

Racing in Belize

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, racing, in Belize. I don't have the tourist versions of Belize I have often heard from those who have vacationed there. It was August. It was hot. I was working. I have learned that one of my favourite ways to travel is to meet other educators and I also like adventure. This summer working with Mount Saint Vincent University was a perfect mix of both. My task, along with seven other Nova Scotians, was to develop and deliver workshops in each of the education districts of Belize. This meant travelling in small planes and automobiles all over the country—quickly. As a group, we created our own version of *The Amazing Race* as we travelled in teams of two. Night after night, we moved our workshops to scattered locations and then reconvened in Belize City at the end. My team didn't win our race, by the way. I didn't return home with bragging rights, but I came back with other things.

Certainly, I've returned with new recipes; rice and beans is a staple in Belize. My friends and family enjoyed, or will enjoy (spoiler alert), hot sauces, chocolate, wooden puzzle boxes, embroidered scarves, and bags. They are also subjected to viewing photos and listening to stories of spelunking, Mayan ruins, and inexplicable moments of serendipity.

One thing that happens when you work outside of your normal frames of reference, is that you have to adapt your knowledge and skills—your theories and practices—to different circumstances. This experience challenges your own reference points, reinforcing the knowledge and skills that are valuable, and affirming best practices. For me, the distractions of “how to” questions are minimized and the “why” questions of pedagogy are reinforced. Perhaps this is because the “how to” questions vary tremendously based on the context and resources available to a teacher. By contrast, the “why” questions of pedagogy become of heightened importance.

My workshop concerned classroom assessment, and as you probably know, the assessment literature is highly technical, focusing on “how to” use assessment to support students' learning. The reasons concerning “why” specific assessment practices are effective is often ignored or minimized. When I work outside of my day-to-day teaching context, as I was in Belize, the

“why” questions concerning best assessment practices are at the forefront of my mind. I returned home with a clear and stronger vision of my own views about the importance of classroom assessment, and about the role of students in these practices. This insider/outsider experience of working elsewhere is very helpful for someone like me who likes to think about issues from new perspectives.

Regardless of where I happen to be working, I've often been thinking about the role of students. How we think about the role of students in our classrooms largely informs our decisions as teachers. Do we see students as empty vessels awaiting knowledge? Are they considered capable? Current citizens? Individuals? The question of valuing students as capable decision-makers in their own education has been clarified for me; teachers need to know how to create spaces for students to be active agents in their learning.

Early in my teaching career, such a space involved the pedagogical language of offering students “choices” and this was accompanied by offering help to students as they made choices, and offering students reflections about their choices. Now, such a vision of the classroom also involves offering a negotiated structure for learning, including decisions that are made by the whole class, small groups, and individuals. In fact, right now,

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everything seems, to me, to be in negotiation: what knowledge, what skills, what attitudes, what texts, and which authorities are deemed important. Our curricula provide this vision for us and continue to evolve to reflect the changing needs of our time. Across Canada, provinces and territories are redesigning curricula to reflect the needs of our current students and our country. It is my hope that the changing vision of education takes into greater account the role of students as active agents in their education.

In Belize, curricula are changing too. The assessment workshops that I conducted in August were to help teachers understand changes in the vision of their education system as they implemented new curricula. One of the aims of this project with Mount Saint Vincent University is to create sufficient capacity within the country's teaching community that in the last years of the project, Belizean teachers will conduct these workshops rather than Nova Scotians. This will require movement away from a culture of compliance towards a professional culture of teaching. It will also require a validation of self-directed professional development.

Regretfully, it is not difficult to find places where governments attempt to de-professionalize teaching,

perhaps as a means to justify the underfunding of public education. In such places, these attempts not only impact the morale of teachers; these attempts also impact the support of public education in those places. When education becomes a reduced societal value, there is need for all citizens to be concerned because education impacts our well-being and quality of life.

Fortunately, the government in Belize is working to improve the quality of life throughout the country and to do this they have decided to support the continued professionalization of teaching as a means of transforming their society.

When I returned home from Belize, I didn't just come home with recipes and gifts; I also came home with a renewed conviction about the importance of understanding teachers to be professionals. I returned home reinvigorated to work with Nova Scotia students and educators. I returned home with strengthened support for public education in Nova Scotia. This, despite losing the race in Belize, still runs through me.

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