Student statements on research-based learning

Different Countries, Different Customs – When Your Master's Thesis Runs on Latin American Time

Discipline: Latin American Studies
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Different Countries, Different Customs – When Your Master's Thesis Runs on Latin American Time: Student Statements.
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ABSTRACT

Maria (26) (name changed) conducted research in Mexico on care work in a vulnerable community and shows strategies for managing your time when conducting research projects in relation to foreign cultures.

Dealing with external circumstances

Marias Challenge: Although I had created a work plan with deadlines, goals, and activities at the beginning of my research, things did not always go as expected. The Latin American context was generally characterized by spontaneity. As a result, some planned activities or events did not take place, requiring improvisation and a positive attitude. Furthermore, many people initially agreed to cooperate but then either did not respond or canceled, which affected both data collection and analysis, as well as the processing time.

Marias Strategy: In order to use my time in Hamburg effectively, I developed a plan that included a break of about two weeks before the actual deadline. This gave me extra time to address any problems or complications. I also set realistic goals in my daily plans. For example, it was unrealistic to plan on writing 10 pages in 5 hours on a Monday when I also had to work, study, and pursue other activities. Therefore, it was important to find a balance between my social, private, and professional life and my research. Additionally, I set aside certain hours for myself to avoid burnout. Another useful strategy was to have a Plan B for days when I couldn't complete certain tasks and to prioritize according to importance and urgency. For instance, if I had planned 4 hours of work for the day but could only manage 1 hour, I used that hour for proofreading. Finally, writing down what I had accomplished and which tasks I had completed at the end of each day was very helpful. During times of low motivation or frustration, reading these results helped me see my progress and stay motivated.

Student statements on research-based learning

The art of setting boundaries: differentiation as a key to research

Discipline: Latin American Studies
Citation: Island of Research (2024). The art of setting boundaries: differentiation as a key to research: Student Statements.
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Laura (26) wrote her master's thesis on motherhood and care work in an endangered community in Mexico. She spent several months there for her research and describes in her statement how she dealt with the emotional challenges during the research process.

Dealing with external circumstances

Lauras Challenge: One of the challenges I faced during the research process was maintaining a balance between emotional involvement and scientific neutrality. The subject of my work:" Motherhood and care work in an endangered community in Mexico" deeply moved me. The mothers I interviewed shared various struggles: emotional, physical, and economic, that significantly impact their personal lives and relationships within the community.
Hearing these stories, where issues such as machismo, patriarchy, and even capitalism are so clearly interwoven, I often found myself feeling powerless and frustrated with the broader system and society. It is challenging to separate the emotions and the connections you naturally form, even when you know the focus must remain on research and scientific objectivity.

Lauras Strategy: It was important for me to become aware of my own limitations, both as a person and as a student and researcher. I realized that there were structures, problems, and circumstances that I could not change or influence overnight, and that were beyond my control. One effective strategy I used was to support projects that the communities had already developed to address their problems. This way, I felt I was contributing to transforming a problem into a solution. I also reminded myself that academic research serves to make these problems visible. A helpful practice was writing down the objectives of my work on a piece of paper and placing it on the mirror to keep me focused on the importance of maintaining neutrality. Although it was both possible and allowed to feel emotional, I made sure that my emotions did not prevent me from considering other factors that influenced the problem under investigation and from staying focused on the objectives of the written work.

Student statements on research-based learning

Don't be afraid of strict but good supervisors

Discipline: Social work
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Don't be afraid of strict but good supervisors : Student Statements.
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Marlon (28), who studied social work, wrote his bachelor's thesis on the topic "The impact of cultural factors on ADHD – an empirical study using Spain" as an example. In his statement, he shows that a change of supervisor can be useful in certain situations.

Dealing with external circumstances

Marlons Challenge: Initially, I found it challenging to find a suitable topic. Personally, I had conducted a lot of research on ADHD and therefore wanted to incorporate this topic into my bachelor's thesis. However, it was difficult to use this topic in my thesis because it is often only addressed in medical or psychological papers. After a long brainstorming session with a fellow student, I came up with the idea of examining the cultural factors of ADHD, focusing on my country of birth, Spain. I agreed with my supervisor to conduct expert interviews with people of Spanish-speaking background at a bilingual primary school where I was also working as a teacher. I have to admit that I don't enjoy scientific work, which is why the bachelor's thesis was a huge burden for me. I'm not particularly interested in writing scientific papers. Furthermore, it was the first time I had to deal with empirical research. During the first few weeks, I felt overwhelmed and unsure of how to approach the work.

Marlons Strategy: As already mentioned, I had no prior knowledge of scientific work. During my studies, I did write several term papers, but I barely passed them. Due to my lack of understanding of scientific work, collaborating with my first supervisor was impossible. So, I searched for a new supervisor, who was the strictest of all my professors. Working with this lecturer, I learned the fundamentals of scientific work from scratch. In summary, I chose this lecturer because I knew he would take the time to answer all my questions and was able to meet me at my level of knowledge, which was very low. I also received further support from a colleague at work who held a master's degree in philosophy and theology. He gave me helpful tips and offered to read parts of my work. It can be said that working on a paper of this scope is more a matter of "learning by doing," and that it is therefore very useful to have experienced people to turn to.

Student statements on research-based learning

Time Management and Goal Setting

Discipline: International Business
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Time Management and Goal Setting: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

Nico (26) has a master´s degree in international business and is now working in the free economy. His strategy for his master´s thesis was based on setting sub-goals and specific time frames for the research work.

