Tears at the office

Vignette #2
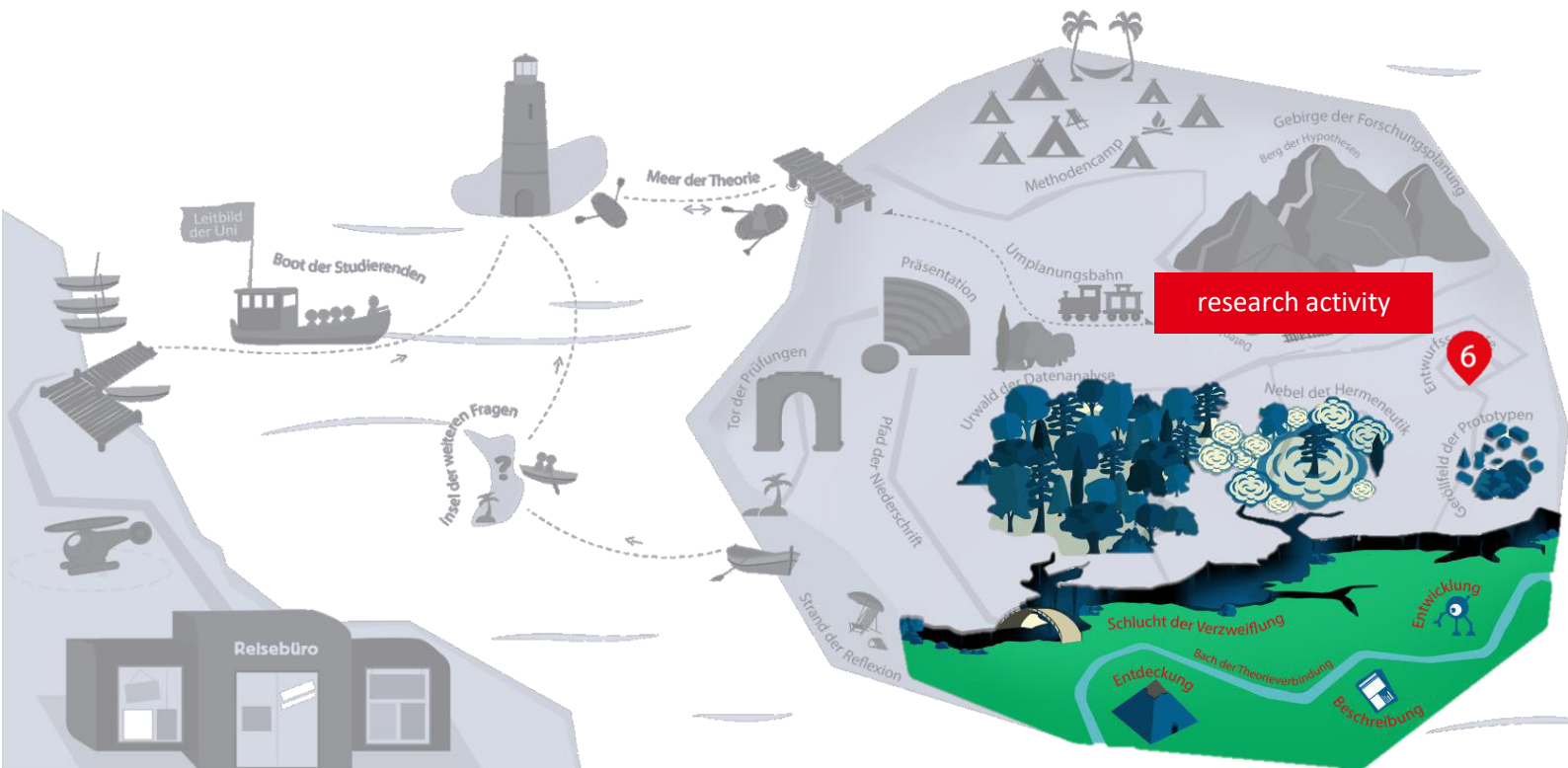
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Authors: FideS-Transfer-Projektteam

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#2: Tears at the office

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.

