

Getting personal – what does it mean? A critical discussion of the personal dimension of thesis supervision in higher education

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The argument of the article is that contemporary research into thesis supervision overlooks important didactical features of the supervisory dialogue because of its focus on general pedagogical categories. Entailing this argument I suggest that the personal dimension should be seen not only as a means to enhanced communication between supervisor and supervisee but as a way of manifesting personalised subject knowledge. As its point of departure the article gives a treatment of different understandings of the personal dimension in thesis supervision in contemporary research in Scandinavia and Britain. Subsequently these lines of research are contrasted with views on personality and professionalism found in prominent Danish and British research into the so-called ontological turn in higher education.

Keywords: higher education; supervision; supervisory dialogue; ontological turn; personal dimension; subject matter

Introduction

The relation between personality and professionalism in higher education has received much attention in recent years, and the meaning of the personal dimension in supervision and teaching in higher education has become a matter of great importance in the mass university of today. This article examines the meaning of the personal dimension of thesis supervision in the university, based on contemporary research in Scandinavia and Britain. The article focus is on the personal dimension of thesis supervision, and more precisely the supervisory dialogue between supervisor and supervisee. I find it of great importance to discuss what exactly the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue contains: is the personal dimension ‘merely’ related to a practical–pedagogical sphere where the primary purpose is to facilitate learning processes during the supervisory dialogue? Or should the personal dimension also be seen as a feature of the subject matter itself in hand in the specific dialogue between teacher and student?

Traditionally, personality in higher education has lived a half-life: at the same time it is acknowledged as an important feature of the pedagogical event *and* seen as an aspect from which one should keep a critical distance when presenting academic arguments. For this reason the personal dimension in higher education is somewhat trapped between its central role in pedagogy where it serves as an important feature of the communication between supervisor and supervisee, and its darker side involving the imagined erosion of objective science and academic method. The personal dimension in higher education has been regarded as an odd fellow whom many have felt equally familiar with and somewhat estranged from. What place in higher education does the personal dimension actually possess?

I argue that the personal dimension of supervision in higher education not only covers a practical–pedagogical dimension concerned with *how* we teach or an existential–ontological dimension concerned with *why* we teach. The personal dimension is entangled with the subject matter itself

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in a way which makes the personal dimension part of *what* we teach. This argument heralds a new understanding of the relationship between practical, ontological and epistemological dimensions of teaching and learning: *knowledge* (epistemological dimension) is (ontological dimension) always already *in a certain way* (practical dimension). This junction of epistemological, ontological and practical dimensions can be foregrounded through the category of style.

Increased interest in the personal dimension in higher education

Research into thesis supervision and university counselling is a matter that is, these days, well established. Since Per Lauvås' and Gunnar Handal's pioneering work in the field, thesis supervision has for the last 20 years received a good deal of attention in Scandinavia, as well as internationally (e.g., for classical texts on supervision and counselling: Lauvås and Handal 1987, 1998, 2006a, 2006b). Especially during the last decade, research into thesis supervision and the supervisory dialogue has accelerated worldwide. In Scandinavia this is, e.g., seen in the Danish literature on the subject, normally called either '*vejledning*' (translated: counselling/supervision/educational guidance) or '*specialevejledning*' (translated: thesis supervision) (Andersen and Jensen 2007; Rienecker, Harboe, and Jørgensen 2005), and in British research into the field several categories are applied to specify the particular type of purpose and interaction between teacher and student, whether it be counselling, mentoring, tutoring, coaching or supervision (Thomas and Hixenbaugh 2006; Eley and Jennings 2005; Eley and Murray 2009).

