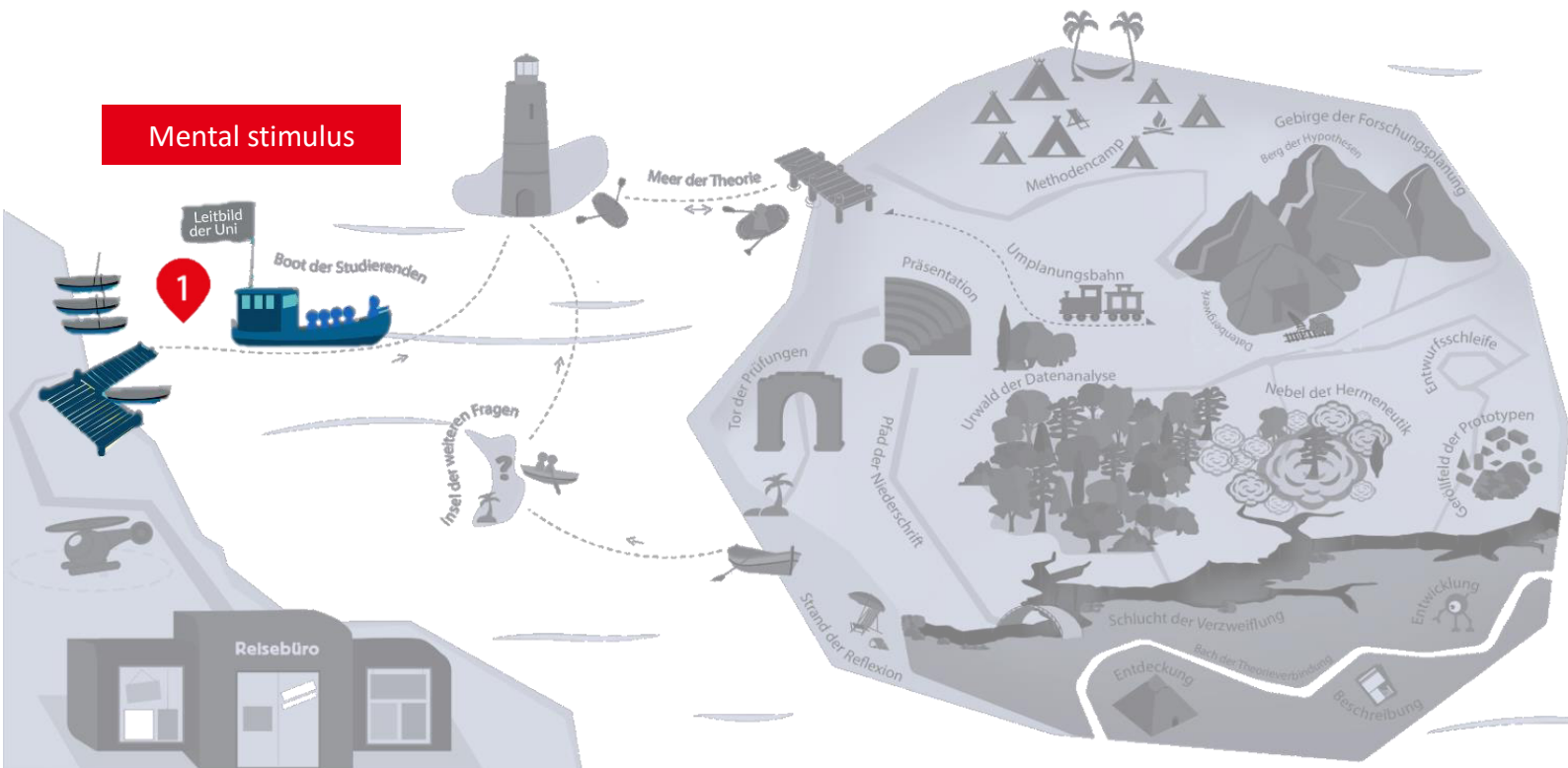




Cat tree
Vignette #4



KEYWORDS

FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS, STRUCTURE
AND AUTONOMY, NEW ROLE AS A
TEACHER



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#4: Cat tree



The following text sequence or vignette describes a situation in the context of a teaching that aims at research-based learning. The situation described challenges you as a teacher and may require you to act directly. The aim of the vignette is to allow you to think about what you are doing in such a situation or how you could prevent it. But you may also consider the situation to be problem-free and more conducive to learning. Either way you can preventively familiarize yourself with possible challenges and reflect upon your own evaluations and impulses for action.

