DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

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In every assignment we used maps from the Atlas of European Values. We did quite different things with the maps: we compared them to see differences, similarities and patterns in European values and tried to draw conclusions from them, to answer question like: Is a more religious country less tolerant towards homosexuality? Is there actually a link between poverty and religion? But: did the pupils get a chance to find answers to these questions in the assignments? Did the pupils get information about the scientific theories behind the patterns in the maps? This chapter deals with the 'why'- questions and the explanations given to the pupils.

Deepening the understanding is an important aspect in both the assignments and the teaching because it is like a bridge between teaching patterns and trends and critical thinking.

Deepening the understanding is one of the stages described in the curriculum framework. However, for the student teachers this part seemed rather vague. There were irritations about what the difference was between deepening the understanding and developing critical thinking

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A very important thing about deepening the understanding is of course to have good background information. If a teacher or student teacher doesn't have any knowledge of the subject, they can never help the pupils to deeply think about it. Especially when comparing two maps, you should have a clear idea of you want them to think about. Also the teacher should think about possible explanations himself. To give an example, in the assignment entitled 'The meaning of religious places' there was a question: 'Do you know any sacred places?' Most pupils came up with 'churches' or 'mosques' or other places of worship. Only after telling them they should try to look closer to their homes and that it does not always have to be a building some pupils came up with 'my own room', 'my house', 'a necklace of my passed-away grandfather'. A teacher can

also tell them an example of what is an important or sacred place for him. This will lead to better understanding of the theory, at least in the sense of how some of the student teachers interpreted deepening the understanding. The pupils who took part in the lessons, in which this assignment was used, came to the conclusion that every place can be a sacred place; it depends on the meaning you ascribe to it. Some would probably argue that the actions of the student teachers as described here are more a way of relating to the students.

The most important source to find explanations for what is seen in the maps of the Atlas of European Values should have come from the background information delivered by the sociologists of the University of Tilburg. However, the first version of the paper (in this publication you will find the version, which was adapted due to our critique) offered explanations based on modernisation and secularisation theories, but was written in a very abstract way and from the point of view of Western Europe. The Turkish students especially had enormous problems in understanding the concept of secularisation in this text because in Turkey secularisation is understood in a very different way: not as getting less religious or getting less attached to churches or mosques but as the separation between religion and public life.

EXPLANATIONS DURING THE LESSONS

Deepening the understanding is closely related to the pupils' age and their competences in understanding and interpreting the maps and also complex theories like modernisation or secularisation. When pupils have a general picture about cultural differences and for example economical or religious patterns, they are more capable of explaining the underlying reasons for differences and similarities.

In some of the classes, the students were able to come up with their own explanations very quickly. For example, in the assignment 'Secularism in Europe', the pupils were presented with the map 'Do you believe in God?' and they had to explain why in some countries many people believe in God whereas in others there are fewer people who believe in God. The pupils said that it could be due to the fact that some countries are more collectivist and religion can be seen as one of the ties, which they have as a group. One pupil commented that a country's economic situation could also affect the belief in God. Poor people can find a feeling of security in God, so in poor countries more people believe in God than in rich countries. Others argued that the differences between the countries could be caused by globalisation and mobility. When people have the chance of meeting different people and religions, they reflect their own values and beliefs and this could affect their belief in God.

At the beginning of the assignment entitled 'Why Be Religious?' there is a map on the question: 'Do you believe in God?' and Turkey is shown in a very dark colour, which means that a lot of people believe in God. The students immediately said that it is because of the fact that there are a lot of Muslims in Turkey, so the country was perceived as more religious than
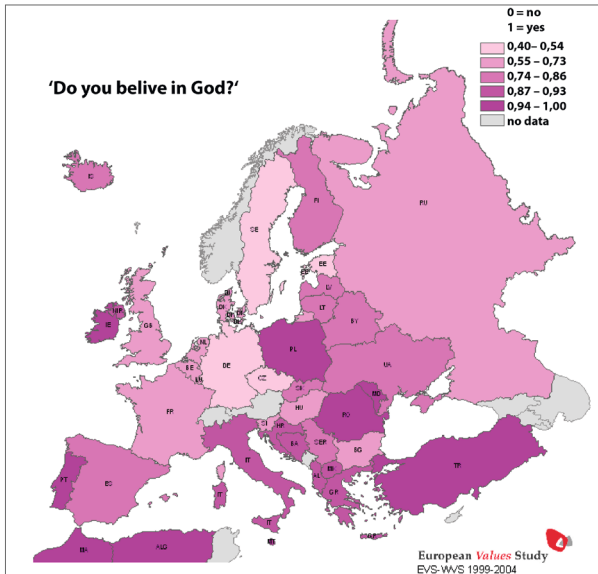
Figure 1: Secularism in Europe

the Netherlands. But would that also offer an answer to the amount of religious people in Poland or Romania?

