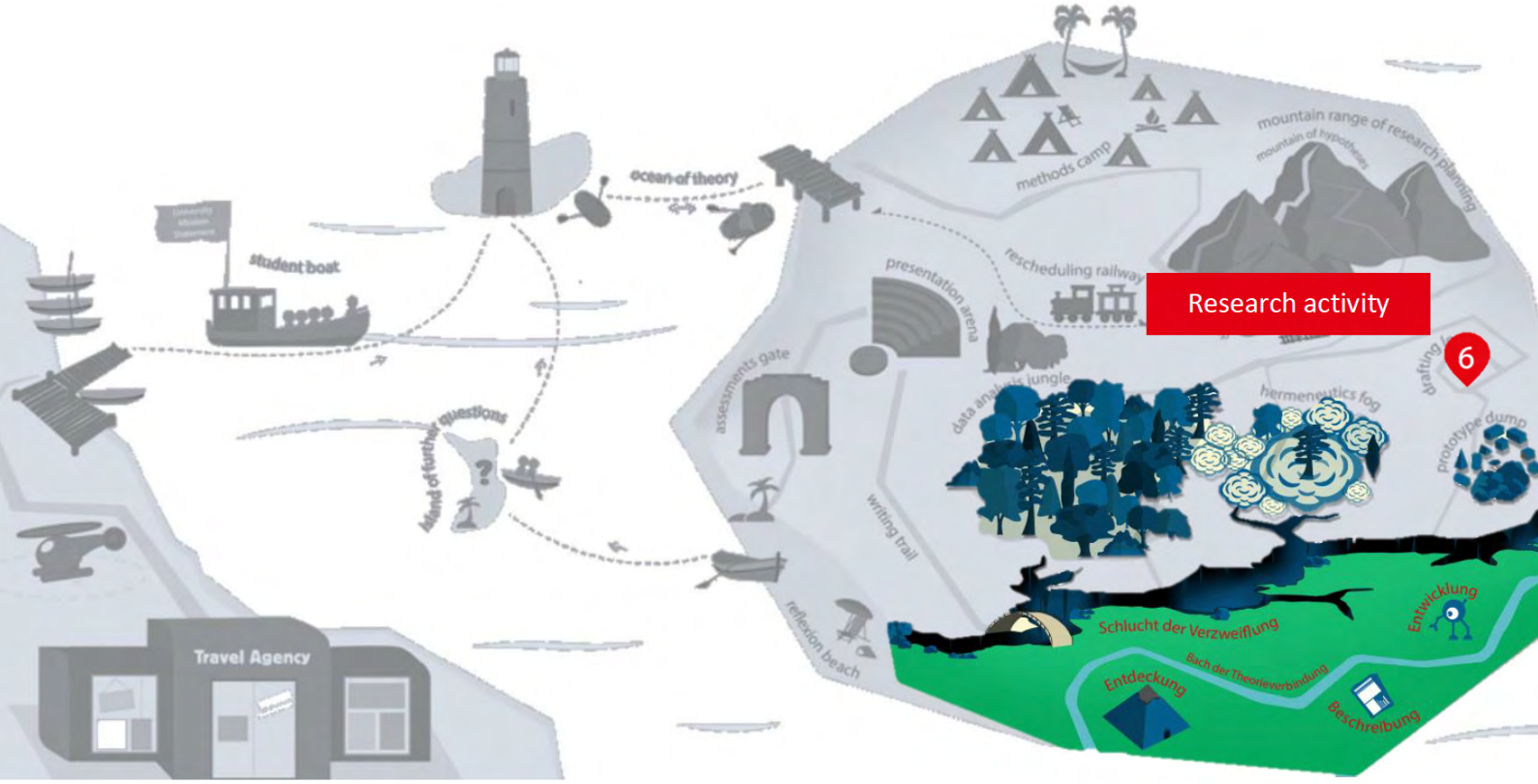
FideS
Forschungsorientierung in der Studieneingangsphase

Tears at the office

Case vignette for tutors



KEYWORDS:

WORKLOAD, GUIDANCE & AUTONOMY; PRIORITIES

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., Lübcke, 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/traenen-im-buero-tutor_innen/

Recommended citation:

Preiß, J., Bartels, M., Herrmann, A.-C., Krein, U., Lübcke, 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

Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung

Förderkennzeichen: 01PB18013

Universität Hamburg
DER FORSCHUNG | DER LEHRE | DER BILDUNG

TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT KAISERSLAUTERN

Universität Potsdam

#2: Tears in the office

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.

