



PSDP—Resources and Tools: The positioning compass

Introduction

A positioning compass is a structured way of reflecting on a dilemma or a conversation (Partridge, 2007, 2010 and forthcoming). It is constructed using 'rich words' (Fredman 2007) from the conversation which create the 'pointers' of the compass. This can be a helpful way to map stories or 'discourses' in a conversation and identify the different positions that people in the system, i.e. the 'actors', might take up. This tool will outline how to spot 'rich words' and provide guidance about how to use them to create a positioning compass (Partridge 2017 and 2019).

There are three sections in the tool. The first explains what a positioning compass is. The second shows you how to construct a compass and the third illustrates how you can use it in supervision, in wider team discussions, and in practice with children and families.

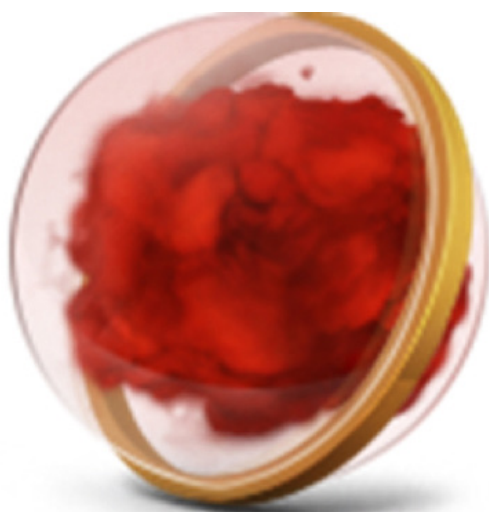
This tool is designed to be used alongside the film clip 'Paying attention to rich words in supervision', which shows how the positioning compass can be constructed and used.

Using the positioning compass to have a reflexive conversation

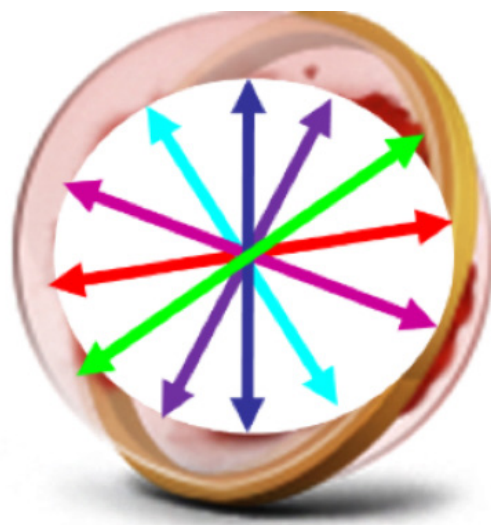
In Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Rowling 1998 p108), Neville's Gran sends him a 'rememberall', a glass ball the size of a large marble filled with white smoke that glows red when you have forgotten something. This tool describes the development of a kind of rememberall, a 'positioning compass', which social workers have found useful to facilitate reflexive positioning (Davis and Harre 1990). This can be described as the ability to recognise the way in which you and others are positioned in the emerging conversation, to become reflexive about this, and to use these reflections and observations to inform your future action.

A positioning compass is constructed using 'rich words' (Fredman 2007) from the conversation which create the 'pointers' of the compass. This tool will describe how to spot 'rich words' and to use them to create a compass to help decide how to go forward in the conversation.

Neville's rememberall



My rememberall



The positioning compass is a tool to help you get reflexive about a dilemma or a conversation. Reflexivity is a key systemic concept which adds an action step to the process of reflection. In reflexivity, you observe your actions, make meaning about those actions and then use that meaning to inform your future action.

In social constructionism, meaning and action evolve together in this way. Self-reflexivity describes the way in which you apply this to yourself, getting curious about your own actions and beliefs.

Relational reflexivity describes thinking about the way relationships are constructed and uses this to shape the future of your relationships.

Epistemological reflexivity challenges the way in which we understand the world and the 'taken for granted' construction of knowledge.

The positioning compass was created by Karen Partridge (2007, 2010) as a reflexive tool based on dialogical thinking (Rober 1999), positioning theory and David Campbell's (2006) concept of semantic polarities. The compass is a helpful and intuitive tool that social workers have found useful.

It can be described as:



To make and use a positioning compass, you listen closely to the conversation and place one 'rich word' at one end of a continuum and its opposite at the other to create what is called a 'semantic polarity' (Campbell and Groenbaek, 2006). You can see this in the below example of a positioning compass, developed to explore teamwork (figure 1).

