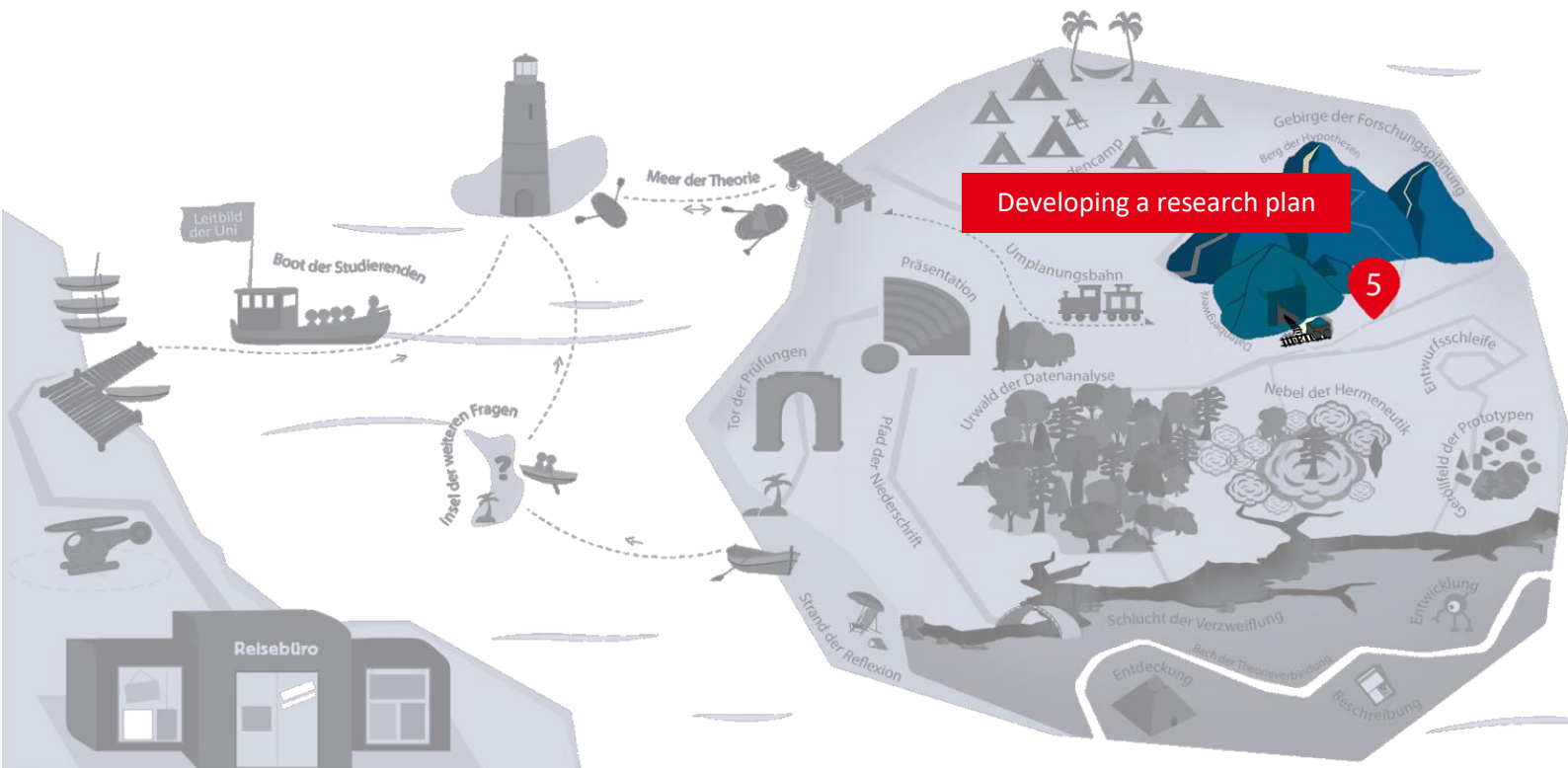




# Agreement? Impossible!

Vignette #1



Developing a research plan

5

## KEYWORDS

GROUP DYNAMICS, STUDENT SELF-ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE AND AUTONOMY



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GEFÖRDERT VOM

## #1: Agreement? Impossible



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.



### Agreement? Impossible

**At the meeting on Thursday: A project group of ten people argues. Since the first day they have not been able to agree whether they want to plan a water desalination project for a village in Namibia or a Spanish hotel. So far, the group has decided to ignore this “detail” and start the construction planning independently.**

**However, in the course of the discussion you notice that the subgroups plan with different prerequisites that are not compatible from a professional point of view. The students do not succeed in reaching an agreement, because giving in would mean losing their own research progress.**

**Keywords: group dynamics, student self-organization, structure and autonomy**





## 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:

**Do you trust the students to solve the conflict on their own?**

**Are there team members who take on certain roles in the conflict and what follows from this?**

**What could the students learn from this conflict?**

**How can you productively use a (possible) failure for the learning process of the students/all students from this course?**

**How can (and will) you intervene?**



## 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".

### 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.**

An appropriate action could be: You communicate your attitude to the students. You point out their self-responsibility and ask them to find a solution as a team. Only if this does not work out, you will intervene with additional measures. In this vignette situation the conflict may have already escalated to the point where the students actually need support; however, the reference to their self-responsibility may lead to the students taking responsibility after all and finding a solution themselves.

