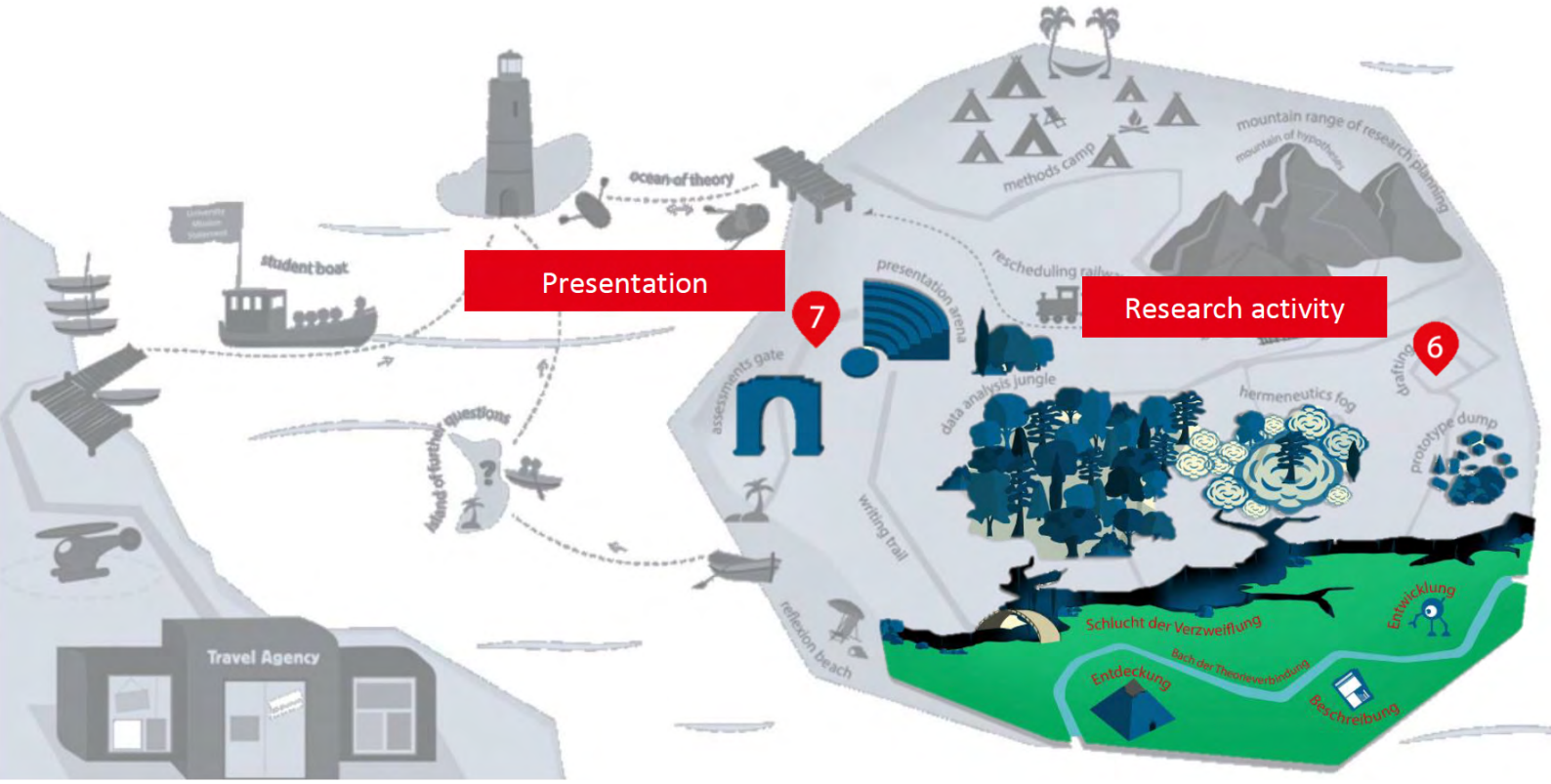
FideS
Forschungsorientierung in der Studieneingangsphase

Dead End

Case vignette for tutors



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#8: Dead end

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.

Dead end

You are in a project team meeting. The longer you talk with the students, the clearer it becomes: the students have already put a lot of energy into their concept, but they are stuck. Their concept cannot and will not work as it stands. Furthermore, the time is getting too short to start again from the beginning and design a new project that will lead to results. You are wondering how to best deal with the students.

Keywords: dealing with failure

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:

- **How can you speak with students about their failures and mistakes without discouraging them ("failure as withdrawal")?**
- **What could a compromise look like (e.g. recognizing partial aims and feasible steps in the process ("failure as experience with adversity"))?**
- **Do you feel responsible for supporting students in coming to terms with failure and its consequences?**
- **What could students learn from the experience of failure?**

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.

Seeing failure as normal

You and the lecturer believe that failure is an inherent part of research. It happens to all researchers and of course also students – it is a normal part of science.

In the situation described here this could mean: You speak openly with the students, ideally as equals. This approach means also to accept your own mistakes and to convey that this is an everyday part of science. The students learn that they can learn from their mistakes and feel encouraged to set themselves new goals.

Facing and accepting failure as a learning opportunity

In your and the lecturer's opinions, failure can help students to gather valuable experience and learn about the realities of research. Therefore, you do not intervene in order to avoid obstacles or unexpected difficulties which students (and you as well) often cannot see coming. You do, however, make sure that students – despite understandable frustration – see a concrete learning result.

In the situation described here this could mean: You and/or the lecturer impart to the students honestly that their project is unlikely to yield results. At the same time, you discuss that such wrong turns are also a part of research and that they need not take their failure personally. Together with the students, discussing as equals, you consider next steps.

Prevention

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

Organizing consultations with experts

You organize opportunities for students to speak with competent contact persons about their research. This can help them to recognize risks early on and take steps to mitigate them.

For the specific situation described here: Communication can help to identify risk factors and potential problems. Certain tips can then either prevent or correct some mistakes. Additionally, exchanging ideas with someone other than the usual lecturer is motivational and offers new perspectives.

Drawing attention to potential problems indirectly

Even if you perceive potential problems early on, you do not point them out directly in consultations. Instead, you pose questions in such a way that the students recognize the challenges themselves.

For the specific situation described here: A failure as serious as the one described in this situation could have been avoided with indirect intervention at the right time. This does however require close enough observation that you could see the development early on. Additionally, such “Socratic methods” require both practice and sufficient time.

Intervention

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

Telling students that something has gone wrong

You tell the students in a discussion that the process does not promise results.

For the specific situation described here: It is very important that failure is discussed openly. A bad, unplanned or unexpected result is still a result. The students must confront the reality that research can lead in an unexpected direction. They must be made aware that making mistakes is nothing unusual, but rather a learning opportunity. The students can consider together what went wrong and what they can do better in the future.