

ABSTRACT: Research and Supervision across Languages and Cultures

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TOPIC:

This paper deals with some of the challenges raised by undertaking research in a language and culture other than one's own. Its five authors come from a range of backgrounds, but have significant shared experience in this regard.

A strongly felt common concern is the sheer difficulty and strangeness of writing academically in a second language and culture. This has many dimensions, ranging from the incomprehension that may result from differences in the level of specificity with which academic questions are posed, through the difficulty of note-taking in a foreign language, to the extensive repertoire of knowledge and skills required to write appropriately for academic purposes. This may include:

- (a) mastery of linguistic conventions, such as the use of particular sentence structures and lengths;
- (b) ability to adjust to different levels of formality;
- (c) familiarity with discursive norms, such as the use or avoidance of citation, references and footnotes and
- (d) accommodating cultural preferences in relation to argument and information structure.

Conventions in spoken academic discourse also gave rise to dilemmas. An obvious one concerns the level of familiarity with which students and supervisors are able to address each other. This is particularly evident where the language of supervision offers a choice between formal and familiar modes. Even where first languages (such as Marathi or Hindi) offer the same choice, making decisions about which form of address to use, in a second language and culture, remains difficult. Another problematical aspect of academic communication concerns the directness or indirectness with which feedback can be delivered (as well as the positivity or negativity of its content).

Finally the paper addresses some of the cultural dilemmas raised in studying and supervising across languages and cultures, such as the role of gifting and cultural assumptions about the relationship between supervisor and student and the responsibilities of each.

METHODOLOGY:

This paper will be jointly constructed using an interview-based methodology, employing critical incident recall to explore and amplify the issues enumerated above, which have been identified as shared by a process of brainstorming.