In contemporary research Gina Wisker is one of the key figures in promoting the importance of the supervisory dialogue for successful thesis supervision. Wisker accentuates the subtleties and polyphony of the supervisory dialogue (Wisker 2005, 127–8) and states that: 'supervisory dialogues, whether face-to-face or through electronic/postal/textual means, are the main way in which we work with our students to encourage, direct, support and to empower them to get on with and complete their research and writing' (Wisker 2005, 120). According to Wisker the space for learning and teaching created during the supervisory dialogue is a complex and transformative space, an unpredictable pedagogical event full of blind angles, surprises and unforeseen challenges wherefore 'it is no surprise that any theory about student learning will be questionable because human beings are not scientific models and not measurable in experiments and trials' (Wisker et al. 2008, 89).

In a similar fashion to Wisker, Lauvås and Handal stress that to navigate in this highly complex pedagogical space it is of key importance to give attention to the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue. As early as the late 1980s, they underline the importance for the supervisor to *not* be a pedagogical chameleon which shifts its colour according to the surroundings, but instead to take the point of departure in oneself, and to act as a professional in a *personal* (not private) way (Lauvås and Handal 1987, x). In order to establish a relationship which builds on mutual recognition and trust, thus generating a space for creativity and differentiated learning, the supervisee must be able to sense the supervisor's person and not only the professional role or mask which she wears as part of her identity as a professional.

This idea has been further developed in their later work on the subject, and Lauvås and Handal maintain the point that the supervisory dialogue must never become an automatic and standardised procedure where the supervisor acts and deals with his students in the same manner during every supervision meeting. To be able to differentiate learning processes during the supervisory dialogue one must be *present* and be able to listen to the student as an individual person and to detect the particular challenges and potentials in the specific personal–professional context. Supervisory dialogues must never harden in impersonal techniques, and the supervisory dialogue must first and foremost be viewed as a personal meeting (Lauvås and Handal 2006a, 101; Lauvås and Handal 2006b, 225).

The personal dimension as a means of facilitating learning processes

In the work of Lauvås and Handal the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue is first and foremost linked to emotional and ethical features which aim at generating a trustful relationship between student and supervisor. What they call for is a relationship which builds on mutual respect and recognition (Lauvås and Handal 2006b, 236). The personal relationship is seen as something which can either increase or decrease the output of the communication *about* the subject matter discussed during the supervision meeting (Lauvås and Handal 2006a, 77).

Likewise, in the subfield termed 'personal tutoring' the personal dimension is located 'outside' the subject matter, and as stated by Sally Wootton the personal tutor deals with issues concerning:

Personal support: ... confidential discussion about welfare and other personal issues that may negatively affect learner's progress... [and] Academic support: This includes study skills, managing workload, work experience and career development. (Wootton 2008, 123; see also Wheeler and Birtle 1993, 15ff)

Despite the ambition of personal presence and individual differentiated supervision this line of research connects the personal aspects of the supervisory dialogue to general pedagogical features in which the personal relationship is described in terms of communication strategies and conversational patterns (Lauvås and Handal 2006a, 104–5).

This understanding of the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue discloses important pedagogical features about the *facilitation* of learning processes in thesis supervision. However, this notion of facilitation of the supervisory dialogue designates general guidelines for how to catalyse learning/teaching processes in the specific supervision meeting. This has problematic consequences as the supervisor is in danger of becoming the very chameleon he should avoid becoming (according to Lauvås and Handal). In this mode personal supervision situates itself as a general pedagogical tool or communication strategy where the aim is to *convey* the subject matter to the student, hereby making complex matters less complex and easier for the student to digest.

Thus, this line of research into the personal dimension of supervision isolates the pedagogical form from the content of the subject matter in play in the specific supervision meeting. The meaning of the personal dimension remains on a general level, on which it is possible only to treat personally differentiated learning as a general pedagogical phenomenon which envelops or cloaks the specific subject matter in hand. This generates a great paradox as the role of the supervisor – in order to establish mutual recognition between student and supervisor, and to activate relevant communicative strategies – requires the supervisor to develop chameleon features and turn into a pedagogical changeling.