Finding motivation

Nicos Challenge: While writing my bachelor´s and master´s thesis, I realised that it´s all too easy to give in to impulses and lose sight of our goal. No matter what phase of research you´re in, you are confronted with a huge amount of information and influences. This can relate to the research question, the source material, your work-life balance, your private life and so on. You could spend days reading every source and not putting anything down on paper or being distracted by your private life or work. In addition, I personally found it difficult to stop researching and writing at the end of my day because I didn´t have any clear daily goals at the beginning. I consider setting strict hourly targets for daily university work an invitation to procrastinate, making them unsuitable for me.

Nicos Strategy: I realised that I can´t get very far with the objective "My master´s thesis has to be finished in 6 months". I have to set myself milestones to be able to assess my progress. This starts with the time it takes to find the research topic and the sources. Here, I set myself fixed periods of time and hours for the research and was thus able to close the laptop with a clear conscience at the end of the day. For me personally, it was important to start writing from a certain day on and not to do any more research because I was avoiding writing. From that point on, I tried to set myself measurable writing goals for each day (e.g. 2 pages ready for submission with sources). This way, you can keep track of your progress, achieve small, realistic goals and also finish work with a clear conscience.

Student statements on research-based learning

Re-entry after a holiday phase

Discipline: Protestant Theology
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Re-entry after a holiday phase: Student Statements.
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Lea (27) studied Protestant theology and describes how to get back into the research process after a holiday or a period of time out.

Finding motivation

Leas Challenge: Back from holiday and back to everyday life. Re-entering a doctoral project after a longer break brings a number of challenges. First of all, you have to oversome the task of reading up and thinking about your own doctoral topic again. Where did I leave off, how do I pick up where I left off? I asked myself these questions after returning from a three-week summer holiday. Related to this the question of how I can find my way back into my daily routine. I realised that it is difficult to rebuild a consistent and continuous writing routine and not get sidetracked. The first few days were chaotic and I found myself multitasking a lot. I also kept to-do lists before my holiday and these quickly filled up with tasks and new ideas. Keeping an overview and getting back into a productive workflow was not that easy for me at first.

Leas Strategy: After taking my inner desire for more structure and system seriously, I dealt with the challenges as follows: In principle, I will prepare my re-entry even more thoroughly after future holiday phrases. I want to write my own briefing for this: my pre-holiday self with an overview of the research project will guide the post-holiday self. I have considered the following questions: What is the current topic (situation analysis)? What are the next three big and three small steps that I will take? For the current phase and the status quo, I have developed a step-by-step concept that helps me to increase the time invested and thus the productivity for the dissertation day by day. This quickly gives me a good feeling, because I also enjoy smal successes and don´t overburden myself. In addition, I consciously perceive that my performance must also be rebuilt after a phase of complete recovery - and that´s a good thing. Because a doctorate is not a sprint, but a marathon, for which there may be periods of tension and relaxation.

Finding Motivation can be as difficult as looking for a needle in a haysack

Discipline: Psychology
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Finding motivation can be as difficult as looking for a needle in a haystack: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

ABSTRACT

Vincenz (25) is studying psychology and is writing his master´s thesis. His tips against procrastination in the research process is to set yourself clear goals, seek dialogue with your supervisor and work together with fellow students in the library.

Finding motivation

Vincenz Challenge: After completing my bachelor´s degree, I was already dreading my upcoming master´s thesis. My bachelor´s thesis seemed like a never-ending task. Getting up early and ending up writing, transcribing and researching until the evening. In the end, I had the feeling that I hardly had any free time left. When I started working on my thesis after a year of my master´s programme, I had an unwanted urge to procrastinate. I didn´t want to have this stressful time again. Last but not least, it was also difficult to find a suitable topic.

Vincenz Strategy: To make progress on my thesis, I found a supervisor early and collaborated with him to choose a suitable topic. Somehow, I wanted to tie in thematically with my bachelor´s thesis. Once I had a topic that was currently relevant, I deliberately set myself working hours for the thesis and also deliberately set breaks for holidays or meetings with friends. My motto was: intensity instead of extensiveness. This allowed me to organise myself better and not sit in front of a huge pile of work every day. My starting point was a regular work life with fixed hours and a clear beginning and end. To avoid procrastinating at home, I often met with fellow students at the university to write together.

Student statements on research-based learning

Research doesn´t always go according to plan - sometimes the only thing that helps is a fresh start

Discipline: Latin American Studies
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Research doesn´t always go according to plan - sometimes the only thing that helps is a fresh start: Student Statements.
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Stephanie wrote her master's thesis on the Haitian diaspora in Mexico City and shows that a research process does not always go according to plan and that sometimes you have to rethink your topic and approach.

Finding the right research question and design

Stephanies Challenge: At the beginning of my research, I had a rough idea of my topic and research question - but this idea turned out to be unfeasible. Initially, I wanted to write about the resistance of migrants. However, during the seminars, I realized that implementing the research question on an empirical level was more difficult that I had expected. After much deliberation, I decided on a new topic. At first, this decision was very difficult for me, and I wasn´t sure how to find a suitable topic.

Stephanies Strategy: Eventually, it was my supervisor who encouraged me to explore other options. As part of the academic research trip for Latin American Studies, I spent a month at the southern border of Mexico in Tapachula at the research center "Colegio de la Frontera Azul". I thought that in order to define my research question, it would be best to consult researchers from the region who work on the topic. I spoke with the scholar Abdel Camargo, who had previosly supervised a student researching the Haitian diaspora in Tapachula, one of the first studies ever conducted on this topic. It was a fortune coincidence that I had the opportunity to exchange ideas with him, and I presented my research question to him. He wasn´t fully convinced, and neither was I, because the question was too abstract and general, and the topic of resistance would have been difficult to research. As result, I completely redefined the project, read more, conducted additional research, and spoke with a student who had written her master´s thesis on this topic. I then developed a new research question focusing on the everyday lives of Haitian migrants in transit to USA, who were staying or living in a public square in Mexico City. The organization of the people, the distribution of roles, and the tensions between them became the central topics of my reserach. The reserach I conducted on site was immensely helpful in this process.

