The Networked Learning Forum 2021: Early researchers' expectations and experiences

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Abstract

Early researchers (ERs) benefit from opportunities to present, discuss and develop their research work. A typical professional learning experience that may support ERs is their active participation in conferences. In this paper, we report on the expectations and experiences of five ERs who participated in the Networked Learning (NL) Forum 2021 by presenting their research and then having opportunities to gain feedback and insights from one-to-one interactions with more knowledgeable others and the larger community within the event itself.

We draw on qualitative research with our main data sources being a pre- and a post-event online survey. We were interested to explore the extent to which the experiences described by the five ERs participants met their pre-event perceived views and expectations. While the pre-event survey delved into the participants' professional background, motivations for participation and expectations, the post-event survey targeted participants' perceptions about their learning and potential takeaways.

Findings indicate that the five ERs saw their participation as an opportunity for their professional development and as an avenue to make and create professional connections with others in the same field of research. Most notably, they expected feedback from the NL Forum 2021 community and their interactions with field experts (referred to also as knowledgeable others) as support that could help them gain new and deepened insights for developing their research ideas and work. In describing their experiences (post-event), participants highlight opportunities for one-to-one conversations with experts, discussions in small groups, individual and collective reflections, connections with other ERs and the possibilities for expanding their professional learning networks. These findings highlight the importance of design features when offering events specifically targeted for ERs. In particular, findings indicate that creating an intimate, interactive and safe environment is essential for ERs to feel confident to present their research, critically analyse new perspectives and knowledge shared by others, and eventually acquire new knowledge.

Keywords

Conference, Expectations, Experiences, Higher Education, Early Researchers, Networked Learning.

Introduction

Conferences, spanning across academic and scientific disciplines, play an important part in the professional activities that research academics engage in (Rowe, 2017). Generally, it is the aim of conference organisers to broaden the participation of diverse groups (Casad, Chang & Pribbenow, 2016) and offer them the opportunity to meet, interact and network. One such target group is early researchers (ERs), particularly because of their novice experience in the field of research and, as a result, their professional need to further develop their research repertoire and presentation skills.

The NL Forum 2021 was organised with this end in mind. It was conceived and planned to bring together and provide support to a small group of ERs in the field of Networked Learning (NL). The NL Forum 2021 thus aimed to provide this group with an educational and networking space for collegial interactions between experts and novice researchers. While it sought to provide a friendly environment within which they could obtain feedback on their research and exchange experiences, it also offered ERs an opportunity to explore possibilities for getting published.

In this paper, we report on our exploration of the extent to which the experiences described by the five ERs participants in the NL Forum 2021 met their pre-event perceived views. To do this, we designed a qualitative study that included two data collection phases: a pre-event and a post-event online survey. While the pre-event survey focused on the ERs' reasons for participating in the NL Forum 2021, the post-event survey targeted their experiences presenting, receiving feedback and engaging in discussions with field experts. This constitutes the first part of the NL forum 2021 evaluation study. The second part of the study sought to deepen insights captured through the post-event survey on the experience of the event for learning and development from the participating ERs' perspective.

Literature

Conferences are generally held to facilitate knowledge sharing among researchers and academics and to support formative higher education and continuing professional learning and development (Chapman et al., 2009; Lang et al., 2019; Rowe, 2018). They also provide the place and space for dissemination of latest research and for networking. While there are different types of conferences, most generally target large numbers of participants and tend to rely on a one-to-many form of communication with limited opportunities for interactions among attendees (Edelheim et al., 2018; Rowe, 2017). However, the research conducted by Rowe (2018) shows that participants value conference events that involve active participation and opportunities for making contributions. Moreover, findings from this research suggest that participants have different needs that include sharing knowledge, increase their visibility as researchers and the need to be acknowledged by others within the field. Indeed, as Edelheim et al. (2018, p. 105) contend, with regards to academics' participation in conferences

> we are simultaneously constructing our own identities as academics: the things we do, the sessions we attend, the questions we ask (and refrain from asking), the connections we develop, and the ensuing research we work on are all part of making us into the selves that we experience and others see.

The most recurrent factors for attendees in choosing to attend a conference is that the focus is on their area of interest, they would have the opportunity to share their work, the presence of knowledgeable keynote speakers and the potential for networking (Edelheim et al., 2018; Lang et al., 2019). A study conducted with educators who attended an online professional development initiative shows that their attendance was based on having the opportunity to ask questions to experts leading the sessions, getting to know and discussing with others who have a common interest in the field and sharing ideas (Poce et al., 2021).

