

Early researchers' experience of a networked learning forum: a site of learning and challenges

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Abstract

International conferences and fora bringing together a diverse group of researchers, scholars and practitioners are claimed to be sites of learning and networking. This paper reports on the findings of an explorative study investigating the experience of early researchers participating in the Networked Learning Forum 2021 which was specifically planned to support their learning and development. These qualitative findings are part of the encompassing evaluation study of the event more generally. This part study implemented thematic analysis on transcript data of a focus-group interview held with participating early researchers soon after the end of the event. In this paper, we share the thematic description of the early researcher's experience as emerged from this group interview. This description generally confirms the preliminary survey findings showing up the Networked Learning Forum 2021 as a site of learning and development. But distinctively, in this part of the study, the event surfaced as a site of early researcher challenges. 'Learning experience' came to the fore as a strong core theme configured by 4 primary, constituent themes; 'event organisation', 'interactions', 'means of acquisition' and 'researcher challenges'. Each of these 4 primary themes was structured by a number of subthemes.

This thematic description of the Networked Learning Forum 2021 experience from the perspective of participating early researchers, highlights the event as a compelling, participatory event bearing substantial academic advantage for learning and development. Distinctively, the academic advantage emerges as closely linked to what are identified as researcher challenges. This thematic picture, based on a single case, is very limited in scope. Further research is needed to verify claims. But meanwhile it is reasonable to listen to the recommendations made by the early researchers of this study encouraging similar events. Such events make it easier for beginning researchers to connect with experts and international peers. They facilitate beginning researchers to present their research to an international audience within a relatively less intimidating environment compared to typical international conferences which are much larger. They provide a space for beginning researchers to be challenged in developing research related competences and emotionally grow as researchers.

Keywords

Conference, Higher Education, Early Researcher, Networked Learning, Experience, Hybridity

Introduction

Conferences and conference-like academic events are pinpointed as sites for learning and development (Coryell & Murray, 2014; Jacobs & McFarlane, 2005). This is deemed to be especially so for graduate and doctoral level researchers attending and participating in such academic events. The purpose of this paper is to report on qualitative findings describing the experience of such a graduate and doctoral level researcher group participating in the 2-day Networked Learning (NL) Forum 2021. As pointed out in the symposium introduction, we use the term early researchers (ERs) rather than the popular term 'early career researchers' (ECRs). We do this in recognition of the arising researcher grouping of this specific study from the overlapping categorisation of doctoral and postdoctoral students to which the acronym ECRs commonly refers to (McAlpine, Pyhältö, & Castelló, 2018).

The concept of the conference as a public learning site traces back to more than a century ago (Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011), but research on conferences and fora to support beginner researchers appears to be a recent development. This evaluation study investigating the experience of participating ERs of the NL Forum 2021 contributes to this growing research strand.

Conference events as sites of learning

Conferences and fora are considered especially useful for supporting beginning researchers (Campbell, Wick, Marcus, Doll, & Yunuba Hammack, 2021; Craus, November, 2016; Fakunle, Dollinger, Alla-Mensah, & Izard, 2019). Jacobs and McFarlane (2005) note that a specific aim of conference events is to induct inexperienced researchers. Specifically with reference to doctoral students Chapman et al. (2009) declare conferences as a route for exploring the chosen disciplinary area and find ways to get more involved in professional communities. In drawing attention to the community of practice (Wenger, 1998) for framing social learning situations and the process of situated peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), Hilliard (2006) insists that established scholars need to take responsibility supporting newcomers to become more involved and develop as active members of the learning community. In general, Jacobs and McFarlane (2005) maintain that conferences are knowledge-building events forging a “reflective community of practice” that includes field experts and inexperienced others to present, critically discuss and evaluate recent developments, and to advance research and professional practice both substantially and methodologically (p.319).

