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 to help their teachers ask and answer that very 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 Bloom (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.”

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, you’ve got 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 minutes were trying to imitate that one mind,” Dr. Klooster says. “In this new classroom, there were 35 minutes 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.

“Yes,” 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 Republican 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’s teaching in 19th century American literature, he is especially aware of the links between education and citizenship.”

“These writers—Adams, 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 instigated 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 used to prepare students to join society; it can also prepare them to transform it.”