Building democracy in Eastern Europe’s classrooms

By Monique Jacobs

I imagine never being permitted to question a teacher, or encouraged to think critically about lessons, books or ideas. For millions of children schooled in the societies of Eastern Europe, this has been the reality of public education. In places like Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia, traditional public education discouraged the development of individual, independent thought.

In response to an appeal from Eastern European teachers, UVic education professor Alison Preece and a team of other North American volunteers, have, since 1997, frequently traveled throughout the former Communist bloc to help teachers develop the necessary skills and resources for generating “democratic classrooms.” The Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project (RWCT), organized by the International Reading Association with funding from the Soros Foundation, is one of the most successful international education programs to date, spanning over 24 countries. An essential objective of the project, and one reason for its success according to Preece, is that “the teachers have taken ownership of the project. People have to make [such a project] their own for it to have any validity.”

The program is culturally sensitive and encourages local teachers to adapt the strategies demonstrated to fit their particular situations. Over a three-year cycle the volunteers conduct interactive workshops that explore how to encourage self-reflection, tolerance, power sharing, critical thinking, independent opinion formation and decision-making among students. They provide individual support for the teachers as they introduce new approaches to teaching and learning. The volunteers then observe and assess the teachers’ ability and students’ response to the program. Then, the volunteers support the teachers as they, in turn, provide workshops for other local teachers.

“I feel privileged to have witnessed students come alive with a passion for learning that shocks even their own teachers,” says Preece, who has worked in Macedonia, Romania, Armenia and Lithuania.

One young student commented, “We found out how much it means to be listened to by the others, to express your feelings, beliefs, and to hear those of others.” One teacher compared her own new drive for learning as being “like water to a thirsty person.”

On an evaluation worksheet a student wonders, “If these techniques had been used by all my teachers, maybe today I would be a little more free.”

While Preece admits there are definite frustrations caused by the constant turnover of government officials and severe lack of resources (some as basic as pens, paper and text books), she is motivated by the profound efforts of local teachers. “I have never seen such creativity, resourcefulness and ability to work in such challenging conditions,” she says.

For Preece, one of the most resonant lessons she brought back from Macedonia was a renewed appreciation of the importance of cultivating democratic habits of thought in the classroom. “If we want a participatory democracy where all voices have a right to be heard, then our students need to have experienced and lived those values in our schools.”

On her website,UVic.KNOWL.EDGE