Conferences and fora are proposed as pedagogical sites whereby educational activity and learning happens outside the bounds of formal learning “in extrainstitutional spaces and discourses” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 338). Emphasising the “public pedagogy” perspective of conferences, Burford, Henderson, and Pausé (2018) refer to the “traditional conference” which they pinpoint as featuring a banking approach (Freire, 1996) to learning. By no means is the reference to Freire’s work here meant to draw parallels to the far-removed context of Brazilian rural peasants who inspired the work of this distinguished pedagogue. It is rather the acquisition learning approach as distinguished from participatory methods that is being evoked. And this is not in any way to suggest that these main learning approaches are in opposition to each other (Cutajar, 2019; Sfarid, 1998). From their declared feminist positioning, Burford et al. (2018) call to question the pedagogical aspect of conferences as sites for learning. They appeal for conference events to be more participatory. They even suggest that delegates introduce themselves and share their attendance goals for creating a more inclusive conference environment. For the case of the NL Forum 2021, such finer details in the attempt to create a participatory conference experience were adopted more strongly on the second day of the event featuring the closed researchers’ meeting. But the participatory approach generally extended across the whole 2-day event. For the public forum of the first day, attendees were provided with numerous opportunities to interact, get involved, and have their voices heard as put on show by the enfolding symposium introduction. This paper sharing a description of the event experience from the participating ERs’ viewpoint, presents it as a pedagogical site of learning confirming literature affirmations but distinctively shows it a site of challenges.

Contextualising literature

Studies on the experience of conference and fora events are scarce. Studies on beginner researchers’ experiences of conferences and fora are even less common, and are mostly recent additions. Fakunle et al. (2019) note that although networking is said to be very important to support beginner researchers’ learning and confidence development being part of a network, conference attendance is hardly ever required when reading graduate studies. According to Fakunle et al. (2019), funding and career aspirations are two motivations compelling doctoral researchers to attend conferences. Lack of funding and beliefs that conference attendance has no significant influence serving aspirations deter attendance. Fakunle et al.’s (2019) observations appear to have been followed up by Campbell et al. (2021) months before the disruption of mass events due to the Covid19 pandemic. Campbell et al. (2021) investigated graduate students who were compelled to attend a conference from a choice of two alternatives as part of their masters’ level study programme. Reporting on qualitative findings analysing student interview data collected before and after the conference attendance, Campbell et al. (2021) report that students learnt by accumulating subject knowledge, broadening awareness of field trends and values, drawing on a sense of belonging being part of a diverse assembly of conference attendees, and appraising personal knowledge measuring up themselves to scholars and professionals. They also note that the intellectual aspect emerged strongly, and along with it there was detectable an emotional trace. Reporting on doctoral students’ experiences of conference attendance Chapman et al. (2009) position these early researchers on the periphery of the congregating scholarly community. Unsurprisingly, the researchers found

that first time attendees are the most likely to be challenged in trying to become part of the scholarly community. They affirm that the doctoral student experience was affected by expectations, approach and personal characteristics. Chapman et al. (2009) found that doctoral students encountered “more barriers than bridges across the “scholarly divide””, the most notable being the conference organisation and structure. Based on their investigation considering doctoral students participating in an international forum, Coryell and Murray (2014) draw attention more directly on the emotional aspect along with the intellectual perspective of learning through the conference experience. They note that the emotional perspective closely correlates to inexperienced researchers and attendees who are relatively new to the conference disciplinary area. The evaluation study of the NL Forum 2021 links up to this nascent literature corpus further shedding light on what makes the conference experience an emotional one for beginner researchers well as an occasion for learning.

Most of the unearthed studies were with reference to physical attendance to conferences taking place in pre-Covid19 pandemic times. Notable, there is a growing mass of studies investigating the use of technology enabled back-channels for networking in relation to conference events such as Jacobs and McFarlane (2005), Kimmons and Veletsianos (2016), Greenhow, Li, and Mai (2019) and so on.

The recent Covid19 pandemic is speeding up the growing strand of literature on the worthiness of a virtual conference event and its setup (e.g. Haji-Georgi, Xu, and Rosca (2021)) and how to maximize the potential of their value (e.g. Rubinger et al. (2020)). Generally, studies emphasise the importance of detailed planning, active engagement of event attendees, and attention to review feedback. The evaluation study of the NL Forum 2021 which convened in hybrid modality for adhering to Covid19 restrictions and social distancing measures also links up to this growing strand of research literature on technology mediated conference events concurrently extending the developing picture of beginning researchers’ attendance and experiences of conferences for learning and development. In this respect, this small-scale study brings a new situational perspective to the literature corpus.

