

# **Malta Networked Learning Forum 2021: Experiences and Reflections**

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## **Introduction**

This symposium presents 3 papers relating to the Malta-based Networked Learning (NL) Forum 2021. The first two papers review the expectations and experiences of early researchers participating in the forum. The third paper presents reflections on the hybrid modality in which the forum convened. The purpose of this symposium and its component papers looking back on a NL community initiative is to look back, inform and look ahead to future similar events which potentially serve novice researchers develop connectedness to the broader networked learning community of scholars and peer researchers.

In this symposium, we use the term ‘early researchers’ (ERs) rather than the prevalent early-career researchers (ECRs) to distinguish between the graduate and doctoral level researchers grouping which arose for the case of the NL Forum 2021 event from the overlapping doctoral and postdoctoral category to which the term ECRs more commonly refers to (McAlpine, Pyhältö, & Castelló, 2018).

## **The NL Forum 2021 event**

The NL Forum 2021 was one of two so-called node events the Networked Learning Conference Consortium (NLCC) helped to organise in the interim year of the biennial International Conference on Networked Learning. This event was a partnership between the NLCC and the Faculty of Education (FoE) at the University of Malta (UM). The aim of the Malta NL Forum 2021 was to foster international collaboration among ERs and scholars. The derivative aspiration was to support the development and dissemination of research in the NL field, promote the NL field of educational research and practice, and broaden the NL community of researchers and practitioners.

The NL Forum 2021 was originally proposed as an onsite event to be held in Malta, but the continuing Covid19 pandemic crisis drove most activities online, turning it into a hybrid event. The only delegates who congregated at the planned physical location were the local hosts, 2 participating researchers and a keynote speaker. The rest of the attendees participated remotely using the Zoom conferencing platform.

The NL Forum 2021 event spread across two days (20-21 May 2021). The first day consisted of a public event featuring 3 keynotes and 5 ER presentations. Keynotes took the form of a short thought-provoking presentation followed by small group discussions in virtual breakout rooms. On return to the plenary, participants were encouraged to share group reflections and to extend the discussion with further questions and comments. Participating ERs presented their research work in progress to the international audience attending the forum. Attendees were encouraged to ask productive questions and pose constructive comments to help support ERs develop their work. Attendees were also invited to post further feedback queries and comments using the in-meeting chat feature for ERs to consider later. The second day was structured by a number of collegial learning activities involving ERs and field specialists in a closed researchers’ meeting. The closed researchers’ meeting intended a space for the ERs to reflect on their work in progress, to access specialist expert support to develop their work, and to consider possibilities for research publication. The design of the NL Forum 2021 generally differed from the traditional conference approach where attendees are mostly passive listeners. The event

incorporated several opportunities for attendees to interact, get involved and have their voices heard. There was aspired a scholarly experience featuring open educational practice and peer learning for value creation.

### **The NL Forum 2021 evaluation**

The evaluation study of the NL Forum 2021 was initiated to explore the viewpoint of participating ERs. The study entailed a preliminary comparative analysis of ER expectations and experiences drawing on survey data collected before and after the event, and a deepened exploration of the ER experience of the event based on a focus-group interview held straight away after the event. The first two papers of this symposium share the findings of this evaluation study. Together these papers reveal that the event was an opportunity for ERs to deepen their knowledge and insight of the NL field for developing their research, to expand their personal learning network and grow as researchers. Concurrently, the forum was a substantially demanding experience requiring ERs to move out of their comfort zone. Generally, the emergent description suggests the ERs see significant value in such specialised events presenting their research work in progress to an international audience and bringing them in close contact with field scholars.

The third paper forming part of this symposium is an introspective critical review by the local host team on the hybrid aspect of the Networked Learning Forum 2021. Superficially, the hybrid aspect of the event may appear to be a matter of combined online and offline participation modalities, but a closer look uncovered a broader and deeper terrain of boundary (un)crossings regarding spaces, otherness, and pedagogic stance. The shared reflections invite attention to detail in planning and running future similar hybrid events.

Together the 3 symposium papers open the stage for making NL community events also an object of research and critical review. They highlight the need for cooperative, collaborative and collective inquiry in trustful relationships to also be directed at processes shaping NL community events and the value they potentially create. Above all, the symposium highlights the potential of special interest events aimed to foster international collaboration among scholars and ERs. Perhaps, into the future, such special interest events possibly recurring in the interim year of the biennial NLC, may become an established safe harbour from where ERs start to develop as active members of the NLC community at large.

### **The NL Forum 2021 blurb collective**

Independent of evaluation study disclosures, below are some comments shared by participating ERs and scholars after the event:

The NL Forum provided me with the ideal platform to engage critically with the concept of networked learning which, like many other concepts, is contested. The second day of the Forum brought me in direct contact with research students, providing me with an opportunity to engage with their work and reinforce elements of the keynote. (Expert scholar)

The format of the event was interactive with various forms of online participation. Many resources and links were shared in the forum and in the chat. Everything was well thought and organized. I was inspired and felt the sense of belonging to the community despite the time zones and a Zoom format. (Early researcher)

During my presentation, I was a little surprised and also happy that I received quite a lot of comments. The second day of the NL Forum was a very good experience. There were many academic experts who guided the early researchers, and the day was planned nicely. (Early researcher)

Participating in this event has been a fruitful learning experience. As an early researcher, the comments and feedback I received from the attendees and the keynote speakers made me feel more confident about how <my research and practice interests> as a teacher professional development model, and networked learning both share common principles that could possibly merge and offer prospects for further research. (Early researcher)

As an early researcher and someone that is relatively new to the field, three main things made me proud and appreciative of being part of NL Forum. Firstly, I was proud to be presenting and talking about an issue that is very important to me. Secondly, I was happy to see how other

researchers and scholars engaged with my research and gave me feedback. And lastly, I appreciated the fact that on the second day of the NL Forum we were allowed to collectively discuss my research and the research of others in more depth. (Early researcher)

As a co-host, I share a very positive experience. The public forum was an opportunity for early researchers, guest speakers and the general public to come together to discuss research and share insights related to networked learning. This was further enhanced in the closed meeting, held the following day, during which early researchers could share reflections and gain support on their research ideas from guest speakers. (Local co-host)

Participation in the NL forum was a great experience. From the open forum on the first day to the smaller research convening on the following day the time was well spent engaging in interesting discussions and being presented with new ideas that can advance one's own research and thinking. (Expert scholar)

A [celebration video of the public event](#) and recordings of the three keynote presentations publicly available on the [NLCC website](#):

[Keynote 1: Learning and Value Creation in Open Practices, with Professor Maarten de Laat,](#)

[Keynote 2: Networked Learning for what? Higher education as a social act in troubled times, with Professor Carmel Borg,](#)

[Keynote 3: Peer-learning and Networked Learning in a PBL context, with Professor Thomas Ryberg.](#)

## References

McAlpine, L., Pyhältö, K., & Castelló, M. (2018). Building a more robust conception of early career researcher experience: what might we be overlooking? *Studies in Continuing Education*, 40(2), 149-165.