

Supervision – From hands-on to hands-off

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Introduction – Reflecting on my supervisory practice

In this final assignment for the University Pedagogy course, I will reflect upon my role as supervisor within research-based supervision, drawing on experiences from a supervision experiment with a candidate student finishing her Master's thesis.

The reason for this topic is that I, as a supervisor, find it difficult to balance the amount of knowledge I should provide to the students and the amount I can expect them to discover for themselves. Often, I see myself talking most of the time during the supervision, not facilitating students' autonomy and ownership of their projects.

I will, in the following assignment, describe the background for research supervision and two methods to support autonomy. Then I will present how I have developed, conducted and evaluated the use of the two methods. In the conclusion, I will include my reflections on future supervision practices.

Background

Research-based supervision is defined as academic guidance of a student who engages in authentic research activities, in which the student develops a research question, applies appropriate methodologies, and contributes to the creation of new knowledge. The supervision is optimally guided by a supervisor who emphasises learning rather than simply transmitting information (Dohn & Dolin, 2015).

Research-based supervision has been identified as a key factor in a successful student research process, and an increasing body of literature has focused on the supervisor–student relationship (Dysthe, Samara & Westheim, 2006). Several studies highlight the vulnerability of this

relationship, with a central challenge being the balance between authority and autonomy between the supervisor and the student (Dysthe, Samara & Westrheim, 2006). Historically, supervisors tend to be placed as experts, and students with minimal responsibility for the supervision process. However, research highlights that to accomplish student learning, growing student autonomy in the entire research process is important (Gurr, 2001; Andersen, n.d.; Wichmann-Hansen & Jensen, 2015). This underscores the importance of the supervisor's ability to incorporate the student into the research supervision process and to find an appropriate balance between hands-on and hands-off supervision.

An important aspect of working with this balance is the acknowledgement that students are individuals. This means that prescriptive guidelines of supervision are not very useful (Gurr, 2001). Furthermore, many students are not used to working within a research supervision process and thereby must learn how to gradually increase their autonomy (Wichmann-Hansen & Jensen, 2015).

Different tools can be used to help balance supervision in a way that supports student autonomy. In this assignment, two methods are used as tools to enhance the student's sense of autonomy and to support my ability to provide more hands-off supervision:

- The development of a joint initial agreement outlining the framework for supervision,
- The use of Karl Tomm's question typology as a guide for supervisory dialogue.

An initial agreement on the supervision framework was chosen because research in university supervision shows that successful supervision often depends on establishing a collaborative relationship early in the process. This relationship can be supported by aligning expectations regarding roles, the process, and the final product (Wichmann-Hansen & Jensen, 2015).

Karl Tomm's question typology was chosen because it offers a structured approach to formulating different types of questions. The framework is designed to facilitate meaningful dialogue between the supervisor and the student and to encourage the student's independent reflection (Tomm, 1988).

This pedagogical assignment thereby aims to evaluate the usefulness of an intervention including the production of an initial supervision agreement and the use of Karl Tomm's question typology. The intention is expected to help in my transition from hands-on to hands-off supervision and in the experience of growing autonomy of the student in the research process.

The experiment will be evaluated by feedback from my department and educational supervisor on my supervision of the student, and by the students and my responses on a so-called “Supervisor student alignment tool kit”.

Intervention

An initial agreement on a framework of supervision

For the design of an initial agreement on a framework for supervision, I was inspired by Wichman-Hansen et al and Andersen (2015; n.d.).

I invited the student to a meeting during the initial period of her master's thesis to discuss a framework for an agreement for supervision. In preparation for the meeting, the student was asked to consider her expectations for the supervision, specific needs, and overall expectations regarding the level and quality of the final thesis.

The meeting was scheduled to last for one hour at the Department of Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy, Rigshospitalet. I started the meeting by introducing her to the definition of research-based supervision and the importance of gradually increasing her autonomy in the entire research process to facilitate her learning. Further, I informed her about my usual way of supervising students concerning academic content, project management, and ways to communicate and prepare supervision. Then the student was encouraged to speak freely of her expectations to me as supervisor and during the supervision session, and to address any specific needs. The student was well prepared for the meeting and had several thoughts and reflections we could discuss. The meeting ended with a written-down bullet point framework for future supervision (Framework for supervision agreement attached as Appendix A).

