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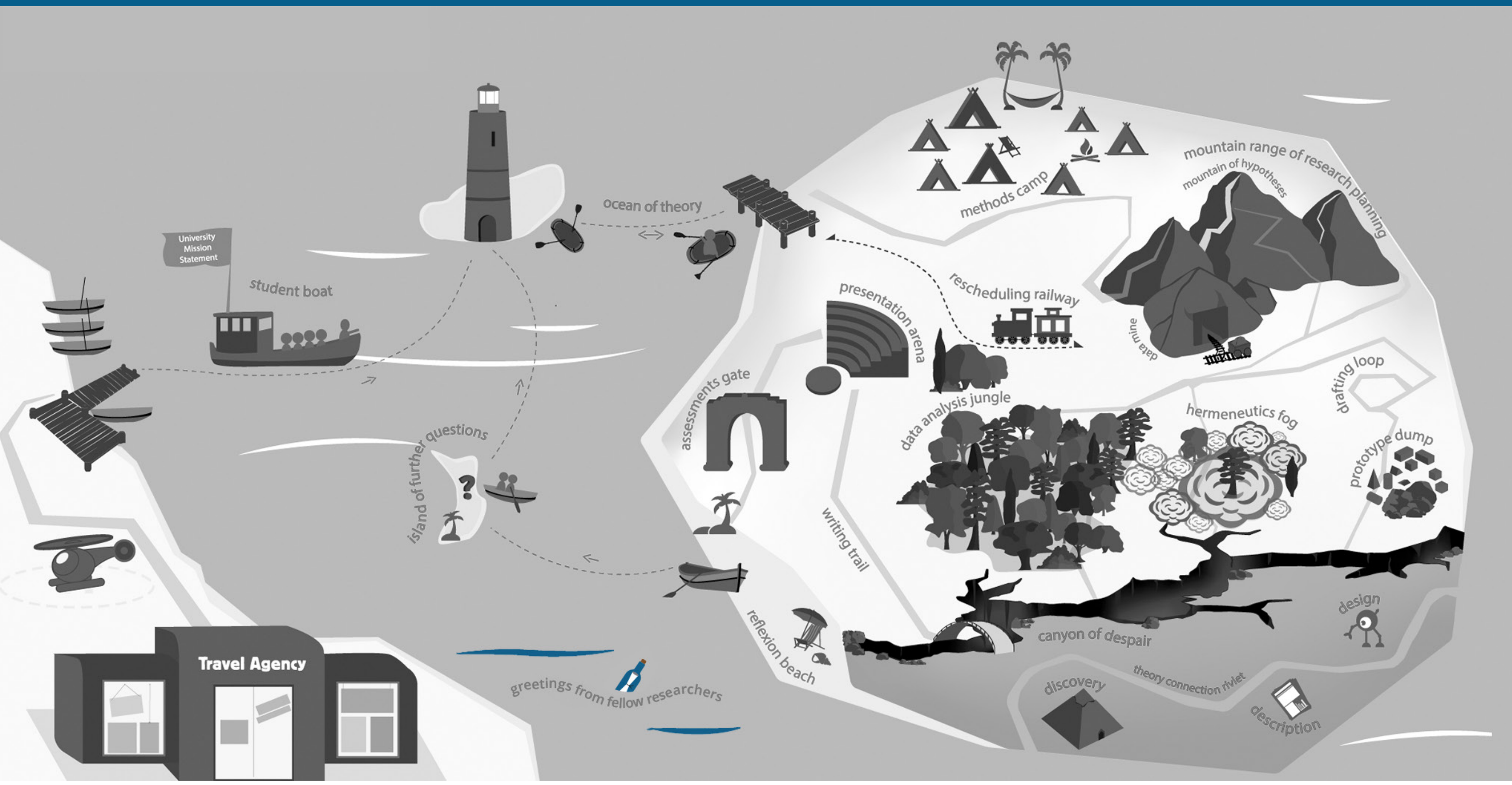
Examples & Good Practices

Role play and theatre as possibilities for case analysis and research-based learning



KEYWORDS:

ROLE PLAY, PRACTICE-THEORY TRANSFER, REFLECTION, CASE ANALYSIS

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Metadata

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University: Nuremberg Tech

Subject: Social Work

Abstract: The example of research-based learning presented here takes place in social work and examines the practical experiences of students with the help of ethnographic practice protocols and scenic work.

