

Session 3: Effective supervisory conversations

Dr Róisín Astell, Dr Julia Rayner, & Dr Eleanor Loughlin



Programme Etiquette

Working with each other

Confidentiality

All discussions are confidential

Commitment

Attendance and Punctuality

Care

Listening, inclusive, non-judgemental

General housekeeping

- Mics off unless you are speaking (put your 'hand up' if you would like to contribute)
- Same rules for coming and going as a physical room
- Cameras on, especially for breakout room discussions
- All slides and resources available on the session webpage

Session overview



In this session, we examine how:

- listening to understand can improve clarity, trust, and candidate ownership
- effective questions can open up thinking and support better judgement
- the Supervisor Dialogue Wheel offers a practical structure for moving from context to next steps



By the end of this session, you will have:

- a clearer understanding of the communicative range for effective supervision
- practical strategies for listening without jumping to advice
- greater confidence in using questions to support candidate thinking
- a usable framework for structuring purposeful supervisory conversations

Why supervisory communication matters



Student Wellbeing

PGR comments frequently highlight **anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty.**



Relationship Dynamics

Rising pastoral demands within the supervisory relationship.



Expanded Roles

Supervisors support research progress, personal and professional development, and wellbeing.

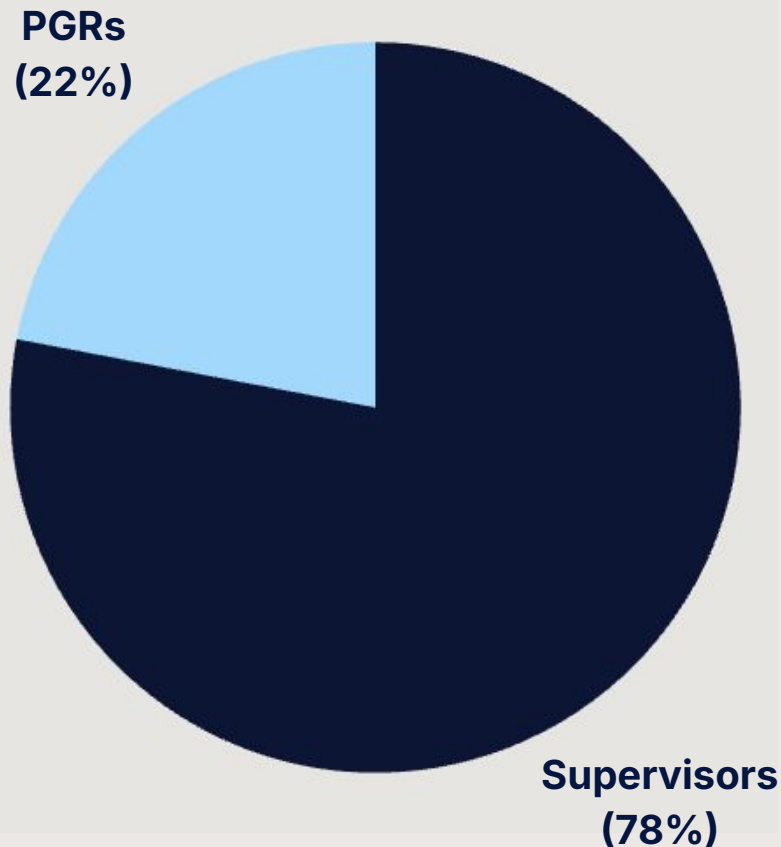
Source: Research SuperVision Project, Analysis of PRES open comments 2021-2025 (forthcoming report); Sonesson et al., 2023; Wichmann-Hansen & Herrmann, 2017

Who is talking?

In a typical supervision, what percentage of the talking do you do?

