

RELATING TO STUDENTS

Andrea Blahušiaková, Christian Röper-Kühnemann, Christoph Staufenbiel
and Hana Vozárová

This time it seemed to be very easy to make up the teaching groups: we more or less worked in the same groups as we did, when we were in Germany. The difference was, that this time we had to work on all the assignments. That meant, we had to create ten groups of two students each, because there were ten assignments to work on. So we decided to simply split each former group into the pairs of students who lived together in Germany. The Slovak students had contacted the schools before, so the teaching groups were already allocated to different schools. The schools were all situated in Banská Bystrica, except two of them, one located in Brezno about 45 km and the other in Liptovský Mikuláš about 86 km away from Banská Bystrica. The grades were not as diversified as the classes in Germany; all of the Slovak classes were the eleventh or twelfth grade, which means the pupils were in their last years at school. The latter is the final school year, from which the students progress to start an apprenticeship or to attend university. Fortunately the Slovak students asked for English speaking classes, so both nationalities could be involved in the lessons. (In Germany we had a problem with the language that forced us to teach in German in most of the lessons, which was a pity, especially for the Slovak students). The major task for us was to develop one single lesson from the assignments on religion, We considered the topic interesting and appropriate for the pupils. Because of the similar grades, we were often able to plan both lessons the same way, which made it a little bit easier to spend enough time on creating an interesting and exciting lesson.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'DEVOTION TO RELIGION AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP'

As mentioned before, this time we had no choice of the assignments, we had to work with all of them. So we did not discuss which assignments were interesting to the pupils and which assignments were relevant to them. But we had to discuss how we could develop an interesting and exciting lesson out of the given material of the assignments. The

teaching group, who did the assignment 'Devotion to religion and Active Citizenship', reported, that this assignment was hard to understand for the pupils and they needed a lot of time to explain to the pupils what it was all about. During the lesson the teaching group didn't use the tasks given in the assignment. They created a separate work sheet for the pupils which contained the tables needed for task 6 and 7. The lessons started with basic questions about being religious using the traffic light game. The pupils did not fill in any work sheets for this, they just raised their hands showing a green, yellow or red card depending on their opinion. After this starter, the teaching group showed the maps from the assignment and handed out the work sheets. At this point the understanding of the pupils became problematic. The student teachers had to explain a lot to make the tasks work. After the lessons the teaching group said that this assignment was very interesting for the pupils, but they had problems understanding the connection between religious life and being a citizen of a nation. For the pupils this could not be separated. Every person has to live as a citizen in a country with all the associated personal duties and rights. That means it doesn't matter whether the person is religious or not. So the pupils didn't find the link between religion and citizenship at first. The lessons ended with a discussion about the assignment. The pupils learnt that there is a relationship between religiousness and active citizenship, and that this relationship is more or less present in the different European countries.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'HOW ARE RELIGIONS SPREAD ACROSS EUROPE'

The teaching-group expected that the pupils would know a lot about this topic, so they decided to focus on historical phenomena and problematic zones in Europe. In the end, this was the right decision, because the pupils reported that they had thought it would be boring but found that it wasn't. Our student teachers focused on the religious conflicts in Europe like the one in Northern Ireland and in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The lessons started with a work sheet that showed a blank map of Europe and the pupils were asked to guess where the borders between the different religions were. At this point the material from the assignment was very helpful and was used by the teaching-group. What was very special about these lessons was that they were held in a school which was equipped with interactive whiteboards instead of a normal blackboard. That made it easy to use the maps and work sheets from the assignment, because they could simply be projected without needing any preparation. Based on the data shown in the maps, the pupils worked on the distribution of religions across Europe, which led into a discussion at the end of the lesson. In one lesson the discussion was not very successful, but in the other lesson the discussion was very effective and interesting. The two student teachers had quite different experiences working with an interactive whiteboard. One of them was very pleased to work with this technology and the other missed the blackboard. But both of them were surprised how naturally the pupils worked with the electronic equipment.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'IS FOOTBALL AS IMPORTANT AS RELIGION?'

