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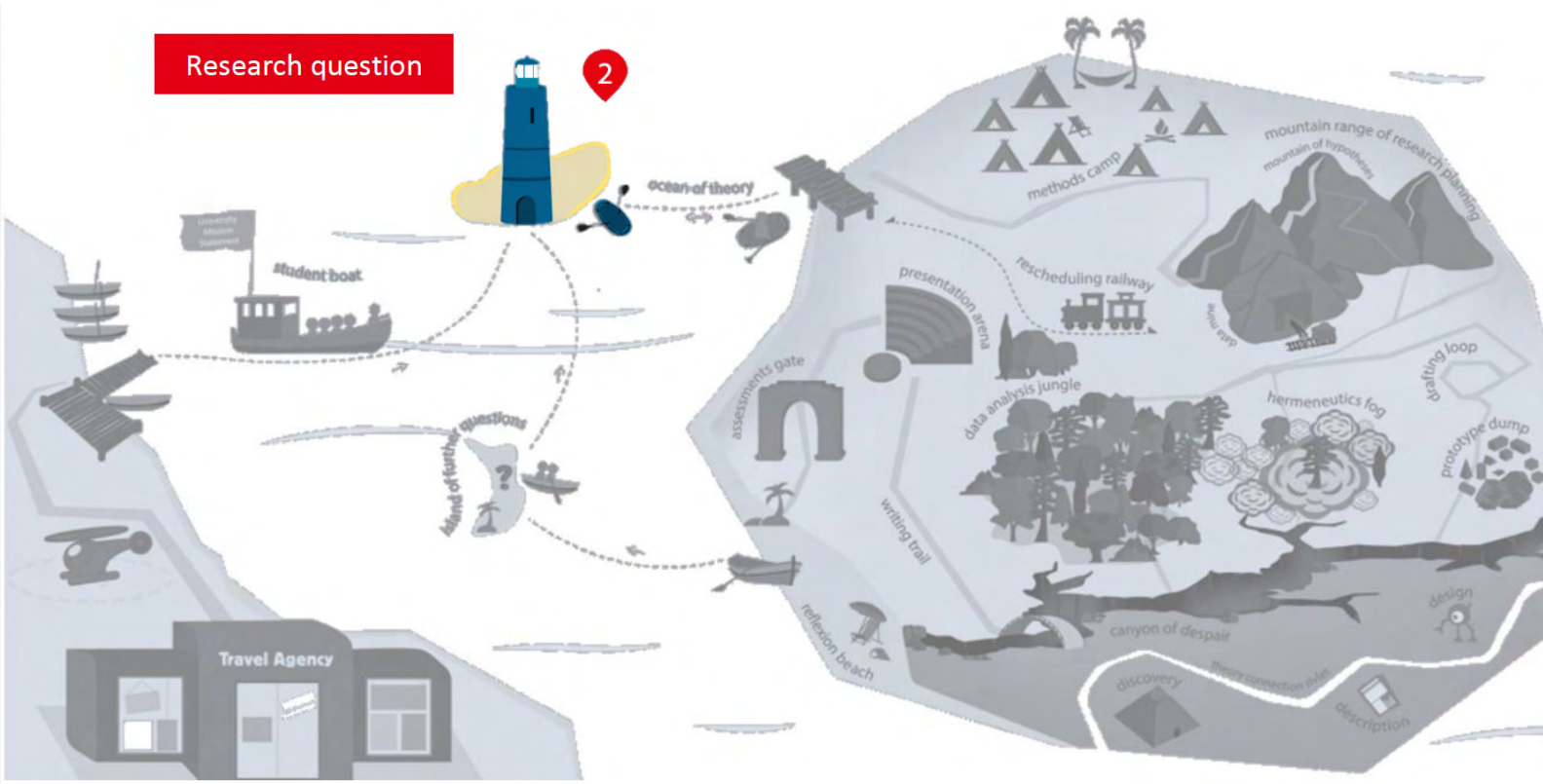
Searching and Finding

Case vignette for tutors



KEYWORDS:

FUNDAMENTALS, TIME MANAGEMENT & WORKLOAD

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#10: Searching and Finding

The following case vignette describes a situation in a teaching and learning context that aims to promote research-based learning. The situation described comes from interviews with coordinators of research-based learning projects and was adapted for both instructors and tutors. The case vignette addresses a typical challenge that occurs in courses designed to encourage research-based learning. This case vignette can help you reflect and consider how you as a tutor would react in or how you might prevent such a situation. To encourage this, each case vignette provides questions for reflection and proposes various attitudes and approaches.

Instructions for tutors

Tutors are employed for a wide variety of activities in the context of research-based learning. Additionally, the lecturers' expectations of their tutors differ widely. It is therefore important for you to clarify in advance what is expected of you. Which decisions can you make? Can you advise student groups? What authority do you have, and where are your limits?

At the same time, it is important that you know your own limits. What do you wish to take responsibility for, and what don't you? Which skills do you have, and which don't you have?

Depending on your role as a tutor in a research-based learning context, the attitudes and possible reactions presented in the case vignettes could suit quite well or may exceed your skills and authority. This is why it is important that you understand the case vignettes as suggestions. If you are unsure which approach you should take in a tutorial or if you can choose one of the proposed actions, be sure to ask the responsible lecturer.