Student statements on research-based learning

Don't get lost in too many ideas

Discipline: Illustration
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Don't get lost in too many ideas: Student Statements.
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Andrea (24) is studying illustration and is currently writing her master's thesis. In her statement she highlights what helped her finding her thesis topic .

Finding the right topic

Andreas Challenge: After two years of studying for my master's degree, I couldn't wait to finally start my thesis and dedicate myself to a larger project, rather than the smaller research projects in the artistic field that I had been working on during my courses. Throughout my master's programme, I gathered a wide range of topics and ideas that I could present artistically and explore scientifically in my thesis. And this is precisely where the problem arose: I had too many ideas and desires for the thesis and wanted to explore very different methods or media. On one hand, I wanted to pursue a book project and research it scientifically, but at the same time, I was also interested in animated films. I was eager to explore feminist topics scientifically, but I was also very drawn to auto-ethnographic research on Scotland. In short, I had far too many ideas and got lost in them, which ultimately led to paralysis and a sense of being overwhelmed.

Andreas Strategy: I overcame this problem by discussing it extensively with peers and my supervisors. In doing so, I particularly benefited from the realization that I don't have endless time or financial resources, and that learning a new illustration method, for example, was out of the question for me. In this context, it also helped to consider how I could interweave and deepen the areas of focus from my bachelor's and master's studies. This enabled me to prioritize my various ideas and determine which ones could realistically be implemented within the given time frame, and which I could perhaps save for later projects. Through this experience, I realized that finding a research question is as much about following your interests as it is about pragmatically considering the areas in which you already have experience and setting realistic goals.

Student statements on research-based learning

Driven by Curiosity: Choosing Research Topics Based on Interests

Discipline: Pedagogy
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Driven by Curiosity Choosing Research Topics Based on Interests: Student Statements.
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Frida (24) wrote her bachelor's thesis on digital learning management systems and shows the importance of finding an interesting research topic.

Finding the research question

Fridas Challenge: When I was trying to decide on a topic for my bachelor thesis in pedagogy, I struggled a lot with narrowing down the subject. I had an interest for motivational psychology, and initially wanted to explore academic self-efficacy and its relation to motivation. This topic in itself is of course far too general, but I really struggled to figure out exactly how I would approach it and make it “researchable”. Looking back, I realize I wasn’t actually passionate about the topic. I had decided to write about motivational psychology because I did well in an exam on the topic in my first year of studying, and I assumed it was a safe choice for my bachelor’s thesis. The problem was, I hadn’t really considered all the other exciting topics the field of pedagogy has to offer.

Fridas Strategy: Eventually, it was my supervisor who encouraged me to explore other options. Being well-versed in media pedagogy, he suggested going in a completely different direction and doing an analysis of our university’s digital learning management system (LMS). This turned out to be a real eye-opener for me. Not only did I get a B on my thesis, but exploring this topic really peaked my interest in digitalization. It’s actually one of the reasons why I chose to pursue a master’s degree in science and technology studies.

Student statements on research-based learning

Navigating different work methods

Discipline: Photography
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Navigating different work methods: Student Statements.
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ABSTRACT

Jana (26) studied photography and will soon begin a master´s degree in photography or film. Her strategy for dealing with the challenges of the writing process was to seek support from friends as well as from her tutor.

Planning a research project

Janas Challenge: I studied photography and my final project was about the role of female clowns in Germany. It consisted of a practical part, in which I made a documentary film about female clowns and photographed them. The theoretical part, in which I explored the role and significance of clowns. Scientific writing was particularly difficult for me, as we rarely have written assignments in the photography programme, but rather exams that consist of practical work such as photographs or films. That's why I had a vague idea of what a scientific paper should look like and how it should be structured. It was hard for me to get started and formulate my ideas scientifically. Also, I had researched so many sources that I wanted to include, but it was difficult to keep the thread.

Janas Strategy: After I had written down my first thoughts for the introduction, I discussed them with a friend who studied politics and philosophy and already has more experience with writing scientific papers and texts. Together we adjusted my introduction. I then presented my introduction to my supervisor and she gave me a few more tips which were even more relevant to my subject. This exchange provided me with a good framework and orientation that helped me to write my project scientifically. Above all, it was exciting for me to see how some aspects (such as formulating research questions) are relevant for writing a scientific text across disciplines. I also realized that there are significant differences between disciplines in other areas—for example, theoretical foundations play a smaller role in my field of study than in humanities research.

Student statements on research-based learning

The Importance of defining Topics and Terms

Discipline: Education and Business Administration
Citation: Island of Research (2024). The Importance of defining Topics and Terms: Student Statements.
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Eylem (37) has a degree in education and business administration and is currently working on her dissertation about collaborations between universities and industry. In her statement, she describes how important it was to define terms and research the literature.

Topic delimitation and definition work

Eylems Challenge: When I started my dissertation, I had big plans and wanted to write a very comprehensive paper about the collaboaration between academia and industry. However, I quickly realised that my time resources and the data necessary for my research would not be enough to cover the topic so comprehensively. Another challenge was that, although I had certain terms at the beginning and had also defined them for myself to a certain extent. However, these were not yet fully developed, so the use of my terms was somewhat vague. The imprecise definitions also led to one of my first papers being heavily criticised by the reviewers.

