

# Reflecting on my day

*Dr. Steven Van Zoost*

**So there I was, reflecting on my day.** To be more precise, I was reflecting on my reflections. I don't know if you keep some form of a journal or not. I do. Most people probably keep blogs or posts on The Facebook to record their day-to-day activities. To be clear, I usually record the highs and lows of life in my journal and it is rare for me to have a "regular day" recorded. This, however, is what I was reviewing: my record of a "day-in-the-life of teaching," written in 2013. Now, two years later, as I re-read my record of a "regular" day at school, I write reflections using the "insert comment" feature of my word processor.

## *A day in the life...*

**Comment 1:** Recently, I found myself explaining to a couple of non-educators the difference between curricula and texts. That is, in my high school English classroom, the curriculum is not a canon of literature. My task is to help students develop and demonstrate specific skills using a wide range of texts. Teachers are needed to help students engage not only with literature, but also with each other.

**Comment 2:** Oh, I must confess this is a treat! I remember in other years when I was teaching five or more courses, most of them new to me. Now, my classroom preparation is about modifying units of study to match the particular interests of different student groups and developing new ways of assessing students in blended learning environments.

**Comment 3:** I wish I had written a bit more about what I ate for lunch. Most likely, it was from my freezer (I prepare lunches in advance). Now, I am no longer permitted to have a small fridge or microwave in my classroom and this means waiting in line for a microwave downstairs. This also means that I have to leave and lock my classroom at the beginning of lunch, asking students to also leave, or wait in the hall for me to return. For a rural school where students are bussed for an hour and a half in all directions to get here, lunch time is a social time of heightened importance. I try my best to use The Shire at lunch as a place for students to connect.

*I arrive at school early: early enough to greet my neighbouring colleagues as they arrive, early enough to boot up the class computer and open the files needed for the day, and early enough to meet students before teaching begins.*

*My classroom, nicknamed "The Shire", is like a second home to me. I have brought in lamps, art, student supplies and bookshelves that, to me at least, hold the promise of discovering new worlds.*

*A highlight of my job is creating unexpected instances of learning for students – a "light-bulb" moment when the brain makes a new and meaningful connection. Often this occurs through literature but more usually it happens during our classroom conversations.*

*I teach three courses – two in advanced English with the 11th and 12th grades (ages 16-18) and a 12th-grade film and video production course – in one-hour classes at Avon View High School in Nova Scotia, Canada.*

*I teach five classes a day and every second day I have one hour for marking and preparation. Today is such a day, and I use that "prep period" to meet a colleague to discuss strategies for assessing speaking and listening skills in our courses. I have worked with this colleague for 18 years in various schools, grade levels, and subjects and we love learning, and teaching, together.*

*At lunch, The Shire is always busy. Most often, I eat in my classroom – although I make a conscious effort to go to the small staffroom to chat. Not many teachers go there anyway; they, too, are busy with students. In my classroom, students spend their lunchtime on computers (often editing video footage for the film course that*

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*I teach), with me or with each other – in a space where they feel comfortable.*

*I check my emails to see what kind of workload awaits me. Some are from administration requesting paperwork about a student. And one from a student – who has made a late decision about what she wants to do after she graduates from high school – contains a request for a reference letter to apply for post-secondary education.*

*In the afternoon, to my great delight, a light-bulb moment occurs in my grade 11 English class. We are enjoying *Macbeth* and we make connections between different parts of the play and then with other texts that students have read in *The Shire*. One student remarks that the myth of Icarus relates to the tragic flaw of *Macbeth* and this opens a class conversation about humanity and how literature can help to frame our thinking about ourselves and the world. Early in the conversation I bow out and let them get on with it – after all, these are the students’ moments of discovery, not mine.*

*I know that I am teaching important material, concepts and skills. For me, however, what I am really teaching is current and future citizenship.*

*After school, I make phone calls, respond to emails, start the marking, and finish the preparation for tomorrow. I have made a vow to stay in *The Shire* to finish my work rather than taking it home with me. What this means is that sometimes I bring my dinner to school but most times I try to be home before sunset. There is no end to the work and no end to my passion for teaching, but there is a finite amount of time and energy in me. I turn off the lights in *The Shire* and smile about *Macbeth* and *Icarus* as I lock the door.*

**Comment 4:** Yesterday, I was 30 minutes early arriving to see a movie in Halifax and I bumped into a previous student. We had a great chat. I have no idea if this was the specific student who needed a reference letter, but I do know I wrote her a reference. My file called “reference letters” is alarmingly large. I wonder when I found time to write this one? Most likely that night, at home. I wonder how many hours every year I spend writing such letters?

**Comment 5:** This is a large part of my calling into the teaching profession. As a mid-career teacher, I can attest to how the concept of citizenship has been expanding since the beginning of my career: civic knowledge, local volunteerism, social justice and equity issues, global citizenship, digital citizenship, social action...the concept seems to keep extending to encompass today’s changing world. So, too, must my teaching keep up with today’s world. My professional development, in all of its forms, is critical to keeping my work with students relevant.

**Comment 6:** I wish I had ended this piece without the imagery of a door. Teaching, like learning, is not contained to a physical space; my work-life permeates my mind as I workout, prepare dinner, or read a new book. Thinking about my classroom is a habit of mind that continues throughout my day-to-day life.