An icon behind each suggested measure for a case vignette indicates our estimation of whether you can take this path independently and without consultation or should probably discuss it with the lecturer first. However, these estimations are only preliminary and need to be scrutinized within each concrete context.

Icon	Meaning
	You are on land with solid ground under your feet … this symbol means that the actions and reactions so designated can be implemented easily and without much effort. You can probably take these paths in your tutorial independently and without consulting the lecturer.
	You have left the island and are at anchor, but are still near the shore … the actions and reactions designated with the anchor symbol might take some more time to implement, and may have a more substantial impact on the tutorial and the connected research-based learning courses. Consider carefully whether your skills and authority suffice to act independently. If you are unsure, discuss them with the lecturer.
	You are on the high seas and in an uncertain situation in which unpredictable weather can occur … this icon is used to indicate that certain actions or reactions may require substantial efforts on your or the students' part and have a strong impact on the research-based learning. It is advisable to discuss these suggestions with the lecturer.

Searching and Finding

It is Wednesday evening. After you discovered in your course that the students were terrible at researching – reading whole books that were not really relevant to the research field, describing outdated states of research, or simply "not finding anything" – you set up a session on effective research in the field. The session was fifty percent self-pity on the part of the students and fifty percent productive, but you barely managed to cover a small portion of what you had planned. You are at a loss as you make your way home.

Keywords: lack of research skills, time management & workload

Questions for reflection

The situation described above is a typical challenge for tutors and lecturers when they support students in research-based learning. The following questions for reflection can help to look at such situations from various perspectives and then to come to different decisions:

- **Are there external provisions covering academic skills that you can recommend to the students?**
- **How much autonomy do you and the lecturer expect from the students in regard to developing their research questions, planning and conducting their research?**
- **What do you know about the students' previous courses and existing knowledge?**

Attitudes and Approaches

The following sections will describe attitudes on the one hand and on the other hand preventative or intervening measures on the other hand for handling the situation described. First, attitudes will be described that could influence whether and how to respond. Following that, potential measures are presented. These are examples from concrete praxis in higher education, either preventative or intervening.

Attitudes

By attitudes we don't mean concrete measures, but rather the perspectives of lecturers and tutors in various situations. Depending on these attitudes, situations can be interpreted as "problematic" and "challenging" or as "desirable" and "normal". As a tutor, it is important for you to know both your own attitude and that of the lecturer in order to support the student as well as possible. The lecturer's attitude can also give you orientation to align your own attitude and to communicate the lecturer's expectations to the students accordingly.

Tolerating a lack of methodological skills at the beginning of their studies

You and the lecturer are aware that the students are at the beginning of their studies and possibly have little or no experience with scientific methods.

In the situation described here this could mean: You offer the students additional help within your course such as handouts or references to external provisions, as well as indicating your own availability when problems arise. At the same time, you see the difficulties as an important chance for students to improve their skills in the course of this project.

Prevention

Preventative action prevents the situation described or at least makes it less likely. Of course there is no guarantee.

Creating a handout

You create a guideline for the project which describes the process and gives an overview of recommended methods including examples.

For the specific situation described here: You create and distribute this guideline (or parts of it) as needed, when things get stuck in certain places. Sketch possible uses of selected methods. For basic research, starting points, data bases and the like, many departments provide guidelines on academic skills that you can also offer to the students.

Distributing existing guidelines on scientific methods and skills

If your department has a guideline on academic research and study skills, hand this out right at the beginning of the course or when it is needed. If there is no such guideline, this would be an opportunity to create one.

For the specific situation described here: If the students lack basic academic skills for research and learning, they will find valuable tips and useful information about basic methods here.

Creating a video tutorial

Instead of a handout, you create a video tutorial to explain the basics of researching or other scientific methods and academic skills.

For the specific situation described here: Especially when students can expect to encounter similar problems and projects in later semesters, making a sustainable video tutorial is worth it. Speak from your own experience, and keep production work down; even simple videos can be effective. The students can then also view outside of course time, so that valuable face-to-face time is not affected.

Intervention

As a rule, we use intervening measures “after the ship has sailed”. That is, these are urgent responses to the situation.

Offering easy-access counselling

You offer the option to students to consult you directly during their research, for example by discussing with them their list of sources. This could be one-to-one, during course sessions, or in the project group meetings.

For the specific situation described here: Students receive specific, targeted feedback on the current status of their research and concrete tips on which areas deserve further research. They benefit from your expert recommendations in both theoretical and methodological areas and also save time.

Outsourcing methodological basics in workshops

You refer your students to provisions for learning methods that are offered outside your course.

For the specific situation described here: Students can improve their methodological knowledge and skills for use in the current project without placing demands on your resources. Workshops or crash courses also have the advantage that students can use them as needed and thus the more advanced students in a more heterogeneous group needn't be bored with the 'basics'.

Handing out a methodological guideline

You create a guideline for the project which describes the process and gives an overview of recommended methods including examples.

For the specific situation described here: Once it has been prepared, this guideline sketching possible uses of selected methods can be used as needed, i.e., whenever students get stuck. For basic research, starting points, data bases and the like, many departments provide guidelines on academic skills that you can also offer to the students.

Setting up an extended project meeting

You extend the usual face-to-face time to a three-hour session in order to address the gaps detected.

For the specific situation described here: You plan a fixed date on which gaps can be addressed. An extended session like this offers opportunities to go into further depth regarding such topics and issues