Karl Tomm's question types

Karl Tomm's question types are described by Karl Tomm in a therapist and client setting, highlighting the importance of different question types to call forth the client's perceptions, experiences, reactions, concerns, goals, and plans (Tomm, 1988).

The questions are based on the therapist's intentionality and assumption, distinguishing four basic types of questions (Tomm, 1988; see also Appendix B):

- **Lineal questions** are asked to orient the therapist. The therapist investigates the client's situation by asking questions such as: Who?, Where?, What?, and Why?
- **Circular questions** are asked to orient the therapist but are based on circular assumptions about the specific phenomenon. The therapist tries to find circular patterns between perceptions and events, and questions are asked out of curiosity. The therapist asks questions such as: "What would others say about your problem?" or "If he does this, what do you do?"
- **Strategic questions** are asked to influence the client based on a linear assumption. The intention is predominantly corrective, and the therapist acts more like a teacher. The therapist can ask questions such as: "If you were to describe an ideal situation, how would that look?", "What would happen if, for the next week, you did...?", or "What would the consequences be if we changed...?"
- **Reflexive questions** are intended to influence the client in an indirect or general manner based on a circular assumption to be facilitative. This could be questions such as: "What options do you have lined up, do you believe the most?", "When do you think you will have done something about this challenge?", "Who can help you to overcome this challenge and hold on to it?", or "What do you think about ... now?"

I integrated these four question types into a supervision setting and prepared a variation of questions based on the four question types for the student. The prepared questions were only meant for support and as my pre-reflections before the supervision, as the specific way of asking questions, I believe, is dependent on how the dialogue is in the concrete supervision setting.

Data collection

To evaluate my intervention, I used two different approaches. I used feedback from supervisions on my supervision, and I used the “Supervisor student alignment tool kit”; both will be elaborated below.

Supervision-on-supervision:

Two supervision sessions were arranged in the Department of Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy. The first was a supervision-on-supervision session with my department supervisor, and the second involved both my department supervisor and my educational supervisor. Furthermore, based on practical reasons, a co-pedagogical student from the university pedagogical course was also present to supervise.

During the first session, the department supervisor was physically present in the room with the student and me. In the second session, the department supervisor and co-pedagogical student were present in person, while the educational supervisor participated online.

After each session, I received feedback from the supervisors. I took notes during their feedback, which I used as data to evaluate the usefulness of the intervention.

Supervisor student alignment tool kit:

The Supervisor student alignment tool kit is a model showing outcomes for four combinations of the students' state (from competently dependent to competently autonomous) and the supervisor's approach (from hands-on to Hands-off) (Gurr, 2001). The goal of the model is to provide a “green light” for the student in the supervision to talk about the relationship between the student and the supervisor (Gurr, 2001). See also Appendix C.

The student was asked three times during her entire supervision period to set a mark in the model which best represented her experience of her state and my approach in supervision. I did the same before knowing her evaluation.

The model was used differently from its original purpose of the model. In this setting, the model was primarily used to evaluate her

experience of autonomy along the research project period and my ability to facilitate that autonomy. However, we agreed that if there were any misalignment between our marks, I would confront her with that, and we could have a conversation about it. This dialogue will not be included in this assignment.

Results

Reflections from supervision-on-supervision

The notes from the supervision-on-supervision revealed different aspects of the effect of the intervention each component will be elaborated below:

Comments from the supervisor to the first supervision-on-supervision:

- **Agreed framework of supervision:** The student was well-prepared, and it seemed to the supervisor as if the student and I had a mutual agenda for the supervision. There was a good energy, and the student were open and not afraid of asking questions.
- **Karl Tomm's question types:** No strategic questions were asked. However, the supervision took place quite early in the process, and the student's need for specific answers (or clear statements) was still quite high. The supervisor, therefore, advised me to reflect on the types of questions I ask during the initial phase of the student's thesis work, and to consider what academic level of response I expect in return.