Eylems Strategy: After realising that my topic was far too broad, I decided to delve back into the state of research and consider how I could narrow down my topic based on both my interests and the data available to me. This is how I finally came to analyse the collaboration between the university and industry on the basis of teaching activities. It may sound like a very simple and logical solution, but at the time I found it very difficult to let go of other topics and I had to negotiate with myself a few times. But once I had made a decision and narrowed down my topic, I felt much better. With regard to the definitions, I realised how important it is, especially at the beginning of the dissertation, to have all terms clearly and unambiguously defined. This made me realise once again that the development of the theoretical foundations and the definitions of terms are fundamental to the succes of a dissertation. When conducting the empirical studies, it also became clear how valuable it is to have all terms theorectically founded and clearly defined. This allows me to refer back to these definitions, bring my interview partners on the same page, and ensure that we are all speaking from a common understanding.

Student statements on research-based learning

The fear of not being able to write well enough!

Discipline: Medical Ethics
Citation: Island of Research (2024). The Fear of not being able to write well enough!: Student Statements.
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Stefanie (42) studied medical ethics, among other subjects, and is currently writing the first articels for her cumulative dissertation. In her statement, she outlines strategies for researchers to overcome writer´s anxiety and writers´s block.

Conducting research

Stefanies Challenge: What do I have to say? I didn´t eben take a writing course at university, and my final papers were written with tears, cramped fingers and often hours of staring at a blank sheet of paper. The result is never perfect! Texts are not just texts to me. Although I learned how to write third-party funding applications and accreditation documents during my academic career, the mere thought of writing articles gives me a stomach ache. They (no, I) have to be good enough for someone to want to publish them. My deep self-doubt about my writing skills has meant that since the beginning of the year, I have been working on three articles at the same time and have not really been able to finish any of them, let alone keep within the character limits. Over the last months, I have had some lightbulb moments that are helping me to move forward. I would like to share these with you.

Stefanies Strategy: It took me a long time to address the problem, and I realised that it wasn´t that I couldn´t formulate the problem. It was the environment that made me afraid to even bring up the subject. At first, I searched in my little room for training courses, books, seminars and/or workshops that addressed the topic of scientific writing. I did find what I was looking for here, but financial resources are limited. There are a few private providers, known as `writing coaches,' who specialise in this area. They taught me to first present my topic orally to friends and then list everything I want to write in the article in a structured format using keywords. Through freely accessible writing seminars at universities, I learned methods for creating an outline and received exercises to help me when I get stuck and can't move forward. These visits led me to realise that writing articles is not a gift. It is purely a matter of practice. No longer so tense and preoccupied, I managed to actively approach other doctoral students and ask to exchange ideas. This exchange was the turning point for me, because I was no longer alone with my fear of not having a critical friend. I also found it helpful to know that submitting an article or abstract is just the start of the writing process and that it's not over once you've sent it off. With the learning mindset `better done than perfect' (don't misinterpret `perfect' here!), I managed to finish an abstract for a conference. And when things get tough again, I invite my demons over for tea (an exercise from Joli Jensen's book, 2017, p. 43).

Student statements on research-based learning

Focus on the essentials...

Discipline: Engineering sciences
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Focus on the essentials...: Student Statements.
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Eva (29) is a PhD student in the field of renewable energies. She has been doing science communication since June 2022. She advises researchers to focus on the essentials and not to be distracted by too many trivialities in the research process.

Conducting research

Evas Challenge: I am pursuing a doctorate in the field of renewable energies, and in June 2022, I had the idea of sharing my research on social media. Before long, I started covering general topics related to the energy transition alongside my own research. My goal is to answer questions from the community in a scientific yet easily understandable way. At first, there were only a few questions, and I was able to respond to each comment individually. However, as time went on, the number of comments grew, and some questions extended far beyond my area of expertise. Despite this, I tried to familiarize myself with each topic, answer every question, and also create visually appealing videos. But balancing all of this alongside my doctoral thesis eventually became overwhelming.

Evas Strategy: Now, I focus more on communicating my own research and pass on other topics and questions to fellow researchers. This way, the community's questions can still be answered, while I primarily provide the platform for scientific communication. I'm grateful to have gained experience in this field. Engaging in science communication has made it much easier for me to explain my own research to others.

Student statements on research-based learning

In search of the lost study participants

Discipline: Economic Sciences
Citation: Island of Research (2024). In search of the lost study participants: Student Statements.
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ABSTRACT

Frederic (28) is currently writing his bachelor´s thesis about co-working spaces and describes how he acquired participants for his study.

Conducting research

Frederics Challenge: Before my bachelor's thesis, my studies primarily consisted of exams, and I had rarely written a term paper, let alone conducted a research project. Writing my bachelor's thesis was therefore uncharted territory, and for the first time in my studies, I engaged in empirical research. I chose to conduct a qualitative interview study, focusing on various stakeholders of coworking spaces. Interestingly, the greatest challenge was not, as I initially expected, the creation of guiding questions or the evaluation of the results. There was plenty of literature and other bachelor's or master's theses that I could use as references for this. Instead, the real difficulty was in recruiting participants. Many potential study participants either did not respond to my requests, agreed to participate but later cancelled, or postponed appointments at the last minute. As a result, I was unable to adhere to my original schedule and had to invest significantly more time in finding new participants, which was a frustrating experience.