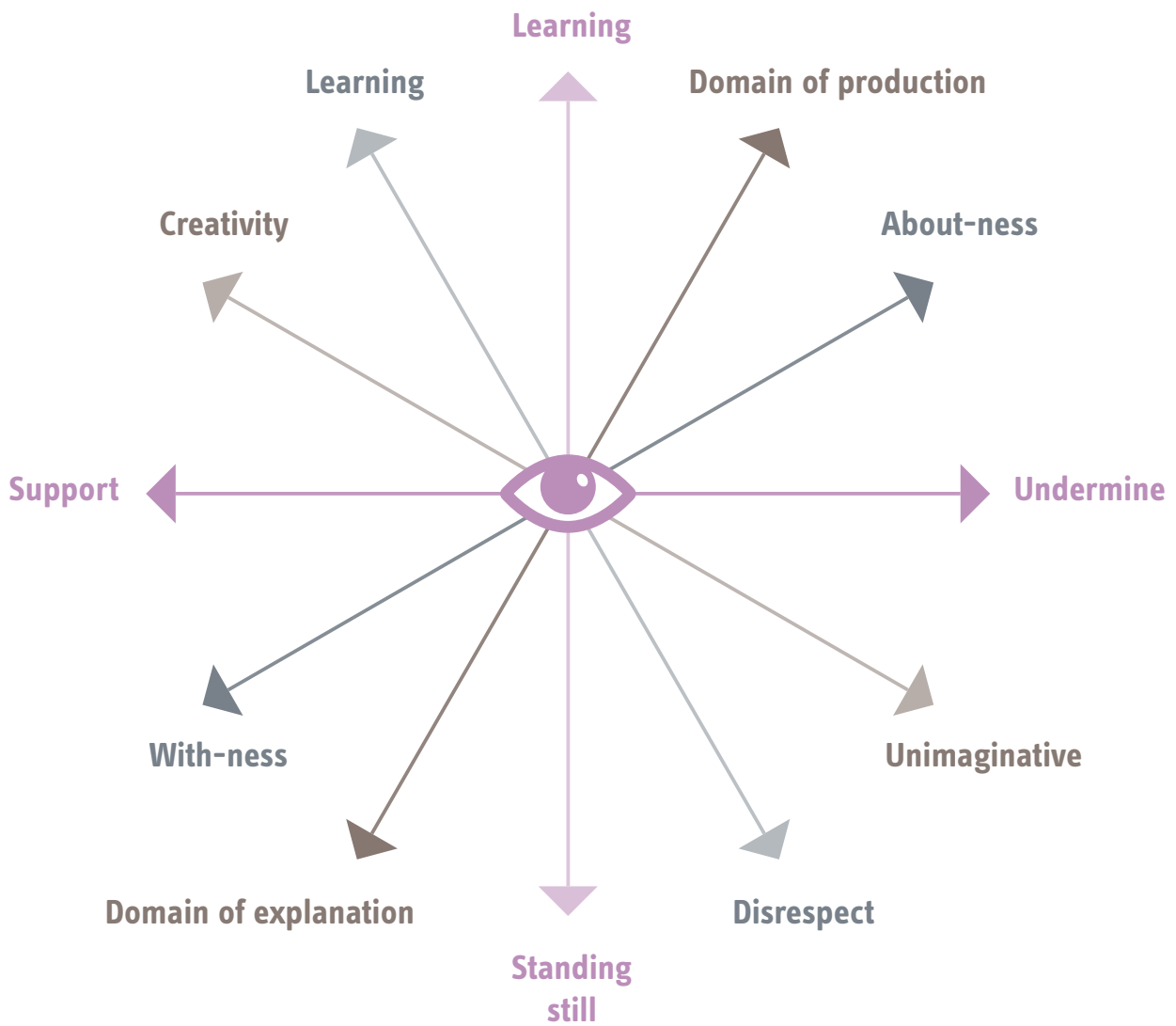


Figure 1: example of a positioning compass

Listening with our embodied selves

Making a compass depends on the experience of deep listening, listening with our whole embodied selves in a way that is fully present and attentive in the moment, leaving all preconceptions behind. The idea is that, in listening to someone speak, certain words, phrases or ideas may resonate with the listener and stand out for them. Often what stands out or ‘rings a bell’ for the listener are metaphors, images or emotions that can be described as ‘rich words.’

‘Life can be found only in the present moment. The past is gone, the future is not yet here, and if we do not go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life.’ – Thich Nhat Hanh.

Resonance, deep listening and 'rich words'

Anderson (1995) used the expression 'walking into words'. By this he meant dwelling in the meaning of the word and exploring all the ideas, feelings and emotion embedded within it. Fredman (2004) also speaks of listening out for rich words that resonate with emotion in her phrase, 'touch a heart to change a mind.'