Conferences are a means by which ERs, and in particular doctoral students, can learn to become practitioners and possibly establish themselves in the world of academia (Chapman et al., 2009). However, the experiences offered by conferences for career development of ERs is under researched (Chapman et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2009). James et al. (2009) explain that ERs as those who are uniquely situated in their career stage of academic research and attempting to build their professional research profile. For ERs, this is a phase that defines a stage of learning, development and growth into academia (Medcalf, 2011).

Chapman et al. (2009) conducted a study about the expectations and experiences of doctoral students who had attended the 2005 International Research Conference of the Academy of Human Resource Developments. They report that doctoral students had varied expectations and professional development needs. Of particular relevance to our paper are findings that relate to the challenges that these research students encountered. In particular, these challenges related to (1) the lack of time and space for interaction, (2) field experts who were not sensitive to students' needs, and (3) students having lack of experience with participation in past conferences and not feeling a sense of belonging within the conference community. Such experiences relate to Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' and, hence, to the challenges of ERs in socialising as they become full members of a larger and more expert community of researchers.

According to Jennings et al. (2009), ERs may develop themselves better by becoming part of and establishing themselves within a community of more-experienced academics, that is, of like-minded people who help them develop their identity as researchers while also offering them support and the space to practise research and to enhance their skills as researchers. For ERs, maintaining relationships with field experts (e.g. past supervisors, university colleagues and other knowledgeable others) related to their area/s of interest is essential for their professional growth. In their transition to academia, they need to develop the confidence to share their research ideas and become critical about their research and that of others. As Medcalf (2011) claims, for ERs, the challenge is to be able to articulate the research and develop the courage and confidence to present their work to more established academics.

Research Method

Data collection

The pre-event survey consisted of seven questions – two closed and five open-ended. The closed questions generated demographic data about the five participants related to their professional role and their years of experience in this role. The remaining open-ended questions sought deep insights related to how networked learning related to their professional

role and/or their research and development interests, their reasons to participate, their expectations, their research and development needs and the extent to which they thought that participation in this event would address the research and development needs they had identified. In order to be able to compare participants' perceived views to their actual experiences, the post-event survey followed the same structure and questions were relatively similar. For example, the first two questions required the same information as those in the pre-event survey. The remaining five questions were again open-ended and required participants to write about the extent that their participation met their perceived pre-event views, the event activities that they found most useful, aspects of the event that they would keep and those that they would change or plan differently. Finally, they were asked to describe the most important takeaway from participating in the NL Forum 2021.

Each survey, which was designed and offered online using Google Forms, took between five to ten minutes to complete. The pre-event survey link was sent through an email a week before the event while the post-event survey link was sent via Zoom as soon as the event ended.

Collaborative data analysis

In embracing the essence and implementing the main scope of NL, as researchers we adopted a collaborative qualitative analysis. Moreover, considering the explorative nature of this study, a collaborative qualitative approach within the interpretative paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) was deemed to be most suitable for understanding expectations and experiences from the participants' own words. Cornish, Gillespie and Zittoun (2013, p. 79) define collaborative data analysis as "processes in which there is a joint focus and dialogue among two or more researchers regarding a shared body of data, to produce an agreed interpretation". We adopted this approach because we recognise that we, as researchers, see the world from a different point of view. Thus, our approach to collaborative data analysis stems from a common belief that, as constructivist researchers, we acknowledge that there are multiple realities to a situation and that integrating our diverse perspectives and research backgrounds could generate more robust findings (Cornish, Gillespie and Zittoun, 2013; Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). We think that by integrating the first author's research interests in the design of continuing professional development opportunities with the second author's interest in the field of learning and teaching using networked technologies in higher education learning settings would generate, on the analysis of the data, deeper insights into how an event such as the NL Forum 2021 could benefit ERs' research and development needs.

Our researchers' roles required us to take a step back and adopt a critical approach to analysis. Being critical meant that we engage in ongoing dialogues that took place face-to-face and online. For example, the pre-event survey responses were first coded separately. This was followed by a discussion meeting to reach an agreement on the initial codes and work on developing a set of surfacing themes. Although quantification of the intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) was not sought, the authors still noted the high rate of agreement with the few disagreements dissolving in the discussion and configuration of themes and subthemes. Our collaboration in the data coding process allowed for a more systematic, rigorous and transparent approach. The same procedure was followed for analysing the responses to the post-event survey. This collaborative data analysis approach

incorporating such an intercoder check served as a means to build reliability (Barbour, 2001) on our interpretation of the research findings. Largely, we think that the fidelity and trustworthiness of the research findings (emerging from the data but also as a result of our personal experiences and beliefs) is fundamentally shaped by the collaborative and critical approach assumed by the researchers through all stages of the research design and development.

