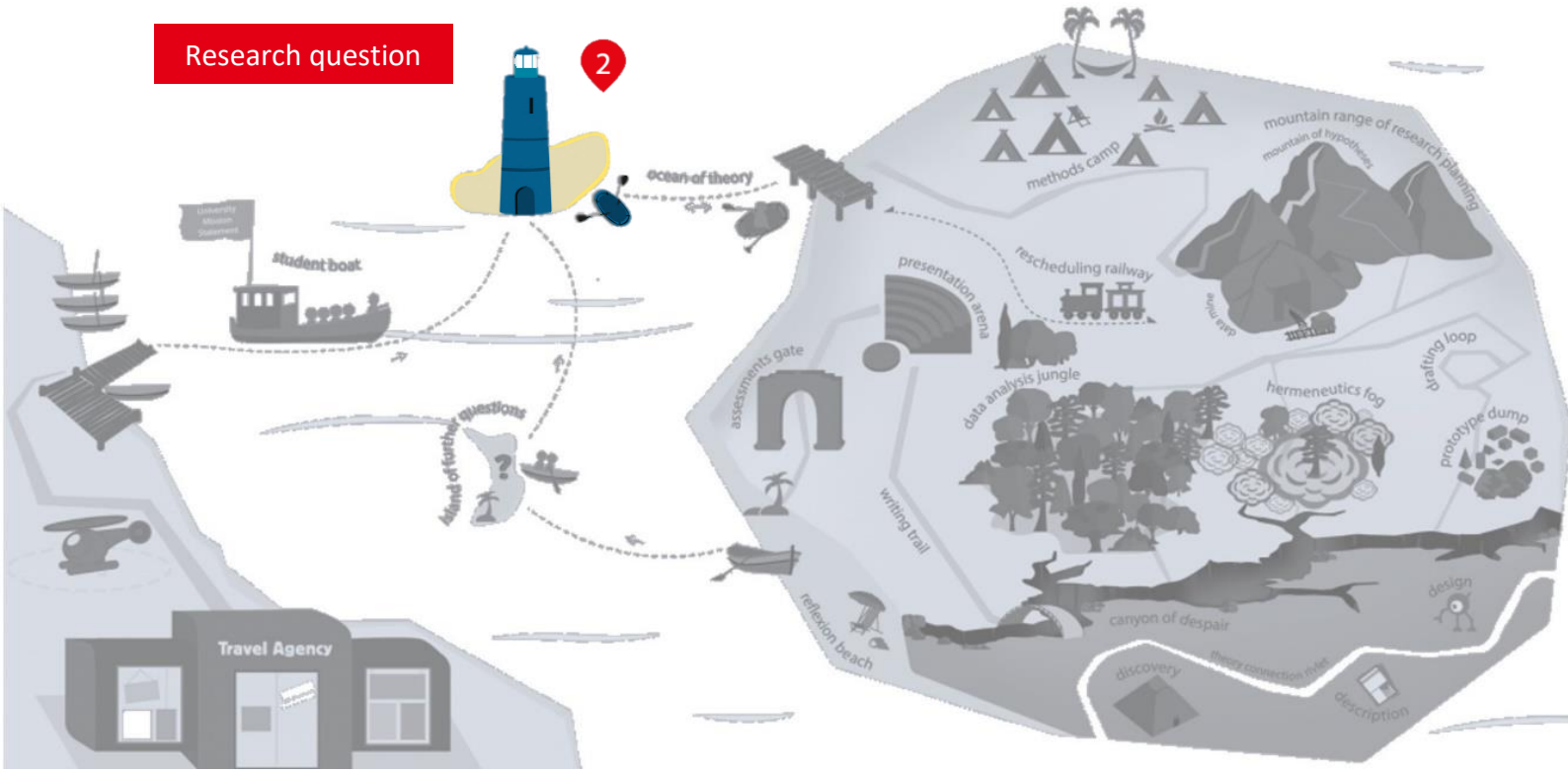
FideS
Forschungsorientierung in der Studieneingangsphase

Time is running (out)

Vignette #6

Research question



KEYWORDS

STRUCTURE AND AUTONOMY, CONTENT-RELATED FOCUS, FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS, WORKLOAD

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#6: Time is running (out)

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.

Time is running (out)

Mid-term. You are on your way home after your class – half satisfied half thoughtful. The group was - as so often - incredibly open to discussion. They are always enthusiastic after the lessons. However, you also notice that you are not making enough progress with the research process because of this; the time frame is simply not enough to accommodate the joy of discussion and all research steps at the same time. You are undecided how to deal with this; whether you should slow down the discussions to put a stronger focus on the content, or whether there are other ways to deal with the situation. After all, you very much welcome the great interest and controversy in the meetings.

Keywords: Structure and autonomy, content-related focus, first-year students, workload

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:

Does the project have to be completed - in its entirety or within the planned time frame?

What other experiences should the students gain in the course of this project?

Which advantages and disadvantages speak for a clearer structure, which for freer guidance?

What positive (learning) effects can you observe from the detailed discussions with the students?

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".

Adapt your management style to the group

They have the attitude that the students are the process owners. You adapt your teaching to whether the students demand closer or more open supervision. To do this, you clarify at the beginning of the project what these different forms of supervision mean and what the students want. In intermediate discussions you clarify whether your role is still appropriate for the needs of the students in the current project phase. In doing so, you point out possible problems - such as lack of time.

An appropriate action could be: The students are responsible for the process. At the same time, the teacher can point out obstacles without taking responsibility for the process.