Tears at the office

Wednesday afternoon, team meeting with the small groups of the student research projects. You noticed that one of your students seemed nervous from the very beginning of the meeting. At one point it bursts out of her: it is too much for her, she feels completely overworked, she is overwhelmed by the workload and does not know "how she is going to manage this in addition to her job and the other university obligations". You see that the student is struggling with tears.

Keywords: workload, excessive demands, priorities

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:

Is the course provided with sufficient ECTS points in terms of effort involved?

How do you assess the situation of the student in comparison to the other students of the course?

Do you feel responsible for the emotions of the student?

Do you consider it your task to restore the well-being of the student?

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".

Show confidence in the competence of the students

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 point out to the student that it is her own responsibility whether she wants to expose herself further to this burden. You as a teacher will not relieve her of any work

Be guided by the principle of minimal help

You only provide help when it is requested and then only to the extent needed by the students. This also means that students are responsible for their own organisation. For example, students can decide for themselves whether to write protocols in which they

record decisions. Only in cases where group work is clearly getting out of hand intervention will take place.

An appropriate action could be : In order to assess whether it is necessary to intervene, have discussions with the students. You point out the confidence in their competence to your students and ask them to find a solution as a team. Only if this does not work, organise a more comprehensive meeting with the whole team. There you keep the intervention as low as possible and also make sure that nobody loses face.

Consider failure as a possibility

You think that failure should be possible, but in a way that the students do not completely lose motivation.

An appropriate action could be: The possibility that some students "fail", i.e. do not complete their project, is also conceivable and acceptable to you. Nevertheless, a first step is a discussion to try to find a solution together on how the project could be continued and completed. Alternatively, it is also possible to "officially fail" and not complete the project. In this situation, you could evaluate in an interview which skills the "failing" students have acquired through their current or previous research. Thereby, you could point out that by all means they have all the necessary basic requirements for successful research.

Preventive action

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

Pre-select the participants

You decide that only those who already have certain skills (e.g. in terms of research ability) may participate.

Benefit of this action: The student would probably not have participated in the project. The participants would probably not be so easily overwhelmed if they had more experience and skills.

Offer a blog

You organize a blog where students can share and comment on each other's research status and experiences just like in an e-portfolio.

Benefit of this action: The student can share her situation and experience that she is not the only one who feels overwhelmed and receive (moral) support from other students. However, she might need an impulse from a teacher that such a blog entry might be useful.

Employ/instate student tutors

You organise 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: The student has a supervised setting in which she can discuss her excessive demands in the group and suggest a possible redistribution of tasks.

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: The student can use this reference to assess whether she is really not in time. She can check if her feeling that everything is too much and that she is not going to make it is in line with the schedule.

Intervening actions

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

Address the option to quit

In a conversation you discuss the possibility of quitting. You also point out the need to pass on the tasks the student has taken on so far. You also address the consequences for all those involved - not only for the person quitting.

Benefit of this action: It is made clear to the student that dropping out is possible and that she can decide for or against it. She is no longer a "victim" of the circumstances but has an influence on how things continue.

Conduct a conversation with the entire group

You conduct a conversation with the whole group to find out whether everyone is experiencing such a great overload or whether it is an individual case. If it affects everyone, you can discuss together whether and how tasks should be readjusted.

Benefit of this action: You as a teacher can check whether there is a general need for action. Overstrained students may receive support from the group, on the one hand through solidarity, on the other hand through possible reduction of tasks by other group members.

Attention! It is important to make sure that the face of all is saved. The positions of the overstrained students in the group should not suffer from the conversation.

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: You may be able to reduce the workload together with the group. In any case, a framework is created so that the work can be redistributed. This might help the student to reduce her workload.

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: In a conversation with the student, you can reflect together on what she has learned so far through the challenging situation and how she can now continue in a reasonable way.

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.

Prepare tutors

If you work with tutors, train them before the start of the project in how to handle difficult teaching situations. In the course of this, personal concerns, strengths and weaknesses of the tutors will also be discussed in one-on-one interviews.