

# DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

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This paper deals with deepening understanding. In the teacher's explanation two important issues are pointed out: key concepts and theories. The students' task is to choose a concept, which can be either change or diversity. They have to focus on this concept in their lessons. They can use theories to support their chosen concept.

Before we started to write this paper, we had read all evaluations about deepening understanding. We had also checked which strategies can be used and which strategies had been used. We detected that most student teachers did not use any key concepts or theories to accomplish the stage 'deepening understanding'. This made it more difficult to add the key concepts to our findings. Therefore, we have written a chapter explaining key concepts. It is thought to help to read between the lines to decide if a group of student teachers has chosen to focus on change or diversity during their lesson. In none of the evaluations have we read anything about theories. Everybody has focused on the strategies they were using and the reason for using it.

## KEY CONCEPTS

During the preparations of the lessons we had two key concepts that we could use. The concepts are *diversity* and *change*.

Diversity deals with the reasons for differences in form, function, pattern of distribution etc. It is also about culture, identity and values. Furthermore, it includes how varieties affect different groups and how this is managed.

Another key concept is change. Change expresses the possible differences between the past and present as well as the changes that might occur in the future. More-

over, we can say that change is also about predictions. With the concept *change* you can also answer questions like: ‘Which of the different future paths are more or less desirable?’ And: ‘How can the more desirable outcomes be achieved?’

## WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD HAVE DONE

According to the presentation and our aims, we should have used at least one key concept as we have described in the introduction. When you want to use the key concepts properly, you should adapt your lesson plan to it. After doing so, you should create your thematic questions, according to the key concepts.

## WHAT STUDENTS DID

Only one group did not pay any attention to the key concepts and did not use them in their lessons. The key concept that was mainly chosen is diversity. This is probably due to the fact that the majority of the lessons were geography lessons. Nevertheless, some of the pairs used both concepts. For example, they started their lessons with some questions about the diversity shown in some of the maps. Afterwards they used some maps to predict how this could change in the future.

## DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

Deepening understanding is one way to reach the aims of the project lessons. In this chapter we are going to discuss the most suitable strategies for gaining it. Furthermore, we are going to focus on the most common strategies which the student teachers used during their lessons. According to the final evaluation of pupils and student teachers, we found not only advantages but also some disadvantages in relation to the applied strategies.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

Many concepts and theories claim to help us to deepen our understanding of the reasons behind the existence of differences and similarities in attitudes. However, they do not provide us with all the answers and some theories are inadequate. Pupils should use some of these concepts to question the map data. Then they are in a position to either verify or falsify and reformulate these theories, which helps them to deepen their understanding.

The theoretical basis for our procedure is the assumption that mental processes in the cognitive system are guided by the knowledge domain with information representing the ‘what’ of the knowledge and procedures describing the ‘how’ of the knowledge. According to Marzano (2000), the cognitive system can be subdivided into four components (knowledge retrieval, comprehension, analysis, knowledge utilization).

Analysis and analysing is one thinking skill which is used and developed in the process of deepening understanding. So, what exactly is analysing? It can be characterized by several verbs, questions and processes. We may use verbs such as *to outline, to create a diagram, to differentiate*. We can use questions like: *What are the attributes of ...? What evidence can you list for ...? What are the components, parts or features of ...? What patterns or relationships do you see in ...?* And in the process of analysing something, we may clarify information by studying parts and relationships, identify attributes and components, determine the characteristics of an entity and identify relationships and patterns.

At the stage of deepening understanding we have two more thinking skills which are generating something and integrating something. In the process of generating we develop new information, meanings, and ideas. Furthermore, we infer by going beyond available information, we predict following events or possible outcomes and we elaborate by explaining. Key verbs might be *to conclude, to predict, to infer, to explain, to elaborate*. In the process of integrating, we connect and combine information, we summarize by restricting information efficiently and we restructure existing knowledge structures to incorporate new information. We use questions like: *Of how many ways can you think of ...? If you could sum it up in three to four sentences, what would you say?*

## WHY IS DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING AN IMPORTANT STAGE?

In our opinion deepening understanding is one of the most important stages within the lesson. Because of this, most of the student teachers included it in their teaching. We consider it to be useful because sometimes a revision and summary of the topic is done. At times it happens that pupils have to think of their opinion for a second time. In a discussion they have to defend their opinion and have to think of new reasons, why they have that particular opinion. In this way they can develop skills to improve their reasoning. What is more, at this stage pupils may learn that they should not accept a theory without questioning it.

## HOW DOES DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING OCCUR IN THE LESSONS AND SOME EXAMPLES

The student teachers used different strategies for deepening understanding, but not all of them might have been suitable. It is obvious that every strategy has some pros and cons.

Furthermore, it has to be mentioned that the length of the lessons were different. The general opinion among the student teachers was that 45-minute lessons were too short to accomplish this stage well.