The teaching group who worked with this assignment was very glad about this topic, because they thought this was a very interesting topic to the pupils. Preparing the lessons the teaching group had no expectations about the results of the lessons, because it wasn't possible to guess, what the pupils would think about the connection between football and religion. So in the end the result was a little bit surprising to the student teachers, because the pupils in general didn't think that there could be a connection between football and religion. The lessons started with a short introduction showing the map on believing in god. The student teachers had created a Powerpoint-presentation, but in the first lesson the whiteboard didn't work, which forced them to improvise. Instead of showing the presentation they worked with short-stories and examples. After the introduction the student teachers asked the pupils to work with the Toulmin scheme of argumentation discussion the question whether football is as important as religion. The student teachers were surprised that the pupils understood the Toulmin scheme immediately and worked very well with it. Some examples of the argumentation with the help of the Toulmin scheme by the are:

- » *I'm not interested in football*
- » *I'm a fan of the Brezno football-team, because my friends are playing there*
- » *I'm a fan of the FC Liverpool, because I like their fan-chorals*
- » *Football players are nice*

The pupils got to know about the different opinions in Europe regarding football and religion and that there are regions in Europe, where the connection between football and religion is strong (where football is some kind of religion) and regions, where football and religion are not linked at all.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'WHY BE RELIGIOUS?'

The teaching group expected that the classes would be divided into religious and non-religious pupils and therefore they could discuss their respective views. The lessons started with the traffic light game to get an overview of the pupils opinions. But there were less pupils who considered themselves religious than expected. Afterwards the teaching group presented the maps from the assignment to introduce the different views people have in different European countries. That was followed by a diamond ranking, for which the pupils were divided into groups and had to rank possible reasons for being religious. In the first lesson each group created a different diamond, but in the second lesson, all diamonds were very similar with the reason 'belief in god' on top. Overall, the ranking showed, that the Slovak pupils related religion not only to believing in god and going to church, but also to the belief in supernatural powers, telepathy or in someone's self. The lessons ended

with a discussion, which in both lessons has been very lively, because the pupils found the topic interesting and they all had opinions about it. In both discussions the pupils came to the conclusion, that religion influences everyday life in all European countries and is important for life in general (culture), but that there exist a wide range of attitudes about it, depending of every individual person and whether they are religious or not.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'LUCKY CHARMS'

The expectation of this teaching group was that every pupil would have an idea of what lucky charms were and maybe had one him- or herself (unfortunately only a few pupils actually got their lucky charms at school). With this expectation in mind, the teaching group aimed their lessons at the link between religious life and lucky charms. To give some basic information to the pupils, the teaching group showed the maps taken from the assignment. Afterwards, the pupils filled in some transparencies with the statistical information of four different European countries (England, Germany, Poland, Slovakia). This took place as a group work and was necessary to compare the different European definitions of lucky charms. Afterwards a discussion about lucky charms took place. The discussion was very lively and interesting and led to the insights the lessons were aiming for, namely, that there is no relation between religiousness and the use of lucky charms in Europe. At the end of the lessons, the pupils had to voice their opinion about religiousness and lucky charms by using the traffic light game. The teaching group remarked, that it would have been very good to use another method, because the traffic lights game, although it did work, was not the best suited method for the purpose.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'NO CREO EN EL JAMAS' (LIFE AFTER DEATH)

The teaching group started the lessons with a scale on how much pupils believe in life after death. The expectation was that there is a big mix of different opinions, because all the pupils had different backgrounds. The scale met the expectations, because the pupils showed a wide range of answers to this question. After the starter, the teaching group tried to deepen the pupils understanding by working with the maps from the assignment and talking about them. After showing the maps the pupils were ask to brainstorm on the question of why some Europeans believe in life after death and others do not. In general the expectation of the teaching group about this assignment was true and they achieved the aim of the lessons to develop a critical understanding in relation to the idea that views on life after death may vary from country to country, with some strongly believing in life after death and others almost unconcerned, although these opinions do not necessarily relate to how religious people are.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'RELIGION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON POLITICS AND POLICIES'

