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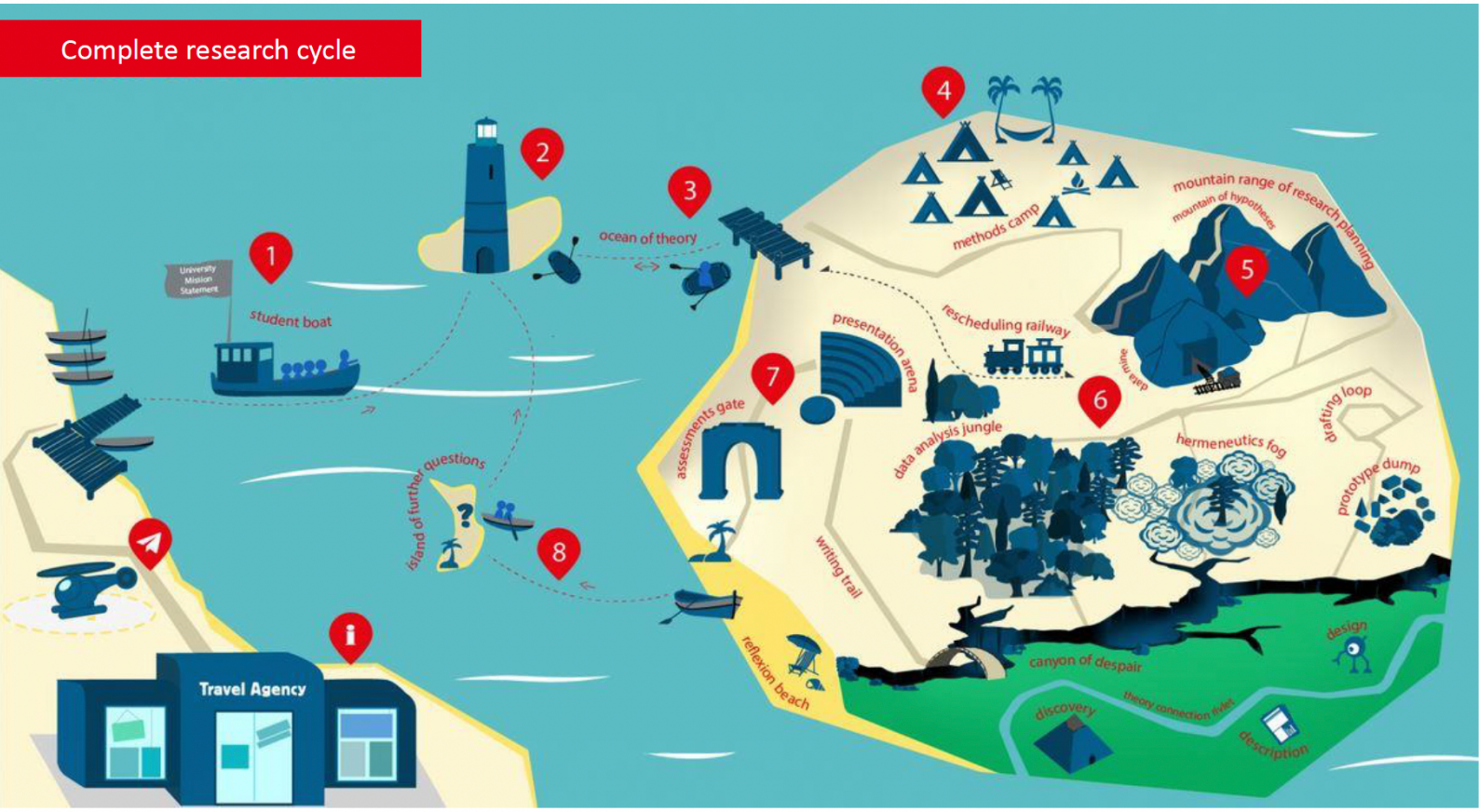
Forschungsorientierung in der Studieneingangsphase

Poor evaluation, excellent results; good evaluation, mediocre results

Vignette #3



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#3: Poor evaluation, excellent results; good evaluation, mediocre results

The following text sequence or vignette describes a situation in the context of a teaching that aims at research-based learning. The situation described challenges you as a teacher and may require you to act directly. The aim of the vignette is to allow you to think about what you are doing in such a situation or how you could prevent it. But you may also consider the situation to be problem-free and more conducive to learning. Either way you can preventively familiarize yourself with possible challenges and reflect upon your own evaluations and impulses for action.

