

Words on Supervision and Supervising

How?

The starting point will be the spoken word, verbal exchange. If this is to be made comprehensible, it has to be integrated with practice. I will offer that through video examples.

The first time I meet the students, I ask them about their own personal history. Why dance? What ideas do they have about art as a concept? What understanding do they have of artistic experience? What are their thoughts on their own practice? Through this discussion I gain insight into the various levels of experience, which we can then relate to in different ways during the project. This also provides a foundation for philosophical and political debate as well as a process of reflection in relation to religion or various social contexts.

Then we get into the practical application of methods, planning work in preparation for the project and the examination to come. The student's own vision takes centre stage and he/she is encouraged to articulate what previously might not have been expressed.

Supervision

To encounter another person at work is also to encounter oneself. In relating to the conceptual universe, awareness and ambitions of another human being, one is forced to take a position with regard to one's own. This is an extraordinarily interesting and creative process, whose focus becomes the dialogue between us. What is the best way for us to clarify what is taking place? How are we evaluating our actions? How can we provide affirmation and stimulate the risk-taking elements of the process necessary if we are to capture what is as yet unknown to us?

When we work with a student as part of an artistic project, we encounter him or her on the basis of our concepts of art, artistry and research. Our encounter is determined in part by the way we see the artistic process. The way we see meaning. We bring our lives with us into the work. The skills we bring with us as supervisors vary greatly depending not only on our experience and our fields of artistic endeavour but on the subjective way we see them and how we value them. It is important for supervisor and student to discuss these matters and reach agreement if a positive result is to be achieved.

It is vital to encourage what we consider to be the individual drive and desire of the student towards knowledge. To provide positive support for the concept as it relates to what will lead to the creative work, even though this may end up in conflict with the values and outlook of the world around us. A precondition of working well together is the development of mutual confidence. It is difficult to resist attempting to force the pace or "push" too hard while providing support and criticism. We have to be provocative in order to move on, away from what is merely adequate and towards new frontiers. A working process must be given the time it needs, however, and that time is relative to the originator.

Productivity and quantitative assessments of numbers of performances and audience figures are currently buzzwords in the stage arts. The idea of putting together a hit show impoverishes content and blocks the path to creative development. Performance becomes a marketable

product to be adapted to a particular market. If you work fast and in a simple way, this will make the performance cheap and allow many people to come and see it. But what are they seeing? What do you see?

Commercialisation in tandem with a difficult labour market and the exploitation of art affect our students and their ideas about what is possible and impossible – success or failure. This is something we as supervisors have to tackle.

Contemporary art is always unambiguously political as it relates to contemporary society in particular. You cannot function creatively outside your time and social context. Working conditions, social and cultural patterns, political ideologies... all interlink and affect what we do. Affecting how we move, how our movement is interpreted, how the work is presented and utilised. The fact that we do what we do – has an affect. Part of the work of supervision is discussion concerning the student's judgements of his or her own work, of dance as an art form, of how art is seen within the wider concept of culture.

I see this discussion as a vital part of supervision and training in clarifying our ideas and understanding of the working process and the finished work. Words flood in when we talk. Ideas are formulated through constructive questioning. Don't put words in the students' mouths. Wait for them to find them. Try to find ways of formulating what needs to be said: speaking, writing, drawing... It is not enough to say that the work speaks for itself. This is something I may assert but the student is faced with mastering a set task as part of the educational situation. Documentation forms an essential part of this.

The work of art is meant to represent the working process and the concept of the project. Documentation provides a necessary complement. What it should look like is not predetermined. Here we have to remain as open and tolerant as possible while nevertheless eliciting from the student what is necessary to clarify the questions, themes and issues of the project.

As supervisors, our task is often to make sure matters are under control and to provide help in setting boundaries. Sometimes, I feel it is important instead to get the student to "let go". Many students put a great deal of effort into written work and the planning of the implementation of the project, and into its logistics, instead of devoting themselves to the physical work and letting go of the written and the verbal. The supervisor's task is to support the student in these efforts and to get the student to trust the choreographic process – to find the confidence to deal with what the project is really about. I can also contribute ideas and references in relation to the work of other artists that touch on the themes of the project and in this way help "widen the student's horizons". What does it mean to be influence – to influence?

The project description is where we start. It needs to contain the overall concept of the project, its motivation, practical and logistical ramifications and a timetable as well as budget calculations, where appropriate. The plan of the project should also make clear what the student sees as the goal of the project - the finished product. The work should be documented both as a working process and as "product" (see the criteria established for artistic projects as examination work). The student determines the form of the documentation.

Another key aspect involves getting to grips with the concept as a whole and not getting overly stuck in the detail while remaining true to the student's overall concept. The student

may be fully consumed by particular aspects of the work and therefore needs to be able to rely on me to maintain an overview in my supervision of the project. As a result I need to ensure that I am available and can be reached at any time for a conversation, a brief word, discussion at a more advanced level or a meeting in person. Moreover, it is my view that, as the supervisor, I have to be prepared to make a major contribution in terms of time and effort towards the concluding phase of the work when the whole thing has to be picked over, criticised, reformulated and so arrive at its final form. For this to work the practical execution of the work has to be well planned and structured in advance.

In my experience what students find most difficult is prioritising the practical aspects of the project. Fitting in time in the studio (or wherever the project takes place) with the choreographic process.