Frederics Strategy: To successfully recruit enough participants for my research, I employed several strategies. Initially, I naively assumed that everyone I approached would feel honored to participate and would readily agree. However, I quickly realized that not many people were particularly interested in the results of my bachelor's thesis. As a result, I contacted significantly more individuals than I actually needed for the interviews. To encourage a stronger sense of social commitment among the participants and minimize last-minute cancellations, I focused on recruiting individuals who were connected to friends, relatives, or university staff. At the same time, I had to be cautious to avoid introducing any bias into the selection process. Beyond this, my approach was a combination of friendliness and persistence. I always responded politely to cancellations or rescheduling requests while emphasizing how important the interviews were for my work.
In the end, I managed to complete all the interviews. If I were to undertake a similar project again, I would allocate more time for both participant recruitment and the execution of the interviews. This would have saved me a considerable amount of stress in the long run.

Student statements on research-based learning

The pitfalls of labortory work

Discipline: Biotechnology
Citation: Island of Research (2024). The pitfalls of labortary work: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

ABSTRACT

Siv (31) did research in a labortory for her bachelor´s degree in microbiology and biotechnology. She describes how important both planning and improvisation were for the success of her research project.

Conducting research

Sivs Challenge: After completing my bachelor´s and master´s degrees in speech therapy, I wanted to study something entirely different and decided on biotechnology. From the outset, I was enthusiastic about the laboratory work, which, of course, was very different from my previous research experiences. During my bachelor's thesis, I was excited to conduct independent research in the lab for the first time. However, my initial enthusiasm quickly faded. I soon realized how much organizational effort was involved. Above all, the very limited time frame for the laboratory work played a major role. This meant that careful planning was essential, and there was little flexibility to adapt. In my particular case, I came down with a severe flu halfway through my lab work and was unable to complete the second part of my research.

Sivs Strategy: My strategy was essentially to plan the research project in very small steps, always allowing for extra time in each phase. I didn't always need this extra time, but it ensured I wouldn't enter the lab phase unprepared. This approach worked very well until I caught a cold. After that, I had to be flexible despite all my planning. In order to continue my laboratory experiment, I asked a female fellow student I knew to carry out my last series of experiments. She took over my investigations, and in return, I provided her with a detailed schedule. Despite this precaution, I couldn't be 100% sure that my friend hadn't worked differently than I had. After consulting with my supervisor, he advised me to disclose this in the limitations section of my bachelor's thesis. In short, my strategy was to plan thoroughly while also remaining flexible.

The lack of Research as a Stumbling Block: How Feedback opens up new Perspectives

Discipline: Pedagogy
Citation: Island of Research (2024). The lack Research as a Stumbling Block: How Feedback opens up new Perspectives: Student Statements.
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Inga (26) is studying to be a foreign language teacher and wrote her bachelor's thesis on multilingualism in Hamburg's primary schools. For her bachelor's thesis, she turned to the Hamburg Center for University Teaching and Learning.

Conducting research

Ingas Challenge: A major obstacle for me was the lack of previous studies on similar research questions. This gap made my work significantly more challenging, as I had no existing examples or references to draw upon to place my own research in a broader context. As a result, I lacked clear guidance on how to meaningfully classify my findings and integrate them into existing academic discussions. It was particularly difficult for me to discuss my observations and results since I could not simply rely on theoretical or empirical models that had already been used in similar studies. I often felt that my work lacked a solid foundation or comparative values in many areas. This made the discussion of my findings considerably more demanding and required creative approaches to substantiate the relevance and significance of my research results.

Ingas Strategy: In my role as a student assistant at the HUL – Hamburg Center for University Teaching and Learning, I asked academic staff and colleagues to proofread my work. This feedback was extremely valuable to me, as I received constructive input from professionals who are deeply familiar with academic research and its requirements. Through these proofreading sessions, I gained new perspectives and realized that my work addressed aspects I had not initially considered. Meanwhile, other elements that I had deemed less relevant were regarded as essential by the reviewers and required closer examination. These valuable insights helped me refine my argumentation and structure, allowing me to develop a more in-depth analysis. Additionally, the Hamburg Center for University Teaching and Learning offers writing programmes, coaching sessions, and workshops. These programmes are particularly beneficial for students who want to refresh their academic writing skills before submitting term papers or theses.

Student statements on research-based learning

Getting into the writing...Being actively involved in research and organizing the writing process.

Discipline: Education
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Getting into the writing...Being actively involved in research and organizing the writing process: Student Statements.
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Anna (name changed) (26) wrote her bachelor's thesis on self-efficacy in the field of education and is now in her second semester of her master's programme.

Conducting research

Annas Challenge: I had already written several term papers during my bachelor's degree, so I didn't give much thought to my bachelor's thesis at first. However, I ran into some difficulties while conducting the research and realized that this independent research work differs in several ways from a normal term paper. For one, it was the first time I had conducted empirical research and carried out interviews as part of my work. This new task made me feel a bit insecure at first, but thanks to a preparatory seminar on qualitative research and the support of my supervisor, the planning, conducting, and evaluating of the interviews went better than expected. I had more trouble linking the individual research steps. During the writing process, I found it difficult to create smooth transitions between theory and practice, and to write a coherent paper, both in terms of content and style.

Annas Strategy: In dealing with these problems, I initially sought the support of my supervisor and frequently took advantage of his advice. At first, I felt a bit foolish and also felt like I might be getting on his nerves. However, since the exchange helped me a great deal, clarified many of my questions, and alleviated my insecurities, I overcame my initial reluctance. The discussions enabled me to link the theoretical and empirical considerations more effectively and to develop a solid research framework. For the stylistic presentation of the individual chapters in my bachelor thesis, I asked a few friends for support, knowing they had already gained experience in academic work and could express themselves well. Three friends reviewed my work and gave me both content-related and stylistic feedback, offering alternative suggestions on how to revise a chapter or improve a transition. These exchanges and their feedback led me to revise my work several times, and in the end, I was quite pleased with the result. My advice to all researchers therefore is to share ideas and seek support from various sources.