Comments from supervisors to the second supervision-on-supervision:

- **Agreed framework of supervision:** There was a sound joint agenda for the supervision, which gave a feeling of security. The student was approached with empathy and understanding; however, I must remember not to resolve all the student's practical issues (for instance, an extended timetable I tried to address), but rather listen, inquire, and allow the student to find her solutions.
- **Karl Tomm's question types:** The student had a significantly broader foundation to build upon (compared to the last supervision), which was evident in the dialogue, allowing me to ask various question types. It appeared that the different questions encouraged the student's reflections on her topic, potentially enhancing her sense of

autonomy. However, I could have employed the same question type in addressing the solution for more practical issues, such as solving time-related problems. Finally, during supervision, I have to give more time between questions and answers for writing down reflections.

Results from the Supervisor student alignment tool

The model was easy to fill in, which was nice in a busy work schedule. The students also had no problem filling it out.

According to the three evaluation results, it seems as if the student's experience of autonomy grew over time, and she experienced less hands-on from me as a supervisor. I had the same direction of my experience as the student. However, my judgement of her autonomy and my experience of hands-off supervision was, in general, a bit lower than the student's judgement (See Appendix C).

Conclusion and reflection on future supervision

The results indicate that establishing an initial agreement on a supervision framework is a useful tool for aligning expectations and clarifying roles. A framework supports the creation of clear agendas and fosters a working environment that feels safe and constructive. In future supervision practices, I will intend to use such an alignment agreement again, as it helps uncover the student's barriers and enablers for autonomy and learning insights, which I would not have gained otherwise. I appreciated the flexible format of the agreement's development, and I believe that involving the student in the process also contributed to her feeling of autonomy.

Karl Tomm's question types were an effective tool for helping me feel more comfortable transitioning from a hands-on to a hands-off supervision style. They also helped me to hold back my eagerness to simply provide answers. It is clear that I still have much to learn in mastering the balance between asking questions and making statements. Additionally, I find it challenging to juggle between different question types while having the academic content present. I find it especially challenging cause a question may take on a different meaning depending

on how, when, and to whom it is asked. But I am inspired and will keep working on my ability to develop the student's autonomy and thereby the possibility of learning. 6

References

- Dohn Nina Bonderup, Dolin J. (2015). Research-based teaching. In: Rienecker L, Ingerslec GH, Jørgensen PS, Dolin J, editors. University Teaching and Learning. 1st ed., Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, p. 43–64.
- Dysthe O, Samara A, Westrheim K. (2006). Multivoiced supervision of Master's students: A case study of alternative supervision practices in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*; 31:299–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600680562>.
- Gurr G. M. (2001). Negotiating the “Rackety Bridge” — A dynamic model for aligning supervisory style with research student development. *Higher Education Research and Development*; 20:81–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07924360120043882>.
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- Tomm K. (1988). Interventive Interviewing: Part III. Intending to Ask Lineal, Circular, Strategic, or Reflexive Questions? vol. 27.

Appendix A – Framework for supervision

Meeting between: Master of thesis student XX [student's name] and supervisor Heidi Tegner Date: 4th of December 2024

Aim: Preparation of a framework for the supervision of XX [student's name] 's master's thesis.

Academic content

- Any academic questions are welcome for supervision. There are no stupid questions.
- Heidi will be able to give comments on the drafts of the paper; however, the main responsibility for the specific university's rules for the content of the paper is YY [name of supervisor] from ZZ University [name of the university].
- Heidi will closely supervise XX in the first part of the process, when XX includes the participants and is writing the background, and at the beginning of the data analysis process.
- XX's expectations of the level of the thesis are to “do a good job” but not necessarily be able to make a publication of the study.
- Further work with the specific research study within the thesis will be agreed upon after the exam.