The NL Forum 2021 was specifically organised as a NL event to support early researchers in learning and development. A description of the NL Forum 2021 event is shared in the enfolding symposium introduction. The design of the event was intentionally shifted from the “traditional conference” method pinpointed by Burford et al. (2018) to provide attendees a more participant-centred experience. The in-depth exploration of the participating ERs’ experiences of the NL Forum 2021 provides a new perspective to the developing picture of international conferences and fora as sites of learning and networking. The research reported in this paper confirms it but exposes several challenges as well. The next section briefly outlines the research methods leading up to a qualitative description of the event from the perspective of participating ERs.

Research Methods

The exploration of the ERs’ experiences reported in this paper forms part of the encompassing evaluation study of the NL forum 2021. The other part of the study looking into the ER’s expectations and experiences of this event is reported by Calleja & Cutajar (2022) which also forms part of the trio making up this Networked Learning Conference 2022 symposium. For this part of the study, the research question which we sought to answer asked: *In what ways did the participating ERs experience the NL forum 2021 as an academic event for learning and development, if at all?*

The qualitative approach within the interpretative paradigm (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) was assumed for answering this research question in the attempt to dig deeper into the ERs’ experiences as they chose to share it with the researchers soon after the event. In the attempt to deepen our understanding of participating ERs’ experiences of the event, we invited the participating ERs to a focus-group interview. The 60-minute group interview was held after the end of the 2-day event. For the interview, 2 of the 5 research participants were physically on location with the researchers while the others joined remotely. The first research author led the interview and the second research author intervened as deemed useful. Ideally, an independent interviewer was hired for conducting the focus group interview but, at the time, several situational factors deterred the possibility. The insider privileged positioning of the researchers carried risks of contaminating the data set as an authentic source for forming the basis of the sought qualitative description of early researchers’ experiences of the event. The researchers relied on the equitable participation tone and group reflective mood of the researchers’ meeting propagating into this post forum group activity, a sustained effort by the researchers retaining a non-judgmental, learning mind-set, and strict adherence to neutral questions through the course of the interview: *How would you describe your overall experience during the event? To what extent did this event meet your expectations and in what ways did it or did it not? Which activity did you feel was most enriching to*

you, and why? Which activity was the most challenging for you, and why? To what extent did you receive support, and in what ways, and why?

The verbatim transcription of the focus group recording was outsourced. It was later verified as part of a pre-processing familiarisation exercise leading to the data analysis process. Data analysis took the form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One of the researchers performed the data analysis which was then passed on to the second researcher for a communicative validity check (Åkerlind, 2005). More than any verification of “correct” findings, the second researcher's scrutiny was to ensure that the thematic findings constituted a convincing interpretation emerging from the data set. The first stage of data analysis consisted of a first iteration perusing the transcript for devising descriptive codes. In doing so, the data set was mapped to an electronic spreadsheet inclusive of trail information to help keep track of each excerpt location in the original transcript. In the subsequent data analysis structured by 4 iterations sifting through the data, these codes were configured and reconfigured to form themes and subthemes so arriving at a representation of the event experience from the perspective of ERs. In reporting this resultant thematic representation, the ER participants are given pseudonyms. For traceability purposes, quotations are followed by the transcript page number (#n). The resultant description expands the preliminary picture obtained from survey data. As abovementioned, this latter part of the NL Forum 2021 evaluation study comparatively considering ER’s expectations and experiences is presented by another paper constituting this symposium.