Special feature: Case analyses, theater elements, co-teaching

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- Nuremberg Tech
- Social Work
- Bachelor students
- Implementation: 1 time
- Number of students: 20

ENVIRONMENT:

The seminar *Role play and theatre as possibilities for case analysis and case understanding* takes place at the Nuremberg Tech. It is part of a larger module on the topic of practice-theory transfer. It is aimed at Bachelor students in their fifth or sixth semester who are returning to the university after a one-semester practical phase in various social work institutions. The seminar combines the creation of ethnographic practice protocols with theatrical production and thus pursues the goal of researching and reflecting on concrete experiences from the practical phase using scientific methods.

- A personal professional concern
- An impulse from my environment

REASON:

We decided to offer our research-based learning course for two reasons. Firstly, we wanted to use the seminar to show students how they can research and reflect on their experiences during the practical phase. In doing so, we pursued two goals: Firstly, we know from our own experience and from academic studies how important the lived experiences of practice are for social work students and that these strongly influence the development of a person's self-perception. It was therefore important to us to give the students space and time to scientifically examine and reflect on the practical phase and to address specific situations. On the other hand, we also wanted to work out the connection between practice and academic debate in a seminar context. Many of our students see themselves more as practitioners and often do not understand the extent to which a research activity or theoretical considerations can have an influence on their practice. For this reason, it was important to us to offer a seminar in which students can examine their experiences scientifically and creatively using ethnographic practice protocols and theatrical work. The second reason was our desire to explore the extent to which theatrical means and practical experience can actually be combined. The idea here was that theatre is a good way to reflect on practical experience and, for example, to examine one's own role in social work contexts. These considerations could be combined well with the principle of research-based learning, as it leaves a lot of leeway in the design and provides space for reflection on the research process.

- 1 semester
- Embedded in a course
- Curricular & mandatory
- Research process: supported by instructors if required
- Feedback: peers, instructors
- Research results: internal

IMPLEMENTATION:

The content of the seminar consisted of case-related reflections on practice, which were examined and carried out using methods and concepts of reconstructive social work and scenic work. On the basis of ethnographic practice protocols, we looked at which processes were observable in a section of professional practice, which difficulties became apparent and how the students dealt with them. The overarching research question here was therefore: What is the case in each of the different practical experiences and what actually happened in these selected situations? The further formulation of the research questions then depended heavily on the situations described. At this point, the exploratory character of the research seminar should be emphasized once again. Accordingly, we as teachers were not sure to what extent methods from theatre were suitable for researching practical situations experienced, which meant that the seminar was also characterized by trial and error and uncertainty.
The seminar can be divided into three phases.

Preparation phase. The preparatory phase entailed two meetings. These sessions focused on two main topics. on the first was understanding the basic ideas of reconstructive social work, getting to know methods of ethnographic research and writing practice protocols on a selected situation from the practice phase, discussing these in small groups and revising them. The second topic was to introduce students to theatrical methods and to familiarize them with this alternative approach (e.g. through exercises). At the end of this phase, the students split up into small groups (4-5 group members) and discussed in these groups which of the various ethnographic practice protocols they wanted to research in the next phase.

Research phase. The research phase formed the core of the seminar and was held as a block seminar over a weekend. The focus of this phase was the scenic development and reflection on the selected practical situations. The students used various theatrical methods under guidance and examined different aspects of the practical experience on this basis. The differentiated implementations led to different perspectives being adopted and different research focuses being set. For example, one group explored the possibilities of using theatrical exaggeration to promote changes in perspective and the experience of difference from the concrete experience, while another group focused on the extent to which potential options for action can be tried out in the context of scenic-documentary reconstructions and the extent to which different perspectives of the actors can be visualized. We also decided together that another group should not present their findings in a stage production, as the experiences were very emotional and theatrical methods did not seem suitable for this. Instead, this group carried out an extensive document analysis on the case study.