The work can be being documented on video and in working diaries in the form of sketches, word fragments, ideas, and text. Here, too, it is my considered opinion that written work must play a subordinate role to physical work. It is in the choreography that meaning is born and the work of reflection around this process may also consist of images and movements. If we are seeking to find acceptance on the part of the outside world for a new kind of knowledge formation, we have to believe in it ourselves. We have to put it to the test.

We also need to discuss how we see the outcome – the finished product. Is the performance the goal or simply an accounting of the knowledge, the understanding that has been acquired in terms of the theme of the project? I think it is worth devoting extra attention to the expectations we carry within us while engaged in the artistic process. As an artist I define a new reality through the work/the performance/the product, but does that make it the goal?

We can always gain new insights through discussions of the work we do. Both the student and I are made to reflect as a result and, by continuously having to struggle to clarify our thought processes, our conceptual worlds come into focus both as ideas and as the formation of knowledge. The important thing is not to get bogged down in words.

As supervisors we need to have an agreed understanding of the framework set out for the course by the examination administrator and the established criteria for evaluation. This enables us to be clear to students about what the “rules” are. What do we mean by what is stated there? An important difference between the secondary and the tertiary educational levels is that “doing one’s best” may not be enough. The work has to achieve a certain level in order to be approved. As supervisors we have to “coach” our students to achieve results that meet the established criteria.

Our role is not to be the one, who knows and has all the answers, but to guide the student with the knowledge at our disposal towards the relevant information, theory, artistic practice and to help them find inspiration in various forms. In this way the project becomes a shared journey, as part of which - as the supervisor - I am expected to have something to teach. What we share is curiosity about the outcome. During the course of the work, the supervisor can make a valuable contribution in pointing the student toward current or previously carried out research or towards work on themes/concepts linked to those of the student.

It is vital:

- To have clear and straightforward agreements between supervisor and student

- Never to leave a meeting without having agreed a time for the next one
- To have reached agreement about what has to be done before the next meeting.

Supervisors need to be given opportunities to meet and discuss their work. As a supervisor I need to be able to believe that the student's project is capable of becoming an interesting piece of artistic work whose quality is unambiguous. What are we to do if we lose faith in the project? How are we to deal with a student who fails to live up to his responsibilities? What should I do if I feel that I do not have the competence necessary for the project? What does it mean to fail? What does it mean to succeed?

Supervision is a key part of the work we do and of the student's education. An adventure!

When, as a student, you work on an artistic project for your examination, criteria will have been established for the assessment and grading of your work. What is necessary in order to be able to apply these criteria is experience of both choreography and of the artistic process – experience, moreover that is not restricted to one's own practice. The examiner is presumed to have this knowledge. The same applies to academic opponents against whom you have to defend your project. This means that certain parts of the assessment are fairly objective, while others are inevitably subjective. This applies to all judgements, irrespective of whether your work is scientific or artistic. It is the responsibility of the educational institution to ensure that most competent individuals have been recruited as examiners.

Thoughts Around the Everyday

What does art mean in our culture and in its various social/political/financial contexts? What does the concept of art represent in our various worlds? What does it mean for you/me? Unavoidable and essential questions we need to come back to again and again.

Feeling inadequate is something many students have mentioned to me. So many of us want so much. We want to do everything for the ones who love us, everything our studies demand and everything no one has ever demanded of us. The whole thing frequently ends up in a collision with what we intuitively want ourselves. Reason is supposed to put this all together into something manageable in an everyday world that is rarely particularly everyday. We have to create ourselves anew every day.

The world, or real life, takes on colour from our thoughts. If we concentrate on thinking good things, the colours are different from when we are feeling mistrustful. Our bodies are our dwelling-places. We move within a context. Our movement expresses where we are in our lives, and it is through the body that we turn this into experience.

Every day a process of examination begins that is without qualification. It takes time. What we discover? That varies. Sometimes nothing more than the confirmation of what we already know, sometimes depressing insights about our inadequacies and shortcomings. Sometimes things that are completely incomprehensible - which can be so provocative they provide energy for several days' work. That's the way daily life is.

We look at one another because we want to see who we are. Our eyes need to be as open as we can keep them. What we say we can see will always say more about ourselves than about the person observed. This is part of our respective set-ups, our ways of recreating ourselves. It

is also vital to do what we are afraid we will not succeed at. This challenge encompasses the possibility of learning something new, both about ourselves and the world around us.

Our fears stop us from taking up space with what we know, with what we desire and what we do. Conventions get in the way. It is fear that is the most restricting. The fear of being inadequate, of failing, of not being good enough. Everything is so much easier on stage, social conventions are much less tangible and the word is so much wider. Our stage is anything we decide it is going to be. It might be the pedagogic situation, the rehearsal studio or the theatre.

We often seek to restrict both our thoughts and actions on the basis of preconceived ideas about social, moral, financial or other forms of limitation. We have to insist on our right to have faith in our ideas. This is easier for some people than for others.

As decided individualists we have to function in the collective environment required for the realisation of a process which demands more skills than I myself possess. In order to make this possible I have to make clear to myself what it is I want to achieve. I have to make this clear to the people I am working with and ultimately to the world around me. It is this that necessitates the daily process of self-recreation. Every day I have to find a new relation to myself, my ideas and my motivation. I have to take responsibility for this process and for the methods I adopt. This goes for me, as well as for the students.

Many of these issues and the decisions that arise in the search for “answers” can be seen as political. They make clear our views on ethics and morality. What rights do we assume in the working process? By what right do we demand other people’s attention.

It is with all these questions stowed in our luggage that we are going to relate to the various needs and wants that form part of the student’s creative process.