

A research project in the first semester?

The Introductory Project in Geography at the University of Bremen

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The background of the introductory project

The module "Introductory Project" takes up a prominent place in the timetable of the Sole Subject Bachelor in Geography at the University of Bremen: It is conducted as a compulsory module in the first semester, with 4 contact hours per week and 9 credit points. In small courses of approx. 25 persons the first year students experience all the heights and lows of a research process. They work in project groups with a maximum of six participants and are supported by two teachers and a tutor. In order to take into account the interdisciplinarity of Geography, the two parallel courses of the module are offered on one hand as a physical-geographic and on the other hand as a human-geographic oriented course.

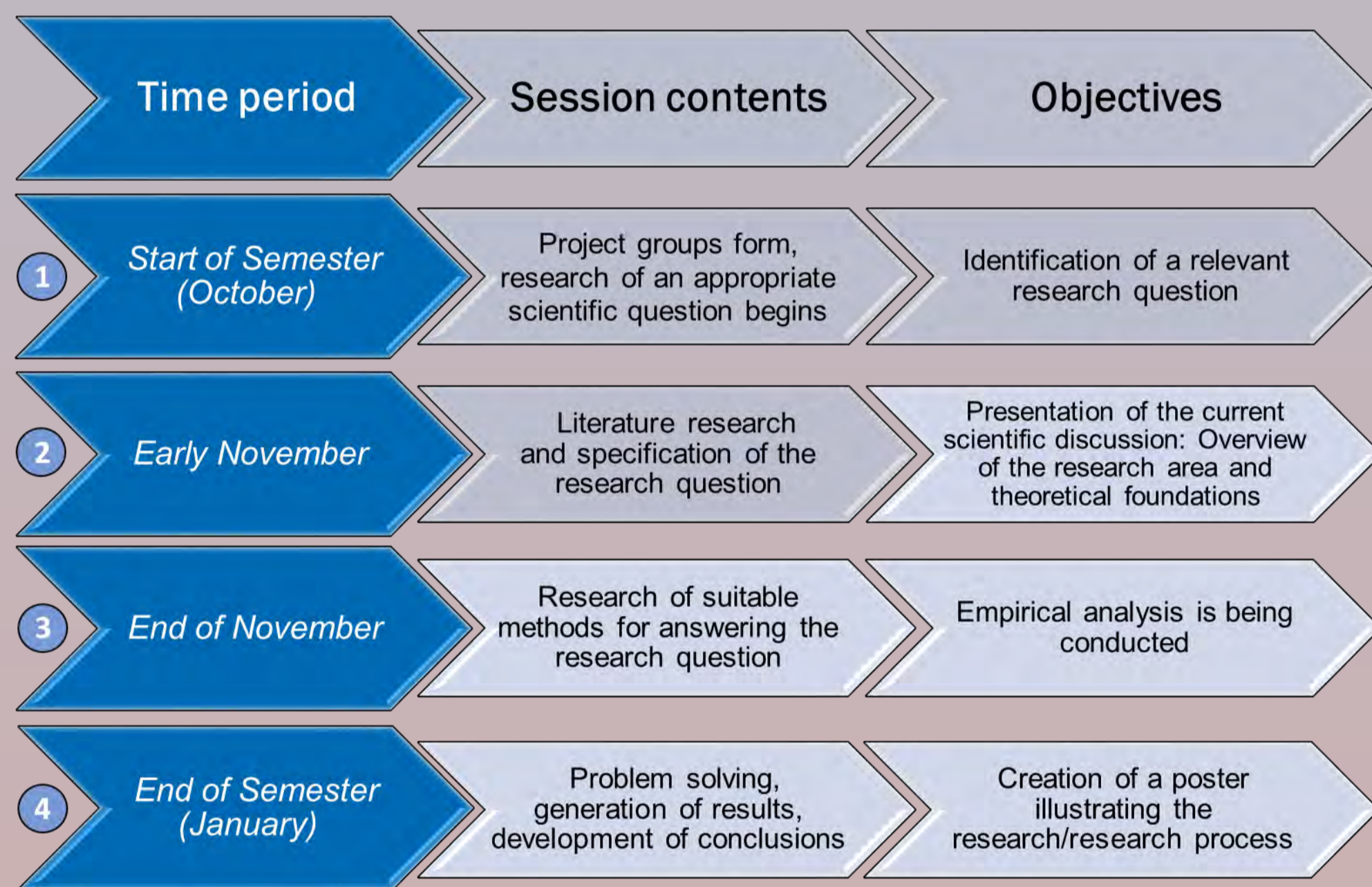
The two objectives of the course

First semester students should adopt a research attitude in the sense of **research-based learning** (HUBER 2009)!

From the very beginning every student should bring in his/her previous knowledge in the field of Geography and is guided to actively deal with geographical content in his/her area of interest: Over the course of the first semester project groups form and work on a self-chosen scientific question with an **own empirical research**.

The first year students are encouraged to define themselves as active researchers and to position themselves within the field of Geography. This is intended to support the formation of an **own professional identity** at university.

The research process from October to January



The results of the empirical research projects ...

... are presented on **self-illustrated posters in ISO A1 format**. The grading takes into account the results of the research, the posters as well as the poster presentation. The posters created by the project groups are professionally printed and presented at the end of the semester in two poster sessions open to the public. In this way, students are made aware of the **relevance** of their own research. The presence of the professors and many members of the academic staff contributes to **constructive and interesting discussions** (see pictures on the right side).

First semester students should be supported in coping with the **challenges of the introductory phase** (HEUBLEIN ET AL. 2017, BOSSE/TRAUTWEIN 2014)!

The "information of the week" at the beginning of each weekly session meets the various challenges of starting to study.

The principles of research-based learning and project work in small groups with close supervision (*left column*) are intended to meet technical challenges. But the introductory project also offers an important opportunity to accompany the personal, organisational and social challenges of the introductory phase of study:

Within this framework, the **relevant information of the week or month** for first year students is communicated and various external experts are invited.

Some of the 10-20 minute long slots contain information that is already addressed during the orientation week, but which the students do not remember due to the "flood of information" during this time.

By contrast, during the orientation week hardly any attention is paid to information about important counselling services at the university, the possibilities of a stay abroad, university committees or on formal examination procedures at the end of the semester.

Further questions about all areas of study can be asked anytime, so that a fixed frame of reference in the sense of a **buffer zone** (Bosse 2017) has been created, which **offers reliability** for the students.



Does it work?

Scale:	Not true ← → Absolutely true										Average
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I think the content structure of the introductory project is very good.											
Frequency (in %)	--	--	--	2 (4%)	3 (7%)	6 (13%)	9 (20%)	17 (37%)	5 (11%)	9 (9%)	7.46
I learned a lot in the introductory project.											
Frequency (in %)	--	--	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	3 (7%)	4 (9%)	13 (28%)	11 (24%)	11 (24%)	2 (4%)	7.48
During the introductory project I was very well informed about the organizational processes of the geography studies.											
Frequency (in %)	--	--	1 (2%)	--	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	5 (11%)	18 (39%)	11 (24%)	8 (17%)	8.22

(own graphic according to BORNEMANN/MOSSIG 2019)

The results of the evaluation after the last round of the course in winter semester 2018/19 show that the concept of the introductory project meets its requirements (see figure on the left).

The mean value for the question *I think the content structure of the introductory project is very good* was 7.46. Furthermore, the surveyed students stated that *they have learned a lot in the introductory project* with a mean value of 7.48. With a mean value of 8.22 the question if *the students felt supported and informed in coping with the different challenges of the introductory phase* achieved even better results (BORNEMANN/MOSSIG 2019).

In summary, it can be said that both, the objective of integrating research-based learning already in the first semester (left column) as well as the objective of supporting students in the introductory phase (right column), can be achieved with the concept of the introductory project (MOSSIG ET AL. IN PRINT).

Literature

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