Supervisors typically **interrupt 38 times a session!**

Source: Research in progress by Professor Gitte Wichmann-Hansen



Spectrum of communication: Supervisor conversations need range

PUSH

Solving someone's problem
for them

PULL

Helping someone solve their
own problems

Directive

Non-Directive

Giving advice
Instructing
Giving feedback

Offering
guidance
Making
suggestions

Asking questions
that raise
awareness
Summarising

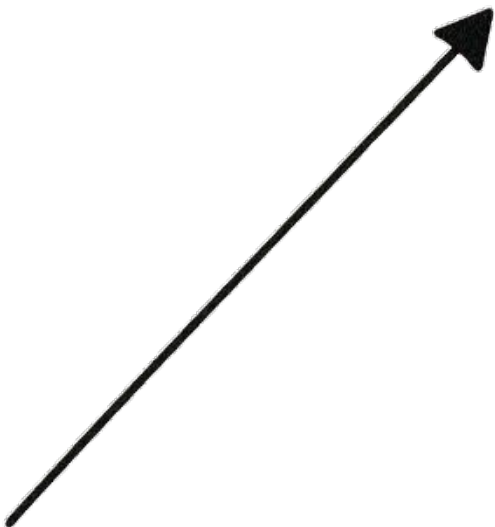
Listening to
understand
Reflecting
Paraphrasing

Supervisory conversations change across the doctorate

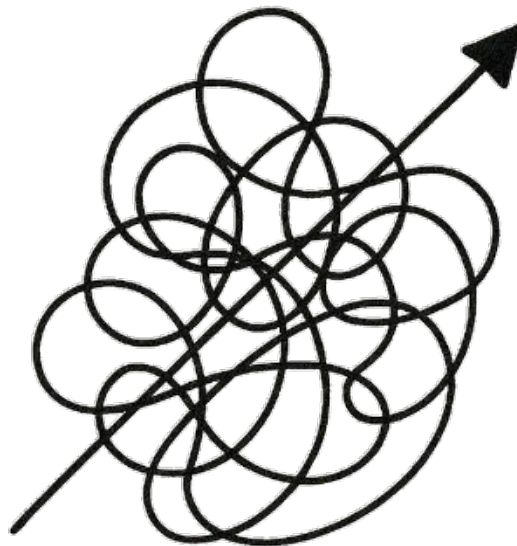
Time boundary	Cognition boundary	Possible supervisory roles (through secondary boundaries: relational, emotional, physical)
Early days	Exploring, discovering, focusing	• Guide or direct • Encourage and/or expect development of independence
Data collection	Doing and finding out	• Balance monitoring progress with responding to updates - hands off or hands on
Progression to PhD	Analysis and sense-making	• Challenge and/or inspire • Intervene and/or influence • Provide feedback
Completion	Critically thinking about originality and contribution	• Be a sounding board • Shape the outcome • Let go • Edit

Source: Benmore, A. (2014). Boundary management in doctoral supervision: How supervisors negotiate roles and role transitions throughout the supervisory journey. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(7), 1251–1264.

Expectations



Reality



What effective supervisory dialogue enables



Exploration and clarification

Ideas are explored through dialogue, not monologue.



Confidence and self-efficacy

Greater confidence and self-efficacy in their research.



Independent thinking

Stronger independent thinking and problem-solving.



Agency and ownership

Greater agency, ownership, and clearer next steps.



'A positive supervisor-student relationship, characterized by trust, respect, and open communication, is central to a strong sense of guidance and feedback quality.'

- Research SuperVision Project, Analysis of PRES open comments 2021-2025 (forthcoming report)

Two common listening stances



Listening to win

- Focuses on countering rather than understanding
- Listens for evidence to defend a position
- Narrows the conversation too quickly
- Can reduce trust and openness



Listening to fix

- Focuses on solving too quickly
- Assumes the problem is already clear
- Often leads to premature advice
- Can reduce candidate ownership

Source: Jennifer Garvey Berger, [‘Listening to Learn.’](#)

Listening to Learn (Listening to understand)



Supportive shift

A deliberate shift from
solving to supporting



Deeper meanings

Listen for meaning,
emotion, and perspective,
not just words



Openness and attentiveness

Practise curiosity,
empathy, embracing
silence, and restraint

Listening activity

In groups of three, take turns to be: **speaker**, **listener**, or **observer**.