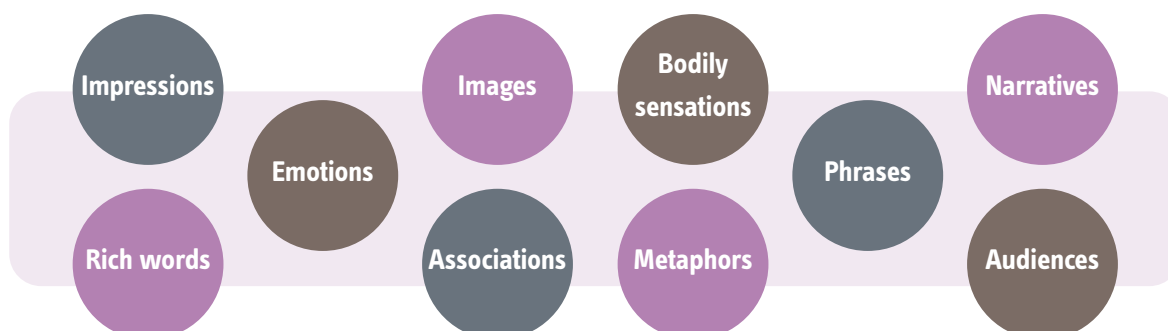
In order to spot rich words, it is important to engage in deep listening, which is sometimes described as listening with your whole embodied self, suspending disbelief and opening awareness to the unknown and unexpected. Deep listening requires:

- > being fully present
- > being tentative
- > taking time to understand
- > making space for emptiness and uncertainty (Mason 1993)
- > being aware of relationships through relational reflexivity (Burnham 2005)
- > questioning from a position of curiosity (Cecchin 1987)
- > taking a position of mindfulness.

Once achieved, it can help you listen out for:

- > rich words
- > emotions
- > impressions
- > associations
- > bodily sensations
- > images
- > phrases
- > metaphors
- > narratives
- > audiences.

Casement (1985) introduces the idea of having an imaginary 'shelf' in your mind, on which you can place experiences that resonate. This idea can also be used to order and remember significant moments in a conversation. This means that you collect these images, phrases, metaphors etc. in your mind ready for when you might need them and then, by reflecting on them, you can see how they might connect in new and different ways.

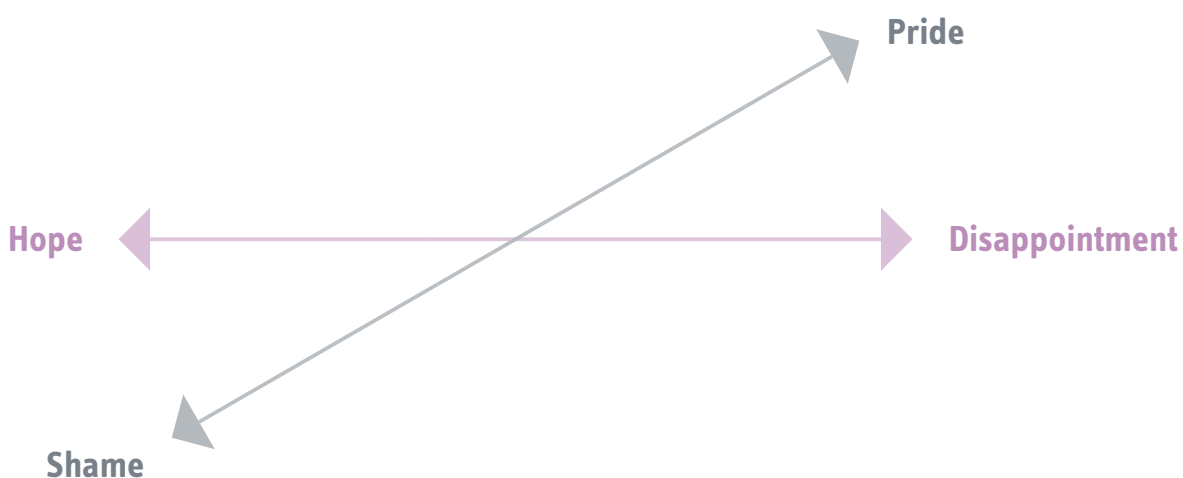


Using 'rich words' to create a compass

To create a compass, you make a note of 'rich words' as you hear them and construct an opposite word which you place at the end of a compass pointer. This is a tool for practice so a 'rough and ready' version constructed in the moment will be most useful. For example, if 'hope' stands out for you, you might come up with an opposite of 'disappointment' and place it on a pointer as below.