Data analysis generated different sets of codes which were discussed and then collaboratively elaborated and developed into themes that informed the emerging findings. For example, data in the pre-event survey included the following codes: 'obtain feedback', 'knowledgeable others', 'personal learning networks', 'support', 'presenting experience' and 'deepened insights'. These pre-event codes were then merged with the post-event codes to identify emerging themes (see Table 1 for more details).

Table 1: The data analysis

Codes		Themes
Pre-event survey	*Post-event survey*	
obtain feedback; deepened insights	discussion; fruitful conversations; reflection; confidence in being a researcher	• Gaining insights and deepened knowledge • Acquisition and participation • Access to knowledgeable others • Expanding the personal learning network
support	acquired resources	
presenting experience	presenting research	
knowledgeable others	meeting experts one-to-one; intimate meeting	
personal learning networks	connecting with others; expand professional learning networks	

The next section presents the findings of the pre-event and post-event surveys. We present an interpretation of the five ERs' expectations and experiences of a NL event which was primarily intended to provide them a space for support in presenting and developing their research towards publication.

Participants' demographics

All participants were ERs but otherwise it turned out that demographically they were a varied group. Two participants were university teachers reading doctoral studies. One participant was in a school leadership position with a Masters' degree level educational background. This participant was doing research on her own initiative. Two other participating researchers were pursuing a Masters' degree award. One of these postgraduate students was a full-time school teacher and the other was a full-time student. For these two latter researchers, the Networked Learning (NL) Forum 2021 was a first-time experience presenting their research in progress.

Findings

Participants provided specific reasons for participating in the NL Forum 2021. These included exploring and deepening knowledge of networked learning and developing professionally. For example, for (P4), notwithstanding her prior participation in past events, this forum motivated her to participate due to

> Professionalism and expertise of one of the hosts, and participation in past events. Every time I participate, I am so encouraged and inspired by new ideas and approaches that are always presented at networked learning events. This event is a new challenge for me. (P4, pre-event survey)

These five participants sought to understand the extent of their contribution to the field of research, 'grow further as an early researcher' (P2, pre-event survey) and 'gather more knowledge regarding the academic world of publishing' (P3, pre-event survey). This suggests that participants viewed the NL forum as an approach to improve their research practice. Others also mentioned that it serves for supporting personal networks. For example, P1 and P2 expected that the NL forum will:

> Provide possibilities to engage in, be part of and enlarge my network and to experience new learning prospects created from engaging in my field of research as a professional development experience. (P1, pre-event survey)

> Assist me in further developing connections with a group of learners and maintaining these connections to relay better information. (P2, pre-event survey)

These expectations indicate that participants also viewed the NL forum as an opportunity for professional development that could further sustain and expand their professional learning networks. The post-forum survey responses showed that the forum served participating researchers to expand their personal learning network, access to knowledgeable others, gain insights and deepened knowledge and obtain support for researcher development. There was a focus on acquisition affordances of the event but more still there was attention to the participatory orientations of the event. As participant P3 commented about the experience:

> It was a unique opportunity to take a step back and reflect on my research work. I was also able to connect with international peers and field experts and get some insights and ideas on how networked learning is achieved. (P3, post-event survey)

These ERs most strongly valued access to knowledgeable others. In the post-survey, participants repeatedly referred to the opportunities to discuss their research with knowledgeable others, to directly interact with field experts and to obtain expert advice. The one-to-one "Meet the Expert" activity, which was part of the researchers' meeting, was especially emphasised by all participating researchers. It was valued for permitting such close contact between novice researchers and field experts. In fact, one expressed the idea for a future similar event extending the activity permitting the novice researchers to consult with different specialists so giving them more time 'to be listened to' (P5, post-event survey). Two participating researchers also called for more structure and clarity with regards to a small-group Zoom breakout room activity. Attention was drawn to an initial moment of hesitance related to the lack of clear guidelines from the hosts before this activity took off. Considering that the elicited criticism and recommendations for improvement were mostly directed at this

activity suggests substantial capacity of such a networking activity to support novice researchers in their academic pursuits. In fact, all participating researchers explicitly singled out this activity and the encompassing researchers' meeting as the most useful aspects of the forum. Evidently, novice researchers valued extended time periods in direct contact with knowledgeable others for supporting their research.

Their expectation for a potential opportunity to share their research and 'get some feedback on getting published' (P3, pre-event survey) were recurrent aspects shared by the participants in the pre-forum survey. Indeed, participants shared their views about what to expect out of this event, mostly related to presenting their research, learning from more knowledgeable others and obtaining feedback to improve on their work.

