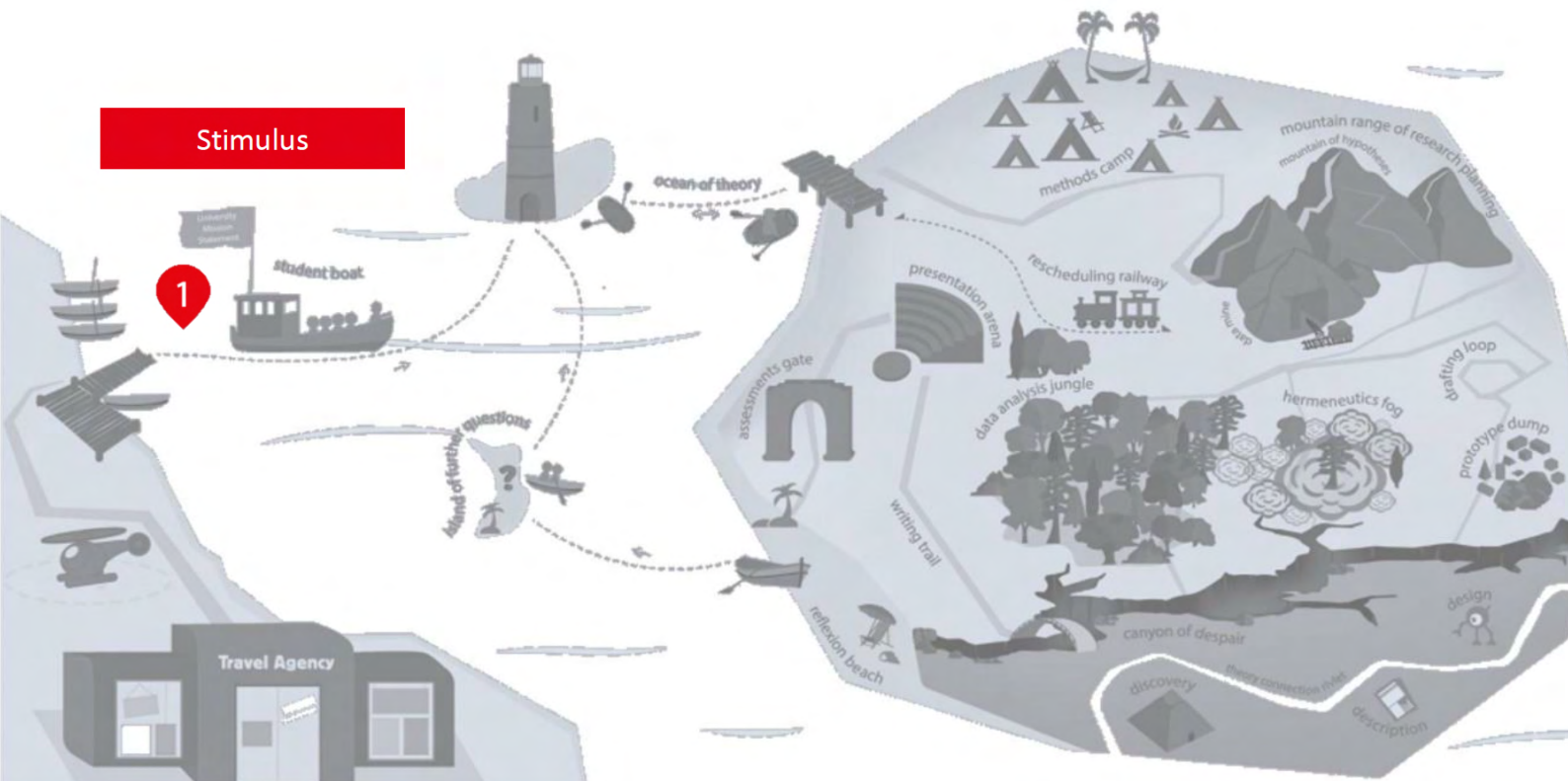




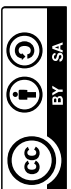
## Scratching Post

Case vignette for tutors



### KEYWORDS:

FIRST SEMESTER, GUIDANCE  
& AUTONOMY, DETERMINING ROLES



This case vignette is licensed under a Creative Commons Attributions 4.0 International License. The author should be credited as follows when sharing under the same conditions: Preiß, J., Bartels, M., Herrmann, A.-C., Krein, U., Lübecke, E., Watanabe, A. & Reinmann, G. for FideS-Transfer & Insel der Forschung 2.0.

### Metadata

Authors: FideS-Transfer-Project Team

Link: [https://inselderforschung.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/2024/01/30/kratzbaumtutor\\_innen/](https://inselderforschung.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/2024/01/30/kratzbaumtutor_innen/)

### Recommended citation:

Preiß, J., Bartels, M., Herrmann, A.-C., Krein, U., Lübecke, E., Watanabe, A. & Reinmann, G. (2024). Tears in the Office – Case vignette for tutors. Hamburg; Kaiserslautern; Potsdam. Projekt FideS-Transfer & Insel der Forschung 2.0.

GEFÖRDERT VOM



## #4: Scratching post



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
	<i>You are on land with solid ground under your feet ...</i> 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.
	<i>You have left the island and are at anchor, but are still near the shore ...</i> 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.
	<i>You are on the high seas and in an uncertain situation in which unpredictable weather can occur ...</i> 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.



## Scratching post

It is the third week in your project group. You knew that you were facing a challenge when you decided to undertake a research-based learning project with first-semester students – after all, it is basically a full-time project. In this phase you are seeing the students daily and therefore observing all the developments, especially their feelings of frustration and overwhelming pressure, which the course participants partially attribute to you. You notice that the students manifest a “school mentality”: they frequently ask for correct solutions, setbacks are seen as intended traps, and you have acquired the role of a manager even as you try to behave more like a coach and leave the students space to learn from their own experiences.