The access to these lessons was established via brainstorming on the words 'politics' and 'religion'. The teaching group expected, that the pupils didn't have too much knowledge about the topic, so that they were surprised to find out that the pupils actually knew quite a lot about it. Although the pupils did have a good knowledge base, they had problems working with the assignment because of new or unknown methods (especially group work). The main part of the lessons was the discussions in small groups about the maps from the assignment. The pupils were pleased to talk about the topic, because it is not very common to speak about the problems of politics and religion in school. But the teaching group reported that the material from the assignment was not very useful, because the maps look very similar and there were no reasons given for why there are differences in the relation between politics and religion in the different European countries. But in the end the aim of the lessons, to develop a critical thinking about why religion is or is not related to politics in different European countries, had been reached.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'SECULARISATION IN EUROPE'

The teaching group expected that the pupils already know about secularisation and they were really surprised when they found out that the pupils didn't even know the meaning of the word. This was not a problem of using a foreign language, because the classes were bilingual with English as the main language. So the student teachers were forced to change their lessons a little bit and they tried to use the maps from the assignment to make the topic more visual. Due to the problems of understanding, the prepared teaching methods didn't work very well, It was hard for the pupils to understand the topic of the lessons. But the student teachers were able to initiate a discussion on the topic, so that they were quite satisfied with the lessons, but they hadn't expected so many problems with this topic. In the end they thought that they did a good job, because the discussions have been very lively and the pupils developed some very good and creative ideas about secularisation in Europe.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS PLACES'

The teaching group were very happy with this topic, because this topic was the most geographical one. But during the development of the lessons the teaching group got the impression that the material from the assignment was not very useful and they created a new work sheet, which was the starter and basis of the lessons. They started the lesson by showing a picture of a famous church in Bratislava and the pupils

brainstormed about that specific religious place. At the end of the brainstorming the teaching group offered the pupils a definition of religious places by Yi Fu Tuan. The teaching group expected the pupils to have very different ideas of religious places, but this expectation was not realised. The pupils worked with a worksheet using the snowball-method. This method inspired the classes to start discussions about religious places and their meaning. Nevertheless, in the end the teaching group was a little bit disappointed because the results of the snowball were the same in both classes taught. Both times pupils named Mecca, Jerusalem and Vatican-City as religious places, only one group named Lourdes instead of Mecca. This made the discussion at the end of the lessons difficult, because there were no different opinions about the meaning of religious places. Even though the pupils usually used 'official' evaluations to argue for or against the importance of religious places, they also thought about religious places in a very private way. The result of both lessons was, that the pupils understood the Tuan definition of religious places and learned to apply it on different religious places, e.g. that they have official and/or individual meanings.

THE ASSIGNMENT 'UNITY IN DIVERSITY'

The teaching-group expected that the pupils knew about religiously homogeneous and heterogeneous countries in Europe and about tolerance and intolerance in European countries and the lessons totally hit their expectations. The topic was related to the pupils by handing them a table of ten European countries, for each of which they should name the main religion. They guessed the main religion and the teaching group gave them feedback afterwards. The main problem of the lessons was the lack of knowledge about teaching methods. To explain the methods to the pupils took a lot of time. At the end of the lessons, the pupils found out that Slovak people think that they are more tolerant of other religious groups than they actually are. So the aim of the lessons, to teach about tolerance and intolerance, was absolutely reached.

WHICH CONCEPTIONS DID YOU FIND?

Basically we can say that our expectations of the pupils' opinions were usually fulfilled, but there were some surprises as well. Some teaching groups overestimated the pupils' knowledge about their topic and some underestimated it. In general, the German students were surprised that the Slovaks are not very religious at all. This is similar to the former eastern part of Germany and can be caused by the post-socialist heritage. (Twenty years after the German reunion, the former western part of Germany is still more religious than the former eastern part of Germany.) Overall, we have to say, that religion was a very controversial topic to all people who were involved in the project and the opinions about religion ranged from one end of the scale to the other.

Generally we received a warm and positive feedback to our lessons. Because of the short time available, we could not include every single pupil in our lesson, so in each group there were one or two pupils, who were not interested in the topics and also did not participate in the discussions. But the teachers of the classes were very pleased with our lessons and told us that their pupils had been very active and inspired. A very positive aspect was that the pupils found our lessons very challenging and that they were forced to challenge themselves and others. Thereby they gained new understandings and got an opportunity to reflect on their own thinking in a critical way. Many pupils told us that it was great to look at several topics from a European point of view and they were surprised how many differences there are, which they had never thought of before.