Results and reflection phase. In the last phase of the seminar, the students reflected on the method, the scenic development and the insights gained from it. This phase had two objectives. Firstly, the aim was to evaluate on a methodological level the extent to which the combination of practical reflection through scenic representation and ethnographic case descriptions is a profitable research design. Secondly, it was of course also important to us that the students reflected on their own experiences and gained insights in relation to the selected practical situations. The results of this phase were recorded by the students in reflection reports.

Proof of performance. The performance assessment consists of several elements. Firstly, it requires the writing of an ethnographic report based on the students' individual practical experience. The seminar participants can either come from an internship or from professional activities before or during their studies (preparatory phase). Secondly, the joint work on the collected data material with theatrical methods during two block days is a central component of this proof (research phase). Thirdly, students are asked to reflect on their experiences during and after the production. This includes writing a detailed reflection report of 4000 characters (plus/minus 10%). The report serves to appropriately document and reflect on the insights and impressions gained (results and reflection phase).

TENSIONS

Tensions between demands for...
- Self-organisation and external organisation
- Teacher's workload and available resources
- Course planning and adaption as a result of the dynamics of research-based learning
- Changed instructor role & the existing teaching tradition

TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS:

During the implementation of the seminar, we encountered various tensions and conflicts, some of which could be easily resolved, but some of which had to be recognised as part of the seminar.

One fundamental conflict, which we were already aware of when planning the seminar, was the combination of theoretical research and theatre. The actual aim of the seminar was to scientifically analyse and reflect on the practical experiences of the students, which should above all enable a distanced and objective view of the practical experiences. The theatrical elements, on the other hand, brought a certain closeness that made an objective and distanced view more difficult. We attempted to resolve this conflict with the help of the ethnographic practice protocols to be compiled. These written texts served as the basis for the theatrical elements and were thus used as an intermediate instance between personal experience and scene setting. At the same time, we could not and did not want to completely resolve this tension, as the students will often be confronted with this feeling of closeness and distance in their later professional lives and need practice in enduring this tension.

A further tension arose from the fact that the students had had very different experiences in their practical semester and so we often had to determine individual processing methods and theatre techniques. On the one hand, this was a good example of how diverse the field of social work is and how differently experiences can be researched and staged, but on the other hand it required all participants to engage with the different protocols and to deal with them intensively.

An associated tension was also evident in the high emotionality and moments of loss of control in the seminar, in which both the students and we teachers were confronted with unfamiliar situations and were not certain how to deal with them. We approached this area of tension with the greatest possible openness and tried to give the students as much freedom and opportunities for co-determination as possible. On the one hand, we were impressed by how well the students dealt with the different practical experiences and embraced the openness and uncertainty. On the other hand, there were also moments that we found questionable, for example when social work students wanted trigger warnings and protection from possible situations in their field of work.

At this point, a conflict also emerged for us as teachers: it was also difficult for us to deal with uncertain situations and to realise that we were sometimes at the mercy of a loss of control in the intensity of the seminar and had to react spontaneously. In doing so, we sometimes gave up our traditional role as teachers and created a safe space for the students and ourselves. However, this approach led to another difficult situation, especially when it came to grading: this conflict was expressed on the one hand in the formal obligation to grade and on the other hand in the protected framework in which the students and we could try things out. As a compromise, we decided in favour of several examination elements, which were primarily of a reflective nature. In addition, there was of course also a tension in the workload, so although we found it a great experience to design and organise this seminar together, it demanded far more than the university's formally calculated time requirement.

OBJECTIVES & VALUES

- Encouraging scientific curiosity
- Recognising the connections between study content and career
- Dealing with mistakes and failures
- Acquisition of methodological knowledge
- Acquiring writing skills

EFFECTS:

A particularly important effect of the seminar was that the students experienced how higher education can help to understand, systematically research, and reflect on practice. The students were delighted that their experiences became the subject of teaching and research and saw added value in the theoretical reflection of practical experiences.

Above all, the uncertainty and the willingness to embrace new things (e.g. in relation to the theatre methods) led to a level of trust being created in the seminar and increased social learning.

The seminar also had an effect on us teachers, especially in terms of how exciting it is to try out new social work research approaches (e.g. theatre methods) and to break new ground with the students. In this context, it was a particularly nice experience to lead the seminar together as a team, to be able to support each other and to rely on each other's expertise.

You can find more information on this practical example in our podcast.

Link: https://inselderforschung.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/2024/05/17/podca/