Student statements on research-based learning

Conducting interviews despite social anxiety and language barrier?

Discipline: Latin American Studies
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Conducting interviews despite social anxiety and language barrier?: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

ABSTRACT

Kevin is writing his master's thesis on political activity in migrant sports clubs and has travelled to Chile to conduct interviews with various clubs and draw a comparison between Santiago de Chile and Hamburg.

Conducting research

Kevins Challenge: Politics is generally a topic that people tend to avoid, and if I had addressed my main topic directly, many clubs likely would not have agreed to speak with me.
Some clubs didn't respond to my emails at all, or they replied only sporadically and irregularly. One option could have been to simply attend the games in person and attempt a cold approach there. However, this would have pushed me beyond my personal comfort zone. You can't just show up at a game and approach people with, 'Hello, I'm a student – I'd like to speak with the team or schedule interviews,' as this often comes across as untrustworthy. While initiating contact in person may work for some people, it wasn't a feasible option for me.
The interviews I conducted in Chile were further limited by the language barrier. Although I speak Spanish, my proficiency is not at a level sufficient for in-depth conversations. Establishing contact with sports clubs in general was already challenging, and as someone who is not particularly extroverted, I initially relied on email. Even when I managed to meet representatives in person, it was still difficult to explain in Spanish exactly what I needed from them and how they could contribute to my research.

Kevins Strategy: Due to mild social anxiety and my focus on planning the research project, it was not an option for me to approach associations in person to ask my questions. Instead, I arranged the interview appointments via email. To start, I asked general questions about the association itself and framed my research questions in a subtle way to avoid surprising people with political topics. When you first make an appointment via email, the interviewees usually have an idea of what to expect. Of course, you remain dependent on their willingness and commitment, but there is often no alternative. In Hamburg, however, I received less feedback via email. As a result, I am now considering making phone calls or even attending games directly, especially as I am under time pressure.
Linguistically, the interviews varied greatly. Migrants from Italy living in Chile spoke clearer Spanish without specific dialects, making them easier to understand. In contrast, the Ecuadorian club members were much harder to understand due to linguistic differences. These discrepancies can be addressed further in the discussion section of the research. As German is my native language, the questions and answers in German interviews tended to be more precise compared to the Spanish ones. However, modern AI tools can be relied upon for linguistic support. Although I had initially anticipated significant challenges, transcribing the Spanish interviews went surprisingly well. Of course, I carefully reviewed the transcriptions at the end to ensure their accuracy.

Student statements on research-based learning

Leave yourself room for flexibility when choosing a topic

Discipline: Protestant Theology and Education
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Leave yourself room for flexibility when choosing a topic: Student Statements.
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Daliah (26) is studying history, protestant theology and education in the Master of Education programme and will soon begin her master's thesis.

Conducting research

Daliahs Challenge: During my master's programme, I worked intensively on the topics of identity, migration, and religion as part of a project, conducting interviews within various religious communities from different faiths. Due to my strong interest in these subjects, it quickly became clear that my master's thesis would also focus on this direction, and I decided to use narrative interviews as the empirical foundation for my research. One of the main challenges of working with narrative interviews is that the specific aspects to be analyzed and the final research question often only emerge after the interviews have been conducted. While it is possible to formulate a guiding question in advance, its relevance to the actual content of the interviews often only becomes apparent during the analysis phase. Nevertheless, deviations from the initial plan can also be meaningfully addressed in the research process. For this reason, I recommend choosing a broader range of topics when employing the empirical method of narrative interviews. This allows greater flexibility in designing the content analysis and writing, enabling the work to adapt to the insights gained during the research process.

Daliahs Strategy: I find it particularly helpful to explore several topics that interest you when preparing for your thesis. Setting different priorities, for instance during the interview process, can provide you with some flexibility in conceptualizing your scientific work. I also found it beneficial to read extensively in advance to identify existing research topics and uncover areas that may not have been thoroughly explored. This approach allows you to determine how you could build on previous research in terms of content. It is important to ensure that the main topics genuinely interest you and that you are willing to fully engage with them. Empirical research can be very demanding and requires a solid level of intrinsic motivation. Additionally, you should allocate sufficient time for the initial planning, implementation, transcription of interviews, as well as the final content analysis and writing. This will enable you to comprehensively address the scope of your chosen topic.

Student statements on research-based learning

Entering new scientific ground: the challenges of conducting your first research project

Discipline: Pedagogy
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Entering new scientific ground: the challenges of conducting your first research project: Student Statements.
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Yurena (26) is studying to become a teacher, specialising in Spanish and French and wrote her bachelor´s thesis on "Multilingualism at Hamburg primary schools". For inspiration, she read other bachelor´s and master´s thesis.

Conducting research

Yurenas Challenge: In my bachelor´s thesis, I examined the extent to which teachers implement the didactics of multilingualism through pluralistic approaches and how the application of these approaches differs between bilingual and monolingual classes. This research project marked a double first for me: not only was it my first scientific study, but dealing with the methodological approach was a particularly demanding challenge. Since my study was based on observations in the school context as a method, I decided to use the coding observation method. This method aims to systematically record specific events or bevaviours and, if necessary, to log their duration. However, I had no prior knowledge and there were no existing studies. Operationalization, i.e. making the observed behaviours measurable, proved to be particularly challenging. The lack of previous studies on similar issues made ist considerably more difficult for me to define and analytically structure suitable behavioural indicators.

Yurenas Strategy: In order to get an overview of similar research projects in the context of teacher training that use observation methods, I contacted graduates of the bachelor´s programme through existing connections and asked them about their bachelor´s theses. It was helpful to see their approach and to understand the individual methodological steps in order to develop a better understanding of the bachelor´s thesis in teaching profession. Such work can also be viewed on platforms such as "GRIN" for a payment. I have also had very positiv experiences asking students about their bachelor theses, as these can be reused in this way. I got the impression that everyone was willing to share them with me.