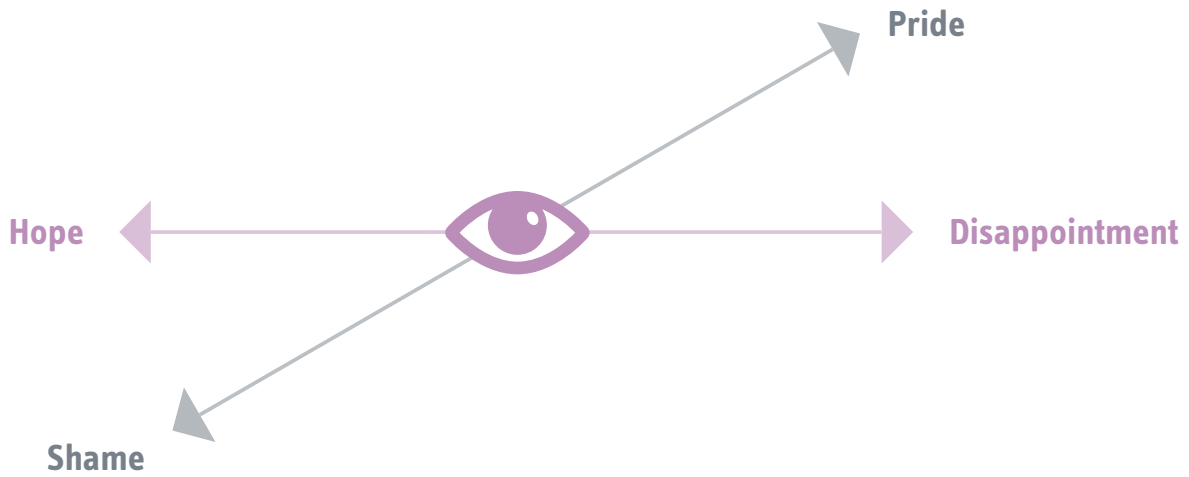


As you continue, other rich words may strike you and you add them to a pointer with an opposite in the same way. Positioning each pointer so it passes through a central point will make a compass. It is best to keep it simple and not get too crowded, it can be very interesting to see what jumps out in the first five minutes, but if you want to continue then move onto a second compass.



It is important to remember that the compass is just a construction, not a reality. It describes the conversation between an actor and an observer at a specific point in time. The opposites that have been chosen by an observer and are not 'real' or 'true'. For this reason, when the compass is full enough to explore, you can add Maturana's eye (Maturana is a Chilean biologist who introduced the idea that reality is constructed in the eye of the observer and that there is a Multiverse of possible ways of seeing – 1988) to the centre to remind you that this is a 'temporary punctuation', i.e. a way of seeing or understanding that is bounded in time.

In another instant it might shift or change and be described differently, or blow away like dandelion seeds.



Questions to explore your compass

Once a compass has been created the following questions might be helpful to explore. This can be done alone, with a service user or family, or in supervision:

What words are you drawn to?	What resonates for you?	What were the boastful stories?
What were the shy stories?	What is unsaid?	What are the positions that these words invite people to take up?
What sort of relationships might get constructed?	What are some of the 'opposite contexts' that might be useful to explore?	What theory might be useful to explore in relation to the compass?
What new directions of enquiry might be opened up?	How might this impact on your practice?	

Ways of using rich words and the positioning compass

This section outlines some possible activities that use rich words and the positioning compass. It suggests where and when practice supervisors might be able to apply these ideas and provides some instructions for different exercises.

All the techniques described as part of this tool use the systemic concept of ‘externalising’ (White 2019). Drawing a compass, lining up on a continuum, or jumping into different positions places the dilemma or problem being addressed outside of the person. This means that the worker and supervisor can join together to work on the issue as it is no longer personalised into one person, but becomes a characteristic of the whole system and a shared endeavour.

1. To inform an individual or group supervision process

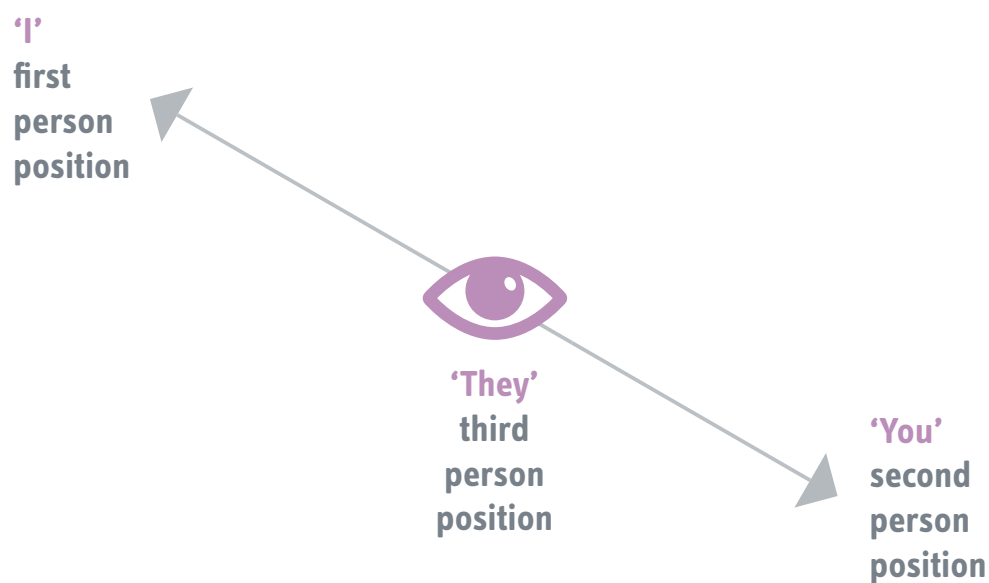
A compass can be drawn as the supervision session progresses, or in a pause for reflection, and the questions above can be explored. In a group supervision process, a reflecting team can also use the compass as material for their reflections.

