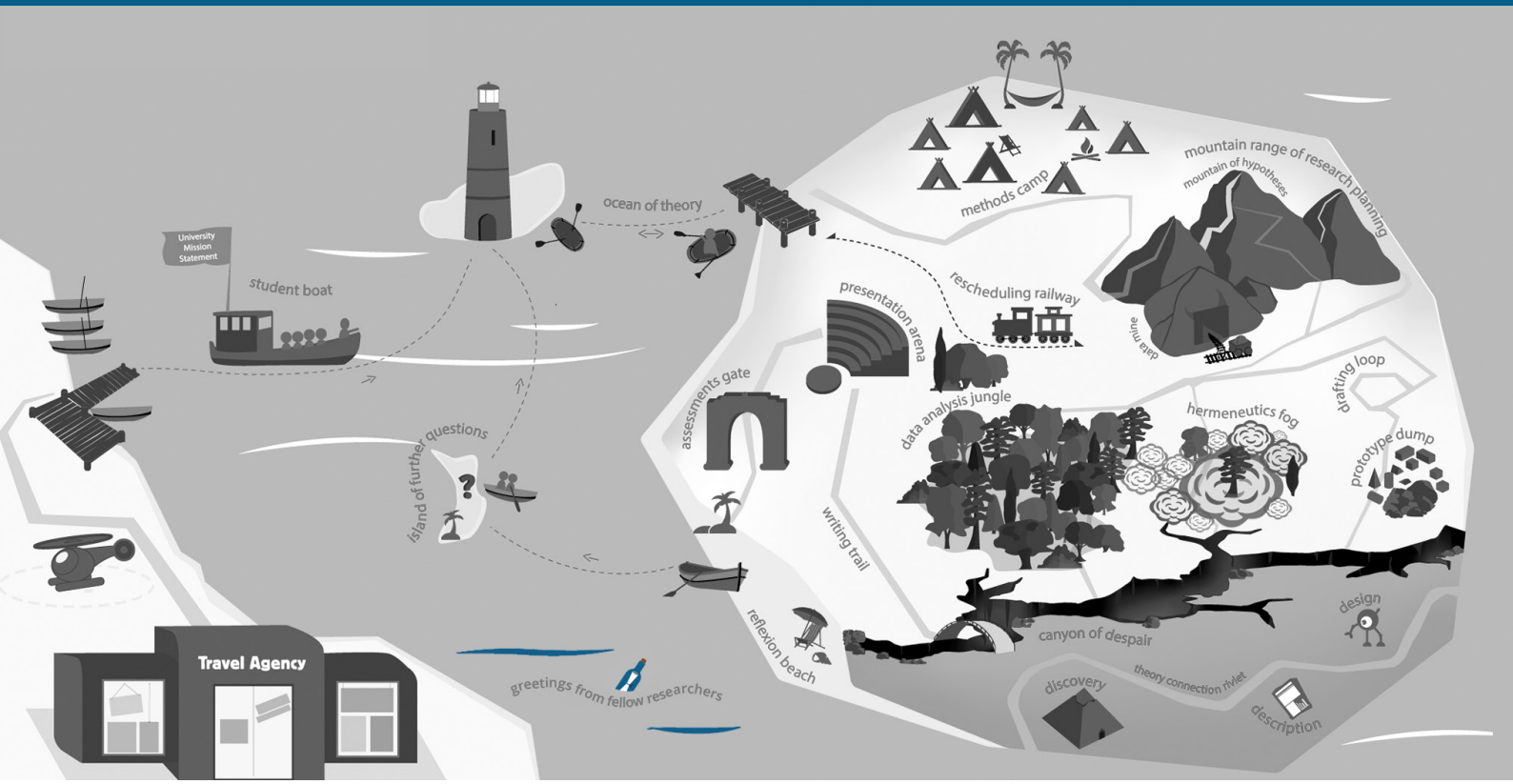
Examples & Good Practices

Supporting non-profit organisations and exploring social science issues through research-based learning



KEYWORDS:

POLITICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH, CAMPUS MEETS COMMUNITY LAB

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Universität Hamburg
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Metadata

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Subject: Political and social sciences

Abstract: The co-creative research seminar "Campus meets Community Lab" takes place in the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Hamburg. In the context of the seminar, Bachelor's and Master's students work together with non-profit organisations to research social science topics over several semesters.