In another assignment entitled 'Unity in Diversity' the pupils were presented with a map and a table and they were asked to provide some explanations for the situations. The map showed the 'percentage of people who would not like to live next door to Jews' and it can be seen that many European countries are tolerant of Jews, but people in Turkey generally do not want a Jewish neighbour. The pupils asked if there was a war between Israel and Turkey and the student teachers said that there was no war, but it was due to the tensions between Israel and Palestine. After this information, the student teachers directed the discussion towards why other European people do not mind having a Jewish neighbour and it was said that it could be due to the Second World War and the lesson that people learned from the war.

Another task from the same assignment was about describing the religious structure of different countries, so the pupils thought about the heterogeneous religious structure of the Netherlands. In this part it was a bit difficult for the pupils to formulate their own explanations hence the student teachers had to lead the discussion by asking some questions related to the history of the Netherlands. After receiving additional information, the pupils started to think more deeply and one of them drew the attention to the developments in the sciences and said that as people know more and more, they stop believing in supernatural powers and a creator.

While using some assignments the student teachers offered some explanations directly to the pupils due to the short time available. A good example of this comes from the assignment 'Why Be Religious?' In the assignment there is a part about individualism and collectivism. The pupils were to read a list, which named characteristics of individualistic and collectivistic cultures, and then to choose three collectivistic countries from the map. The map was a bit difficult to use because these concepts were too abstract for the pupils. Even though they understood the pattern, they needed more explanations of why Turkish people are more collectivistic than Dutch people. Hence, the Turkish student teacher gave some examples herself by saying that she was still living with her family and being in a group and working together was very important for her. She also added that it was a dimension rather

than two opposite poles. This short information was very helpful for the pupils to understand the reasons behind the data and they were able to state why Dutch people are more individualistic.

DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING IN SOME ASSIGNMENTS

In our view there wasn't enough attention given to the deepening of understanding in some of the assignments. Here are the critiques of the individual assignments.

'Religion and Active Citizenship': There were not many comments on the complete assignment. However, the time limitation undermined a deeper discussion on the subject. Some of the first tasks and activities can be omitted or shortened so that there is enough time for meaningful discussions. On the other hand, if the information or explanations at the beginning are not made sufficiently clear, the discussions will not be efficient either. Therefore the balance is of crucial importance: if you have no time for explanations at the beginning, the discussion will probably not have the desired outcome. If you spend too much time at the beginning, the discussion part will not go into as much depth because of lack of time.

This problem was also mentioned for the assignment about 'Religion and Politics'. Explaining maps can deepen the understanding and just because some of the pupils had some difficulties using the maps, the student teachers had to explain the maps themselves. For the future it could be an idea to give some information on how to use a map as a source in the assignments like the assignment entitled 'Is there a place for every penguin in heaven' did. This will lead to more time for discussions and formulating arguments to deepen the discussions about values and explanations. There was also a task to practice the deepening of understanding in this assignment, but it was too long to use in a regular lesson of 45 minutes.

The assignment entitled 'Why be religious?' seemed to have posed the most difficult problem. This assignment was about 'individualism and collectivism' and the pupils (13–15 years old) couldn't make any sense of these words. Without clarifying the meaning of these words, it was impossible to reach the aim of deepening understanding. Because of the necessity of explaining these words, there was so little time left that it was no longer possible to go through the tasks in more depth.

The last assignment that had problems regarding the deepening of understanding was about 'Lucky charms'. There is a really good part in this assignment that gives a lot of information about lucky charms in different countries. This was supposed to deepen the understanding of the pupils. But there was a lot of reading and explaining, so the student teachers had to skip that part in their lesson.

We can see now that the understanding was deepened in most of the assignments. To improve the assignments the tasks should be shortened and be more specific.

CONCLUSION

The deepening of understanding is an important step before pupils can start to think critically. But thinking at a deeper level also requires some qualities of the teachers and students. As a teacher you should think about the question, what you want them to know and what you think, they already know. Not every pupil has the same level of thinking. Some of them found it hard to see patterns in maps or tables. So you should pay more attention to that before pupils can start thinking deeply. If you know, the pupils will have difficulties with the meanings of words or explaining the maps, you should think about the rest of the lesson: are we able to make them think deeply or are we just going to search for the patterns and trends? Some pupils are just too young to find out the link between religion and active citizenship. But a teacher should also be prepared to answer questions of the pupils, for example: 'Why is a religious person in Turkey less active in the community?'