Tears in the office

It is Wednesday afternoon. You are holding team meetings with the working groups from the student research projects. From the beginning, you notice that one of the students seems nervous. At some point, it overcomes her: it is al l too much, she feels utterly over-worked, she is overwhelmed by the workload and doesn't know "how she is supposed to manage this next to her job and her other course commitments". You can see that the student is fighting back tears.

Keywords: time and workload, excessive demands, priorities

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 do you assess the student's situation compared to those of other students in the course?**
- **Do you feel responsible for the student's feelings?**
- **Do you see it as your duty to restore the student's well-being?**

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.

Showing trust in the student's skills

You and the main lecturer assume that students needn't be served or spoon-fed. Instead, you believe that they can work and act independently and only need support in exceptional cases.

In the situation described here this could mean: You indicate to the student that she bears the responsibility of deciding whether she wants to handle the pressure. You, the tutor, are not going to make the decision for her.

Applying the principle of minimal support

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 own organization 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: To determine if it is necessary to intervene, you talk with the students. You show the students your confidence in their skills and ask them to find a solution within the team. Only if this does not work do you organize a meeting with the whole course. There you keep the intervention as small as possible and also make sure that no one loses face.

Considering failure as a possibility

You and the main lecturer believe that failure can be possible without the students losing motivation entirely.

In the situation described here this could mean: The possibility that some students ‚fail', i.e. do not complete their projects, is for you and for the lecturer both conceivable and acceptable. Nonetheless you will have a discussion with them and try together to find a way to continue and complete the project. An alternative can also be to 'fail officially' and not complete the project. In this situation you could discuss which skills and abilities the student has acquired during or before the research and point out that they still meet all the requirements for successful research.

Prevention

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

Providing a blog platform

You and the lecturer set up a blog which students can use like a portfolio to share and comment on their and each other's progress and experiences in their research.

For the specific situation described here: The student can share her experience and discover that she is not the only one feeling overwhelmed and receive (moral) support from other students. She may, however, need the suggestion from a tutor or a lecturer that such a blog entry could be useful.

Using milestones

At the beginning of the research project, it is useful to define intermediate steps and milestones. This can help students to keep the whole process and timetable in mind.

For the specific situation described here: Being able to refer to this timetable can help the student to estimate if she is really behind schedule. She can check to see if her feeling that the workload is too high for her to manage agrees with the timetable.

Intervention

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

Addressing the option of withdrawing

You discuss the possibility of withdrawing from the course. As you do, you point out the necessity of passing on the tasks taken on with the group and address the consequences of withdrawing on all participants – not only the person withdrawing.

For the specific situation described here: It is made clear to the student that withdrawing from the course is conceivable and that she herself can make this decision. She is no longer a “victim of circumstances” but rather has control over her own fate.

Holding a discussion with the whole group

You have a conversation with the whole group to find out if everyone is feeling similarly overwhelmed, or if the student is an isolated case. If everyone is affected, you can discuss with the students and the lecturer whether the research task needs some revision.

For the specific situation described here: As a tutor, you can determine if there is need for a more general response which you can discuss with the main lecturer. The overwhelmed students receive support from the group, on the one hand through their solidarity, on the other hand through actual workload support from other group members. Attention! It is important that no one loses face. The position of the overwhelmed student must not suffer from the results of the conversation.

Teaching students to set priorities

You have the group discuss what is really important to complete the assignment: what is essential and what is just the cherry on top?

For the specific situation described here: Perhaps you can reduce the overall workload together. In any case, a possibility is created to redistribute tasks and reduce the pressure on the affected student.

Setting up challenges for students, but planning phases for reflection

You set up a group discussion at the end of the session to address frustrations, so that students learn to independently recognize their successes and their learning progress.

For the specific situation described here: You can set up a meeting with the student to reflect with her on what she has learned in the challenging situation and how she can move on from it.