



- The International Reading Association promotes high-level literacy through improved teaching techniques and dissemination of information. www.reading.org/
- More information about the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project is available at www.uni.edu/cow/rwct/
- The Soros Foundation links numerous nonprofit foundations that follow a common mission to support the development of an open society. www.soros.org/
- Preece is a professor in the Department of Communication and Social Foundations in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria. www.educ.uvic.ca/

Building democracy in Eastern Europe's classrooms

By Monique Jacobs

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."



Preece (back row, left) in a classroom in Stip, Macedonia

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 creativ-

ity, 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."

EDGE/WISE Taking sides: the geometry of democracy

In her chapter in *Ideas Without Boundaries*, a recent book drawn from the students' perceptions of the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project in Macedonian classrooms, UVic education professor Alison Preece describes a Grade-4 geometry lesson. "The atmosphere was electric," she writes. By playing devil's advocate, the teacher created a debate about the attributes of polygons. "What impressed all of us who watched this unfold was the confidence and energy with which several of the children challenged and

countered their teachers' statements." Equally evident, Preece continues, was the teacher's pride in his student's eagerness to do so.

Ideas Without Boundaries: International Education Reform Through Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking. David J. Klooster, Jeannie L. Steele and Patricia L. Bloem, eds. International Reading Association, Inc.: Canada, 2001. Preece's contribution is chapter 7.

FACTS FROM THE EDGE

Some indicators of the success of the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project (RWCT):

- Ninety-three per cent of second-year RWCT students reported being more motivated to expand their learning than before.
- More than 95 per cent of second-year RWCT students reported being more involved in their "new" classes than before.

ON THE EDGE OF YOUR SEAT PUBLIC EVENTS AT UVIC

Public Stories: Museums, Audiences and Narrative

A free, public conference

March 16, 2-6 p.m.

Senate Chambers (University Centre A180)

March 17, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Maritime Museum of B.C., 28 Bastion Sq., Victoria

Information: UVic Humanities Centre, 721-7289

Town Hall Meetings on UVic's Future

The university invites public input on UVic's plans and priorities for the future

March 27, 7:30 p.m.

Langford Municipal Hall, 2805 Carlow Road

Registration/information: 472-5046

March 29, 7:30 p.m.

Victoria City Hall Council Chambers,

1 Centennial Sq.

Registration/information: 472-5048



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