

# DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

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## WHAT DO WE MEAN, WHEN WE SAY 'DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING'?

During the first exchange we already explained what was meant by the term 'explanations'. After our first teaching experience in Germany (and in Turkey), the project decided to change the aim and description of this step of the curriculum framework from 'explaining data' to 'deepening understanding'. The intention behind this change was to get a better idea of what was being asked for. In this chapter we want to show, what this change means and how it was put into practice. We will especially focus on the assignments 'Religion and its Influence on Politics and Policies' and 'Devotion to religion and the active citizenship'.

Following Anna Thomson explanations and deepening understanding could be defined as answering 'why' - questions posed with respect to data or facts. We know that there is more than one way to do that. On the one hand, it may be accepted that something is like it is, which means that the main objective is to find out why it is like that. This assumes that the given fact will be independent of the explanation. On the other hand, the fact itself may be disputed. It is more a claim that something actually is the way that a person sees it. Then we usually start arguing.

There are two sides that frame the deepening of understanding. On the one hand there is the question of who I am and what my beliefs are. On the other hand there is the decision-making process and the acceptance of responsibility in relation to questions, problems and themes.

The best way to reconstruct given facts is to become aware of your own individual thinking. If a pupil finds out his or her own attitude towards a theme and maybe also the attitudes of his or her class mates, which could be completely different from the pupil's idea, he or she can better imagine what is hidden behind the opinions shown for different countries in the maps and diagrams. While digging deeper into the themes, pupils will find out similarities and differences between their own opinion and the belief of the society they live in. They should understand that there are different views

even in their own society and learn to accept and respect them even if they don't agree with them. Pupils should find their responsibility within the society. This perception will help them understand and question their place in the places where they live.

The other aspect of the process of deepening understanding is the ability to make decisions and take responsibility, which will help pupils while working on the themes. To find answers to why-questions may help them to find and understand structures and relations between different facts. So they are able to understand, explain and discuss themes. While working on exercises to understand a theme better, pupils are asked to analyse diagrams, charts, texts and maps. These competences will also help them succeed in other exercises in other subjects.

## WHICH METHODS CAN BE USED TO FOSTER DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING?

The main method of deepening understanding is still the same as for explanations: answering why-questions by discussing the issues brought up by them. The discussion could be between pupils or between the teacher and the pupils. It is also possible to involve an expert or a person from outside the classroom.

Based on the given structure of deepening understanding in part one, there are different methods for pupils to better understand a theme. Concerning the question of who I am, pupils could find out their own opinion by answering questions, which are based on the theme and can be answered with yes and no. These should be questions the pupils never thought about before. They could answer these questions by using words or, to make it more interesting and diversified, by using coloured cards (as in the traffic light game) or making crosses in a given box. If you want to go one step further the teacher can look at the class as a society in itself: as each pupil symbolises one part of this society, you can calculate an average and draw a diagram to show the results. These activities will also develop the decision-making skills and the responsibility of the pupils, because they make them understand and comprehend the methods used in social studies.

Using this competence from a different perspective, the perspective of explanations as a foundation for decision-making, the pupils are able to interpret diagrams and maps in a more refined way, because they already know about the mode of constructing diagrams and maps. The teacher can use these skills to let the pupils find out about the opinions in different societies, while interpreting the colours of maps or the bar in diagrams. They could also look more critically at facts they find in texts.

After using different methods in relation to the question of who I am and to support decision-making and responsibility in association with different materials, pupils could compare the results of the class (or their own idea) with the real results from society. This could be achieved by asking them to transfer their newly learned skills to another scale. Thus pupils can interpret different diagrams, maps or cross-tables projected on

the wall or shown in the form of posters. The posters are a good means to remind the pupils and teachers of the results of their previous efforts while working on the theme. All these products of the pupils should always be used for a following discussion between the pupils and the teacher. This is the last step to make pupils deeper understand a theme. And it is also a way for the teacher to lead the class to tangible results, because in the end he is responsible for the learning outcome of a lesson.

## EXAMPLES FOR DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING BASED ON THE ASSIGNMENTS

The previous chapters discussed what it means to deepen understanding and what methods can be used in order to develop it. The following text, based on an example from the assignment ‘Religion and its Influence on Politics and Policies’, will show what types of assignments can help to deepen understanding.

As mentioned before, the core method to deepen understanding lies in asking the question ‘why’, which is followed by a discussion on the issue. The key aspect of this question lies beyond the process of deepening understanding it lies in the core of the definition of geography as a field science focusing on interactions among individual elements of a geographic area.

Task one can be used as an example of application of this method. In the first segment pupils answer questions regarding their attitudes towards faith in God and hell. In the second segment they compare the answers with opinions of pupils from other countries shown in short video sequences. Their task is to discover differences and similarities in opinions and to try to explain why people agree or disagree.

This task directly provides the teacher with the question ‘why’. The teacher should apply this question in order to guide the pupils towards thinking about their own opinions. When giving reasons for differences and similarities, it is necessary to support arguments with relevant facts that are based on different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds of individual countries and to distinguish one’s own sentiments from objective reality.

Another group of methods that appear valuable for the given issue are methods of developing a personal view and methods that guide students towards decision-making and responsibility. Tasks 5 and 6 may be used as good examples. In general, pupils compare their own opinions on religion and politics with the opinions of pupils in other European countries that are represented in the maps attached below. To be more specific, the following two arguments for pupils to give their opinion may serve as examples: ‘Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office.’ or ‘If a nurse were asked to perform a legal abortion, he/she should be allowed to refuse it based on religion beliefs.’ Pupils should be able to grasp the idea of how they’ve come about with the opinion and what has influenced their decision-making with respect to this specific opinion. By discussing the issue with other pupils and with the teacher they

should realize various motives and experiences that lead to the construction of the different opinions found in the classroom. Finally, using maps, they should compare own opinions with the opinions of people from other countries.

