

Challenging Perspectives. Multiple viewpoints as a supervision strategy

Workshop for doctoral supervisors in artistic research led by Heloisa Amaral at the Multiplier Seminar for Doctoral Supervisors in Artistic Research Orpheus Institute, Ghent, November 26th 2020.

Summary of Workshop Results

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The workshop looked at key issues in doctoral supervision regarding how to contextualise and delimit research, how to conceptualise artistic practice, how to deal with insecurity and competition amongst supervisees, what is and what are the best forms of methodological advice, and finally, the role and position of the supervisor towards the supervisee.

Participants addressed these issues using exercises from the Das Arts [Feedback Method](#). These exercises were created about a decade ago by philosopher Karim Bennamar to provide structure to the weekly critique meetings of the well-known Amsterdam performing arts school. What was happening back then was that instead of giving productive comments on each other's work, students often ended up imposing their views on each other and speaking in terms of 'rights and wrongs'. As a result, students presenting their work easily became defensive or closed off. Bennamar's method broke this pattern by forcing feedback givers to articulate their thoughts in a manner that seemed artificial at first, but which helped digest immediate reactions and consider what they had seen and heard from a more reflected and/or new perspective. On top of that, some of the exercises were very creative and stimulating, thus appealing to the imagination of both feedback giver and receiver. Most importantly, the method encouraged a form of feedback based not on the opinions of the feedback givers, but on the needs of feedback receivers.

Back to Challenging Perspectives, most of the issues discussed during the workshop were based on concrete cases that cannot be disclosed here for privacy reasons, they also contained more general reflection and advice, summarised below. What became clear at the end of the sessions was that there is much need for regular and structured discussions about supervision amongst doctoral supervisors within and across institutions, including occasions in which supervisors can give and receive feedback from each other on particular cases, challenges and doubts. When it comes to specific issues of supervision, it shone through our rich discussions that certain issues tend to benefit from particular feedback strategies, as highlighted in the text:

- 1) How to help supervisees contextualise their work within the wider field of practice(s): Seminar participants suggested, for instance, to reflect together about what is at stake in the research, how the topic came about, how it resonates with other aspects of the supervisee's life, why and for whom it needs to be done, what artists, artworks and theories inspire him/her, who has researched the same issue before them and to what results.
- 2) How to deal with insecurity and/or competition amongst supervisees: Possible strategies could include advising supervisees to look for the aspects of their work that distinguish them from that of their colleague's and to use public presentations to discuss these differential aspects; to formally disseminate some of their work to make them more secure when sharing information, or to use each other's research to back up their own. Open questions starting with what, why, how, etc. provoke thought and discussion.

They might be useful when helping supervisees refine their research question ('what is at stake, what matters to you?'); articulate research methods ('what resources can you use to explore your topic?'); rethink the way something is being done or (re)consider neglected or less obvious aspects of a project or problem ('what would happen if you would do this or that differently?'); contextualise their work ('who and what inspires you?'); or even dealing with competition ('how is your work different than his/hers?')

3) How to help supervisees delimit their research, for instance in the case of students whose topics are too broad, or those who have lost sense of direction: Suggestions included refining and rethinking the research question together time and again; encouraging supervisees to pursue multiple paths only as long as they follow each of them consistently; help them find overlaps within multiple paths; identify the resistances of the supervisee in abandoning certain paths and explore these as affordances; getting students to objectify themselves within their field of inquiry in order to recognise where they got lost; and last, recalling what made/makes this supervisee the best person to carry out this particular project, and study each upshot of the research under this light. Expressing precise approval and appreciation for aspects of the supervisee's work might encourage he or she to continue working on that which is already giving results instead of (just) focussing on reworking that which is not going well. Usually phrased as 'what worked for me is x', this kind of affirmative feedback is handy when encouraging unmotivated, disorientated or insecure supervisees.

4) How to encourage supervisees to conceptualise their artistic language or vision. Supervisees having trouble to set words to their artistic practice or unwilling to query aspects of this practice could be asked to talk more generally about various elements of their art; to unpack moments of their work that they find particularly interesting (in other words, to express what works for them in their own work); to articulate his/her like or dislike for the work of others. Highlighting and rephrasing concepts used by the candidate is yet another useful trick, for it helps understand own thoughts when hearing them articulated in someone else's words. Concept reflection, that is, associating freely around an idea, artwork or music production (thinking of concepts and other work related to it) and discussing these associations with the supervisor, might also bring in new insight.

5) How to instigate supervisees to express how their research impacts on their artistic practice, especially in those cases where the research is done 'for the benefit' of others, such as in therapeutic research or community projects. What might help is to have the supervisee rethink and analyse the documentation of research process with an eye to his/her own status/position/role/attitude within the documentation material; to express their motivation for doing the work in a pitch format, for instance, to explain why he or she thinks that their art/music can help others; to find out in detail how the practice of the supervisee looked like prior to the research. To speak from different perspectives can be a very useful exercise in this context: : 'As a web designer from our department, I need a short inspirational text about why your research is valuable', or 'As a patient with depression, I would like to know how your music can help me'.

6) How to establish a dialogue of equals between supervisor and supervisee, or at least at form of interdependency that is productive, and which plays out beyond the traditional master/pupil relationship. Ways to establish such a relationship might include having an open dialogue about mutual expectations and the official expectations of the institution/degree; combining structured meetings with more relaxed encounters; listening more to the supervisee, including to apparently trivial details of his/her research; sharing personal experiences and opinions in an honest and direct manner without hiding behind the role of supervisor; giving thoughtful and articulated feedback on the supervisee's questions, struggles and artistic work (that is, caring not only about how one speaks to the supervisee but how). In addition, it was

generally agreed that feedback in the context of doctoral supervision is much more productive feedback when it addresses the precise needs of the supervisee. For this reason, it is essential that supervisor and supervisee agree beforehand on what they would like to get out of a supervision session. For instance, the question of the supervisee to the supervisor should not be 'What do you think about my work?', but 'I need help to/with...'. Likewise, the supervisor might want to help the supervisee formulate a *productive question* for the session by asking the supervisee what he/she is going to experience in that session, whether it is a finished piece of writing, a work-in-progress, or just an idea, what concerns the supervisee in that moment, and what he or she would like to get feedback on. That defined, it becomes easier to listen and speak.

7) The workshop also included discussions about the necessity and nature of methodological advice in supervision contexts, and more broadly, about the role of the supervisor. To the question of what is methodological advice in doctoral supervision, participants answered in contrasting directions, stressing that it might mean or include, among other things: looking for an inner thread within one's existing practice; examining best practices by others; exploring and experimenting; systematising; finding the voices one respects; giving direction; letting the art speak; having the supervisee try out and experiment before taking distance and reflecting; finding a form of rigour; helping the supervisee take decisions or recognise the need for decisions. Further, methodological advice was said to be dependent on each project; an open bucket, or the filtering of specifics through a general framework; and finally, an ongoing conversation between supervisor and supervisee. Regarding the way in which supervisors can act as transformative forces in the research of the supervisee, it was suggested that the supervisor gives traction to the research of the supervisee; helps join fragments into a whole, finding connections and gaps between them; inquires and learns about the artistic work of the supervisee; asks, listens, and asks again. Lastly, the supervisor is at his/her most helpful not when giving answers and solutions, but when engaging in new or unexpected ways of thinking about specific issues, when setting thinking in motion, and therethrough the enthusiasm of the supervisee.

