

## It Ain't Easy...And That's Why I Do It!

I was at a party not too long ago. Since most of the other guests were fellow teachers, the conversation drifted around, as it inevitably does, to school.

“Will your next teaching job be at an international school, or will you go back to the U.S.?”

For some, the answer was easy. Teaching abroad was just a lark, a walkabout, an “experience” to look back upon fondly some years hence.

“We’ll probably go back home next year or the year after.”

For others, like me, the response was equally automatic. Teaching overseas is a lifestyle, a vocation, a choice to be pursued with purpose and passion. A number of teachers with similar attitudes voiced their reasons for originally leaving the States and remaining abroad.

“Class sizes are too big.”

“The parents don’t care about their kids.”

“Too much paperwork.”

“Too much pressure by administration.”

“Taxes!”

“Kids don’t want to learn.”

I listened in polite but disbelieving silence. Every statement seemed to focus on how much *easier* it was to teach overseas. I wanted to shout back, “Teaching here might be a lot of things, but ***it sure ain’t easy!***”

Of course, as a well-mannered, long-time contrarian, I am used to holding my tongue, and so I did. Nonetheless, I maintain that the requirements of the typical teaching job overseas are far greater than the same job in the U.S....and that’s a *good* thing. Consider:

- Smaller class sizes mean fewer students “falling through the cracks.”
- Increased parent involvement means higher expectations and more pressure.
- Students who are intrinsically motivated dictate a more demanding, challenging curriculum.
- Teachers abroad are expected to do far more outside the classroom for far less additional compensation.

These are precisely the reasons that I **do** want to teach abroad. I decry the conspiracy of lowered expectations that undermines the achievement of our students in the U.S. I welcome the increased pressure of having to produce, both inside and outside of the classroom. And as any of my former administrators will attest, I like to work hard!

I believe that the fundamentals of teaching are not related to a school’s location, nor are they affected by family income or involvement. Almost two decades of experience as an educator has taught me that students, regardless of their country of origin or temporary home, need the same things:

- ✓ Consistent, clear, high expectations for behavior and achievement
- ✓ A sense of connectedness with those around them
- ✓ A meaningful, varied curriculum that is connected to “real-world” experiences
- ✓ Critical thinking skills that teach them “how to learn”
- ✓ Instruction that addresses all learners, regardless of learning styles or intelligences

I am currently in my third year at Xiamen International School in Xiamen, China, teaching a mixture of students from Taiwan, Korea, and “other.” Once at XIS, I found myself immersed in what has become a familiar experience: WASC accreditation. At the same time, XIS was undergoing accreditation by the local Chinese textbook authority and recertification as an IB

World School. It was this latter process that would most profoundly affect me over the next three years.

Prior to my arrival, “IT” at XIS was taught as a series of discrete, disconnected skills: learn to keyboard, make a webpage, publish a brochure. Over and over and over. The visiting IB team quite rightly noted that this approach did not match the stated vision for MYP Tech. I was asked to overhaul the tech program in response to the IB’s very pointed criticisms.

The essence of MYP Technology is found in the Design Cycle, a rigorous, structured approach to creating products and solving problems. I designed a series of projects to which students could apply the Design Cycle, including identifying and correcting environmental deficiencies in our school plant, publishing personal videos, and creating interactive tools for university selection. These projects emphasized a variety of trans-disciplinary skills, along with the ability to follow a specified procedure—investigating, planning, creating and evaluating.

The unfamiliarity of this approach coupled with the high expectations for student work caused an initial backlash. Parents complained, students resisted, admin fretted. Low marks and even failing grades on report cards documented the difficulties of implementing this “new” curriculum. A number of teachers urged me to “ease up” because, after all, “you can’t expect ‘these students’ to get it all at once.”

I ignored them and persevered. Out of the chaos of those beginnings came order and progress, as students started to make sense of what they were being asked to do. The IB revisited the campus in May and singled out the tech students for their knowledge of the design process and the criteria by which they are assessed. This year, students in tech are outperforming students in other departments.

This was not a miracle, and I am not a miracle worker. It started with high expectations and included the familiar elements that I listed earlier. Anybody can do it. But, no, it ain’t easy.