Before you can start with deepening understanding, it is important to introduce the class to the subject matter of the lesson. You can do this in different ways. Some of the student teachers decided to produce a mind map; other student teachers used the traffic light game. Nevertheless, there are still more possibilities that could have been used. If you use one of these strategies, pupils have to formulate their opinion, but they also get to know what their classmates think regarding the topic. This is the first step of forming an opinion. However, some more steps are necessary in deepening understanding.

Now, we want to talk about the strategies that were used by the students. One pair of student teachers used the *living-map*-strategy for deepening understanding. The pupils received some statements from people of different countries which were related to the topic of the map. The pupils had to decide from which country each person originates and should also present the reasons for their decision. This strategy gives the teacher a lot of space to ask questions and to tell what the situation in other countries is like. This strategy is also very useful if you want to tell something about the past. For example, the map shows a big difference between Central Europe and West Europe. For deepening understanding you can ask a question like: 'If you think of the political history in these countries, are you then able to give a reason for this difference?' The main focus in this case was at the stage of deepening understanding, but it was hard to make it work properly, because pupils found it difficult to think of reasons. But the pupils liked it and they came up with good options and in that sense they were able to reach this aim.

*Intelligent guesswork* is also suitable for this stage of the lesson. The pupils have to use their knowledge to decide if a country would agree or disagree on the given statements. After their guessing the maps from the Atlas of European Values are shown to the students. Then they compare their predictions and expectations with the facts shown on the maps. The teacher has the opportunity to use a theory to explain why his or her pupils have that particular idea of another country. A reason for that could be stereotyping. To summarize, both teacher and pupils need to have some background knowledge to use this strategy successfully.

One pair of student teachers used a graph without a legend to reach the stage of deepening understanding. The pupils had to find out what the graph was about. In the beginning the answers of the pupils were rather guesses, but later on they

gave good examples and were able to explain what they thought the graph was about. The role of the teachers here was to question the pupils and name possible alternatives. The aim was to give them a deeper understanding of the reasons for a changing society. Generally speaking, they think they have reached it.

One of the most important strategies to support deepening understanding is the strategy *snowball*. Pupils had to express their own opinions and they had to explain their decision with the help of suitable arguments. The pupils broadened their understanding because they discussed the topic. Their knowledge was a basis for the discussion and their arguments defended the knowledge and understanding of the topic. It really made them think: *Why do I have this opinion and why do my classmates or people from other countries have another one?* In general, showing some maps helped the pupils to understand the topic better and quicker.

We consider all the strategies that were used as suitable for reaching the aim. However, a larger amount of time was necessary to summarise all the opinions and add theories to it.

Some of the student teachers did not use any specific strategies, but just enhanced the topic with the help of different questions. Thanks to the fact that they insisted on the answers, they developed understanding among the pupils. Moreover, as they got closer to the core of the lesson, it was possible to use free discussions or conversations.

## POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES

We have noticed several difficulties, which occurred at the stage of deepening understanding. The main problems which arose were language barriers, shyness and lack of time. In addition, some groups were not used to communicating in front of the whole class or among each other. Sometimes the pupils found it difficult to express their opinions, ideas or attitudes. Even if they did so, they were not able to explain their choice or give suitable reasons and arguments for their decisions. These difficulties which appeared during the lessons could be related to cultural differences among the countries. The pupils in Slovakia were brought up in a different way and also in an absolutely different society, which had an influence on them. Because of this fact, it might seem that they were not willing to communicate or even participate in the discussions.

There are several ways how to avoid these hurdles. As a first step we recommend splitting the class into smaller groups of the same age and language level. Another option is that you give the pupils a few minutes to write down their own statements individually. Producing a mind map is also possible. During the discussion they can look at their paper which could help them expressing their ideas. When nobody is willing to say something the teacher can directly ask

someone what he or she thinks. If they do not know what to say, the teacher can ask: 'What did you write down?'

Additionally, the teacher has to be ready to solve any situation that comes up in the classroom. Therefore, the student teacher should be able to encourage the pupils to speak, not to be shy and even to use their mother tongue when it is necessary. Furthermore, the student teacher should help them to translate what they want to say into the target language.

Most of the lessons were not long enough to develop all the required stages. Because of this, deepening understanding and critical thinking were excluded in some cases. Several student teachers complained about the lack of time and not being able to improve deepening understanding during their teaching. Although we had prepared the lesson plans precisely, unexpected events occurred and disturbed the process of teaching. The most frequent reason was the situation in the class.

## CONCLUSION

Regarding the pupils' evaluations, they mostly enjoyed the discussions. They had the opportunity to share their opinions and they also used different strategies during the lessons. They appreciated not only the interesting topics but also the different way of teaching. Due to this lesson organization, the pupils learnt more in an indirect way. We have found that strategies like snowball, the fish bowl activity, the traffic lights game, role plays or living maps were suitable for deepening understanding. At the same time, the pupils liked these activities because of their innovative approach. We as teachers, appreciate the flexibility and variability of these strategies. We can use them in many ways and adopt them during the lesson if necessary.