## Be guided by the principle of minimal help

**You are convinced that assistance is only useful if it is called for; and even then you only consider as much assistance appropriate as the students need; this also means that the students themselves are responsible for their own organisation. Your assumption: Teachers should only intervene when group work is clearly getting out of hand.**

An appropriate action could be: In order to assess whether it is really necessary to intervene you have to have discussions with the students. Make them aware of their self-responsibility. If this advice does not have any effect, you as a teacher may step in – and only to the extent necessary.

## Consider the heterogeneity of the group as a learning opportunity

**In principle you regard conflicts resulting from heterogeneity as constructive sources of impulses that give the parties involved new perspectives and uncover blind spots.**

An appropriate action could be: In a discussion with the students you will highlight the advantages of this approach. In doing so you emphasise that all positions are justified (especially in the case of interdisciplinarity). You can also use the learning effects resulting from the conflict: What do the students learn in this argument? If necessary, you can give the students a new assignment and ask them to professionally process the different preconditions and basic assumptions and show why the two concepts are incompatible.

## Consider challenges as reasonable

**You want the students to get through challenging situations, but do not leave them alone. Instead, you offer the students advice and encourage their contemplation.**

An appropriate action could be: You deliberately accept the conflict between the students, even a possible failure of the project. However, afterwards you reflect together on the benefits of the conflict, for example what was learned from it.

## Accept excessive demands as a basic principle of university

**You view excessive demands on students as normal and desirable and communicate this to them. You emphasise that excessive demands lead to growth.**

An appropriate action could be: You initiate reflection talks with the students. Here you take up the issue of excessive demands. Together you think about the benefits of the excessive demands in this situation.

## Preventive actions

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

### Promote the distribution of roles in a team development activity

**Before the actual research is started, you initiate a team development phase. In this phase, students experience, among other things, the benefits of role allocation in the team - without being explicitly told how to do it. As a rule, students then usually decide to adopt this approach for their project work and assign different roles to each other.**

Benefit of this action: If tasks and roles are clearly distributed, it can be prevented that students work in parallel or in different, non-matching directions

### Offer contact persons

**From the very beginning, students are regularly informed that they have contact persons in case of difficulties - even for minor questions or concerns.**

Benefit of this action: If students are explicitly made aware of the available support several times, the inhibition threshold to use it tends to decrease; this can lead to disputes being professionally moderated at an early stage and not escalating.

### Appoint several group spokespersons

**You demand that the project groups appoint two spokespersons who will be in contact with you or the tutor.**

Benefit of this action: The allocation of roles to several speakers can prevent that only one perspective on the research process is communicated and possible misunderstandings or ambiguities remain concealed. Thus, conflicts may become more visible, especially if the contact persons come from the respective conflicting "internal teams".

### Accompany informally

**You repeatedly ask the project groups in between informally how things are going in the project and in the group.**

Benefit of this action: Frequent informal communication allows conflicts to be identified and dealt with at an earlier stage.

## Employ student tutors

**You suggest that there are regular tutoring sessions that are supervised by students. There, the aspect of teamwork is reflected upon, the understanding of roles in the groups is clarified and conflicts are discussed.**

Benefit of this action: Supervised meetings on a regular basis offer a fixed framework in which conflicts can be dealt with – at best before they escalate.

## Give individual advice for small groups in fixed sessions

**You offer fixed consultation hours to the individual project groups.**

Benefit of this action: There are fixed appointments for dealing with conflicts - at best before they escalate.

## 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 that have the same or a similar work assignment. In this way they may become aware of contradictions and potential problems earlier. Arguments from outside the group can also be included in the discussion. In addition, supervisors can become aware of the emerging conflict earlier and support its resolution.

## Intervening actions

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

## 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 cannot reach an agreement or 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 relieves the group of the burden of face-saving: None of the competing ideas will be rejected by the students

## Provide impulses to move forward without prescribing a solution

If students make gross mistakes like working without internal coordination, you can provide them with professionally experienced contact persons who can use targeted questions (instead of direct instructions or ready-made solutions) to make it clear that this is not the way it works and to help them plan ahead. You can also assume this role yourself.

Benefit of this action: If a fundamental problem is addressed and solved early on, at least the extent of the conflict can be reduced. At best, the students themselves will quickly understand why parallel processing is not conducive to achieving the goal and will find a different way of organizing themselves.

## Indirect (accompanying) actions

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

## 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.

## 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.