## SUMMARY OF METHODS AND RESULTS

Such formulation of the tasks should provide pupils with the understanding of mechanisms that form both their own and different opinions and help them better understand society. In this context they should be able to perceive social decision-making as a process that needs responsibility and a deeper understanding of the problems.

### HOW DID WE TRAIN DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING IN SCHOOL?

After discussing the meaning of deepening understanding and the methods that may be used for deepening understanding, it is necessary to look at the process in which the deepening of understanding was developed in practice.

The first step involved gaining an idea of the general level of knowledge that pupils had about a certain topic. In each of the individual schools student teachers filled in a questionnaire containing series of short questions, discussed a chosen topic or used various written methods to voice their opinion on the issue.

The second step specifically involved deepening understanding. Based on the information from the questionnaire, it appears that the most suitable methods were discussions and working with thematic maps. During the discussions, however, it is important for the teacher to lead the discussion in the right direction, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as religion. Teachers should feel responsible to try to avoid the prevalence of emotions in such discussions and encourage the pupils to argue by using real facts. When using thematic maps it is important to teach the pupils to read the maps from different points of view and avoid simplified explanations which promote various cultural and social stereotypes. To achieve this, we tried to develop a number of different possible social, cultural, economic and political reasons which may lead or not lead to the acceptance of religion in peoples' lives across Europe.

The third and very important step required the evaluation of whether we were actually able to develop deepened understanding during the classes we taught. In questionnaire, this question was answered by most of the student teachers with YES. But a closer look reveals that the answers are influenced by subjective evaluations of the pupils' reactions in the class and by analysis of evaluation forms which the pupils handed in at the end of each class. To conclude, the ambition to deepen understanding in class may be considered as successful.

## WHAT DID THE PUPILS LEARN FROM IT?

In our lesson in Slovakia we wanted the pupils to engage in the theme ‘Devotion to religion and the active citizenship’. We used the correspondent assignment from the European Values education project. Because of the short teaching time we reduced the number of tasks and pulled together some of the exercises. We used the same way of working with the tasks as described in the assignment: the pupils answered the questions while coloring a table. We have chosen three items relating to the religion (Religion is very important for me; I believe in heaven; I believe in hell) and three items relating to active citizenship (I am concerned with living conditions of human kind; I am concerned with unemployed people rights; I am concerned with sick and disable people). We put all items into one table, so that the pupils could compare their answers and could (maybe) find some correlations.

In the beginning of the lesson we talked about the meaning of the topic and of the different questions and words to make sure that the pupils understand the theme and can get into it. In the working phase at first the pupils marked the answers for the religion items: green for ‘yes’ and red for ‘no’. Afterwards they did the same for the items of active citizenship. Both tasks needed the individual activity of all pupils and should help them, to *become aware of their own level of devotion*.

The next step in this lesson was to compare the results in a short discussion. Could the pupils find correlations between their answers? Did they mark the boxes in the same color? When the pupils explained their own results, they found out and had to accept, that there are completely different possible answers. You may not answer in the same way as your friend or neighbor, because your *level of devotion is related to your own lifestyle and your educational background*. For us this was the most important learning outcome.

To make it more clear for the pupils we asked them to compare their results with the results of the European Values Study. We showed the results of each item in a map projected on the wall and discussed the results with the pupils. We also designed a table in red and green for Slovakia and after this second working phase the pupils could compare their own results with the Slovakian results. On the one hand they asserted that the answers could be different again. On the other hand, they learned how to *evaluate a map*. We also explained that the results of the different European countries were made by using a *representative sample* and that not everyone was asked.

After the second working phase we again discussed the results. The pupils were asked to argue on whether they were ‘typical’ Slovaks or not. It was very interesting for the pupils and of course for us, the teachers. We heard statements like ‘Oh, I’m more a German than a Slovakian’ and used this to make sure again, that the results were here based on the countries, but that they don’t necessarily have to. Also when you are living in a very religious country, you don’t have to have the same level of devotion as most of the other people. Contrary to our topic in Germany ‘People in Need’, where we had the aim to make the pupils aware that there are quite different reasons of people in their environment to be in need and their feelings about it, our aim this time was to

make the pupils *aware of the individuality of each person*, independent of their country. In that way: we achieved our aim. And not to forget, the pupils learning process was organized in a new and open way of teaching, which was up to now unknown to them. But it was successfully implemented anyway.

## OUR OWN EXPERIENCES WORKING ON THIS CHAPTER

Writing this chapter was definitely more difficult than writing the last one. I think these complications were based on the fact, that almost all of the student teachers were passing their last exams, writing the last papers at university and already preparing themselves for the following practice time in school at the same time. Because of that, some student teachers were really stressed while working on this chapter.

The other reason for me personally was the change from the German way of learning and organizing things to the way of Slovakian students. When we had the project in Germany, the Germans were the 'leaders' and as is commonly known, Germans like to have everything done in a very structured and planned way. So when we said goodbye in Germany, everybody knew, which part he has to work on and which facts can be used for that. In Slovakia, our Slovakian partners were the 'leaders' of the project, but when we left, we didn't have a real agreement on the further work and we also didn't evaluate the lessons like we did first time. Because of that, we had some problems at home, because we had to get back into the lessons again and this time on our own.

But anyway we had a really good time together in Slovakia. We enjoyed the teaching practice and, of course, the collective events. Both parts of the project were successful and helpful for our own development and experience and none of us would like to miss it.