

Geography: Geography and Justice

What if population migration were about people's stories?

Cheryl taught about population migration as part of geography, but felt that the statistics did not adequately reflect the real lives of those involved in these population movements. She wanted the students to connect with more empathy, not just see facts and figures.

"I showed them maps, and we identified the routes for different groups. Then I divided the class into groups and gave each a route, a map, and a story. I used stories of different people who had moved to another country for a variety of reasons (<http://www.refugeestories.org/stories/>; http://www.refugees.org/refugee-voices/refugee_voices_index.html; <http://www.arcrelief.org/site/PageServer?pagename=SuccessStories>).

"Each group read its assigned story of the people and traced the route using the personal histories of migrants, their reasons for migrating, and what it had meant to the families involved. I also asked them to think about what they could learn from people who often have had to leave most of the people and things they treasured behind. I asked each group to share their route and story plus their insights. This related to many of the students in my class, since we draw on an area rich in many cultures.

"We covered other aspects of the standard geography unit, but the maps and statistics were now related to real people and what we could learn from them."

What's going on here?

Cheryl saw her geography lesson as being personal—about respect for people and attentiveness to their stories and the chance to learn from others—rather than just statistics and maps. She wanted to challenge her students' thinking in terms of how they related to the people whose stories were involved.

She engaged students in exploring through stories, interaction in groups, and research and reporting, and helped them learn from—not just about—migration (students' insights).

She reshaped her practice by choosing an appropriate teaching style and resources that supported her goals (a storytelling approach) and by structuring her lesson to allow for the interaction (groups presenting).

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Taking time to understand someone else's story is an application of love. To quote Paul Tillich, "The first duty of love is to listen." Laying ourselves open to being challenged and changed by what we learn means making ourselves vulnerable. It is saying, "What does this have to say to me and to my community?" This way of viewing learning makes both knowledge and the learner active, drawing them into a relationship. Processes that open us to change in a positive direction hold out hope for better relationships in our communities. Vulnerability is at the heart of love; it was expressed by Jesus, who was vulnerable as a baby, as a poor man, and on the cross.

What difference does it make?

The route maps and statistics about migration are important, but this teacher wanted to move from learning about population migration as information to learning about life through population migration. Some stories of migration challenge our ideas of what is important in life and give us a chance to grow by learning from others.

Where could we go from here?

Stories of first-hand experience can also be used in history and other subjects to make them more personal and relevant and to connect larger themes to individual life choices and values. True stories of ordinary people are particularly pertinent and can be easier to relate to than stories of well-known figures.

Digging deeper

Migrants are often a marginalized group in society and are not always treated well or responded to with humility and hospitality. Christians need to repent of attitudes that discriminate against others. Christians also need to be open to different cultural expressions of the faith as the center of gravity of Christianity moves to the south: the majority of Christians now live in the two-thirds world. Western Christians have much to learn from African, Asian, Oceanic, and South American Christians.

Cheryl wanted her students to learn from migration, not just master the information. “Mastering” information implies that the people doing the mastering are active while the information is passive. Information becomes one more thing we consume and collect to see who has the most. This attitude can go with an unconscious position of superiority. Such an attitude can leave us untouched by what we learn. The opposite is an attitude of restraint and humility that does not jump to judgment. It also is an attitude that recognizes that some information can change us and make us wiser (Proverbs 17:27; Proverbs 1:5).

Hasty conclusions are the mark of a fool; a wise man doubteth; a fool rageth and is confident; the novice saith, “I am sure that it is so”; the better learned answers, “Peradventure, it may be so; but, I pray thee, inquire.” Jeremy Taylor



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