Speaker

Talks about the issue or experience.

First 3-4 minutes



Listener

Focus on actively listening. You should summarise and paraphrase. **Avoid interrupting or giving advice.**

1 minute



Observer

Make a comment on the process - making observation of what happened between the speaker and listener.

1 minute

Allow 6 minutes for the process, then switch roles and repeat

Benefits of listening to understand

- Builds trust and rapport
- Leads to new insights
- Promotes independent thinking



Psychological safety

'...a shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes — all without fear of negative consequences.'

- Gallo, A., 2023



Comfort Break

See you in 10 minutes

Asking effective questions



'a well-timed, simply worded question can remove barriers, unlock hidden information and surface potentially life-changing insights....you need to be able to ask great questions. It is a skill that can be developed, with concentration and practice.'

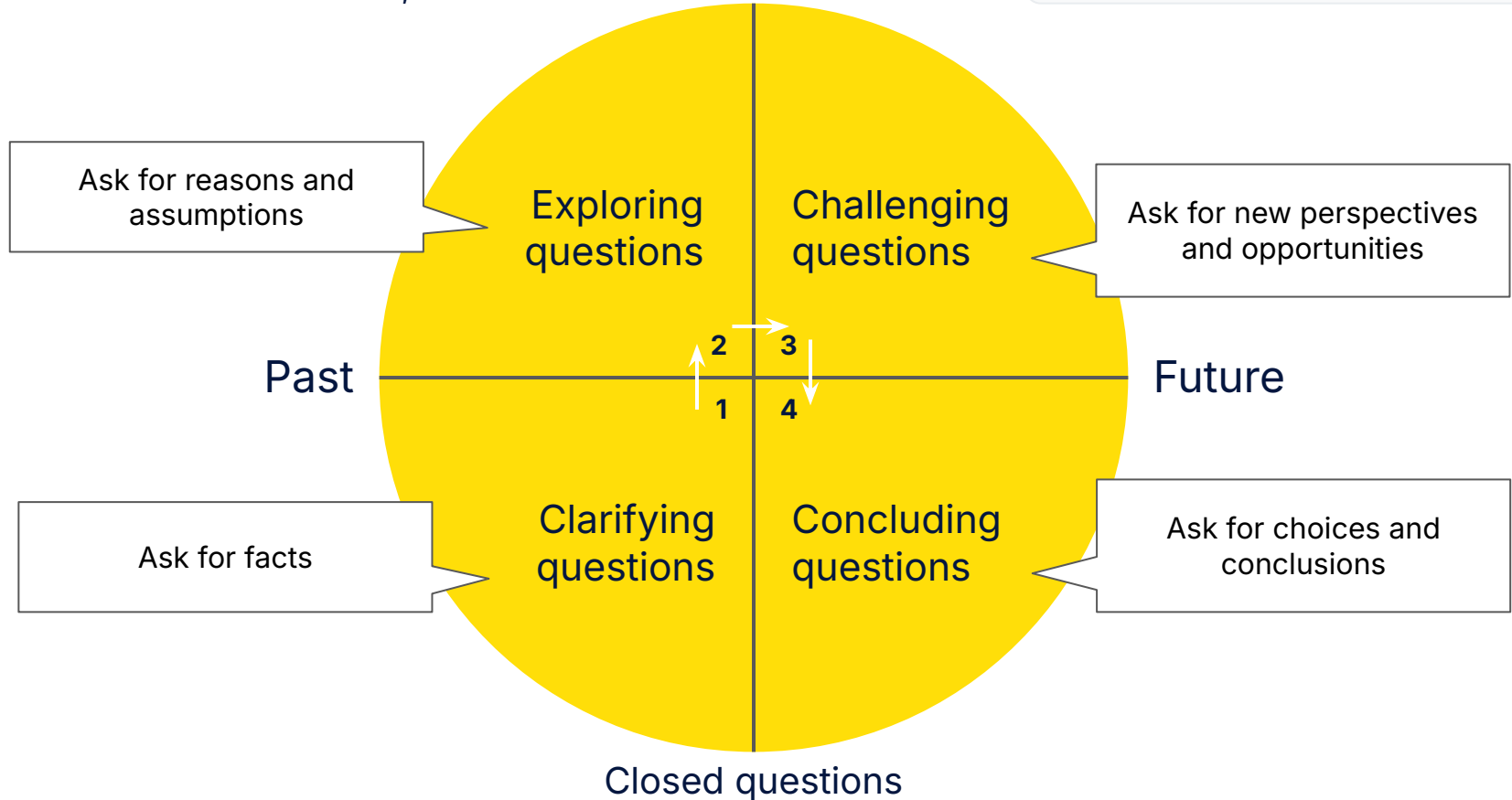
- Starr, 2021

The Supervisor Dialogue Wheel

Wichmann-Hansen and Jensen, 2015

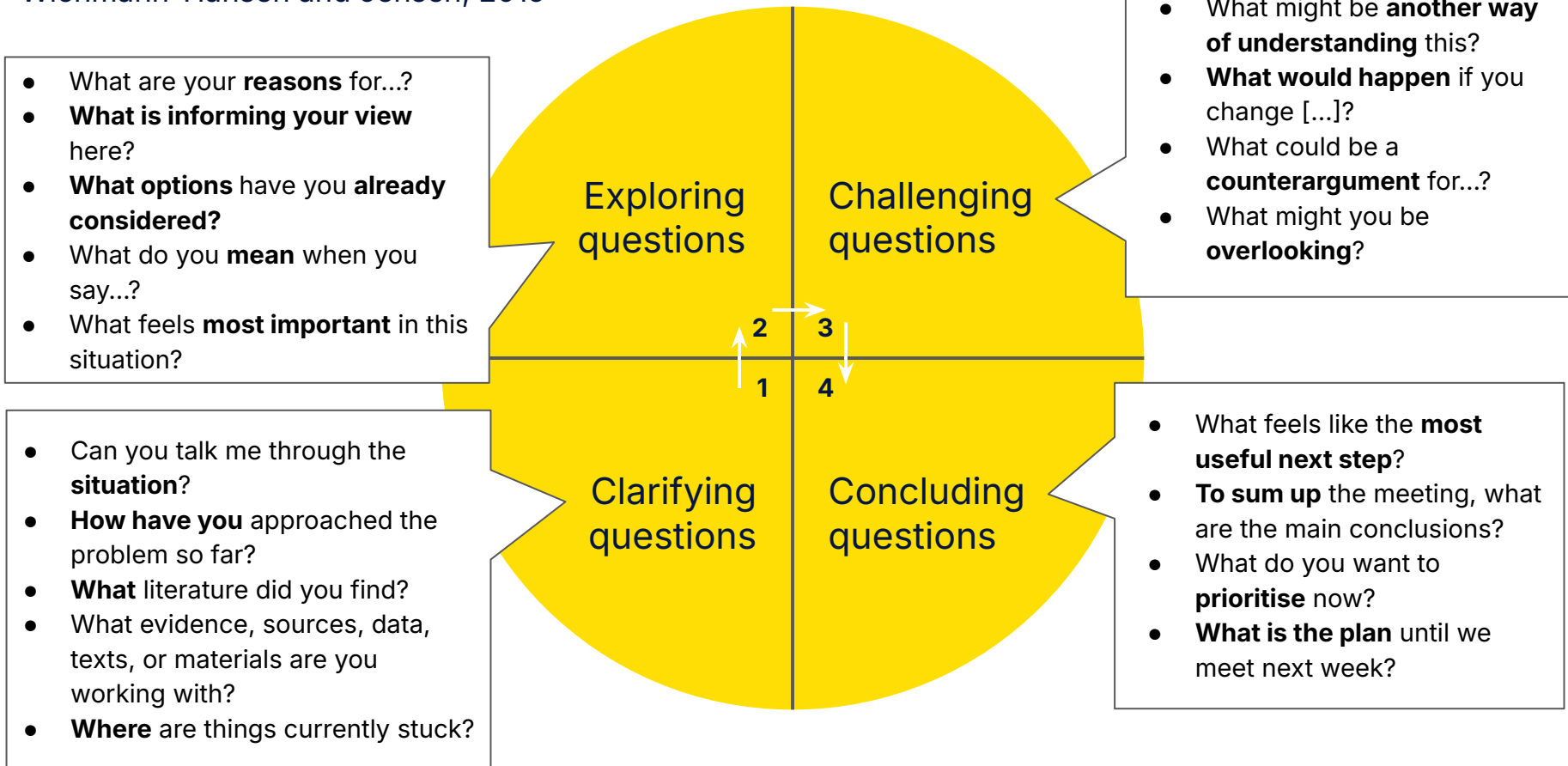
Open questions

You do not need to use every quadrant in every meeting.



The Supervisor Dialogue Wheel

