



# Reading and Writing for a Better World

By Nicole Brace '07

**H**ow can one classroom make a lasting difference in a society recovering from war, oppression, or violence?

For the past 12 years, Dr. David Klooster, professor of English and chair of the department, has traveled to various countries in the midst of societal transition in order to help their teachers ask and answer that very question. As a volunteer for the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project (RWCT), he believes that students who “learn how to learn”—the basic hallmark of a liberal arts education and the democratic process—can form a more alert citizenry and sustain a more civil, productive, and humane society. In addition to shaping his teaching at Hope College, Dr. Klooster’s service has

produced a related book, fostered international friendships, and taken him to Armenia, China, Russia, Liberia, Turkey, and the Czech Republic, where his collaborative workshops and seminars invite educators to experience and teach a more open, active way of learning.

After earning his Ph.D. in American literature, Dr. Klooster taught English at DePauw University in Indiana and John Carroll University in Ohio. He joined the Hope faculty in 2000, three years after taking his first trip with the RWCT project. The project’s benefactor, the multi-millionaire George Soros, established RWCT to aid countries whose societies were transitioning from communism to democracy. The first of Dr. Klooster’s many trips sent him to the Czech Republic, and he



**Dr. David Klooster of the English faculty sees a liberal arts education as a means for preparing students for citizenship and to themselves transform the world. It’s a view that informs his teaching at Hope and has also prompted him to help educators in nations that are in societal transition to more effectively help inspire their students in the same way.**

offers his experience there as a paradigm for his subsequent travels in what he calls “the most important professional opportunity of my lifetime.”

From elementary teachers to university professors, Czech educators who enrolled in the teachers’ workshop asked a central question: “How do we change the educational system to produce a new kind of citizen?”

“After 40 years of communism and a decade after the Berlin wall fell, they were wondering how to produce citizens who were critical thinkers,” Dr. Klooster says. “They wanted citizens to be able to analyze the very ambiguous lifetime, political, and career situations that they found themselves in; it was really an issue of remaking an educational system from a model of indoctrination to one that supported independent-minded, responsible members of society. They were very clear that the change would come from the classroom.”

So Dr. Klooster and his wife, Dr. Patricia Bloem (an associate professor of English at Grand Valley State University in Allendale) began leading workshops that presented alternatives to the prevalent lecture-style

teaching. Teachers engaged in conversation, had debates and discussions, worked on small-group collaborations and research projects, and wrote papers to help them develop their own voice, articulate ideas, and defend them.

The workshop participants agreed to learn these “best practices,” Dr. Klooster notes, but they were skeptical at first. “They were very proud of their educational system, which had produced a lot of notable accomplishments: they were very good at training in the technical fields and the arts, for example. Besides, their former Cold War enemies were now their teachers. You don’t get over that immediately.”

“Education doesn’t just prepare students to join society; it can also prepare them to transform it.”

— Dr. David Klooster

To break down the wall of skepticism, whether in the Czech Republic or more recently in post-civil war Liberia, Dr. Klooster and his colleagues have emphasized meeting their fellow participants as equals in the classroom.

“We didn’t start with lectures, we didn’t start with ideology; we always started by teaching a class,” Dr. Klooster explains. “We said, ‘Give us 45 minutes. Be the 40-year-old person you are, but accept the role of a student. After 45 minutes, let’s talk about the kind of learning that happened for you, and how ideas like these might be useful in your classroom.’ We weren’t lecturing or presenting academic papers. We were just teachers, teaching other teachers something we believed in.”

It worked. “In the classrooms they were used to, one mind was hard at work and 35 minds were trying to imitate that one mind,” Dr. Klooster says. “In this new classroom, there were 35 minds at work: all of them engaged and active, creative and critical. Everyone had a voice.” He and his teammates found that after several days, their new colleagues saw that this kind of teaching was humane, worked with kindness and cooperation, and tapped into their own creativity. Laughter, debate, and

intense discussion characterized the sessions.

And the learning certainly hasn’t been one-sided. Dr. Klooster says he has gained a new understanding of what it means to be devoted to one’s teaching and one’s students despite enormous obstacles. Some of his Armenian colleagues, for example, taught in classrooms with broken windows and no heat; others hadn’t been paid in months. “Yet,” he says, “these teachers came to work everyday, gave their weekends to professional development workshops, and worked with enthusiasm, skill, dedication, and devotion. We found an extraordinary willingness to commit oneself there.”

He also came home from Eastern Europe with new ideas for his own teaching. In particular, he appreciated how teachers in the Czech Republic and Armenia taught their students to have deep disciplinary knowledge of a subject—which they acquired by memorizing and internalizing stories, poems, facts, and dates. “In the United States, we think it’s important to be able to think, but we don’t always think it’s important to be able to know,” he reflects. “I came home from Eastern Europe having decided that a really good education combines both.”

Indeed, Dr. Klooster is constantly refining his view of good education in light of his international service, and he tries to offer his own “best practices” to his students at Hope. When he teaches courses in 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature, he is especially aware of the links between education and citizenship.

“Those writers—Melville, Emerson, Whitman—are all working out what it means to be a democratic citizen. And those were very abstract issues for me until I saw them playing out in the lives of people in a contemporary setting through RWCT. But what I think about when I teach at Hope is that the students in your classroom are going to be your neighbors. They are going to be voting in the next presidential election; they’re going to be teaching your children and doctoring you and your family when you’re sick. The students in your classroom *are* your fellow citizens.”

That conviction energizes Dr. Klooster, who is finding that his work abroad has sharpened his research interests, provided him with new publishing opportunities, and invigorated his teaching “with joy.” It has also strengthened his commitment to giving students a robust liberal arts education at Hope.

“It changes the way I think about what I’m doing when I walk into a classroom here,” he says. “Education doesn’t just prepare students to join society; it can also prepare them to transform it.”



**Dr. David Klooster’s service as a volunteer for the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project has taken him around the world, including Armenia, China, the Czech Republic, Liberia, Russia and Turkey. Here he is working with educators in Monrovia, Liberia.**