2. Exploring positions and relationships in supervision and teamwork

In conflictual situations and at times of organisational change, individuals and systems can take up oppositional positions to each other. Creating a team compass in a group meeting might show that the words at the ends of the compass pointers describe the positions that the actors involved in the interaction take up. This means that each pointer can describe the opposite reciprocal positions that people in the system are taking. For example, if one person or one part of a system takes up the position of holding onto hope, others might be full of disappointment. If one team is enthusiastic about change, another may be full of resistance. These positions are linked in a dynamic way, like a taut elastic band, so participants can also flip positions.

In positioning theory, three 'person positions' are described on the compass pointer below:

- > **I:** first person position
- > **you:** second person position
- > **they:** third person position, an objectifying position outside of the interaction.



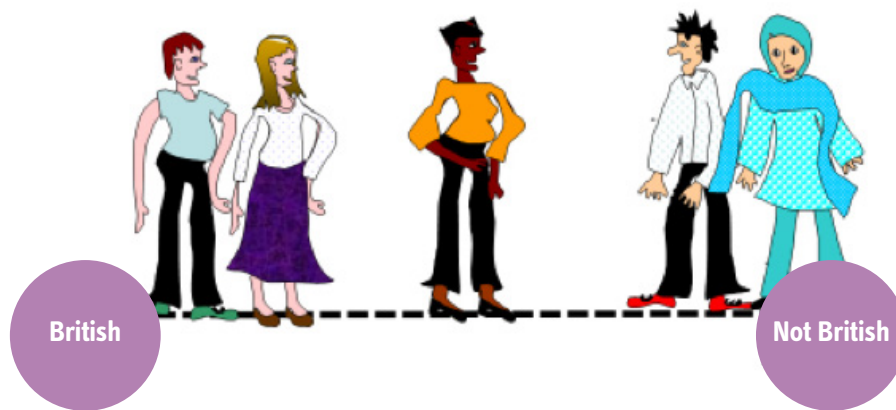
It can be helpful in supervision to ask questions which invite people to place themselves in different positions, perhaps like:

'If you were to give up the position of rescuer, what do you think would happen to the family you are working with?'

3. As an action technique to experiment with changing people's physical position in the room

You could invite a family or a team to line up on one pointer or 'semantic differential' (a way of thinking about differences in ideas, objects or events) as described by David Campbell, who used to say that the most important thing was not where you positioned yourself on the line but the conversations you had with your neighbours to choose your place.

LINING UP ALONG A CONTINUUM



The rich words from a compass can be written on 'footprint' pieces of paper and placed randomly on the floor. Participants are invited to stand in one footprint and speak from that position, saying what it feels like to be there. They are then invited to choose a more attractive position to stand in and speak from. This is particularly helpful to address tricky dynamics in teams as the whole team can get reflexive to the problem and the footprints or positions are placed outside the individual and therefore externalised.