From the first stages of data analysis, ‘learning experience’ came to the fore as a strong theme. Data analysis iterations led to its configuration as a core theme binding all other constituent themes and subthemes. The ‘learning experience’ core theme is constituted by the primary themes ‘event organisation’, ‘interactions’, ‘means of acquisition’ and ‘researcher challenges’. Each of these 3 primary themes are configured by 2 or 3 subthemes as elaborated in the next section. These first 3 primary themes promptly surfaced as strong constituent perspectives. The primary theme ‘research challenges’ was initially configured as a recurrent subtheme extending across the first 3 primary themes. Further data analysis iterations resulting in deepened discernment of its loading led to its configuration as another primary theme shaping the core theme ‘learning experience’ in describing the ERs’ experience of the event. This theme was further explained by the subthemes ‘researcher immersion’, ‘research skills’ and ‘personal traits’. Although analytically these elements were configured as separate subthemes, in recounted situated experience they mostly surfaced in combination. The next section shares the detailed thematic description of the ERs’ experience of the NL Forum 2021 as it emerged from this data analysis.

Research Findings and Discussion

Overarchingly, the Networked Learning (NL) Forum 2021 event was described by the participating ERs as a ‘learning experience’. As noted in the previous section on research methods, learning experience emerged as a core all-binding descriptor constituted by 4 primary themes each characterised by a number of subthemes. Table 1 below summarises the thematic representation describing the ERs’ experiences of the NL Forum 2021 as configured by this qualitative exploration.

Table 1: Thematic Description of the NL Forum 2021 Experience

Core Theme	Constituent primary themes	Leading subthemes		
<i>learning experience</i>	<i>event design</i>	participatory approach	organisational features	
	<i>interactions</i>	discursive activity with others	access to experts	
	<i>means of acquisition</i>	accumulating resources	gaining insights and confidence	obtaining ideas and perspectives
	<i>researcher challenges</i>	researcher immersion	researcher skills	personal traits

Learning experience

There was unanimous agreement among the participating ERs that the NL Forum 2021 was “a learning experience” (Kelly: #5, Emma: #3), “training-like” (Cora: #1:) and “like an academic seminar” (Jeff: #11). Kelly also insisted that “the whole process was a learning process” (#2). These affirmations continued to arise through the whole course of the focus group interview. This finding agrees to the survey findings of the

encompassing evaluation study of the NL Forum 2021 event. More than this, it concurs with results of other research studies identifying conferences and professional development events as learning episodes (Coryell & Murray, 2014; Davis, Fedeli, & Coryell, 2019).

Event design

Approach and features

The NL Forum 2021 as a conference-like event is claimed by the participating ERs as deviating from the customary conference they are used to. Cora claimed that the event had “*a new format*” (#1). Picking up on this idea, Kelly explained that “[we were] *learning together even though we're physically distant*” (#2). These assertions bring to mind Burford et al.’s (2018) conceptualisation of public pedagogy as an alternative to the traditional conference and its one-way communication strategy.

The participating ERs all referred to the forum giving them a chance to focus on their research and development. Cora reflected on how the participatory attitude “*encouraged critical thinking*” (#1). Jeff also declared that the use of break-out rooms in the public forum was an unexpected surprise (#4) as it offered the chance to engage in small group discussions with others. He stressed the extended opportunity to talk about his research with others as contrasting to what is usually experienced at conferences. The participants noted that the forum strayed from the traditional conference they are used to – which brings to mind the congregation of delegates silently listening to expert knowers (Burford et al., 2018). Emma explained the change “*with different activities ... involving early researchers and even field experts to contribute to such an event*” (#5). Especially the relatively more experienced researchers repeatedly emphasised the participatory nature of the event giving participants a voice. Jeff observed that the forum brought together people with a shared research passion (#11). This calls to mind the ‘shared interest’ dimension of Etienne Wenger’s (1998) concept of community of practice (CoP) and Jacob and McFarlane’s (2005) claim that conferences lead to the formation of a reflective community of practice. The mutual engagement and joint enterprise CoP dimensions did not surface, but Cora avowed that the event fostered “*a sense of belonging to a community*” (11) in being with “*people who understand me*” (#9) and a sense of being with one’s “*tribe*” (#9). The manifestation of a developing communal sentiment peaked at the end of the focus-group interview which was held straight after the closing of the forum. It brought about a flurry of recommendations for future similar events including a plea to consider a longer event duration, and a scramble to share usernames for remaining connected through social media platforms. This finding appeared to strengthen Jacob and McFarlane’s (2005) proposition of conferences creating cohesion among participating attendees.

