

ASSIGNMENTS, CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION AS THE BASE OF DEVELOPING LESSONS

Kezban Altuntaş, Pinar Akçay, Suzanne Kools and Richard Schnabel

WHAT ARE THE GENERAL STRENGTHS OF THE ASSIGNMENTS?

All the assignments were tested at different schools with different grade levels. Although most of the assignments required certain adaptations regarding the age and abilities of the pupils, there were three main strengths in common. These were:

- » *the structure of the assignment*
- » *the resources of the assignment*
- » *the fostering of self-expression*

STRUCTURE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

The 'bottom-up' teaching pattern was observed in almost all of the assignments. They started with simple activities and the activities became more and more demanding towards the end of the assignment. To exemplify, one of the assignments started with the questions asking for the pupils' personal opinions and then for the classes' and finally for the countries'. Starting with individual values and beliefs, the students were to compare their findings to the class level and then to the country level. This helped them see how a value can differ from one person to another, one group to other and on a higher level from one country to another.

There was another common pattern in the structure in the assignments: the assignments contained tasks, which were related to the previous tasks, so that pupils could be taken

through the lesson step by step to finally be able to see the whole picture of values and religion. Work on each task led to results which were then used for the following tasks which paved the way to a final classroom discussion during which the whole process was revised.

RESOURCES OF THE ASSIGNMENT

The second common strength of the assignments was the various resources provided. As the name of the project indicates, plenty of maps were used during the lessons. Some of the assignments even provided some stimulating directions on how to read and interpret maps and how to draw conclusions from them. Most of the preliminary tasks were recognising patterns and trends in the maps. The following ones were like short summaries of the maps, which led pupils to come to a conclusion.

The articles, examples and explanations supplied in the assignments helped the students to view the issues from different angles. To illustrate, one of the assignments gave one good example about tolerance and religion in Bosnia Herzegovina. The causes and the effects of conflicts were linked to each other in a model for explanation which could then be used by the students to scrutinise new kinds of conflicts.

FOSTERING SELF-EXPRESSION

The last common strength of the assignments was that the students were encouraged to think and talk about their own beliefs and share them with their classmates. While some of the pupils said that they did not talk about anything new, some of them stated that they had an interesting lesson because they talked and thought about things that they had never thought and talked about before. Moreover, pupils were asked a lot about their opinions and visions. There were numerous activities in which the pupils had to relate the information to their own lives and views. With a little adaptation (such as a card game) the pupils enjoyed the assignments a lot. Most of the assignments relied on the views of the pupils and they got involved in the subject this way.

HOW COULD YOU IMPROVE THE ASSIGNMENT?

Four main points were highlighted in the evaluation forms of student teachers regarding the question of how you could improve the assignments. These points were:

- » *the lack of specific examples*
- » *not relating the issue to the students*
- » *language problems*
- » *the infeasibility to adaptation*

LACK OF SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

Some of the assignments were criticised for lacking specific examples and it was stated that there could be more specific examples from the daily lives of the students. For instance, one of the project members stated that more examples about football teams from other countries should have been given in the assignment on religion and football.

NOT RELATING THE ISSUE TO THE STUDENTS

Most of the student teachers stated that the issue dealt with in some assignments were not related to the pupils and it was hard to attract their attention. To involve the students in the assignments the student teachers had to start the lesson using games to introduce the issue into the students' lives.

Not only the issues but also the concepts in the assignments did not relate well to the students. To illustrate, concepts such as individualism and collectivism were not related to the lives of the students, hence these concepts were not meaningful to them. It took a lot of time to explain their meaning even in the native language of the students.

LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

The third point important for improving the assignments is the language level. In the evaluation forms it was stated that the English used in the assignments could and should be easier. It was suggested that shorter text or maybe a video about the history should have been provided instead of a long, complicated text, which was hard to follow for the pupils. There was another striking example about how the definitions were difficult to handle. To demonstrate, there were too many academic concepts about identity. Since the student teachers assumed that it would be hard for students to handle the concepts, they had to skip an important task, which was designed to foster critical thinking.

INFEASIBILITY TO ADAPTATION

The last common point of the assignments was that all of them contained too many task sequences, some of which were demanding. In the teacher information it was often said, that the assignments were designed to be taught in two to three lessons, but the classes we held usually only lasted fifty minutes. Thus, the assignments had to be adapted and most of the tasks had to be cut. However, some assignments included sequences of tasks, which relied on each other and that made the adaptation even more difficult.

Another problem with the adaptation was that some of the assignments focused mainly on just one country such as Germany. The students were complaining that the tasks about Germany were too detailed even though the student teachers had already managed to adapt those tasks. Since this project is about European values, the assignments should also include more information about Europe.

IN WHAT WAYS WAS THE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION USEFUL? HOW COULD THIS BE IMPROVED?