JUMPING INTO POSITIONS

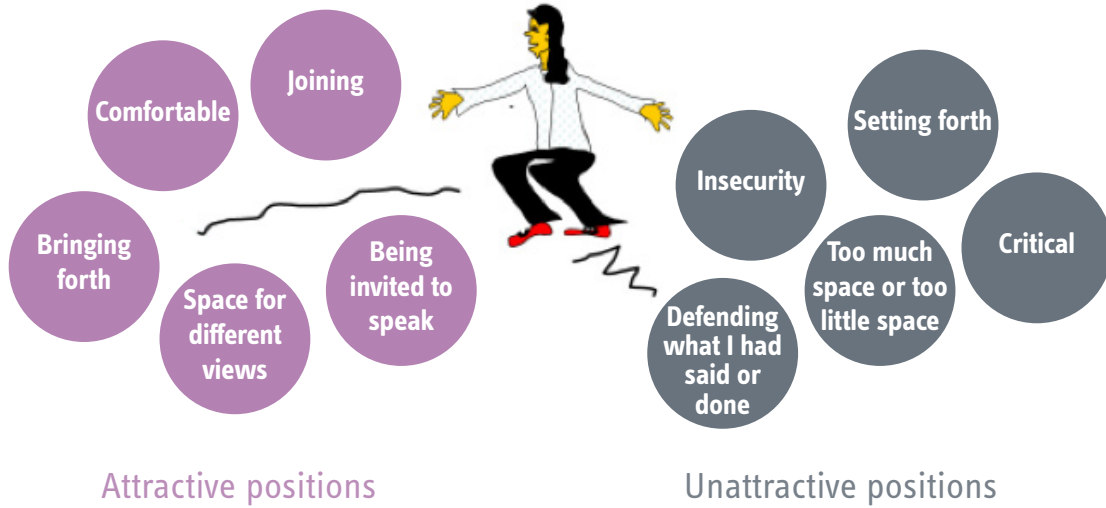
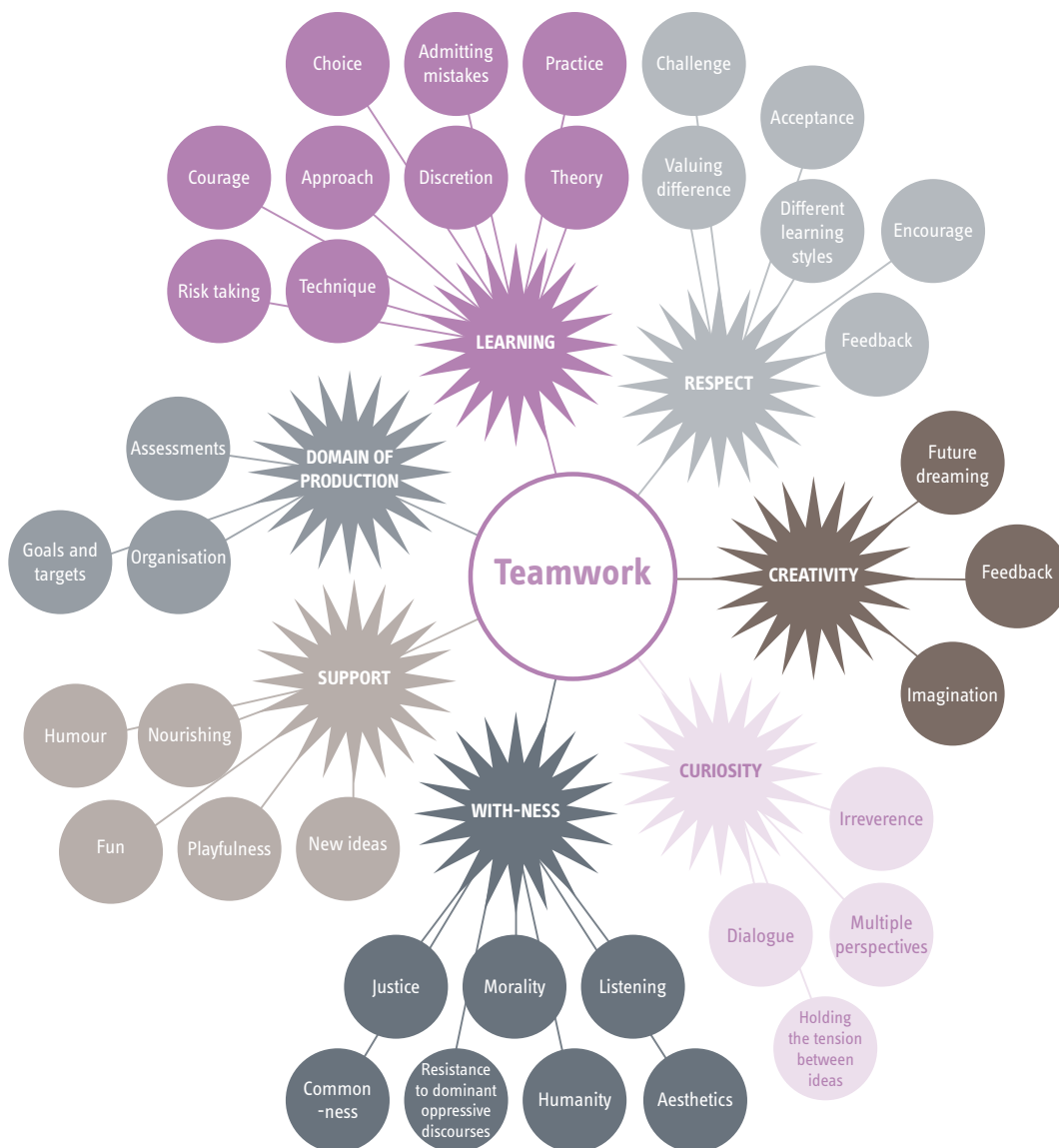


Figure 2 shows an example of how rich words can be used to jump into positions.