As a challenge to the research described above, I shall argue that the meaning of the personal dimension can be stretched to include the subject matter itself. Thus, I find that there is an overlooked dimension of the supervisory dialogue regarding the supervisor's (and supervisee's) personal refraction of the subject matter in hand. To fully grasp the meaning of the personal dimension we have to view the *subject matter itself* as a person-dependent phenomenon. This way we gain access to intriguing and formerly overlooked personal modalities of the subject matter itself.

The ontological turn in higher education

In contemporary research into higher education Ronald Barnett (Institute of Education, University of London), Denise Batchelor (Institute of Education, University of London) and Finn Thorbjørn Hansen (the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark) have independently pointed out what they refer to as an 'ontological turn' in higher education (Barnett 2007, 2008; Batchelor 2006, 2008; Hansen 2008, forthcoming).

For Barnett the premise and foundation for learning is for the student and teacher to find *their own voices*. Barnett distinguishes between what he calls *pedagogical voice* and *educational voice* in higher education. The pedagogical voice is an epistemological voice resounding the standards, norms and myths of a given field of knowledge or a given teacher's paradigmatic opinion on a subject. This voice is not really one's own voice, but a reflection of the expectations and demands from the classmates, the teachers, the institution and the public. It is not a fake voice, but not a personal voice either. In contrast, and acting as a supplement, to the pedagogical voice Barnett argues for an educational voice (Barnett 2007, 90–9; see also Barnett and Coate 2006, 141–2). The educational voice is linked to authenticity and personality in higher education and is ontological in the way that it not only generates knowledge, but also generates personal reality within that knowledge. To know *how* to do something or *how* to explain the key points of a given subject matter is to fuse such explanations with the contemplation of *why* this is important to me, to my life. Learning and teaching in higher education is not just something you *do*, it is also to a very high extent something you *are*:

The educational voice is authentic – and that is necessarily so. Here, the student is coming into herself; is realizing herself and inserting herself into her [educational] offerings. Her utterances, her activities, her exchanges are manifestations of *her* voice. ... [it] contains the hope that the voice will be an authentic voice; the student is pressed for *her* stories, *her* reasoning. ... In finding her voice, the student discloses her being. (Barnett 2007, 93–5)

When we learn we are not 'only' producing knowledge (in the technical or pragmatic sense), we are also producing, or creating, our personal reality. Barnett states that for the educational voice to be ontological, and hence personal, it must challenge traditional discourses and roam in the periphery and at the fringes of a given paradigmatic horizon. The voice must destabilise and be destabilised itself. To put oneself forth and give voice to a personal interpretation of a given subject matter one must enter strange places where one loses one's ground and becomes disoriented and confused. Barnett links teaching and supervision in education to modes of epistemological *and* (first and foremost) ontological destabilisation and dislocation, and in the most intense and powerful situations learning and teaching challenge paradigmatic codes and contexts within given fields of knowledge (Barnett 2007, 72–6).

The educational voice does more than reaffirm the traditional academic mythos, it becomes full of integrity, enchantment and fantasy – but simultaneously it becomes disquieting and maybe even bizarre as well. The original and creative ways of voicing one's perspectives in higher education require a certain amount of courage in order to be able to endure the possible doubt and scepticism which often meet originality in higher education. The will to learn is threatened by powerful adversaries on both sides – fatigue, uncertainty and anxiety, just to name a few. Finding one's own educational voice is a struggle which renders the student (and sometimes also the teacher, fortunately) vulnerable and fragile in her own being. An important task for the supervisor in higher education is therefore to explicate 'the student's *preparedness* to venture into unknown and probably discomfoting frames' (Barnett 2007, 158; see also Barnett 2008, 78–9).