The situations described are taken from interview data with coordinators of research-based learning projects and have been sharpened for the purpose mentioned above. The most common challenges in teaching courses to promote research-based learning have been selected and converted into vignettes.

Poor evaluation, excellent results; good evaluation, mediocre results

End of the course. You look at the evaluation of your course, which was really good compared to the previous ones. You made an effort to respond to the criticism of the students who felt overwhelmed by the freedom in their project in the last courses. In return, the participants had delivered really good project reports in a looser context, some of them so good that they had been published. The project results of this course, however, were mediocre at best. You are undecided whether you should not give the students more freedom yet again (and thus also more room for overstraining).

Keywords: Structure and autonomy, evaluation

Reflective questions

The situation described above is a typical challenge that you could face if you implement research-based learning in your teaching. The following questions of reflection serve as impulses to look at such or similar situations from different perspectives and then to come to different decisions:

How important are good student research results for you?

To what extent do you consider the students to be indepen dent? How much can you expect of them?

How important is student criticism to you?

What speaks for a clearer structure, what for a freer guidance?

How important are the evaluation results for you and your teaching design?

Does the evaluation instrument measure what is important to you in the course?

Attitudes and actions

In the following, attitudes as well as preventive and intervening actions in the situation described are presented. First of all, attitudes are described which have an impact on whether and how to react. Then actions are presented. They are practical examples of how teachers at universities deal with the situation in a preventive or intervening manner. In addition, indirect measures are listed which involve a more subtle approach yet may have a strong impact

Attitudes

Attitudes do not include concrete measures but describe the inner attitude of teachers (or coordinators) towards different situations. Depending on the attitude, situations can be interpreted as „problematic“ and „challenging“, but also as „desirable“ and „normal“.

Allow the experience of frustration

You assume that some frustration is part of the research process and that the students have to endure it.

This could mean on the action level: No matter whether you continue with the new or the old concept: the students are not relieved of too many research tasks.

Consider excessive demands as a basic principle of university

You consider it normal and desirable that students are overwhelmed. In conversations you make it clear to the students that it is okay and normal to be overwhelmed and what positive effects it has: excessive demands lead to growth.

This could mean on the action level: In a reflective discussion with the students, you take up the topic of excessive demands. Together you think about the benefits of excessive demands in this situation.

Trust in the students‘ competence

You consider that not everything has to be taken from the students. Instead, you believe that they can act largely on their own responsibility and only need support in exceptional cases.

This could mean on the action level: You return to the old, open concept and let the students make their experiences.

Be guided by the principle of minimal help

The principle is that help is only provided when it is requested and then only to the extent needed by the students. This also means that students themselves are responsible for their own organisation. For example, they can decide for themselves whether to write protocols in which they record decisions or not. Only in cases where group work is clearly getting out of hand intervention will take place.

This could mean on the action level: You return to the old concept with less pre-structuring but remain responsive to the need for assistance.

Respond to individual structural needs

You divide the project groups according to the members‘ need for freedom and structure. Depending on the (communicated) need of the students you either offer more freedom or more structure.

This could mean on the action level: At the beginning of the project, grouping takes place in a joint event (which could also be supported by a digital group-finding tool, such as FL-Trail). There, you communicate that you as a teacher are available for any kind of request. At the same time, you clarify beforehand how much guidance the students expect from you at the beginning and in general.

Preventive actions

Preventive actions prevent the situation described or rather makes them less likely. There is – of course – no guarantee of avoiding such conflicts.

Define the research question as well as the topic in advance

In order to save time, this (difficult) part of the research cycle is set by you. The rest is done by the students.

Benefit of this action: You make sure that the students do not push themselves too hard from the beginning by posting a question that is feasible for the time frame.

Use „external players“ to readjust the task

From the very beginning you draft tasks as „work orders“ from fictitious clients (companies, social institutions, ...) Once such a client is established, it offers a good opportunity to regulate the task and to intervene in conflicts.

Benefit of this action: If the students do not manage to adhere to plans on their own, the fictitious external client can adjust the assignment afterwards – according to the motto: „The company changed the assignment because the deal with Spain failed“. This gives you the possibility to readjust the research process for the students in a face-saving way.

