

DEVELOPING LESSONS ON THE BASIS OF THE ASSIGNMENTS

Pavel Rýgl, Anett Seeger and Anja Strehmann

During the second part of the exchange project some things were changed. We still used the assignments to create the lessons, but the way we chose them and our partners were new: the themes were introduced and given to the Slovak students before the German students arrived and the teams were made up of one Slovak student plus his/her German host. The democratic rules we have had in Germany, where we could choose the theme and our partners on our own, were gone. Because of that the number of the group members declined from four to two while the number of groups increased. This change would help us to work on more themes than we did during the first part of the exchange project in Germany. At that time we chose two of the ten themes, what seemed to be too little for an overall evaluation. The change did work in the way that every theme was taught by one group this time. But it also caused problems that we had not had before, e. g. a distance to the topic because some teacher students did not get the underlying message of the theme, and therefore problems arose when working together on the concept of the lesson. We agreed that these problems did not necessarily result from the new system, but it influenced our motivation, because if someone does not allow you enough freedom of choice, you feel less trust in yourself and your skills. Working in small multicultural groups, this change brought in additional which arose from the different ways that people interpreted the assignments. That in turn means that the authors of the assignment must be very clear on what they want to achieve. They must make sure that the topic is easy to understand and that it has an open-minded approach that leaves room for sensible changes that may be needed in relation to the cultural background of the pupils who work with it. To assure this, it must have well-formulated and concrete tasks, the intention of which should be explained in the teacher information.

On other hand, the user of the assignment must already have an idea about the theme, at least in relation to the underlying theoretical ideas, so that he can develop his own opinion on it. It is important to be able to develop your own lessons on the

basis of the assignments. Therefore for our project it is important to know how students developed their lessons in a pedagogically convincing way. This information is needed, to develop the project further in the future. With the help of a short questionnaire of four questions we wanted to find out how students were preparing their lessons with the help of the assignments. As we wanted to at least try to cover the whole process of working with the assignments, we asked them whether the assignments were helpful in seeing the aim of the lesson and then plan it accordingly, whether they used the material and the teaching information, and how they would like to improve the assignments.

The evaluation of the ten assignments about *religion* will be represented in the following.

WHAT WAS THE AIM OF YOUR LESSON AND HOW HELPFUL WAS THE ASSIGNMENT FOR PLANNING IT?

Each group somehow wanted to show the relations between religion and their topic. Furthermore most wanted the pupils to understand the reasons for different regional distributions of different phenomena. To give a more detailed overview you find the aim for every assignment listed in the following:

- » *Devotion to Religion and Active Citizenship: Find out whether there is a relationship between religion and behaviour.*
- » *How are religions spread across Europe? Show which religions there are in Europe and how they are distributed.*
- » *Is football as important as religion? Find out whether there is a relationship between religion and football and why people support a team.*
- » *Why be religious? Get an idea of what religion means and what reasons are for being religious.*
- » *Lucky Charms: Find out whether there is a relationship between religion and lucky charms.*
- » *'No creo en el jamas' (Juanes): Find out whether there is a relationship between peoples' general religious attitudes, their belief in God and their belief in life after death.*
- » *Religion and its influence on politics and policies. Show the influences to the pupils.*
- » *Secularization in Europe: See differences between state and religion.*
- » *The meaning of religious places: Realize that there are different opinions about religious places.*

You could say that some groups found it easy to illicit these aims from their assignments, some had some problems and some found it very hard. Most of respondents found it easy to develop an aim on this basis of the assignment. They felt that their assignments were very helpful offering them a lot of opportunities to plan a good lesson. The material was made accessible by well considered tasks for pupils and they had clear thematic character. In most cases the aim of the lesson was easy to understand,

but there were also themes where the aim was very open so that it had to be adjusted to the requirements of the practice. It means that after the experiences from first lesson, groups changed the lesson to better suit the pupils in the second lesson.

The second group, that had some problems with finding an aim, said it was due to their impression that some of the assignments had rather non-geographical themes, which made it harder for them to adopt the assignment to a geography classroom. This problem was solved by developing new aims for the lessons. Often, the aim was reformulated after the first lesson. Still the respondents in this group did not have bigger problems with the assignments.

The group that found it hard to develop an aim for the lesson used the assignment only by referring to its name and overall idea. They brought in information from other sources and only used the maps from the EVS. To them the maps were the most important things in the assignment. They valued them as an information base. Maps as a symbol of the geographic sciences are coherent to all geography lessons.

To conclude, in most cases the assignment helped the student teachers to develop their aims. Furthermore they used the material from the assignments, like questions, tasks, maps, cross tables and definitions and the information. Most of the students agreed that the assignments were helpful to get an idea what the topic was about. This was absolutely necessary, because we had only little time for first reading through the assignment and then planning the lesson. So we had to understand the theme very quickly. Therefore most of the assignments were just right.

WHICH TASKS DID YOU CHOOSE FROM THE ASSIGNMENT (WITHOUT OR WITH A LITTLE CHANGE)?

It's difficult to find the group which chose most tasks from their assignment because most assignments were planned for more than one lesson. Therefore one assignment had 18 tasks. But while in this assignment every question is a new task, in another the assignment with 'only' three tasks, a lot of different questions make up one task. This not only makes it hard to compare the assignments, but also creates a need to leave some tasks out. Nevertheless, concerning the question about which tasks the students chose, we would like to start with those groups which used most of the tasks: these were on the one hand the student teachers who worked with the assignment *Is football as important as religion?* This group used all four tasks which were offered in the assignment. On the other hand the student teachers who worked with the assignment *Secularization in Europe* also used many tasks from their assignment, namely four of five tasks (task one, two, three and four). One of these student teachers said that they changed the tasks a little because there were no teaching methods used in this assignment.