Preventive actions

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

Use microformats of research to take up existing capabilities

At the beginning of the project you ask the students what they are already capable of. Adapted to these results they develop the project to be carried out. This does not have to cover the entire research process, but can also only cover individual research steps, such as developing a research question, collecting material or evaluating existing material. Another possibility would be to narrow down methods and subject areas.

Benefit of this action: Students have less freedom and can therefore work in a more focused and goal-oriented manner. This makes it easier to stick to the given time frame. In addition, the learning objectives can be better aligned to the project.

Adapt timetable to the rest of the term plan

Already in the conception you pay attention to the rest of the term plan, especially to exam phases. Setting milestones can be helpful in process control.

Benefit of this action: Neither teachers nor students are surprised that in certain study phases students suddenly have less time for the research project. This knowledge supports a more consistent awareness of the timetable on both sides.

Support team coordination in advance

At the beginning of the project you hold a "project organisation meeting". There you will introduce different roles that can be taken over by the students: e.g. minute taker, timekeeper, project leader, etc. You also let the students decide which communication channels should be used when and how. Alternatively, a team training can be conducted, in which the students understand through the exercises that are carried out that a division of roles can be useful.

Benefit of this action: The teacher is not responsible for the success or failure of the project. Through their roles, students have an increased awareness of issues such as documentation of results, timing and decision making, and thus responsibility for their own project progress.

Stretch over two terms

From experience you have learned that one term-time for a project of research-based learning is very short. Therefore, you have arranged for your course to extend over

two terms. It is anchored in the curriculum accordingly and provided with an appropriate number of credit points.

Benefit of this action: There is relatively much time for the project. Therefore, there is more time to let the students find their own way.

Take plenty of time to define the research question

You allow for a few weeks in which the students spend most of their time trying to find a question.

Benefit of this action: A well planned research question helps to keep the focus. It also helps you as a teacher to get the students back "on track" without becoming directive: The students have a clear vision of their goals, which acts as an anchor in the process of developing ideas.

Keep close contact to the students at all times

You are in close contact with the students. You always create opportunities for short questions and find out what kind of support the students need.

Benefit of this action: Overflowing ideas quickly become visible to you and can be captured by you informally. Alternatively, you can suggest larger meetings if you feel that a more formal setting for the meeting is needed.

Use milestones

At the beginning of the course, you work out a plan with the students to determine which intermediate results ("milestones") they need to achieve their goals. You embed these milestones together in a schedule. This enables students to estimate when they should have reached which milestones.

Benefit of this action: The clearly visible timetable makes it obvious to students when they should stop incorporating new ideas. They understand that it is time to complete a milestone.

Define the research question as well as the method in advance

At the beginning of the project you define the research question (and thus the research topic), but also the methodology. This enables you to prepare the students methodically in a way that fits them perfectly. You can also ensure that the students deal with topics in which you yourself are an expert.

Benefit of this action: Students are well equipped with a good research question and a method from the very beginning and can therefore work in a focused way. Ideas from them can be countered with reference to the research question and method and students have more time for research overall.

Outsourcing learning of research methods in workshops

You do not try to teach students certain methods during the research process. Instead, you either offer methodological workshops yourself or advertise existing offers.

Benefit of this action: Questions or discussions on methods can be "outsourced" to other contexts, thus saving time and energy. Furthermore, some of the students' ideas turn out more realistic when they have learned more about the methods and the corresponding workload.

Assess the skills and previous knowledge of the students in advance

You discuss the students' previous knowledge and skills with regard to the planned project in an interview at the beginning of the project. This way the students already know among themselves who can be approached for which topics. At the same time, deficits become apparent and you can estimate how extensive the project can realistically become.

Benefit of this action: You have a realistic picture of what the group can achieve. For example, you can point out that learning certain methods is time-consuming and thus lead the students back to realistic goals.

Provide basic knowledge on scientific project implementation in advance

At the beginning of the semester, you hold a course that teaches the basics of what research actually is, how it is defined in your subject and how projects can be structured.

Benefit of this action: The students have learned in advance to better structure themselves and each other. They are better able to estimate workloads and to commit themselves to plans.

Intervening actions

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

Make compromises

You make compromises, for example, by allowing students not necessarily to complete the process after all. Alternatively, you can cut out parts of the process, make decisions yourself, or otherwise relieve the students of work.

Benefit of this action: Through the time saved at a later stage, students have more room in the initial phase to explore possibilities, interests and approaches.

Demand agreements within the group

If you notice that the students ask you to make decisions, or if they do not appear in a coordinated manner in the meetings with you, you ask them to first make agreements within the group.

Benefit of this action: The internal agreement without the "authority" present has several advantages: Firstly, there is more "clarity" in the group meeting. Conflicts are dealt with or sharpened to such an extent that they can be better dealt with. This saves time and nerves in the meeting situation with you. In addition, the students experience that they can also make decisions independently. Finally, it also means that the students are introduced to taking responsibility themselves.

Implement peer-to-peer feedback

Right from the start of the project, you can guide students to compose collaborative essays or a research portfolio. The different project groups should each create a product that receives feedback from other project groups during the process.

Benefit of this action: A portfolio or essay provides structure for the students. You as a teacher can also use it to regulate which questions the students should deal with at what time. Through peer feedback, students can give each other suggestions, but also draw attention to mistakes and correct each other. A further bonus is that the resulting product can also be an artifact that can be used later for evaluation. (Just like the feedback.)

Consult in small groups as well as in plenary sessions

You meet the students alternately in the overall plenum and in small groups.

Benefit of this action: It is easier for you to respond to the needs of the small groups. At the same time, synergies can become apparent in the plenary sessions.