4. To explore an organisation issue or dilemma

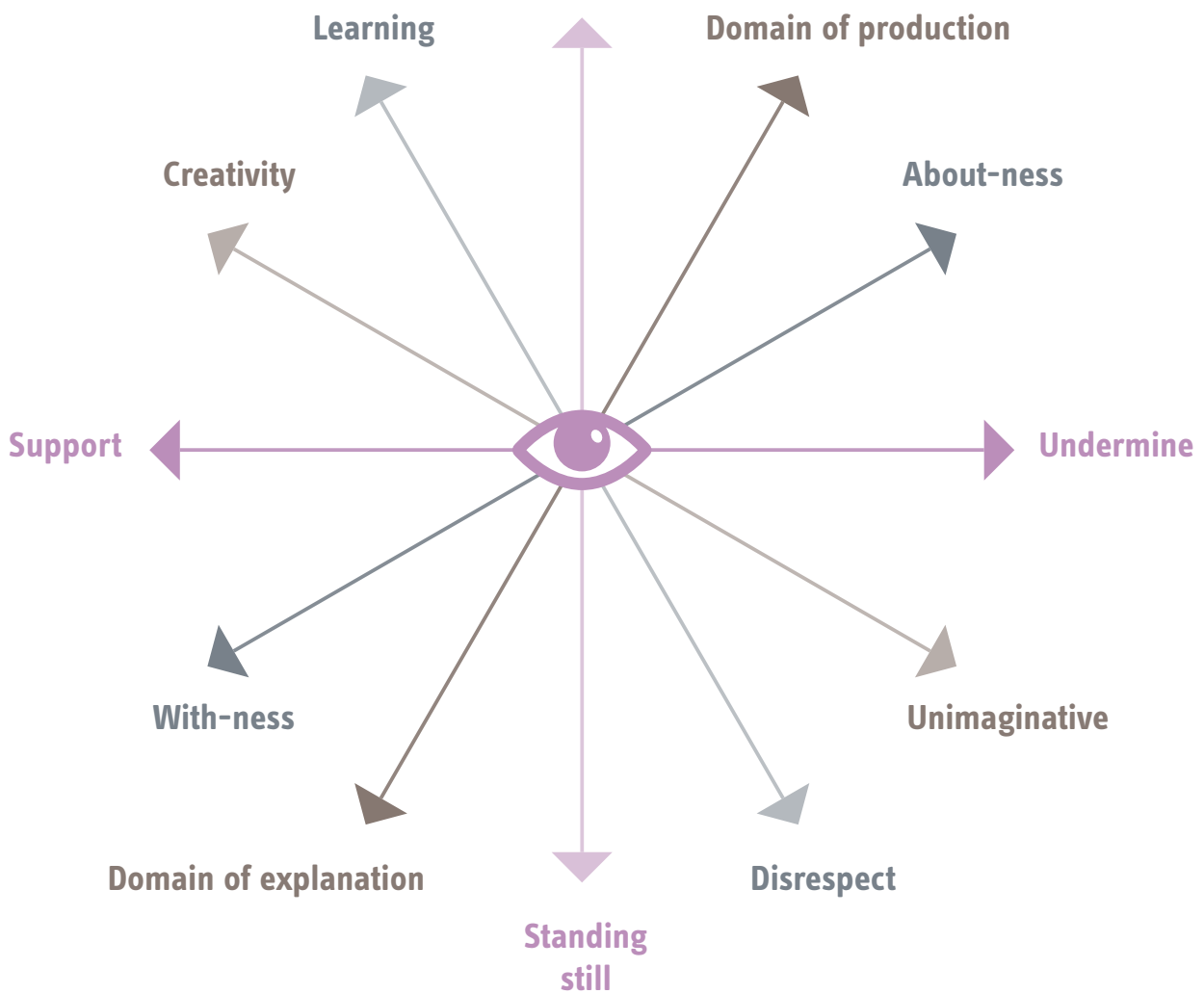
The diagram below shows a ‘linguagram’ created by a small supervision group to explore teamwork. A linguagram (McAdam and Lang 2009) is an opportunity to ‘walk into a word’, a sort of themed brainstorm, where a rich word to explore is placed at the centre and the participants create connections that are grouped together into themes, as per the spiky shapes in the diagram.

The first linguagram deconstructed the word ‘supervision’ and was completed in a small supervision group where people had different views about what they wanted to get from the session. This enabled the group to set goals for the future.



