**Teaching Teens About the Middle East**

**High school course becomes a model for other teachers**

Imagine you are a leading expert on a country in the Middle East—Egypt, for instance—and you find yourself part of a group that is tasked with advising the President of the United States on foreign policy toward Egypt. You have 40 minutes to give a comprehensive and persuasive presentation on the state of the country to the president himself, as well as other high-ranking advisers.

That’s the scenario that eleventh-grade students face in the Middle East course taught by Ben Roosevelt at Academe of the Oaks, an independent high school tucked away in northeast Decatur. Roosevelt, who has taught the course since 2007, stands in for the US president in this culminating activity that challenges students to build their research, collaboration, and presentation skills while acquiring deep knowledge about their chosen country.

Roosevelt developed the group assignment partly to get students away from their computers and into a highly interactive, real-life situation. The assignment sheet warns that the presentation is “not a book report or general touristic information” and also that it “constitutes a large percentage of your grade.” The student “advisers” are required to thoroughly outline the historic, geographic, social, economic, and political factors that should shape US foreign policy toward their country.

“Students who might not always shine in other areas can suddenly show themselves as really good political thinkers,” Roosevelt says. “It’s made me realize something about the qualities that can make good leaders.”

Sitting beside a tall stack of more than a dozen books on all aspects of the Middle East—culture, religion, oil production, major leaders, political history—Roosevelt describes creating the course from scratch, based on what he viewed as a need for high-school level social studies curricula on one of the most volatile and influential regions in the world. Although the subject wasn’t previously a specialty of his, Roosevelt embraced it in the spirit of Academe’s rigorous Waldorf-based approach to education.

He says the course material was “instantaneously engaging” to the high-school juniors, who have a keen interest in global issues. Through assigned readings, lectures, class discussions, essays, and projects, the class covers everything from Middle East energy revolutions to the critical role of the media, both within and outside the region.

Discussion gets particularly lively around the impact of the Internet and the “Arab spring.” Using social media to organize and plan protests “works very well because of the population ratio of young to old in these countries,” explained some of the students in their presentation on Egypt.

Roosevelt, who holds a B.A. in religious studies from the University of the South and a master’s in theological studies from Vanderbilt, finds that the students are also particularly interested in learning about Islam—its branches, its followers, and its impact on the region and the world. “Islam is overlaid like a blanket on tribal and familial differences,” he says. “In class, we listen to the call to prayer to try to understand the profound rhythm of Islam.”

And it’s often a surprise to the students that the Middle East was arguably the most intellectually advanced place on earth during the Middle Ages. Scientists and philosophers congregated in and around what is now Baghdad, then a center for sharing and advancing knowledge.

“One of the objectives of the course is to challenge stereotypes about the Middle East,” Roosevelt says. “Students are very responsive when we discuss the 20th century and they begin to grasp the factors, such as colonialism and the Great War, that have made the region the turbulent place that it is.”

Roosevelt says he changes the course every time he teaches it because “I like to teach at the very living edge of the topic.” But after several years, he believes the class is well developed and evolved enough that it could serve as a model for other high-school teachers. That’s why he is currently writing a book on teaching the Middle East to teenagers—a work that is part philosophy, part instructional toolkit.

“It’s supposed to be a practical daily resource for teachers,” he says. “As a teacher myself, I know I appreciate it when I have access to resources that are very in-depth but also helpful for last second preparation.”

A teacher trained in Waldorf instruction, Roosevelt, like most faculty members at Academe, teaches a broad range of courses—including units on ancient Greece, political philosophy, and America and the modern world. He is also a working artist who holds an MFA from the University of Ireland, Galway, and has exhibited across the US and Europe.

“I love everything I teach,” he says. “There’s nothing I teach that I don’t love thinking about.”