The situations described are taken from interview data with coordinators of research-based learning projects and have been sharpened for the purpose mentioned above. The most common challenges in teaching courses to promote research-based learning have been selected and converted into vignettes.



Cat tree

The third week in your project group. You knew you had to prepare for a challenge when you decided to run a research-based learning project with first semesters – after all, it's almost a full-time project. At the moment, you see the students every day and get to know everything. In particular, their frustration and excessive demand, for which the participants sometimes blame you. You notice a "school mentality" among the students: there is a lot of demand for the right solutions, setbacks are seen as mean, deliberate traps and you are tied to the role of the leader, while you are actually trying to give the students a lot of freedom for their own experiences and to act more as a coach.

Keywords: First-year students, structure and autonomy, new role as teacher





Reflective questions

The situation described above is a typical challenge that you could face if you implement research-based learning in your teaching. The following questions of reflection serve as impulses to look at such or similar situations from different perspectives and then to come to different decisions:

Have you addressed the challenges of the project together with the students from the very beginning?

How much independence do you think your first semesters are capable of?

How is failure used productively for the learning processes of the students/all students in the project?

Have you discussed your own role with the students?

How would you assess/locate your previous behaviour: in the role of a manager or that of a coach?

How important is it to you that students already overcome the idea of their role as pupils (in the first semester) and do you see it as a longer-term development process?

How much does it burden you if the students are negative towards you?



Attitudes and actions

In the following, attitudes as well as preventive and intervening actions in the situation described are presented. First of all, attitudes are described which have an impact on whether and how to react. Then actions are presented. They are practical examples of how teachers at universities deal with the situation in a preventive or intervening manner. In addition, indirect measures are listed which involve a more subtle approach yet may have the same impact.

Attitudes

Attitudes do not include concrete measures but describe the inner attitude of teachers (or coordinators) towards different situations. Depending on the attitude, situations can be interpreted as "problematic" and "challenging", but also as "desirable" and "normal".

Endure differences in role understanding

There are always students who expect service from the teachers. Instead of turning it into too much conflict, the frustration that comes with it on both sides could be "simply" endured.

An appropriate action could be: You can still try to point out via meta-communication the nature of the cooperation, the different roles of all participants and the university learning

environment (which is not school). Nevertheless, you stick to the old course. You do not give in and do not take a leadership role.

Be guided by the principle of minimal help

The principle is that help is only provided when it is requested and then only to the extent needed by the students. This also means that students themselves are responsible for their own organisation. For example, they can decide for themselves whether to write protocols in which they record decisions or not. Only in cases where group work is clearly getting out of hand intervention will take place.

An appropriate action could be: You communicate to the students at the beginning of the project that you will adhere to this principle and what this means for the students: namely, that they will have to come to you in case of problems and that you will not give them solutions, but only give them (thinking) impulses to get a step further.

Enable experiences of failure that are not personal defeats, but can be operationalised

Mistakes are part of it. From mistakes, students should learn something new and develop further. It is important that failure is not seen as the end result. Instead, it specifically reflects what went wrong and how the students can avoid it the next time.

An appropriate action could be: You address at the beginning that research cannot and must not always go the "straight way". If something does not go as planned and you are accused of it by the students, use metacommunication to discuss what the students have learned through this "wrong track". It is relevant that this is not pre-stated by you as a teacher, but that the students recognize it for themselves as much as possible. However, this requires competent guidance from you as a teacher, for example through constructive questions.

Promote passion

Research-based learning usually aims not only at acquiring skills and new experiences of students, but also at having a framework that enables them to discover and follow their own interests.

An appropriate action could be: You point out their freedom to the students, in conversations you focus on the interests expressed and show possibilities to pursue them.