In a similar manner Batchelor distinguishes between different voices in higher education: the practical, the epistemological and the ontological voice; and Batchelor, in line with Barnett, links the ontological voice to the personal dimension of learning processes (Batchelor 2008, 47; Batchelor 2006, 786). Batchelor accentuates the vulnerability of the personal voice and suggests that the personal voice, if nurtured and not thwarted, can become a powerful tool for 'creativity and self-expression' (Batchelor 2008, 41). This careful attention towards students could mistakenly be seen as the promotion of learning processes facilitated through means of, e.g., personal tutoring, as explained above. However, for Batchelor, the personal dimension has a primary existential and imaginative meaning, and the personal dimension of supervision makes it possible

to stimulate and motivate the individual students' 'raw dream of what higher education might mean for them... This space is the site of their internal utopias, an ontological space' (Batchelor 2008, 52).

In Batchelor we find the notion that personality in higher education is first and foremost a space for existential sensitivity and imaginative freedom and potency. The personal dimension designates a space for trying, for risk and uncertainty. Batchelor links the personal (ontological) voice to themes of courage and experiment, and it is a voice which is 'exploratory, uncertain, not always in control, and suffers periods of obscurity in thought that seem like failure' (Batchelor 2008, 54).

In Scandinavia Finn Thorbjørn Hansen is a key figure in contemporary research into the personal dimension of higher education, and Hansen agrees with Lauvås and Handal that the supervision or counselling meeting is first and foremost a contextual, situational and concrete event which is impossible to standardise and fix in general categories. However, according to Hansen the traditional approach to supervision and counselling in the university is primarily based on the understanding of the supervisor as a craftsman, a person who possesses certain competence and abilities to use in the different situations of supervision (Hansen 2008, 311–2). For Hansen this instrumental approach to supervision reminds one too much of a technician's problem-solving approach to his work, and Hansen stresses that the central attitude of supervision in the university is not problem-solving but *wonder* (Hansen forthcoming, 9).

Otherwise acknowledging the work of Barnett and Batchelor, which he largely finds highly sympathetic, Hansen distances himself explicitly from Barnett's and Batchelor's notions of ontology (Hansen forthcoming, 7–8). In Hansen's view the understanding of ontology in Barnett and Batchelor places too much emphasis on the individual subject and thus becomes a disadvantageous prolongation of the subject view found in existentialist philosophy in the early twentieth century (in which the subject is understood as autonomous and independent, in contrast to views on subjectivity understood as inter-subjectivity in, e.g., Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel). For Hansen wonder is:

... primordial, a dialogical phenomenon, which not only calls us to find our 'own personal voice' but also to hear the 'voice of the matter itself' (*die Sachen Selbst*). Wonder therefore can be understood as a Middle Voice, which, paradoxically, is silent although we are able to 'hear' the silence of wonder. (Hansen forthcoming, 8–9)

Hansen stresses that the primary concern for the supervisor is to engage the student in a community of wonder, and Hansen points out that wonder: 'is the most crucial attitude or way of being that a university teacher can hope to foster or make room for in higher education if we want to educate creative and critical independent thinkers' (Hansen forthcoming, 8). To make wonder an epicentre of the supervisory dialogue is a way of accentuating the focus on the dialogue itself. In the wondrous communication between student and supervisor the dialogue itself opens up the subject matter in new and unforeseen ways, and this approach can never be an instrumental or technical approach based on communicative strategies but instead:

Wonder is the unwilling willingness to meet what is utterly strange in what is most familiar. It is the willingness to step back and let things speak to us, a passive receptivity to let things of the world present themselves in their own terms. (Hansen quoting Max Van Manen; Hansen forthcoming, 9)

For Hansen this means that the ontological turn in higher education is not merely about finding of one's own personal voice. Furthermore, it is about using this personal voice as a take-off towards mustering the readiness and receptivity for dimensions of the subject matter *itself* – a movement which must transcend the personal level in order to baffle, overwhelm and invite student and supervisor to join in wondrous dialogue.

The ontological turn – another way of facilitating learning processes?