Jeff discerningly drew attention to the low ratio of early researchers and experts (#1) as a distinctive feature from the customary conference experience. In reaction to this observation, Kelly surmised that this permitted the one-to-one discussions with field experts (#2). Kelly also reflected on the opportunity of the coffee break in physical space furthering the potential of networking with more experienced others:

“Even the fact that we could discuss one-to-one with an expert ... And being here, sorry for the others who are not here, offered us further support, even for example, a simple coffee and you share something” (#10).

Kelly’s related experience of the coffee break hints at privilege of the physical space. Cora countered this idea pointing out that a shy person will not “*go directly [to an expert] and start conversing about this and that*” (#3). This issue is picked up again by Lister, Cutajar and Calleja (2022) in this symposium reflecting on the necessitated hybrid modality of the NL Forum 2021. These comments recall the complexity involved in thinking about the affordances of spaces and places (Carvalho, Goodyear, & de Laat, 2017). Bayne et al.’s (2020) outlook that “*place is differently, not less, important online*” may be a useful way for addressing this complexity. For this specific case it appears that the low ER-to-expert ratio combined to the opportunity of physical attendance served ERs to network with more experienced scholars but generally not necessarily so. The event’s narrowed theme spread provided a better chance for the ERs to talk about personal research with others. Jeff compared the forum’s “*narrow field of research*” (#11) with the vast range of topics you usually get in conferences (#2). This was different to what happens at typical conferences where the range of topics is huge making it difficult for delegates to interact with others with similar academic interests:

“I would say to the younger researchers here that, that this is something extra. You don't get this much attention from typical academic conferences, because this is something else. And I think the biggest threat in a normal conference is ... I think structure. And you don't meet any people who share the same interests with you” (#11).

The forum’s restricted focus coupled with a participatory approach served to create a space for meeting and interacting with people with similar academic interests (even transcending the hybrid nature of the event and the Covid19 restrictions leading most of the delegates to attend remotely). Cora refers to “*this world of people who*

understand me” (#9) and having “*an access to people with whom I can talk about that [technology enhanced learning and networked perspectives]*” (#10). In general, the event organisation with its strong participatory attitude incorporating elements to facilitate interactions with others who share the same academic interests surfaced as a primary descriptor of the NL Forum 2021 learning experience. However, as discussed in the next section in relation to the primary theme ‘interactions’, the human factor is crucial for setting off these sought-after academic conversations.

Interactions

Discursive activity with others, access to experts

Participating ERs put particular emphasis on interactions with others and access to experts. The interactions with peers and experts for the case of this forum were claimed “*fruitful*” and “*deep*” leading to “*reflecting much*” (Cora: #1) and “*a very thought-provoking experience*” (Emma: #5). They give reason to Falkunle et al.'s (2019) claim that the possibility to network with peers and experts highly motivates ERs to attend conferences. Especially the relatively more experienced ERs, who disclosed that they have been engaged doing research and presenting at conferences for some time, elaborated on the significance of discursive interaction with others. Cora described these interactions as an opportunity to develop “open-mindedness” (#3) in seeing the perspectives of others and broaden one’s knowledge horizon:

“learning about things you're not used to, sometimes opens your horizons as well. So the idea of networking even online with other people from around the world who joined us gives you the idea that you're not alone (Kelly: #2).

Jeff also reflected on the opportunity to engage in discursive activity with international others. Coupled with the narrowed focus of the forum, permitted ERs to interact with peers who employed different research approaches. As newcomer to NL, Kelly disclosed that the discursive activity with peers helped her understanding of the field:

“I was open to any opportunity that would come by and even learning ... being here with you all and sharing in the breakout rooms ... the way we discussed somehow offered a fruitful experience” (#5).

The access to experts featured strongly in what was shared by the participating ERs during the focus-group interview. Numerous times, the ERs referred to the possibilities the forum gave them to talk directly with field experts. Kelly and Cora discussed practical alternatives including a consideration to increase the time allotted for the ‘Meet-the-Expert’ activity permitting the ERs one-to-one conversations with each of the attending experts:

“maybe a roster could have been created and we could have visited another expert.” (Kelly: #11).