Let students work together who are not keen on each other

In group works, students are often allowed to choose their project partners. Especially in the first semester there is a lack of references and experience in which group constellation one works best. In addition, there is a lack of experience with other

students, and so it can quickly happen that one or the other is left with group members with whom cooperation seems impossible. For students this can be an almost unbearable burden from their perspective, which is often passed on to the teachers. However, since in the following working life of the students, teamwork rarely takes place with elective partners, it can be a strategy to let the students endure it and let them understand what advantages they can gain from it.

An appropriate action could be: Complaints about the group constellation are returned to the students with the request to take care of it themselves and, if necessary, to seek a clarifying conversation within the group. Only in extreme situations (such as the complete boycott of members) do teachers interfere as a regulating element.

Preventive action

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

Organise a conference to arouse intrinsic motivation

At the end of the semester, a conference organized by the teachers will take place at which students can present their results.

Benefit of this action: The idea of presenting their own results to peers and teachers usually motivates the students very much – the conference format also illustrates once again the university framework in which the work takes place. In addition, the presentation reflects the independent development of the presentation results.

Set a motivating final product as a goal

The feeling of working on something relevant motivates the students to get involved. Motivating final products can, for example, be those that have a real practical benefit.. This can also be achieved through community-based research. Another possibility is that the students' research results contribute to an ongoing research project, so that students see their contribution as part of something bigger.

Benefit of this action: Students do not regard their work as a "homework" without any further relevance. They are held accountable and understand that their research is not only for their own learning, but also for a greater good.

Intervening action

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

Reflect at the end of the course

In a reflection meeting at the end of the course, a discussion will be held again about how the students evaluate the process and where they may have felt "let down". The teacher moderates the conversation in such a way that the students understand how much they have learned through these situations and that it was intended that the students were overwhelmed in between.

Benefit of this action: Even if the students may be outraged at first, they can see what they have achieved on their own. At best, they understand that they would not have learned so much if they had been guided more closely.

Offer stronger leadership advice

Teachers can also respond to students' concerns, answer questions, provide professional impulses and make decisions for students.

Benefit of this action: Students who are more closely supervised make fewer mistakes, complete tasks in less time (because they make fewer mistakes) and are therefore, overall, more satisfied. Students would complain less because their demanded leadership would be provided. However, this measure tends to move away from the basic assumptions of research-based learning.

Offer regular consultation appointments for the small groups

On regular, e.g. weekly appointments, the small groups are advised individually.

Benefit of this action: Bad mood does not immediately spill over into the entire plenum, but in part can be discussed in the small group concerned. In addition, time is used efficiently by addressing individual concerns, rather than trying to reconcile the many concerns expressed in plenary. This takes a lot of time, but brings a lot of benefits and has proven to be effective.

Readjust if there is too much frustration

If you feel that the mood is becoming too destructive, or you cannot or do not want to withstand the negative attitude of the students any longer, you can also decide to readjust the task and make it easier.

Benefit of this action: Students feel taken seriously in their concerns. They experience that their needs are heard and they are relieved.

Indirect (accompanying) actions

In addition, indirect measures are listed which involve a more subtle approach yet may have the same impact..

Introduce tutorial process monitoring that provides feedback on social skills

The project groups are accompanied by a tutor. The task of this team support is not to guide the students, but to observe the process, to give feedback to individual participants and the overall groups. The content of the feedback is, for example, the discussion behaviour, problem solving behaviour, moderation skills, etc. Finally, a group report is created in which the process is mapped. The tutors must be trained in advance for these tasks.

Benefit of this action: The students are made aware of their own role by the process attendants. They can be made aware of their immature behaviour". The feedback also provides an opportunity to think about how one wants to perform: What role do I want to play in the group? What social skills do I want to show?

Train mentors

Mentors can also be used for the process of offering research-based learning. However, they must first be prepared for this task, for example by dealing with difficult teaching situations, learning about prevention and intervention measures and by sitting in practice.

Benefit of this action: Mentors have a different effect than the observing and feedback-giving tutors. Mentors take on moderating tasks and thus provide more "guidance".