Across different individual approaches and perspectives we find important shared notions of the student–teacher relationship in Barnett, Batchelor and Hansen. They seem to share the conviction that subject knowledge presents itself in existential–ontological modalities, which contrasts the view that subject knowledge is fixed in general paradigmatic and person-independent categories. The three authors all underline the importance of the dialogical space between supervisor and supervisee in which the subject matter takes its concrete form and becomes relevant for the particular persons involved. This calls for a heightened focus on the educational *force* of the supervisory dialogue in contrast to its pedagogical *form*. In this line of thought the supervisory dialogue can be conceived as a visionary space, and the ontological turn in higher education thus seems to hold romantic features of originality, self-transcendence, self-transformation and a certain spiritual force in high esteem.¹

However, there seems to be problematic consequences of the understanding of the personal dimension in the view of the ontological educationalists. The issue I wish to address is the idealist hierarchy between different voices in higher education. Barnett, Batchelor and Hansen all promote the ontological voice as the most important voice present in the supervisory dialogue. Even though all three authors stress the importance of the link between practical, epistemological and ontological voices in higher education, Barnett symptomatically points out that: ‘the student’s ontological and epistemological voices are intertwined, but also the ontological voice has the upper hand... Ontology still trumps epistemology’ (Barnett 2007, 97. For similar points see Batchelor² 2008, 45–6; Hansen 2008, 357–8).

As a consequence of this explicit separation and isolation of the personal dimension (the ontological level) from the subject matter in hand (practical and epistemological levels) I shall argue that Barnett, Batchelor and Hansen maintain a gap between a pedagogical–existential dimension and the concrete subject matter itself, a gap in some ways similar to the gap found in Lauvås’ and Handal’s and Wisker’s view of the supervisory dialogue. From this perspective one may say that the ontological turn in higher education is another way of seeing the personal dimension as a means of facilitating learning processes – as the learning process is facilitated through means of dialogical wonder. In this view the concrete subject matter is seen as a means of generating deeper existential–ontological meaning for the student and teacher. Seen this way, I argue that in Barnett, Batchelor and Hansen, the personal dimension is explicated in general, and to a certain degree abstract, pedagogical categories circling round themes of ontology, strangeness and wonder.

I find that the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue must be accentuated in its *concrete and specific expression* to supplement the abstract categories of the ontological educationalists. At this point it is evident that the personal dimension in higher education has largely been treated as a general pedagogical category where as the concrete expressions and the specific style of the different modes of personal supervision are not treated as phenomena in themselves but are seen as examples of abstract categories. This has the unfortunate consequence that personality and wonder threaten to dissolve into paradoxically *impersonal* and metaphysical concepts which are forged in a galaxy ‘far far away’ from the concrete supervisory event.

The personal dimension as manifestation of knowledge

In my opinion the work of Barnett, Batchelor and Hansen is of seminal importance and lays bare the deep philosophical structures of the meaning of the personal dimension in thesis supervision. However, in order to stay attuned to the concrete supervisory event it is necessary to develop new ways of approaching this concrete event. As a supplement to the above mentioned

endeavour – to lay bare the meaning of the personal dimension as either formal pedagogical categories (Lauvås/Handal, Wisker) or existential–ontological categories (Barnett, Batchelor, Hansen) – I shall argue for the need to lay bare the meaning of the personal dimension as a *stylistic* event which renders the distinction between practical, epistemological and ontological voices superfluous. Following this line of thought the personal dimension not only covers a pedagogical or existential facilitation of learning processes, but a concrete–personal *manifestation* of subject matter as well.

Here it would be advantageous to turn our attention to certain positions in contemporary American phenomenology which treat the relation between personality and knowledge as a *stylistic* relation (Lingis 1998, 2007; Harman 2005). Our engagement with the world and our encounters with other people can thus be described as stylistic events and stylistic relations. This view uncloaks a feature of the supervisory dialogue which has far too often been overlooked: the way the subject matter in the supervisory dialogue is manifested through concrete stylistic features which ‘stick’ to the supervisor and supervisee in their professional–personal engagement.