Special feature: Research with community partners, different examination formats, rules for group work, bachelor's and master's students

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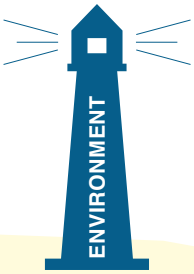


- University of Hamburg
- Sociology, political science & public and nonprofit studies
- Bachelor and Master students
- 6 CP and 4 SWS
- Number of students: 20 per semester

ENVIRONMENT:

My research-based learning programme is the Campus meets Community Lab (CC-Lab). It is aimed at students in the Bachelor's degree programmes in Sociology and Political Science, as well as the Master's degree programme in Public and Nonprofit Studies. The CC-Lab aims to examine issues related to civil society through research-based learning together with various practice partners from the civil society scene and students – it is therefore based on a community-based research approach. The guiding principle of the CC-Lab is that students not only conduct research for themselves, but that their research findings also acquire social significance and benefit civil society. In this context, the CC-Lab works together with the City of Hamburg's 'Haus des Engagements' (House of Civic Engagement) and is in close contact with the Research Office for Social Innovation (ROSI) at the University of Hamburg. In addition, it is funded by the Transfer Agency of the University of Hamburg, which, for example, enables us to employ student tutors and to provide additional support for the work of the student research groups. A special feature of this research-based learning programme is that the research projects run over several semesters, the students change during the research process and, in a given semester, more partial research is carried out.
Another point of reference for the practical examples mentioned below is the basic course in Methods of Empirical Social Research in the BA programmes in Political Science and Sociology. In this course, we also work together with partners from the field.

- Personal professional concern
- Impulse from my environment

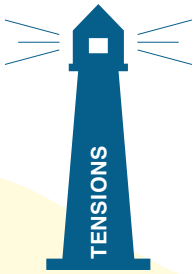
REASON:

The reasons why I decided to implement research-based learning in many of my courses can be divided into external circumstances and inner convictions. On the one hand, the study regulations of the various courses of study require me to conduct courses in which students begin to conduct independent research. On the other hand, I am firmly convinced that the principle of research-based learning enables students to internalise the learning content more deeply, with greater involvement and commitment, which leads to more enjoyment for the students and greater learning success. As a teacher, I also find this format much more beneficial than traditional lectures. I like the fact that research-based learning breaks down hierarchies between my students and me, allowing us to discuss problems and challenges in the research process together.

- Longer than 1 semester
- Own format
- Curricular & voluntary
- Research process: guided
- Feedback: peers, instructors, external parties
- Research results: public

IMPLEMENTATION:

In contrast to my other research-based learning courses, the CC-Lab is characterised by a fairly open structure in which the research process is more freely designed. Despite this openness, there are also certain research phases in the CC-Lab that various student research groups (consisting of 4-5 members) go through. In the preparation phase, the ROSI, the community partners and I first meet and discuss initial ideas. Together, we refine these so that we can provide the students with initial topic suggestions for the various research projects. This is followed by the initialisation phase, in which we present the topics to the students, who then deal with at least two of the possible research ideas and form groups. In this context, the social perspective of joint research is also included and basic rules of conduct are developed in the various groups. These groups define a common constitution in which they lay down how they organise themselves. These common ground rules can help to avoid problems. After that, the actual work phase begins, in which the students substantiate their research projects and, together with the community partners, develop the theoretical foundations and selected methods, create a research plan with milestones and begin the research activity. The research projects can be very different. For example, one student research group examined the core elements of a “house of engagement” and developed a set of guidelines from their findings that other cities can use to establish a similar institution. Another group has been dealing with the topic of migrant self-organisation and has organised a networking event in this context. The work phase is characterised by three aspects. Firstly, the student research groups work independently on their projects. Secondly, we regularly exchange and discuss partial results in plenary sessions, with each group presenting its current status. Thirdly, there are various content-related input sessions at this stage, some of which are provided by me, others by the ROSI or experts on specific topics. These are mainly in-depth workshops in which students receive further information on how to create standardised questionnaires, for example, or are taught more advanced skills in specific evaluation methods. The community partners are an important part of the research team. They can get involved in different ways, for example by acting more as mentors, making contacts or contributing local knowledge; or, if more time and resources are available, by actively participating in each group meeting and also conducting their own research. However, it is important to us that this is communicated at the beginning of the seminar so that all group members have clear expectations. At the end of the work phase, the individual groups present their results both orally and in writing. The actual examination performance can vary. For example, one group developed a guideline as a concrete product, while another planned and carried out a network event. Of course, there are also groups for which a classic term paper makes the most sense as an examination format. Despite these different formats and topic areas, all groups must summarise their milestones, research methods and results in a portfolio. It is also important that the various groups show which sub-aspects or sub-research questions could not be answered during the semester, as this represents the basis for possible further research in the next semester. At the end of the semester, there is a kick-off event for the new students, where the old research groups present their work and results and the new researchers can ask questions.