Next in the number of tasks used from the assignment is the group who worked with '*How are religions spread across Europe?*' These students took two of the three tasks which were proposed in their assignment. They changed task one a little bit in that they gave

the pupils a blind map of Europe in which they were asked to draw how they thought that the different religions were spread across Europe. Then the pupils were asked to compare their results with a given map and see whether their assumptions were right?

These were the groups which left out no or only one task of their assignment. Then there was one group which left out two tasks of their assignment. These were the student teachers who worked with *Unity in Diversity*, who chose three of the five tasks (task one, two and five). Moreover, in this assignment there is a starter which was used by the group, too.

And then there were the assignments which consist of a lot more tasks than the assignments mentioned before, for example the assignment *Why be religious?* This assignment consists of three parts with twelve tasks: 'religion in Europe', 'religion and identity' and 'comparison to culture'. The students who worked with this assignment decided to use only one of these parts because working with all parts would have been too much for one lesson. So they took the part 'religion in Europe', which consists of seven tasks (task a-g), but the students only used the tasks a, b and d and changed them by introducing different teaching methods.

The assignment *Devotion to Religion and Active Citizenship* consists of eight tasks, and the students who worked with it chose two of them: task three and task six, but they shortened the first task and changed the second one. One of the group members said that they used the tasks as an inspiration.

The group which worked with the assignment *Lucky charms* took three of the 18 tasks (task one, six and 15), and the students who worked with the assignment *Religion and its influence on politics and policies* and those who worked with *Do you believe in life after death?* chose one task only. The group who worked with *Religion and its influence on politics and policies* used one of seven tasks which were proposed in the assignment (task one), but again they changed it, too. Moreover, this group chose a lot of maps from their assignment. The group *Do you believe in life after death?* took one out of 14 tasks, namely task five.

The only group which chose not one single task from the assignment was the group that worked with the assignment *The meaning of religious places*. The only thing they used was the definition of what a religious place is, according to the American geographer Yi Fu Tuan. This definition belongs to task two in this assignment.

Summing this up, you can identify three different approaches: In the first group, you find the students, who used no tasks from the assignments because they had better ideas on how to reach their aim.

The second group did all or most of the tasks exactly as they were or with only slight changes. But it was important, that to do all the tasks in the assignment, they had to have enough time for that. For this group the material was very helpful, because it gave them a very good orientation, as there was a clear aim in the assignment.

The third group of students also often did not change the tasks but chose only a few tasks for their lessons. This could be due to the impression that the theme was hard to

understand, because it was more or less non-geographic, but it could also be seen with easy to understand, but long assignments.

So here we see that one factor that played a big part in all of this was time. Students had to take decisions on what to do and how to do it. They had to agree on the way they wanted their lesson to be and on what information was important for the pupils.

DID YOU WORK WITH THE TEACHER INFORMATION? WHY? WHAT WAS HELPFUL?

Only in two of the working groups both student teachers said that the teacher information was helpful (the group that worked with *Religion and its influence on politics and policies* and the group that worked with *Lucky charms*). One student teacher of the group who worked with the assignment *Religion and its influence on politics and policies* answered that he used the teacher information because it was helpful to plan the lesson and because he got some background information about the topic. The other student teacher of this group noted that he used the teacher information only a little bit, mainly to find out about the aims of the lesson. One member of the group which worked with the assignment *Lucky charms* said that she used the teacher information because it was good to get an overview of the topic and to work out typical things for different countries. The other member of this group answered that she used the teacher information especially because it was helpful for teaching patterns.

One student teacher of the group that worked with the assignment *Unity in diversity* noted that he used the teacher information to improve his understanding of some aspects of the assignment while the other student teacher said that she read it, but that it was not really useful and that she made up her own opinion. It's the same with the groups that worked with the assignments *Do you believe in life after death?*, *Secularization in Europe* and *How are religions spread across Europe?*: one member of these groups answered that she/he used the teacher information while the other member noted that she/he only read the teacher information.

The groups that worked with the assignments *The meaning of religious places*, *Is football as important as religion?*, *Devotion to Religion and Active Citizenship* and *Why be religious?* did not use the teacher information at all. One member of the group that worked with the assignment *Is football as important as religion?* explained that their assignment is only useful for teachers, who work in the United Kingdom and in Ireland and that's why the students didn't use the teacher information.

WHAT CAN BE IMPROVED IN THE ASSIGNMENT?

One big recommendation is that the assignments are not planned for 45 minutes. That's why some student teachers had to choose which tasks from the material to include. Some themes are very interesting or difficult and student teachers wanted to use everything that was in their assignment. It would be better for the future if the authors of the assignments face that time problem. Less is sometimes more.

Another important point are the maps and their quality. Their titles are sometimes hard to understand and the representation of the data is not always clear. A good example for this is the map entitled 'How people believe in God?' For us as student teachers it is hard to understand what the map shows. How can we then explain it to the pupils? More information would be very useful.

CONCLUSION

These are the results from our questionnaire. As a conclusion, we can say, that for us as future geography teachers it was not always easy to connect the theme of religion with geography. It would be good if some of the assignments were a little more geographic. It is very hard to develop lessons from an assignment that is not based on geographical concepts. The authors should try to keep this in mind. If that was done, the students generally have no problem with the assignments. Of course, in a multicultural context there will always be difficulties in understanding things at once, maybe also in choosing aims or setting priorities, but clever and sensitive students will find solutions that satisfy all involved in the project.