

An open mind to closed borders

Ulrike Fallet and Bob Lefever
Netherlands (u.fallet@clz.nl)

One aspect of “Science in tomorrow’s classroom” is teaching geography students the basic skills and knowledge to play an active role in society as citizens. Topics that frame the development of good citizenship are wide-ranged and include climate change, migration and integration as well as democracy and identity. Often these kinds of topics do not allow for right or wrong answers or classroom lectures; it is more important to encourage students to find and discuss arguments with which to underpin their opinion. In this way, civic education is very suitable for active learning. Active learning is described as a method of learning in which students are actively involved in the learning process through (group) discussion, experiments or games. By doing so, students are stimulated to engage in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, which are inherent to becoming responsible, reflective and critical citizens as well as (future) scientists. It has also been shown that the use of active learning methods significantly increased the number of meaningful geographical relationships that students give in tests (Karkdijk, 2012).

I, therefore, propose to use active learning to approach civic education in the classroom. Specifically, I used a “mystery” to engage students in active learning on the highly polarizing subject of migration. A mystery (Leat, 1990) is a didactic method that uses short bits of information to solve an intriguing question. A current polarizing subject in society and in the classroom is the migration from Northern Africa and the Middle East to Europe and the increasing number of terrorist attacks by individuals who have radicalised before, during or after their journey over the Mediterranean. In class, students were asked to solve this migration mystery: “Could the terrorist attack in Berlin have been stopped by closing the borders of the Mediterranean countries to migrants?” In order to solve this mystery and to find an answer to this polarizing question, students got clues, which they had to analyse and discuss. Through solving this migration mystery, high-school students were encouraged to keep ‘an open mind to closed borders’ and learned important steps of the scientific thinking process as well as experience the nuance in a widely discussed civic case.