The American phenomenologists Lingis and Harman insist on the importance of giving attention to the personal modality of specific subject matter, a modality which is of course flavoured by past experiences, sociocultural norms and traditions, and geopolitical agendas, but, however, is always manifested by individual persons in their concrete engagements with the world and each other (Lingis 2007, 55; Harman 2005, 45ff). Our world is a ramshackle of multiple levels on which we move, speak and act. Naturally the voice of an individual person at one level echoes the voice of the culture, scientific paradigm or institution in which this person belongs. However, the personal voice also contains a concrete–personal level which can *never* be reduced to general socio-cultural structures or abstract philosophical categories:

A perceivable style is a distinctive kind of coherence... As we recognize a page of an author by the style, we recognize a friend by the style of his conversation, his gesturing, his way of entering into a group, of taking decisions or procrastinating. The style remains a coherence we catch on to, which varies within a certain range without our being able to predict exactly what turn it will take. We recognize at once what does not belong to this style – sentences, postures, initiatives, and emotions that we perceive as not really his but imported from elsewhere. (Lingis 1998, 35)

In this way I think it is of great relevance to examine and scrutinise such concrete stylistic features of the subject matter present in the supervisory dialogue. Hereby I call for more attention to the personal style through which *any* given subject matter is made manifest on a concrete level. We should no longer merely speak of pedagogical diversity across supervisory dialogues at the university – we should also speak of the great diversity in concrete manifestations of subject matter. Thus, it is not merely the pedagogical form which varies across supervisory dialogues – it is the subject matter itself which varies. We never just ‘know something’, we always know something in a certain way in relation to the situation we find ourselves in and the audience we find ourselves addressing. But even more important, we always express our knowledge in a certain *manner*, giving our arguments new shades, stronger or softer annunciation, functional or colourful plots, foreseen or unforeseen detours and corridors, which continually lead to new places, new vistas and horizons – or old familiar dwellings and safe heavens for our most treasured ideas, fragile arguments and secret visions.

As supervisors in higher education, we must listen to the personal voice of the supervisee – and our own personal voice as well, as stated by Barnett and Batchelor. However, we must be careful not to reduce the personal dimension to an existential category. Supervisors must be equally attentive to the fact that the personal dimension of supervisory dialogues has something to do with the concrete stylistic features of the *subject matter itself* and not merely the subject as an individual person. The personal dimension is not only about the amount of relevance a given

subject matter can have for the persons involved in the supervisory dialogue. The personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue is to an equal extent about how the persons involved are relevant for the subject matter in hand.

I am especially indebted to Finn Thorbjørn Hansen for forging the concept of the Middle Voice (see above), the voice of the matter itself. Hansen points out that it is not only the matter in hand which can be relevant for the persons involved, it is just as true the other way around. However, when Hansen mentions the matter in hand, he speaks of it in a philosophical–ontological sense (especially inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger’s later period) in which the ontological level precedes and is prior to epistemological and practical levels (Hansen forthcoming, 21). However, I do not see any reason to distinguish between practical, epistemological and ontological levels. The only differences I find relevant regarding the personal dimension are the stylistic differences where which the subject matter is concrete-personally manifested. Thus, on a stylistic level there is no point in separating practical, epistemological and ontological voices in a hierarchical way. The different voices are not different in ontological status – they are different in their stylistic expression, and hereby in their different ways of manifesting the subject matter in hand.

So, to start giving attention the concrete stylistic features of the supervisory dialogue, we must first acknowledge that there are features of the personal dimension which *cannot* be generalised and instrumentalised or hardened in abstract concepts and categories. These personal stylistic features I speak of are *not* hierarchically more pure or true than practical and epistemological features. On the contrary it is *because* of the subject matter in hand that it becomes possible to expand the understanding of what the personal dimension covers in the concrete pedagogical event. Lingis is occupied with much the same idea that the notion of the Middle Voice in Hansen suggests. According to Lingis the personal dimension is already a dialogical phenomenon, and in this he agrees with Hansen. However, for Lingis the dialogical or Middle Voice does not recede into ontological silence but conversely stands out in concrete stylistic features (Lingis 2007, 114–5).