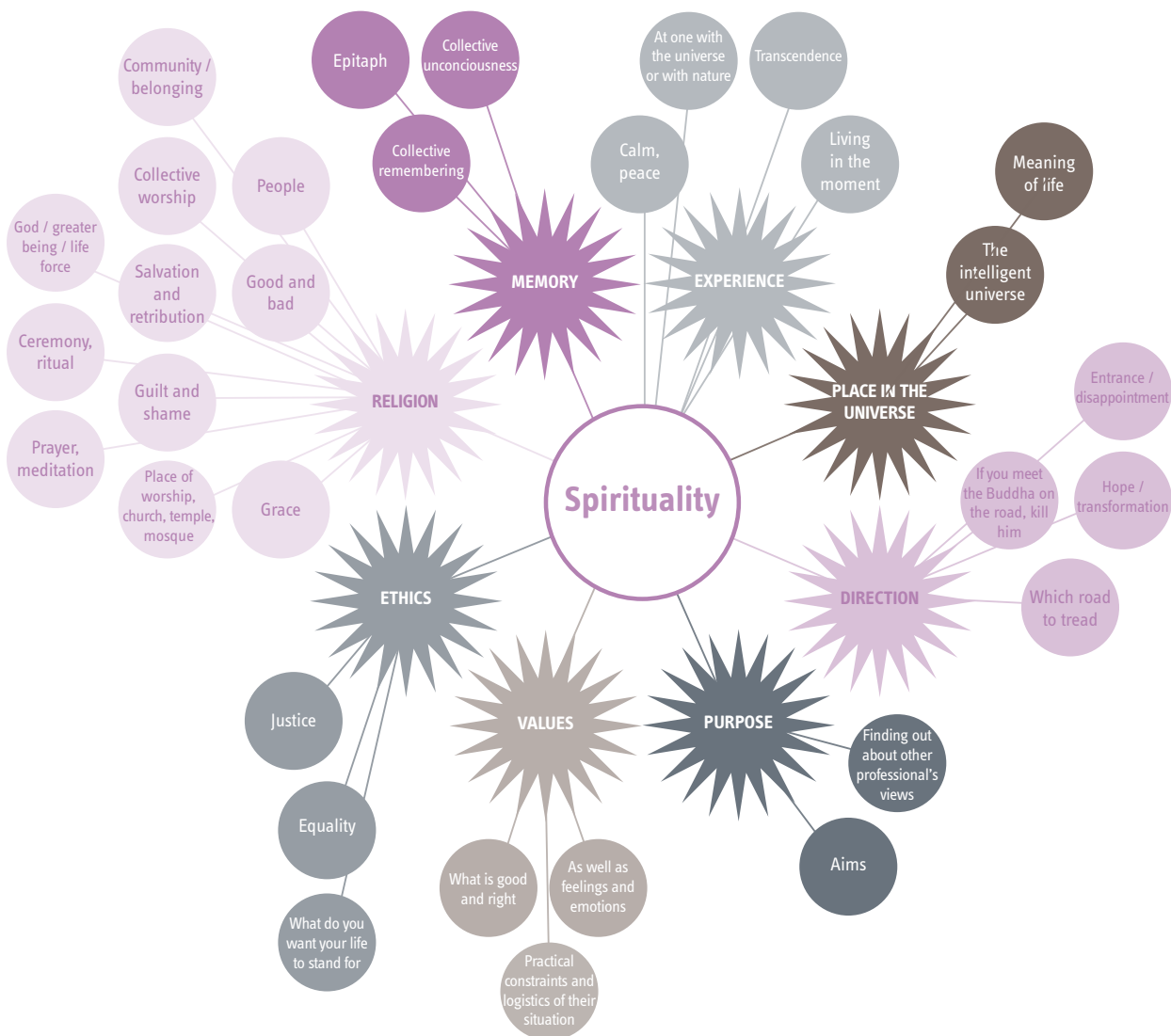
The main 'spiky' themes can be used to make a compass as below. This illustrates the narratives that the team is caught in and enables them to be creative about ways forward.

POSITIONING COMPASS FOR TEAMWORK



5. For personal and professional development and for future learning

This linguagram was created in a personal and professional development session with a team who had decided they would like to increase their competence in asking families about their spirituality. Creating this enabled them to compile a set of potential questions to ask, a useful resource for both families and social workers.



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We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

Thich Nhat Hanh (2005). *Taming the Tiger Within: Meditations on Transforming Difficult Emotions*. New York: Riverhead Books.

White M (2019) The externalizing of the Problem and the Re-Authoring of Lives and Relationships. SCRIBD website, article. Available online: www.scribd.com/doc/105397109/The-Externalisation-of-the-Problem-and-the-Re-authoring-of-Lives-and-Relationships-by-Michael-White downloadd 11.39

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