change.

One of the most difficult challenges for me was not being able to find a student in a digital world. If the student ignores my email or doesn't log in to Moodle I can't go down the hall to find them and have a chat to see what's going on. Thankfully, NSVS has involved other supports for students.

- First, at every high school where there is a student enrolled in NSVS, there is an NSVS contact teacher. If I have a concern about a student, I can email the contact teacher. This year, a contact teacher met with one of my students on my behalf to discuss their progress (or lack thereof) in the course.
- Second, there is technology support for students at every school, although I have learned that this looks different from board to board and school to school.
- Third, there is a NSVS Student Engagement Facilitator who I can contact after I have made three attempts to sort out an issue with a student with no success. Typically, I have contacted this person when I've been worried about a student who has fallen behind in the course.

One of the pedagogical perks of an online environment is that everything is recorded. Our conversations can be reviewed and analyzed. In fact, in the course I'm teaching, students are expected to watch their recordings and reflect on their speaking and listening skills. Another perk is that all my anecdotal comments and descriptive feedback on students' assignments can be reviewed on one screen. It is easy to notice patterns in students' strengths and as well as patterns in the kinds of suggestions I have made for further learning.

But I am skirting around what I think about when I've been asked, "How do you like teaching online?" To be truthful, I was unsure about how I would like it. I love my brick and mortar classroom environment – would I love an online classroom? I was worried about the affective part of education in an online environment. After all, as Aristotle aptly put it, "Educating the heart without educating the mind is no education at all." I was worried about facilitating heartfelt conversations about Holocaust literature through screens and cameras. I was worried about being able to engage students with a sometimes needed "heart-to-heart" chat about what's going on in their world. I was worried that those "light bulb moments" among students might not transcend Internet connections.

I won't suggest that my worries were unfounded or that they are resolved. However, what I can suggest is that I was not fully appreciative of the experience that students bring to online learning. Most young people use screens to communicate all the time; this is a normalized experience for them. While I might be in sheer wonder and amazement of the technological possibilities for teaching online, students are not. Many students today are ready for online learning – I suspect that they have been ready for some time now. Students, during our synchronous "eChats" taught me this. The students in my class from Baddeck and Upper Kennetcook who did not know each other before this course, taught me this. They had heartfelt conversations and light bulb moments as they interviewed each other. While they were learning about each other's communities, they were also creating an online community of their own.

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