Student statements on research-based learning

Conducting research for the first time: making mistakes, restructuring your plan and asking for help is perfectly normal

Discipline: General linguistics
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Conducting research for the first time: making mistakes, restructuring your plan and asking for help is perfectly normal: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

ABSTRACT

Anahita (23) studied General Linguistics and wrote her bachelor's thesis on "Code-switching" via WhatsApp communication. She shows that mistakes and moments of failure are quite normal in research and beneficial for the process.

Conducting research

Anahitas Challenge: During my bachelor's degree, I wrote numerous term papers—no surprise, given my two humanities subjects: I majored in General Linguistics and minored in Sign Languages. However, all of these were literature-based papers, which meant: coming up with a research question, reading about it, reading some more, and then synthesizing something new from the given texts. By the time I approached my bachelor's thesis, I was already highly experienced in this process. While that was certainly practical, it could also be quite monotonous.
That's why I wanted to take a different approach for my bachelor's thesis and conduct my own research. I quickly found my topic: “Code-switching between German and Persian in WhatsApp communication.”* I also knew about the existence of MoCoDa2, a WhatsApp chat database where donated chats are available for research purposes. Initially, I planned to draw my data from MoCoDa2, but I soon realized that the corpus was still quite small and contained hardly any Persian-language examples—presenting me with an initial challenge in my research.

Anahitas Strategy: I then had to adjust my approach and decided to ask my German-Persian social circle for anonymized chat excerpts. Unfortunately, the response was limited, but I managed to collect enough data to conduct a qualitative study and a very small quantitative analysis. Next, I had to choose a programme for data analysis and experiment with different methods to determine the most effective approach. Since chat research is still a relatively young field with little existing literature, this process involved moments of frustration and several adjustments to my research plan. However, in the end, I was able to achieve a satisfactory result from my analysis.

*Code-switching refers to the process of switching between languages or language variations within a context or conversation.

Lack of commitment among the members of the research group and the groups interviewed

Discipline: Spatial Planning
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Lack of commitment among the members of the research group and the groups interviewed: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

ABSTRACT

Leah (24) has examined the development prospects of the district centre of Hagen-Haspe in a research project and shows how to deal with group conflicts in the research process.

Conducting research and collecting data

Leahs Challenge: As part of a project study, I worked with a group of 13 students to examine the development prospects of the district centre of Hagen-Haspe. We had to overcome two main challenges. The first challenge arose from the size of the group, since some within the group withdrew and contributed significantly more to the success of the project. The second challenge was the lack of participation of the groups of people to be surveyed. For example, many of the people contacted did not respond to our questionaire or refused to participate in the study from the outset.

Leahs Strategy: We tried to solve the first challenge by repeatedly addressing the unequal distribution of work in the team and trying to divide up the various tasks. This approach led to a few people getting more involved. However, some members of our research group were not interested in improving their behaviour. The resulting tension in the project could not be completely eliminated, but it helped to at least address the problem in team meetings and to vent one´s anger from time to time. Nevertheless, in the end, we had to accept that there were few team members in our project who didn´t truly contribute to the research. We tackled the other challenge by creating an Instagram account and designing a story that directed people to our online survey. This was shared via various channels (e.g. Fachschaft Raumplanung, TU Dortmund). We also approached local authorities and acqauintances in the neighbourhood and asked them to hand it over to friends and family. We were able to collect 150 completed questionnaires and derive exciting research results and recommendations for action.

Student statements on research-based learning

Jumping in at the deep end – dealing with a lack of experience in data analysis

Discipline: Sign language interpreting
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Driven by Curiosity: Jumping in at the deep end - dealing with a lack of experience in data analysis: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

ABSTRACT

Hilke (31) is currently writing her bachelor´s thesis, in which she examines what support is available for deaf women in women's shelters and what potential there is for improvement. She finds data analysis challenging, but she overcomes this with the help of literature research, discussions with her supervisor and reading other research papers.

Evaluate data

Hilkes Challenge: My studies were primarily practice-oriented, although my personal focus was always on learning German Sign Language, understanding deaf culture, and exploring translation processes. Consequently, scientific research or in-depth investigation into specific aspects of sign language was less relevant to me, and I gained little experience in these areas during my studies.
After a lengthy decision-making process, I chose to conduct interviews with women's shelters to examine how they support deaf women and identify areas for improvement. I really enjoyed the topic, which made it easy for me to quickly familiarize myself with the material, and I found the interviews with the women's shelters to be very engaging. However, when it came to analyzing the interviews, I encountered difficulties. What exactly was this category system that was frequently mentioned in the specialist literature, and how was I supposed to apply it?

Hilkes Strategy: After initially procrastinating on the topic of data analysis, I eventually had to face the bitter reality that it wasn't going to disappear on its own—I had to tackle it. First, I revisited Mayring's method of data analysis and tried to understand, through the literature, what this specific approach should look like in practice. While the theoretical explanations made sense to me, applying this knowledge was an entirely different challenge. Although I had a general idea of how to proceed, I still wasn't entirely sure how the evaluation in my thesis should look in detail. I shared my concerns with friends and discovered that one of them had used the same method to evaluate interviews for her master's thesis. She kindly shared her thesis with me and explained step by step how she had approached the process. With the help of this concrete example, I was finally able to understand how to systematically evaluate my interviews. Afterward, I sought further reassurance from my supervisor, which gave me the confidence to complete my work with a very positive feeling.