In a similar way I wish to promote the idea that the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue is deeply rooted in the specific *content* of the concrete dialogue. Our scientific visions, ideas, conceptualisations and interpretations of the work of our peers are refracted through the personal dimension – which contains the *concrete manifestation* of these visions, ideas, conceptualisations and interpretations. These concrete stylistic features give the subject matter in hand a certain flare of personal coherence which could be termed ‘eccentric’ or ‘idiosyncratic’. Professor of rhetoric and linguistics Barbara Johnstone has examined what it means to be a linguistic individual, and Johnstone uses the terms eccentricity and idiosyncrasy to describe the particular coherence which stick to us as individuals. Johnstone’s point is that what we say or tell others is always said in a certain manner, using certain stylistic habits, eccentricities and idiosyncrasies – thus giving our speech individual character and style (Johnstone 1996, 19–20; 2008, 157–8).

I suggest that we import this view as well when speaking of the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue: that due to the personal dimension the subject matter in hand can be said to contain eccentric and idiosyncratic features which cannot be reduced to psychosocial features of the context in which the subject matter is treated, but more radically understood; that the subject matter in its concrete manifestation is eccentric and idiosyncratic in itself due to its concrete stylistic presence. This does not only count with regard to the *way* we say something or other, but to *what* we say. If we look for the range of the personal dimension in the supervisory dialogue we should not stop at the demarcation line between pedagogical form and scientific content. The personal dimension prolongs itself into the very heart of the subject matter in hand in our dialogue.

Conclusion

It has been shown how the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue helps facilitate learning processes and helps the supervisor and student navigate in the complex network of elements of supervision in higher education. This method of facilitation was ascribed first to more traditional research into supervision especially seen in the research of Lauvås and Handal and Wisker. In addition to this, the so-called ontological turn in higher education has set a new agenda for the meaning of the personal dimension of the supervisory dialogue. The promotion of an existential dimension has expanded and deepened the understanding of the relationship between personality and professionalism in higher education.

However, my criticism in this article has been that these two approaches to the personal dimension of supervision primarily focus on general aspects of the supervisory dialogue which can be extracted from the concrete encounter and used to generate new abstract categories.

I argue that there are important pedagogical features of the supervisory dialogue which *cannot* be generalised, and are not therefore tacit knowledge or beyond technical importance. I have argued that the concrete personal manifestation of knowledge present in the supervisory dialogue contains important stylistic features which cannot be reduced to general themes or abstract pedagogical categories. On the contrary, these concrete stylistic features must be viewed on their own terms as different concrete–personal modalities of the subject matter in hand.

So, what to do with this abstract treatment of concrete stylistic features? Hopefully, it unsettles our traditional pedagogical framework which strives to settle the personal dimension in well rounded and fixed categories and structures. This view is clearly not adequate, and more importantly it gives an impoverished understanding of the relationship between personality and professionalism in higher education. We must be more closely attuned to the concrete level of the supervisory dialogue and view the dialogue as a stylistic event in which the personal dimension is seen as a feature of the subject matter in hand. Not with the aim of forging new tools or categories through which we can deal more efficiently with students and curriculum in higher education. We should take care not to limit our understanding of the personal dimension as a category merely containing views on *how* we teach or *why* we teach. We must understand the personal dimension as a central part of *what* we teach.

Notes

1. Here we find interesting and not yet explored familiarities with another British educational researcher, David Halpin, whose focus explicitly is turned to the relationship between romanticism and pedagogy in higher education. Halpin explores features of heroism and hope in higher education, not unlike the themes found relevant in the view of the ontological educationalists (Halpin 2003, 2007).
2. In contrast to Barnett and Hansen, Batchelor tends to view the different voices present in higher education as equally constitutive of the educational space. Barnett and Hansen are more firm in their opinion that the ontological voice has primary status in relation to practical and epistemological voices.

Notes on contributor

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