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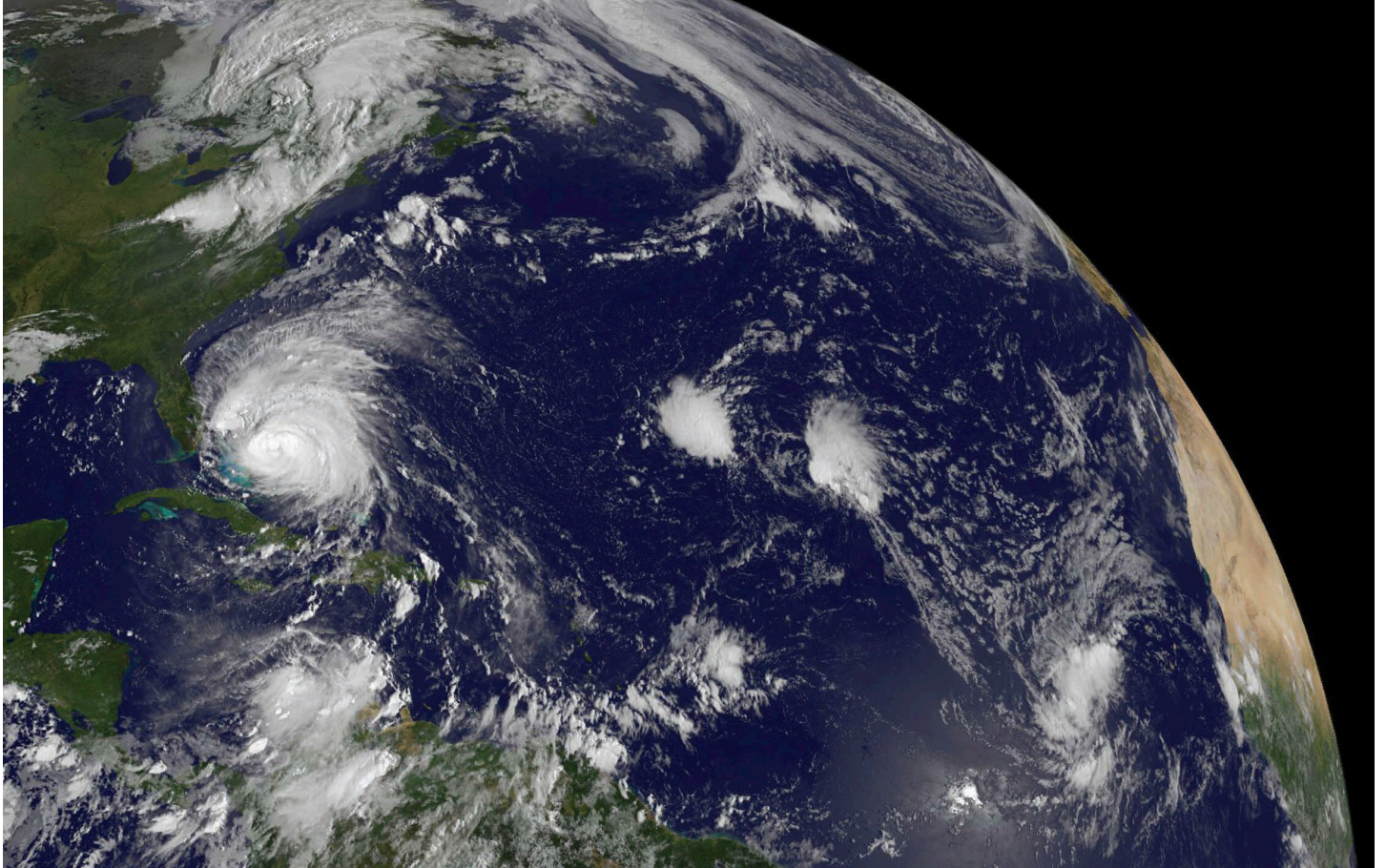
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# Are we where yet?

Dave Loveland and Jim Wasserman



**M**ost every teacher today has had the same nightmare. You have planned the cool, student-centred activity. You picture yourself effortlessly guiding the student's attention to the website, or clicking on the icon, and then watching as their minds expand and their critical thinking skills develop, all while the warm glow of the monitor screen illuminates their teeth in a perpetual grin of engaged joy. You have merely to sit back and accept the commendations for your innovative techniques and mastery of the student driven classroom...

and then it happens...