And as Cora put it “*if you have such a unique opportunity, you would like to discuss everything with an expert, to grab the expert and not to let him or her go*” (#6). Clearly, participating ERs of the NL Forum 2021 greatly valued the access to experts.

Means of acquisition

Resources, insights, ideas

During the focus-group interview, there was a pronounced general consensus among participating ERs on the possibilities to discuss their work and receive advice in informal ways, to obtain ideas, insights and resources. ERs expressed appreciation of the forum serving them to obtain papers, references, and ideas. Cora underscored “*how many resources were shared during our two days. A lot of papers. A lot of references. A lot of ideas*” (#1). Kelly highlighted that the experts participating in the forum were open and willing to share their knowledge and expertise with participating ERs. Jeff disclosed that he was inspired to do better in the future considering the remarkable presentation of a fellow ER. Three of the participating ERs also declared that they accumulated knowledge on NL as a study theme as well. For example, Emma declared:

“I learned more about networked learning and how this can be applied to different scenarios, whether you're a researcher or maybe you are in a different position” (#2).

Participating ERs agreed that the forum permitted them to gain insights from experts and the assembled group of international peers (and other delegates). Jeff picked up on the appeal of a keynote for “*seeking the cracks in the system*” (#4). Closely considering the three keynotes and bringing them together as different perspectives of NL, Cora concluded that:

“these three presentations, were really an eye opener for me. So the first one about activity channels, the second one about critical approach to networked learning and about the program how networked learning principles can be deployed right at institutional level” (Cora:#3).

Especially the relatively less experienced ERs drew attention to the opportunity to present research to an unknown audience and the emotional gain seeing for yourself that others are interested in your work:

“One of the biggest things that inspired me and gave me more confidence was seeing that people are at least somewhat interested in my topic and what I researched and people had questions, had interesting takes on it” (Ben: #3).

Hinting at a broadened understanding of knowledge, Kelly succinctly summarised the forum as a means for intellectual development:

“It creates this idea of cognitive conflicts ... it makes you reflect what to do with all this knowledge that you've gained from the experience and the experience of others. It could be considered as a challenge to keep you going” (#8).

Researcher challenges

Immersion, skills and traits

The forum's special focus on ERs inviting researcher immersion did not arise so much as a direct object in the focus group interview. Mostly it surfaced as a subject coming across in challenging issues and encounters recounted. The clearest direct statement was Jeff's admission that “*focusing for two days it's also a little bit mentally stressful*” (#1). Cora was less forthright in admitting that “*two days but I have a feeling that was longer than two days because the discussion was so deep*” (#1). Arguably, researcher immersion was negatively and positively experienced as a challenge.

There appears to be unanimous agreement among ERs that the most challenging activity of the whole event was the one-to-one meeting with an expert. This activity took place during the closed researchers' meeting.

According to Cora, choosing an expert after listening to the three keynotes was problematic because when you “*resonated personally with different aspects of their research and the theories they presented ... that was challenging to choose one person*” (#6). For Cora the limitations of gaining access to experts is challenging. It is disappointing for an ER to first be offered this unique opportunity to discuss her research with field experts she has been reading and then constrained as to whom she can consult with and for how long:

“that was challenging to choose one person ... The second challenge was to choose one or two questions, because if you have such a unique opportunity where you would like to discuss everything with an expert ... And there's a challenge, time limit, 10 minutes, and we were thrown out of the session room” (#6).

For a less experienced ER, the one-to-one meeting with experts also led to a problem on the kind of questions to ask: “*for example, should we ask general — more career advice, or maybe, advice about the research specifically as well? I had that question as well*” (Ben: #9). The loose structuring of the activity permitting ERs to prepare their specific set of questions to ask without any further direction created different kinds of uncertainties. Despite acknowledged experience attending conferences and presenting research to international audiences, Jeff confessed that he remained uncertain to the very end about choosing an expert with whom to discuss his work.