Project management

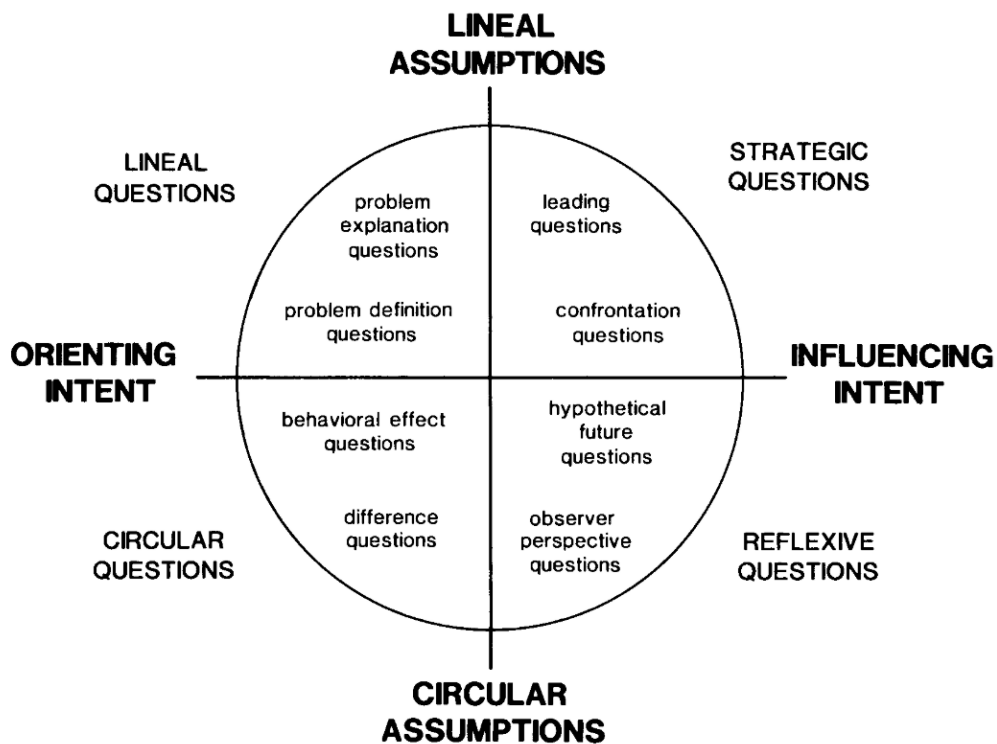
- XX will prepare a timetable and send it to Heidi. Heidi expects that XX will inform Heidi if this timetable changes.
- Heidi will be the link between XX and clinical personnel.
- Heidi will be responsible for the possibility of including participants in the study.
 - In the inclusion, XX will be responsible for the first contact with the participant and afterwards sending consent and participant information.
- Heidi and XX will both fill in the “Supervisor student alignment tool kit”. Heidi will respond to XX if any disagreements.
- Heidi will be responsible for data security and setting rules for how to handle data.

- XX will ask for help if there is any insecurity regarding data management.

Ways to communicate and prepare for supervision

- XX will send an agenda for the supervision session before the supervision session. Heidi will comment on the agenda. XX will revise and send the final agenda.
- To secure time for the preparation of supervision, Heidi must receive any material and questions for supervision in adequate time if XX expects thorough comments.
- Because XX has a small child, it is important for XX that meetings are not held between 3 pm to 8:30 am.
- If part of this agreement needs to be changed because of changes in cooperation, plans, etc., both XX and Heidi Tegner will be responsible for the corrections.

Appendix B – Framework for question types for supervision



Appendix C – The Supervisor Student Alignment Tool Kit

Rigshospitalet
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Supervisor/Student Alignment Model

Kære XX

Du ser her en model, der på engelsk kaldes "Supervisor/Student Alignment Model".

Modellen er velegnet til at tilpasse vejlederens supervision med den studerendes udvikling, og til at adressere den studerendes udvikling mod uafhængighed.

På grafen har vi graden af vejlederens involvering på den ene akse (fra hands-on til hands-off) og graden af den studerendes afhængighed/uafhængighed på den anden.

Jeg vil bede dig angive på grafen med ét kryds det punkt på grafen, der samlet angiver, hvor afhængig/uafhængig du føler dig nu i dit arbejde med opgaven, og i hvor stor en grad du føler lige nu, jeg er involveret i opgaveprocessen.

Jeg vil ligeledes sætte ét kryds, og vi vil næste gang vi mødes på baggrund af de to kryds drøfte, dine behov for vejledning og hvordan min vejledning bedst kan understøtte din proces.

Jeg vil bede dig udfylde grafen 3 gange i dit forløb som kandidatstuderende. En nu, en midtvejs og i slutningen af dit forløb.

Mh Heidi Tegner

REGION H

Rigshospitalet
HovedOrtoCentret

1. evaluering

Den studerendes status

Fuldstændig selvstyrende

Afhængig

Hands-on

Hands-off

Vejlederens nuværende supervisionsmåde

Heidi

Student

REGION H

