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Teacher promoting world understanding through language

Distance education teacher Katie Grubb gets great satisfaction from expanding students' horizons, Kristie Kellahan writes.

Kristie Kellahan

Katie Grubb says the best thing about teaching languages is seeing grow young people's interest and understanding in the world beyond their own backyard. The greatest reward for teachers is seeing the world of students open as their ideas of what is possible expand.

Grubb, a teacher with Southern Cross School of Distance Education in northern NSW, teaches all high school grades. Her specialty is Chinese Mandarin.



Transcending boundaries: Katie Grubb with students Malaika and Amani Okoth. Photo: Tommy Salmon

Working in distance education makes one question the idea of a traditional classroom setting, she says.

"I have taught in many different settings, ranging from indigenous communities in Australia to China, Taiwan, PNG and rural Kenya," she says. "In distance education, walls and boundaries are transcended and places like the cyberworld, the beach or even a cafe become viable classrooms."

For distance educators to work successfully, they must develop a massive toolbox of technology skills, ranging from creating online content to video conferencing and interactive programs, she says. She has also had to develop skills in publishing programs, including Adobe Illustrator and Indesign.

In addition to teaching Chinese Mandarin, Grubb is part of a team that creates project-based cross curriculum units that thread ideas like sustainability and interconnectedness into learning.

This year Grubb was awarded the Premier's Kingold Chinese Language Teacher Scholarship, an opportunity to bring more connected learning into student lives. With funds provided as part of the scholarship award, Grubb will explore projects that encourage students to create content and share their learning with each other globally.

"Having authentic feedback loops, learning stimulus based in the real world and peer-to-peer collaboration will encourage learners to question and develop creative solutions to real-world problems," she says. "This will help traditional Chinese language course work move beyond content emphasis."

To capture and hold students' attention, Grubb will incorporate into language lessons discussion of such hot topics as the emergent surf, skateboarding and associated Chinese youth culture and how they relate to the environment. "This will provide an opportunity for learners to develop global perspectives," she says.

In addition to teaching, Grubb also works on educational strategies for organisations such as the Australian Marine Debris Initiative, Tangaroa Blue and Revolve Your World. "I find that being involved in community projects such as these works like a bridge connecting young people in schools to the real world," she says. "On our beaches in Far North Queensland we will often find rubbish washed up from overseas, so you can immediately see a learning opportunity of Australia's engagement with Asia and how we are all connected to each other."

Grubb gets a lot of satisfaction from teaching. "Concerns that Chinese is a difficult language, especially for students with low literacy levels, are urban myths," she says. "I have seen high school kids who are in low literacy learning programs come out with awesome spoken Chinese that can be understood by anyone in China. It's about being able to tap into your students' passions and then personalise learning programs."