**Keywords:** first-semester students, guidance and autonomy, new role as lecturer



## 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:

- **Did you and the main lecturer discuss the challenges of the project with the students from the beginning?**
- **How much autonomy do you expect from the first-semester students?**
- **How is failure used constructively as a learning opportunity for all students in the project and the course?**
- **Have you discussed your own role with the students?**
- **How would you describe your behavior up to this point: as that of a manager or of a coach?**
- **How important is it to you that the students are able to overcome their accustomed role as school students this soon (in their first university semester), and do you see that as a longer-term process?**
- **How much does it bother you when the students have a negative view of you?**



## 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.

## Enduring differences in role perceptions

There are always students that assume that lecturers and tutors are there to serve them. Instead of turning it into a conflict you could 'simply' endure the frustration that accompanies this misunderstanding from all sides.

**In the situation described here this could mean:** You can continue to point out the desired form of cooperation, the differing roles of each involved person and the university environment (where learning happens differently from in school). You, however, stay the course. You do not yield to the pressure and do not take on the manager role.

## Applying the principle of minimal support

This principle means that you and the main lecturer help only when you are asked to, and then only to the extent that students need it. This also means that students are themselves responsible for managing their time, tasks and workload. For example, students can decide for themselves whether to take written notes of decisions made in group meetings. Only in cases in which group work is really suffering do you intervene.

**In the situation described here this could mean:** You and the lecturer tell the students at the beginning of the project that you are going to apply this principle and what that means for the students. The students will have to approach you when they have problems, and even then you will not simply give them solutions, but rather only thought-provoking prompts to help them take the next step.

## Facilitating experiences of failure that are not personal defeats but rather learning opportunities

Mistakes are part of the learning process. Students should learn and grow from their mistakes. The important thing is that failure is not seen as a final result, but rather reflected upon in order to determine what went wrong and how to avoid it the next time.

**In the situation described here this could mean:** At the beginning of the project, you and the lecturer point out that research does not always follow a straight path. Then, when something does not quite go as planned and you are accused by the students of misleading them, you can discuss with them what the students learned from this 'wrong turn'. For this part of the process it is important that you don't simply tell them what they've learned, but rather that the students recognize it themselves. This does, however, require competent non-directive facilitation from you, for example in the form of constructive questions.

## Encouraging passion

Research-based learning mostly aims not only to add to the skills and experiences of the students, but also to give them a framework in which they can discover and follow their own interests.

**In the situation described here this could mean:** You point out the freedoms of the students, use discussions to focus on the interests they express, and show them how to follow these interests.

## Making students work together even when they don't feel like it

For working groups, students are often permitted to seek their own group members. However, especially in the first semester they on the one hand lack the experience and references to know in which group constellation they will work best, and on the other hand they do not yet know the other students. Individual students may thus find themselves in groups in which the necessary collaboration seems impossible. This can appear to be an unbearable burden which is then addressed to lecturers or tutors. Since in their future professions students will rarely have the opportunity to choose their partners, it could be one strategy to make the students bear the situation and learn what advantages they may gain from it.

**In the situation described here this could mean:** Complaints about their group constellations are returned to the students with the assignment to take care of these themselves and to address them with clear conversations within the group. Only in extreme situations (e.g. a complete strike by group members) should tutors and lecturers get involved.

## Prevention

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



## Organizing an annual conference to create intrinsic motivation

At the end of the semester an annual conference is set up by tutors and/or lecturers at which the students can present their research results.

**For the specific situation described here:** The opportunity to present their own results to peers, tutors and lecturers is generally a significant motivation for students. The conference format also imparts a sense of the university environment in which the students are now working. Finally, the task of presenting the results themselves compels them to compile and prepare the results as independently as possible.





## Setting a motivating final product as the overall aim

Having the feeling that they are working on something important motivates students to engage with their research. Motivating products could be for example ones that will have a real use in practice. This can be achieved through Service Learning – that is, research for external practice partners. Another possibility is to make the students' research results a contribution to a larger, already existing research project. This shows students how their research is part of a whole.

**For the specific situation described here:** The students don't see their work as 'homework' with no further significance. They are given responsibility and understand that their research is not just for the sake of their own learning but also contributes to a bigger picture. of circumstances" but rather has control over her own fate.

## Intervention

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



## Integrating reflection at the end of the semester

A discussion is planned for the end of the semester in which students reflect on and discuss how they rate the whole process and where they felt 'left on their own'. The tutors facilitate the discussion in a way that the students recognize how much they learned from those situations and that it was intentional that the students felt overwhelmed once in a while.

**For the specific situation described here:** Although the students may be somewhat indignant at first, they come to understand what they have achieved on their own. Ideally, they come to understand that they would not have learned so much if they had been guided more firmly.



## Providing more directive guidance

Tutors can also address the students' concerns, answer questions, give subject-specific advice and even make decisions for the students.

**For the specific situation described here:** More closely supervised students make fewer mistakes, complete their tasks in shorter times (for they take fewer wrong turns), and are therefore also overall more content. The students would complain less, because they would get the guidance they demand. However, this measure tends to lead away from the basic principles of research-based learning.



## Providing regular consultations for the research groups

The research groups receive consultations in regular, e.g. weekly, meetings.

**For the specific situation described here:** Unpleasant atmospheres don't affect the whole course but rather are addressed within the smaller research group. Additionally, the time can be used efficiently to address individual needs instead of trying to cover all of these in the full plenary. Regular sessions may require a lot of time but have been found to be effective and productive.