Student statements on research-based learning

Crisis in data analysis

Discipline: Information Science
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Crisis in data analysis: Student Statements.
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Verena (22) is studying for a bachelor´s degree in information science and has conducted research in a research project on artificial intelligence in higher education. She suggests specific tips on how researchers can deal with problems in data analysis.

Evaluate data

Verenas Challenge: In the sixth semester of my studies, I took part in a research project in which we conducted a survey on the use of AI tools by our fellow students. Our main goal was to analyse students´ behaviour in relation to AI tools. The survey was carried out and the data evaluated in small groups. The biggest challenge in this project was that we had to rely on a programme language of this tool and the correct processing of the data proved to be challenging. This led to technical difficulties, which were particularly noticeable when retrieving formulas and correctly processing the data.

Verenas Strategy: The technical side of data evaluation thus presented the biggest hurdle for us. In particular, the programming language and the precise input of data required additional effort. To overcome these obstacles, I studied the programme´s scripts intensively and searched the internet for solutions to overcome any problems that arose. The exchange and collaboration within the group also helped us to distribute specific tasks and work together efficiently to solve various software problems.

Student statements on research-based learning

Collection and data analysis using a new technique unless experience in order to publish a scientific paper

Discipline: Pedagogy
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Collection and data analysis using a new technique unless experience in order to publish a scientific papes: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

Amelia (27) (Name has changed) has studied Pedagogy and Research in Education and is currently a PhD student. Her research topics are connected to teaching, learning and assessment in Higher Education, Academic Development in connection with digital competences and Technology Enhanced Assessment and Feedback practices. In her research projects, she finds that interacting with colleagues, other scientists, and her supervisors helps her overcome challenges.

Collection and data analysis

Amelias Challenge: The first time that I had to introduce a new analysis method in my first year PhD program, it was really hard for me. I was so worried about the collection of the data and related analysis process of this unknown procedures and I felt a little bit lost.

Amelias Strategy: First of all, I decided to deeply understand the theoretical part of the methods through an individual study moment. Then, I asked my supervisor for some help and suggestions in order to solve the situation and to develop the analysis. My supervisor suggested me to collaborate with a peer, so a colleague from another University with similar competences: it was crucial for me in order to scaffold collaborative moments. We helped each other, we shared competences, ideas and information and we created our coding system to continue the research. After that, for a specific part of analysis, we decide to find a professional advisor, so we engaged an expert in the field, in order to have feedback and practical/technical suggestion. After a first step of analysis, we checked the work with our supervisor: after the check we wrote down the paper and than we activated another feedback and check process. In this way, we created a virtuous network also for future work. So if you have a methodological problem, first you can enrich your knowledge, than ask to professionals and expert, share and collaborate with peers and create a network.

Student statements on research-based learning

Obtaining a Representative Sample for Empirical Research

Discipline: Sustainable Mobility Management
Citation: Island of Research (2024). Obtaining a Representative Sample for Empirical Research: Student Statements.
Licence: CC BY SA

ABSTRACT

Venura (32) is pursuing a Master's degree in Sustainable Mobility Management and is currently working on an empirical study as part of his studies. In his statement, he shows how to overcome the challenges of data collection.

Conduct research and collect data

Venuras Challenge: In the course of my empirical research, I encountered a significant challenge in collecting primary data to form a representative sample. The primary data collection method involved conducting an online survey, without any monetary or other incentives to entice participants. Consequently, I initially relied on distributing the survey among my acquaintances, which obviously resulted in a sample heavily skewed towards students. This disproportionate representation raised concerns about the sample's accuracy in reflecting the broader population.

Venuras Strategy: To address this issue, I devised a strategy aimed at diversifying the respondent pool. Recognizing the limitations of my initial approach, I turned to LinkedIn as a platform to engage individuals who were not students. This approach yielded a substantial number of responses from a more diverse demographic. Furthermore, I deliberately gathered as many responses as possible and subsequently applied a systematic filtering process. This process aimed to retain responses that maintained the sample's representativeness while eliminating any outliers. This approach was chosen because it struck a balance between collecting a robust dataset and ensuring that the sample accurately mirrored the population under investigation.

Student statements on research-based learning

To improve research reports with the help of AI

Discipline: Cultural Studies
Citation: Island of Research (2024). To improve research reports with the help of AI: Student Statements.
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In his statement, Leo (27) shows how he uses AI tools for spellchecking and proofreading

Present research results

Leos Challenge: I participated in several research projects during my bachelor's and master's studies, gaining valuable experience in this area over the years. In general, I really enjoy working on research projects, as I believe this is one of the best ways to acquire long-term knowledge. Therefore, my challenge in the research process is not so much the research itself, but rather the presentation and summarization of the results. Due to my dyslexia, I often find it difficult to express my findings clearly in writing or to create error-free PowerPoint presentations, as I tend to overlook many mistakes. However, since in most cases it is primarily the final product (i.e., the term paper or presentation) that is evaluated, I have occasionally received deductions for spelling and style errors, which is, of course, quite frustrating

Leos Strategy: My basic strategy is to have my work or presentations reviewed by as many people as possible, such as fellow students, friends, and acquaintances. They specifically look for spelling mistakes or awkward phrasing. While this strategy works very well, it has the disadvantage that I become highly dependent on others' time management. The work must always be finished at least two weeks before the deadline, which can sometimes be stressful. With AI tools like DeepL Write, I now have the option of reviewing my texts myself. On the one hand, I can spot spelling or punctuation errors, and on the other, I receive suggestions for alternative phrasings. This is great because my friends and acquaintances, whom I still rely on for proofreading, now have less to do with formal aspects, such as searching for spelling mistakes, and can focus more on the content.