The student teachers weren't quite sure about what the additional information was for. Some thought that it was extra information for the pupils; some thought that it was background information for the Turkish and Dutch student teachers and yet others thought it was the teachers' notes from their assignment.

Actually the additional information is the general background information for all the assignment tested by the teachers. So, the teachers' notes and the background information about religion together form the additional information. Just a few of the twenty student teachers did get this. It is important to make this point clear to the student teachers, but also other teachers who might want to use one of the assignments.

In general the student teachers were not very happy about the additional information. Especially the background information about religion was discussed many times. Some student teachers did not use the background information at all. In their eyes it was too hard to understand. It was too difficult to read for the Dutch student teachers because it was not written in their language. Even the Turkish students, who are studying to be English teachers, found the background information hard to understand.

If the background information could be made clearer, it would be more accessible for the student teachers and probably also for the teachers who might want to use the assignments.

Apart from the language problems, many students thought the background information was not useful because it did not offer enough information on differences and trends in the European countries. It was also very hard for the Turkish student teachers to explain what the real causes were for every similarity and difference in European values.

The teachers' notes were also thought to be insufficient by many student teachers. Firstly, some assignments seem to need some basic knowledge and many teachers' notes did not supply that extra information. For example, teachers outside the United Kingdom need special background knowledge to teach an assignment about two English football clubs, so that they do not have to waste time on researching the subject and maybe also to be able to better relate the topic to the students.

Secondly, the teacher's notes are more like an answer key in many assignments. The student teachers would prefer it to be more like a guideline than an answer key. What they were missing was some ideas on how to use the assignment in the lesson,

for example in relation to the time management. A kind of time schedule would enable the student teacher to better anticipate what he can achieve and what might be too much. Then it would also be easier to decide which tasks of the assignment should or should not be used when there is not enough time to teach the whole assignment. It would also be convenient if the teachers' notes described which parts of the assignment could be used instead of others. Therefore it would be good to know what the aims for each task were.

Also explanations of the maps that were used in the assignments were missing. Because of this, it was very hard for the student teachers to explain the maps, for example when they were expected to explain patterns. If they had more information about the maps, it would have been easier for the student teachers to use and explain the maps.

As a final conclusion about the additional information, it can be said that there should be clear teachers' notes and background information for every assignment. With this it would be easier for the student teachers to explain the topics in more depth.

WAS THE FRAMEWORK USEFUL FOR YOU AND IN WHAT WAY?

The curriculum framework used for preparing the lessons was split into four main sections. It discussed the different steps that were to be taken in the lessons that were held by the students:

- » *relating the attitudes represented in the maps of the Atlas of European Values to the pupils*
- » *describing differences (and recognizing similarities)*
- » *deepening understanding*
- » *developing critical perspectives*

The student teachers had read the curriculum framework before developing the lessons on the basis of the assignments.

When, after the lessons, the student teachers were asked for their opinions about the usefulness of the curriculum framework in terms of preparing the lessons on the basis of the assignments they had very different views about it. Most of them were rather positive.

The student teachers were pleased with the curriculum framework because it offered them a good guideline to develop the lessons and helped them to develop a more focused approach while preparing the lessons. The student teachers could try to verify whether the assignments did have the items mentioned in the curriculum framework.

On the other hand the student teachers were not pleased with the English used. This was especially true for the Dutch students, who had difficulties understanding the approach of the curriculum framework. A lot of the student teachers did not even use the curriculum framework for developing the lessons.

Another thing which was mentioned was the lack of specific examples in the curriculum framework.

IN WHAT WAYS DID THE ASSIGNMENTS REFLECT THE STEPS IDENTIFIED IN THE FRAMEWORK?

The assignments (written by lecturers of the universities of Potsdam, London, Banská Bystrica, Istanbul and Fontys Tilburg) were supposed to be based on the curriculum framework. The four main steps of the curriculum framework should then be recognisable in the assignments.

It was difficult to really write an objective conclusion about this question because a lot of student teachers did not answer or misunderstood this question. The answers we could use were rather negative about identifying the four main sections of the curriculum framework in the assignments.

A lot of the student teachers mentioned that they had difficulties in identifying all four steps of the curriculum framework in the assignments. A lot of student teachers had to then adjust the assignments that they used or they did some activities to help reach the aims of the curriculum framework. For example one group of student teachers who did the assignment entitled 'Football and Religion' wore football shirts and brought a football to the lesson to better relate the assignment to the pupils.

As a final conclusion about the curriculum framework, it cannot be said that all four steps of the curriculum framework were visible in the assignments and the student teachers were required to do some extra activities or definitions. The curriculum framework helped the student teachers as it enabled them to take a more focused approach because it offered the students guidelines to work with. The curriculum framework could be improved by using simpler English and specific examples.