

# In Botswana, Rethinking the Scale of Zeds

*Dr. Steven Van Zoost*

**So there I was, in Botswana, in the Okavango Delta, in a makoro—a dugout canoe.** We moved along the deep and clear hippopotamus paths, hoping not to encounter one. My guide had provided us with advice about confronting certain animals: with an elephant, run and hide; with a buffalo, climb a tree, and; with a lion, stand very still and don't run. There was no advice for meeting a hippopotamus. Despite the tension of feeling like prey, a particular day in the makoro remains one of my favourite life-experiences to date. My understanding of “scale” was dramatically challenged.

When I was young, my family used to canoe to the other side of a lake that was shaped like a set of lungs. Our family cottage was at the bottom tip of the right lung, and on the other side – through the narrows, past the island, beyond sandy cove – was a small inlet at the bottom of the uninhabited left lung. It was filled with water lilies and the quiet sound of the canoe scraping over the lily pads. Almost assuredly, we would also see a beaver dam, turtles sunning on a fallen tree, and dragonflies in abundance. Each summer, one water lily returned to the cottage, making its trip at the bottom of the silver canoe. This little cove was, and remains, a quiet place in my busy mind. Lilies immediately make me think of the quiet rustle of the canoe over their leaves and the warm sun of a late August afternoon. I had never seen more lilies in one place than in this remote and undisturbed cove – until I was in Botswana.

In the makoro, we ventured into the Okavango Delta through tall reeds that parted to reveal water lilies that consumed about the same amount of space as that small cove in remote Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia. Within minutes, we passed through another patch of grass and I was surrounded by water lilies that spread to the size of a school campus. While being among water lilies in a canoe was an experience that I knew well, it was difficult to conceive the scale of these water lily fields. For hours, we moved through field after field of water lilies; water lilies to the horizon in all directions. It never occurred to me that so many water lilies could be seen at once.

Many times in my life, I've been shaken by the

changing notion of “scale” in my head. When I was a teenager and fresh off the farm, for example, it never occurred to me that there could be more than one major train station in a city (Hamburg has four, in case you need to know). Last month, I had planned to meet my partner's mother at Costco on a Saturday afternoon and we ended up at different places. Who knew that there was more than one Costco in Halifax? I'm not a Costco member and I had no idea. In education, there is no choice: as teachers, we have to keep-up with envisioning scale in a way that represents our students' world views.

Generation Z – those born between 1995 and 2009 – are now in my classroom and their sense of the world is noticeably different than mine. Their world is moving beyond my common frames of reference, especially in terms of scale. The projected forecasts for their lives reach far beyond my internalized expectations for working and living. According to Australian researchers, [mccrindle.com](http://mccrindle.com), Generation Zeds can expect to have five careers, 17 jobs, and 15 homes in their lifetime. On average, they spend 10 hours and 19 minutes a day using technology. By 2020, the Gen Zeds will be 40% of all consumers. By 2025, these Gen Zeds will be 31% of the work force (Baby Boomers – 8%, Gen X – 28%; Gen Y – 33%). It's time for us, as educators, to think beyond Millennials, and address the needs and strengths of Gen Z.

Changing our scales of reference is not easy. You may recall the way “scale” has previously been taught to young kids, inviting them to imagine sitting in a

chair. Then, as a series of images that zoom out, reveal the child sitting in their home, in their community, in their province, in their country, and in the world. These simple stages of increased view are complicated in today's world. What does "community" look like for Gen Zeds? Is Larry Uteck Blvd considered a community? Is "Little Big Planet," an online gaming community, more relevant for Gen Zeds than their physical community? Is YouTube considered a global view? I don't think it will be much longer until virtual reality is social. Then, how will you determine your place in the world (and which world)? Students' reference points are in flux, and simultaneously their world view is increasingly siloed into smaller networks of similarly thinking (or similarly consuming) social media "friends." Screenagers see a largely mirrored world on their five screens (smartphone, television, laptop, desktop, and iPod/iPad) as content algorithms direct who you might know, what you might want, and how you might think.

School has always involved helping students to understand the world beyond their everyday experiences. Education helps young people consider alternate points of view, learn about the broader world and societal problems, and, I hope, develop empathy and other citizenship skills along the way. Schooling also provides opportunities and risks for students to understand themselves in relation to others. While engaging with their peers, students learn about diversity, poverty, social advantages and disadvantages, as well as how they are important to others. Perhaps, schooling has never been more important than right now, where students have to work with those outside of their often consuming self-selected networks formed behind screens.

School provides opportunities for students to come out from their own worlds and screens – or use their own worlds and screens – to connect in meaningful, emotional, and interpersonal ways.

Teachers are mindful of widening the range of our practices needed in the classroom to address students' needs. Gen Zeds don't sit and listen; they try and see. They want us, as teachers, to be learner-centric and to design tasks that are flexible, visual, collaborative, and in an open-book world. They are "technoholics" with little understanding of any alternatives. Goodbye print and self-contained textbook; hello personalized learning resources. We have to look up from the keyboard and beyond the world of students' everyday digital encounters to find meaningful learning experiences for our students. As teachers, the scope of our teaching practices has to change. This is exciting pedagogical work and I love it!

As I see it, we need to disrupt the digital algorithms of everyday life that consume and define Gen Zeds and ensure that the world that young people live in is broader than their own social network of notifications from Vine and SnapChat. We need to build on their strengths of wanting to share, to contribute, and to solve problems collaboratively so that we can facilitate the broadening of their world view. While the screenagers help us see the world differently, we can help Gen Zeds widen their scope. It might even include water lilies.

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