Wichmann-Hansen and Jensen, 2015



Trying out the Supervisor Dialogue Wheel

Task: One person shares a real issue, challenge, or situation they are thinking through or grappling with. The focus is on practising the questioning process, not on solving the issue.

How it works

- Speaker outlines issue (2-3 mins).
- Questioners ask **one question only**.
- Speaker listens and makes notes (no immediate response).
- Speaker chooses 1-2 questions to respond to per round.

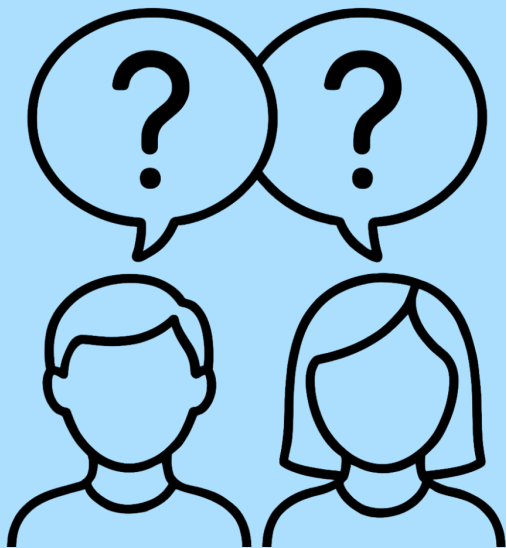
Rounds (each 3 mins)

- 1. Clarifying:** Understand the situation.
- 2. Exploring:** Examine reasoning and assumptions.
- 3. Challenging:** Stretch thinking and alternatives.
- 4. Concluding:** Identify next steps.

Ground rules

- State question category.
- Ask one question at a time.
- No advice.
- Allow silence.
- Challenge ideas, not people.

Whole group Debrief



Speaker

- Which question(s) were most helpful in moving your thinking forward?
- Was it difficult to not respond straight away?

Questioners

- How did you feel thinking about your questions in those ways?
- What were the challenges?

Using the Supervisor Dialogue Wheel in supervision

Use in **one-to-one or group supervision** to structure discussion and keep the focus on the candidate's thinking.

Quadrants 1 and 2 - Clarifying and Exploring: Establishing the context

Helps you establish the lay of the land: clarifying the issue, surfacing context, and understanding the candidate's reasoning.

Quadrants 3 and 4 - Challenging and Concluding: Decisive action

Helps you get into the more difficult or decisive parts of the conversation: testing assumptions, opening alternatives, and identifying next steps.

Active Listening: Slowing the conversation down, allowing pauses, and giving candidates space to reflect before responding.

Turning today into practice

Communicative Range

Supervisors need a broad communicative range to adapt to different supervisory needs and contexts.

Listening to understand

Improves clarity, trust, and ownership, giving candidates space to reflect and respond thoughtfully.

Purposeful Questioning

Thoughtful inquiry supports candidate thinking, helping them arrive at their own conclusions.

The Dialogue Wheel

A practical tool for structuring conversations, from establishing context to decisive action.



**Questions or
comments?**

**Provide feedback for this
session**



Scan QR code for feedback form or go to:

forms.gle/qUcKR4KQAbxP3rZo9

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