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A playful approach to PhD supervisor training: Exploring the difficult balance between independence and direction

Are you running PhD supervisor workshops and are you looking for inspiration on how to engage participants?

In this workshop, we share a playful approach from our training programs to open up supervisors' reflections on how they balance direction with student independence. This balance is always a dominant theme brought up by supervisors at our workshops and it is also a key dilemma in supervision according to the research literature ¹. In our experience, it is challenging to engage supervisors to critically reflect on and potentially to revise their practices. Therefore, we have found inspiration in the strand of literature that emphasizes the importance of articulating supervisory values and beliefs as a means to understand and change concrete practices ².

When we invite supervisors to identify their core values about supervision, it creates a mirror that allows them to reflect on how (well) their intentions are aligned with their actions and their students' needs. A directive supervisory practice may be the right fit in certain situations and not in others, but to act in flexible ways requires a careful insight into one's own intentions, values and beliefs. To activate supervisors' embodied values, we encourage 'play' as a way of sharing their 'inner voices'. For instance, we make them place themselves physically in the room on a spectrum from hands-on to hands-off

supervision and to solve a concrete participant dilemma based on their groupings. The exercise has even been very well received at workshops for highly experienced supervisors with very established practices.

Workshop description (60 minutes)

- Introduction to our theoretical and pedagogical approach, to preliminary findings from running the workshop at eight PhD supervisor courses in recent year, and to the elements of the workshop (20 min)
- Demo where participants try out key elements of the exercise to experience of how it works (25 min)
- Plenary discussion where participants share their immediate experiences and together we reflect on how it can be applied in different settings (15 min)
- After the workshop participants will be able to apply it in their own context.

1) McNair, D.E. (2011). Developing a philosophy of supervision: One step toward self-authorship. *Special Issue: Supporting and Supervising Mid-Level Professionals*, 136, 27-34.

2) Wichmann-Hansen, G., & Schmidt Nielsen, K. J. (2023). Can hands-on supervision get out of hand? The correlation between directive supervision and doctoral student independence in a Danish study context. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2023.2204113>