

Teaching at an international school: How sweet it is!

by Daniel Cwik

Coming from a city school in Chicago, Illinois, the concept of an “international school” was not foreign to me. The Chicago Public Schools were international in many ways. Countless countries were represented by the student body and the number of languages spoken by students was impressive. However, the limited resources for education in my city and the threat of gang activity created an ominous cloud over our school.

As an educator, I wished for the “international” experience away from home. I hoped to be creative, away from the constraints of our high-stakes testing environment where unrelenting testing is the central means of assessment.

My transition to Curacao was easy, as the destination I chose wasn't ter-

ribly removed from what I was used to. I was offered a position teaching history at the International School of Curacao, in the Caribbean. A plush job, given my background. (Imagine making the decision: a Chicago winter (freezing cold, high winds, snow & ice) or a Caribbean winter.... wait...there is no winter!)

I was the envy of my colleagues back home...many of whom yearned to make the leap to International teaching, but were held back for one reason or another. With apprehension, as I was moving somewhere I had never even visited, I held my breath and took a great leap into the unknown.

What luck, I thought upon my arrival, I was greeted at the airport by an endlessly helpful parade of teachers. As soon as school began, I real-

ized I was in a new world. A request to students to form groups was met by instant accommodation. Probing questions were met with insightful answers and further questions. The administration was anxious to make sure I had everything I needed. My head was spinning! I realized that I was a lucky man, indeed.

I had come to a place where I could implement my crazy plans for high-level high school Napoleonic puppet shows (complete with rebellions and guillotines), and Renaissance musicals (have you seen Savonarola sing and dance? Or witnessed a duet between Da Vinci & Michelangelo? I have).

My work life now consists of live news broadcasts, two-voiced poetry, pre-recorded commercials, published newspapers, original board game

construction, wall-sized propaganda banners and MUN debates so intense you would swear that more than a grade was riding on it.

— I am a happy teacher and realize that I am in a special place at a special time. If I hadn't taken a risk and ventured into the unknown, I would not be having the incredible creative experiences I am having every day.

I am still at an “international” school, but this time, I'm in a country other than my own. The student population is still diverse. The language challenges are still there. Even though my students here will make it with or without me, I know I make a difference, especially when I am asked for “another project...quick, before the year is over!”

Of course, not all is fun and games...IB curriculum, essay writ-

ing, political theory are difficult. But when as an educator we make the curriculum come alive and see the light in the eyes of our students, then we know we have succeeded, achieving what teachers have always attempted to achieve, the spark that leads to lifelong learning.

If you are considering making the leap to international teaching, I can only share my joy from my own experience and encourage you to make the leap. Be brave.

The lives you touch will include your own.

Daniel Cwik teaches IB history I and II, world history, Model United Nations and psychology at the International School of Curacao. He says he is attempting to find yet another crazy way to bring history to life.