"What do I do again?"

"This is too complicated."

"Do I have to read all the rules?"

"This is no fun... we're just doing school stuff."

"My program doesn't start."

The art of teaching is in many ways becoming the art of introduction. In an ideal, student-centered classroom, the teacher serves to bring together the student, the knowledge and/or skills to be explored, and a vehicle by which the two can interact. Each of these three parts is necessary for optimal learning, and in perfect combination, the teacher, having brought the elements together, can step aside and remain the encourager and advisor (and in the case of Middle School education, sometimes the refocuser) on the side while the student explores.

Unfortunately, too often in a teacher's mad rush to win over students by embracing the newest, coolest technology, we are actually following the siren's or Lorelei's technological call (or tweet) only to find too late our lesson foundering on the rocks of classroom chaos. Any teacher who has discovered their class's smooth sailing suddenly aground will recognise the following situations:

- Programs that require so much logging in, registering or setting up that the bulk of class time is spent getting all students ready to engage rather than actually participating.
- A steep learning curve that frustrates students into not wanting to participate or even undermining the activity for all in an act of revolt.
- A 'cool site' that, while engaging, really is a time filler without challenging students to use the cognitive processes educators want the lesson to be essentially about.

In addition, there is also the boredom factor. Students today respond less to motivators such as "This will build your skills for the future," and the 'Wow!' factor of using technology is no longer pertinent to this generation.

Ironically, however, some 'old-fashioned' motivators still work to engage students. One is the empowerment of solving a mystery. The genre is eternal in literature, movies, and television because we all share the thrill of 'figuring it out'. Given a challenging mystery, what student

doesn't feel a little of the 'Scooby Doo' thrill of putting clues together to see the big picture? The other motivator is simple competition. It is perplexing that competition has become anathema in some education circles, most probably due to all competition being lumped together as a divisive method for destroying self-esteem. However, competition, or rather, the need to measure one's self against another, is a natural, eternal instinct that propels people, including students, to want to do their best. It doesn't need to be a source for degradation, but for escalation, and if put in perspective (no one is better or worse than another in the long run because of a small competition) then a score-counting simulation remains a valuable tool in a teacher's toolbox.

So is there such a technological wonder? We think we have found it in a recently popularised web-game called Geoguessr. We have been using this to such great results; we wanted to share some strategies for utilising an engaging, highly flexible and useful tool for the classroom.

The premise of the site is that one is plopped down somewhere in the world, seeing a Google street view. The object of the game is to simply, as close as one can, figure out where you are. The closer one is, the more points one is awarded. A game consists of 5 rounds, long enough to keep students engaged, yet short enough that multiple sessions can be played in a class.

That's it. One is placed somewhere in the



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### TEACHER EVALUATION

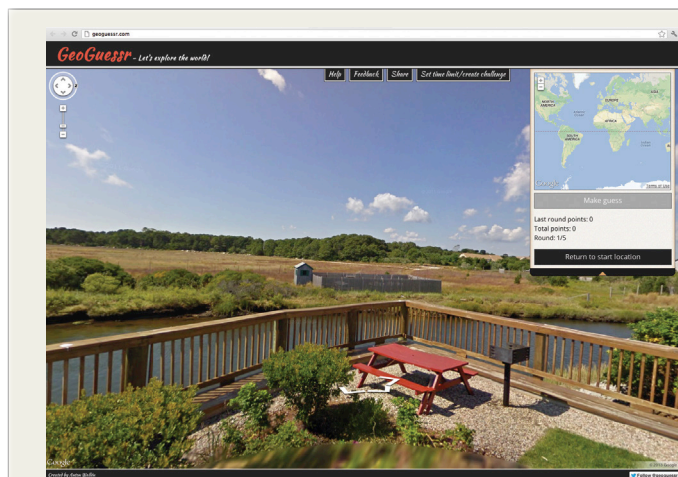
Fantastic! Beyond all my expectations. It has really opened up my eyes and has given me a sense of purpose and direction in my teaching and has INSPIRED and MOTIVATED me to take it all into the classroom.