Interactions with others did not always work out. An ER recounted the occurrence of a dysfunctional discussion group during one of the breakout room activities during the public forum. Ben reflected that this might be due to participants being “*more introvert or shy to speak*” (#4). Evidently the pre-set discussion question was not always enough to spark off the intended conversation. This incident emphasises the cruciality of facilitation (Garrison, 2017; Salmon, 2004) even in public events such as this hybrid international forum going beyond the confines of discussion conferences in formal learning settings. It substantiates recent literature on technology mediated conferences (Haji-Georgi et al., 2021; Rubinger et al., 2020) stressing the need for detailed planning along with plans for interactions.

Emma also called attention to the challenge of presenting research work to an unknown audience (#7). For inexperienced presenters this issue is a reality. Extending on the issue of unknown audience, Kelly reflected on the difficulty interpreting the feedback provided from unknown delegates (#8). In consideration of research presentations in the public forum, the more experienced doctoral researchers, focused mostly on the capacity to succinctly and clearly communicate the research. For example, Cora saw value in the limited presentation time: “*That helped us not to be too wordy about our research, because we can talk hours about our favourite topic*” (#1). She referred to the importance of developing researcher skills:

“to be extremely focused on the most important aspects ... you should step back and look at your slide and to see just what are the most important aspects that I would like to articulate that you would like to present as a message to your target audience?” (#1).

Ben confessed that Cora's comments gave him a new perspective for looking at the researcher challenge “*to be concise*” (#9). The capacity to communicate your research work succinctly is a challenging researcher skill.

There was unanimous agreement among ERs that the public forum presentation was a challenge demanding researcher presentation skills, but not only. Jeff and Kelly noted challenges relating to information management and academic writing skills. For example, Jeff revealed that the substantial email correspondence added to the onus of a busy work schedule. Kelly felt challenged by the unfamiliar submission requirements:

“we had to write two abstracts and I couldn’t understand why the long one and the shorter one, and now I understand why. But most probably you need it for the programme but at the beginning, that was a challenge for me to try and write ... However, as Cora was saying, sometimes it helps you focus even further” (#2).

As highlighted by some of the shared quotations, researcher skills emerged as a prevailing structuring aspect including academic writing skills, information management skills, research presentation skills, skills connecting to unknown audiences and interpreting academic feedback. There is called to attention the need for conferences and similar events intending the involvement of ERs to be especially sensitive supporting researcher skills development.

Especially on personal traits, Emma declared that as a researcher one needs to overcome shyness to join in conversations (happening in a conference-like event like the NL Forum 2021). Reflections shared by other participating ERs, such as Ben’s comment earlier, express the same sentiment of shyness and possibly introversion as personal traits. Ben and Cora also pointed out that inexperienced researchers may hold back from actively participating in discursive activities during such academic events because they perceive others to be more knowledgeable. This finding corroborates Campbell et al.’s (2021) claim about their graduate students appraising their personal knowledge compared to other conference delegates. But rather than emphasising the learning benefit this study highlights the ensuing participating ERs’ challenges. The challenge of productive participation in academic conferences may be further exacerbated for ERs coming from traditional educational institutions where teaching and learning is top-down, accentuating power in expert learner relationships.

Concluding Remarks

This emerging description of the NL Forum 2021 experience from the perspective of participating ERs confirms it as a compelling, participatory, learning event bearing academic advantage. Generally, this description of the ERs’ experience of an international academic event corroborates earlier findings. Distinctively, this exploration shows academic benefit melded with researcher challenges fashioned by researcher immersion, research skills and personal traits.

But this emergent thematic picture is based on the single case of the NL Forum 2021 and a small research participant cohort. This renders the research outcomes very limited in scope. Further research is needed to verify these findings. Meanwhile, it is reasonable to heed the recommendations made by the ERs of this study demanding similar future academic events making it possible for inexperienced researchers to connecting with international peers and expert scholars for academic research development. Such academic events which are ER-centric facilitate beginning researchers to present their research to an international audience within a relatively less intimidating environment compared to typical international conferences which are much larger and wider in scope. They provide a space for beginning researchers to be challenged in developing research related competences and grow emotionally as researchers. It also makes sense for organisers of large-scale, international, conference events welcoming inexperienced researchers to pay attention to event design details providing additional support to researchers who are taking their first steps being part of a learning community for the advancement of knowledge, the development of related practices, and value creation.

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