> It will be an opportunity to present and discuss my research work with international peers and field experts. I expect this to help me reflect even further on my research work and perhaps provide me with a greater insight. (P2, pre-event survey)

> Belonging to a community, having access to keynote speakers and their ideas, presenting my research and getting feedback are aspects that I am looking forward to. (P4, pre-event survey)

> I expect to familiarise myself with different research approaches and understand how others view my research and topic. (P5, pre-event survey)

Participants also expected that such an event would serve as a support structure to deepen theoretical knowledge and strengthen the research being presented by the insights and critical feedback from others.

> Through the feedback gained and the discussions created with the keynote speakers and attendees, further thoughts and deliberations could be generated on how networked learning and professional development could both work conjointly to support and enhance teacher learning and development. This could also lead to the possibility of further research and the writing of a paper on these areas. (P1, pre-event survey)

> Judging by the experience of the organizers, keynote speakers and the researchers, and the design of the event, I believe it can help me gain insights into my research. (P3, pre-event survey)

> The opportunity to talk directly about my research is rare for me as I am a part time distant student. I am interested in critical feedback and identifying some weak aspects of my research for me to strengthen it theoretically and methodologically. (P4, pre-event survey)

In the post-forum survey, all participating researchers referred to the fruitful discussions they had experienced. These discussions were variously claimed to have permitted acquisition of resources, feedback on research and gaining insights to deepen and extend their knowledge.

The most useful activities were those that provided them with space and time to discuss their research leading to the acquisition of feedback, resources for knowledge development and deepened knowledge on research development. While one participating researcher stopped on acquisition (of deepened insights) as the most important take-away from the event, the other four signaled connectedness with others. These four participants saw this connectedness with others as serving to fulfil their expectations of the event. They noted that, as expected, the NL forum permitted them to connect with international peers and field specialists. Connections developed by listening to the presentations of other researchers and the keynotes and actively participating in 'fruitful conversations (P5, post-event survey). From participating researchers' disclosures, in a sense the forum served as a means to expand the personal learning network.

Furthering this idiosyncratic perspective, multiple responses in the post-event survey referred to researcher development. Researcher development was seen happening in 'presenting research to others' (P4, post-event survey) and the experience of 'receiving feedback' (P2, post-event survey). Presenting and receiving feedback were claimed to build the novice researchers' 'confidence' (P4, post-event survey) and 'self-esteem' (P4 and P5, post-event survey). As one of these participants put it 'we were not considered as 'one of many' but were given importance and particular attention' (P4, post-event survey).

For these ERs, this NL forum was a space to present and discuss their research work while also gaining valuable feedback from more knowledgeable others that could help them develop their capabilities as researchers. From what was shared by the participating researchers, the NL forum was a means for deepening and extending knowledge of networked learning, a network for gaining insights and critical feedback for strengthening their research, and a site for growth as researchers and professionals in the broader education realm.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings indicate that the ERs' experiences of the NL Forum 2021 corroborated with their pre-event expectations. These ERs were intrinsically motivated to attend, particularly to gain new insights and deepen their own knowledge of networked learning. They attributed this acquisition of knowledge to their participation in the event activities offered – presenting their research, getting feedback from attendees and discussing their work with more knowledgeable others. As Rowe's (2018) research shows, the active and collaborative engagement of attendees has a positive impact on their learning. In the case of our five ERs, they viewed this kind of participation as an opportunity for their professional development as researchers (e.g.: in getting their work published) and to expand their personal learning network and build their professional research profile – a finding also reported by Edelheim et al. (2018) and James et al. (2009).

Similar to the findings by Chapman et al. (2009), our five ERs reported different reasons for participating in the NL Forum 2021 event. However, the opportunities for learning that the ERs in our study shared appeared to converge. Most notably, they related their learning to the one-to-one session that they had with a more knowledgeable other. Unlike other conferences, where the more knowledgeable others are generally the keynote speakers who address a large audience, in the NL Forum 2021 keynote speakers also engaged more closely and actively in

one-to-one and group discussions with the ERs about the work that ERs presented and issues related to their research journey. This aspect, of ERs engaging in conversations with and receiving targeted feedback from more knowledgeable others, is quite revealing in view of the learning and development opportunities that such events can offer. For ERs, this aspect is indeed key since, as Medcalf (2011) claims, ERs pass through a delicate stage of learning, development and growth into academia and, in the process, they build their own identity as researchers (Jennings et al., 2009).

The implications of such findings draw us to the design of events (particularly, conferences and fora) as professional development opportunities specifically intended to enhance and facilitate the process through which ERs may become part of a community of more-experienced academics and eventually establish themselves as researchers. Based on our findings, we think that such opportunities should: (1) consider, integrate and address the diverse need of ERs; (2) include a range of activities requiring ERs active and collaborative participation supported by more knowledgeable others, when and as ERs request it; and (3) span over an extensive and extended period of time so that leaning for ERs becomes an ongoing process rather than a one-off event.

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