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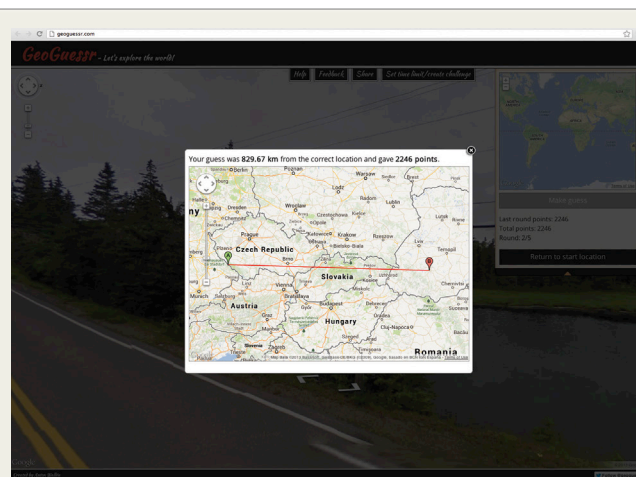
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**Geoguessr** randomly selects a site and students estimate where it is and are awarded points for how close they are



world and, as best they can, (or at least better than the next person/group in the class) must figure out where they are. Having run this exercise several times with groups working in teams, we have found a wealth of positive experiences:

- Students naturally integrate a multitude of disciplines, from language to geography to climatology to get high scores.
- Students' forensic skills are honed as they learn to look for clues such as which side of the road cars are on, whether the signs indicate miles or kilometers, etc. Look closer at that yield sign. It reads, "Give way". No clue is too small!
- Students learn about the similarity and diversity of global cultures. Our students were fascinated at how similar the geography of parts of Texas and Australia are. At the same time, students study the European town square or Japanese neon lights in a whole new (and interested) way.
- Cooperative learning becomes a key to success. The sports enthusiast recognises a team logo, while the shy kid who reads nature books recognises trees. Like a team of experts in a spy movie, each becomes an important member for the skills and knowledge they bring to the team.

Best of all, the enterprise is fun, student-centered learning. The teacher starts the exercise and then deftly hangs back to perhaps lightly guide students and, most of all, hear their enthusiastic discussion well beyond the end of class.

What makes the geoguessr simulation also valuable is that no game is the same twice

(unless you wish), especially with some added features:

- The game changes locations each engagement; alternatively, a player may send out their challenges so people have the same locations to determine.
- Using geosetter, teachers or students can design their own location map (such as gothic architecture, historic battlefields, or showing colonial influences around the world; the possibilities are endless).
- A great alternative play that develops research skills is to allow teams to open a second window to research as they guess. The location of a small town named on a sign, or finding out where a type of drink advertised on a billboard is sold, then becomes critical.

Finally, the entire process can be brought back to purposeful learning by way of a student reflection afterwards. The reflective part reveals one of the most enlightening attributes of this game; it challenges one's own stereotypes about people and culture. You may find yourself asking things like, "How can I not tell the difference between Brazil and South Africa?", "Are those people tourists?", and "Why did I assume these characters were Chinese?" For more revelatory fun, you can set a short time limit that forces the students to go with their first guesses. What are their assumptions? Talk about them. Figure them out. Having students discuss and or write what they learned about cultural similarities and differences, what skills they found useful, and what knowledge and skills would they find helpful empowers students to engage in the life-long learning process of education, application, and reflection.

In a time when educators seek to embrace more technology in their classroom, we must be careful that we maintain teacher guided, student driven learning. As the teacher steps aside to give maximum space for the student to take command of their growth, so too must technology not be the altar at which the student is merely an acolyte. Geoguessr, when used properly, ensures that the centre of the classroom is neither the teacher's voice nor the computer's raw access to data, but the most essential piece of education, the student's problem-solving mind.

ET

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Loveland has taught for several years in both California and Texas and is currently a Middle School history teacher and Subject Area Coordinator for social studies.

Wasserman has taught for many years in Texas and is currently teaching Middle School Ethics as well as Upper (High) School History, World Religion and Government.

He has had several publications in fields from law to education as well as several fictional children's stories.

Neither has any business connection to Geoguessr or any other program mentioned in the article.