Intervening actions

Interventions are usually carried out „when the milk has already been spilled“. These are therefore acute reactive measures:

Practical measures to reduce complexity:

Help students to set priorities

In a discussion, you let the group work out what is really important for fulfilling the task: What is essential and what would only be nice to have?

Benefit of this action: The complexity of the task is reduced, and the students find clear structures for themselves. The workload can possibly be reduced.

Make compromises if necessary

It should be possible to complete the task within the planned period of time or you will be able to adjust it.

Benefit of this action: The workload is reduced so that students are less stressed and have more time for the thorough documentation of their results. If necessary, the reduction by clearly defined sub-steps is also sufficient.

Request consultation with the group

If dissatisfaction is expressed, speak directly with the whole group to assess whether the excessive demands remain within limits or whether you should take action.

Benefit of this action: You gain an impression of where the problems lie and can thus specifically address problems at certain steps in the research process. You can also better assess whether the group has set itself too much of a goal and intervene in an advisory capacity.

Remove work that is not relevant to the learning process

You talk to the group to find out where the excessive demand lies and decide, if necessary, to support certain steps in a goal-oriented manner (e.g. with references, sample data, etc.).

Benefit of this action: The workload is reduced by accompanying the students out of situations of excessive demands, so that the students are relieved and can complete their project within the planned time frame and carefully document it in writing.

Use milestones

At the beginning you define milestones for the project duration so that the overall schedule is not lost sight of by the students.

Benefit of this action: A clear structure will be established for the duration of the project, which the groups can use as an orientation. They will be able to get a feeling for the approximate time needed for each phase of the research process, and it will be more likely that they will not get tangled up.

Consult working groups according to key sections

Once the groups have completed a specific research stage – for example, the drafting of a research design – advise students in small group or individual settings before moving on to the next research step.

Benefit of this action: The process is structured by the consulting appointments and the students receive concrete advice on how to deal with their respective challenges. As a teacher, you gain insight into where the difficulties lie and can react to them at an early stage (in an advisory capacity).

Direct measures to increase the „complexity tolerance“ of students:

Point out personal responsibility

You communicate from the beginning that the students are responsible for the structuring of their project themselves, but that they have contact persons in case of excessive demands.

Benefit of this action: If you explicitly point out the available support to the students, the inhibition threshold tends to decrease that they use it. This can lead to students actually seeking advice when needed, but it can also make it clear to them from the very beginning that they must plan and structure the project themselves.

Create space for requests

You arrange regular meetings during which all groups in one room continue working in their small groups. You will be present as a teacher and can be asked for help if necessary and also work more intensively with a group.

Benefit of this action: You support the students indirectly to better cope with the complexity. Because you are present as a contact person and act as a „backup“, students can work more relaxed.

Provide an online forum

You organize an online forum. In this forum, students can ask and answer each other‘s questions. Only when questions cannot be taken up or answered by peers you or other supervisors will provide support.

Benefit of this action: In a forum, students can communicate with other groups who (possibly) face similar challenges. They can advise each other and also observe that everyone experiences the research process as complex and challenging, so they are not alone with their problems.

Expose students to challenges, but allow for periods of reflection

At the end of the session you address frustrations in small groups or individually, so that students can independently identify their performance and learning success.

Benefit of this action: The students reflect almost independently on what they have achieved. Even if not everything went according to plan, you can accompany them so that they do not leave the course frustrated.

Indirect (accompanying) actions

In addition, indirect measures are listed which involve a more subtle approach yet may have the same impact.

Introduce long-term evaluation

If external circumstances permit, use an evaluation tool that is designed to interview students at different points in their studies. In this way, more reliable statements can be made about how much a course designed in a certain way is perceived by students and how it is evaluated in the further course of the study.

Benefit of this action: In the long term, you can gain a better impression of whether your course concept is not only „well received“ but also useful to the students in the further course of their studies and beyond.

Coach tutors

If you work with tutors who supervise the student groups, regular coaching sessions can be useful, in which the tutors are supported in small groups and in individual settings to perceive and deal with group conflicts.

Benefit of this action: The tutors receive further training and are better able to support the students in the process of research-based learning.

Set up a Jour-Fix for tutors

If you work with tutors, you can establish a regular appointment where teachers and tutors advise each other on difficult situations.

Benefit of this action: You can share your impressions of the different research results with the tutors and gain access to group processes that might otherwise be hidden. Together you can critically question which priorities you want to set, which goals you aim for with the offer of research-based learning and if and how these can be achieved.