Tensions between demands for…
- Individual and social learning
- Workload and resources available to teachers
- Workload and formally calculated time for students

TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS:

In the CC-Lab research process, there are various tensions and conflicts that can best be outlined on the basis of the different actors. For me as a teacher, the biggest tension is that this format is a lot of fun and leads to better learning outcomes for students, but it also means a significantly higher level of supervision for me. I have been working on this topic for a long time. In 2010, I founded the Applied Social Research Project Office in the Department of Social Sciences, which has been called ROSI (Research Office for Social Innovation) since 2022. As a faculty institution, it supports teachers and students in certain aspects of the research process. The ROSI takes on some administrative, coordinating and formal tasks for lecturers at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, deals with the topic of data protection in one of our sessions and also provides templates for data protection declarations in this context. We also exchange ideas with other teachers at our faculty about course formats and approaches to research-based learning. We discuss problems together and share materials. Over time, we have built up a good collection of materials that saves us a lot of time. An important source of support, if available, are student tutors, who relieve me of some of the burden, especially when it comes to social problems or group conflicts and discuss many issues with students peer to peer before they are brought to me as a teacher.
Another tension exists between enthusiasm and great commitment to the project and the high workload on the other. With 6 credit points, the project places high demands on students in terms of quality and time, which they are not used to from other courses. This can lead to excessive demands, or at least makes a rethink necessary. I try to resolve this tension by clearly communicating my expectations to the students at the very beginning and pointing out that it is a demanding and time-consuming activity that can be exhausting on various levels. In this context, I also address group dynamics and try to create awareness of them, for example, by having the individual groups define their own group constitution, as mentioned above. In addition, during the semester, the student groups and I use an internal questionnaire to discuss the current mood in the group in order to address possible social conflicts. The student tutors also support the research groups in the event of challenges related to content or social issues, provide tips on various topics, offer advice and inform me if the burden on a group is to much or other major problems arise.
In addition to the areas of tension from the student and teacher perspective, there are of course also challenging aspects with the community partners, who sometimes have different ideas about research projects or do not understand that we have a tight research schedule due to the semester schedule and need information as quickly as possible. Furthermore, there are sometimes different ideas about how we access the field and to what extent we depend on the support of our community partners. In this case, it is particularly important to address possible areas of tension and to openly communicate our options and expectations of our community partners from the outset. This creates understanding on both sides and resolves many points of friction.

OBJECTIVES & VALUES

- Developing and acting on scientific curiosity
- Acquiring methodological knowledge
- Recognising connections between studies and career
- Collaborating with external project partners
- Career counselling

EFFECTS:

The effects and impacts of the CC-Lab can also be well illustrated by the different parties involved in the research projects. For the students, this course leads to them becoming active researchers and thus developing an understanding of what it actually means to carry out social science research projects. On the one hand, this experience helps students to recognise that their studies provide them with concrete tools for addressing and solving social problems and that they have specific and applicable knowledge. On the other hand, the research project gives students a first idea of whether this type of work could also be interesting for their future career. While some students find that they want to delve deeper into empirical social science research and may then become tutors for research training projects or apply to be student research associates at ROSI, others find that a career in empirical social science research is less appealing to them. Learning through research in the CC-Lab is thus an important foundation for later career choices and gives students orientation for their professional development after university.

Another aspect is that through our community research, students experience self-efficacy and realise that their work is not only relevant to their studies but also to society. The students' findings attract a great deal of attention from community partners and are often used to initiate change in non-profit organisations.

This consideration leads us on to the effects for our community partners. The research projects at the CC-Lab initially led to the external partners beginning to reflect on themselves and their structures. In addition, the research results have had a strong impact on the individual institutions, for example, by creating concrete products such as guidelines or a networking event, or by initiating changes in certain areas of the institutions through our recommendations for action. For example, one non-profit organisation has completely redesigned and adapted its adult education programmes based on the results we developed. Another effect is that our cooperation also gives our partners in industry insights into social science research, enabling them to better understand its complexity and diversity and to recognise the value of this type of research for their professional practice.

From my perspective as a teacher, I also notice the effect that I enjoy learning with students and community partners and I see how the students grow through the project work. I also enjoy showing both students and community partners that we as social scientists don't just sit in an ivory tower, but also develop valuable scientific insights for non-profit organisations and can initiate small-scale social change.

Further information on this practical example can be found here in video format.

Link: https://inselderforschung.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/2025/01/10/interview-kai/