**Conference presentation**: **Reflecting on the learning opportunities**

**Abstract**

Research productivity is a major indicator of Higher Educational Institutions’ (HEI) academic performance. Therefore the increased focus on research productivity, places an expectation on academics to publish their research initiatives, ideas and developments within their scope of work or area of interest. The notion of research productivity also appears to have a significant influence on academic status. Nursing academics also are compelled to meet this requirement by undertaking higher degrees, including PhD or other doctoral studies. This paper articulates a nurse academic’s reflection of presenting her doctoral thesis at an International Conference and also serves to encourage students to embrace the research dissemination process.

Keywords: conference presentation, doctoral student, research dissemination

**Introduction**

Nursing research has the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of knowledge, which consequently impacts on the outcomes for healthcare consumers (Horsfall et al, 2011). The value of nursing related research is essential as such scholarship ratifies nurse education as an academic discipline (Roberts, 1997). Accordingly, nursing academics should be research active and are encouraged to publish and present their research, either local or to the wider international audience (Happell and Cleary, 2014). Academics are also expected to enrol onto PhD and other doctoral degree programmes, whilst continuing to hold a full time academic workload (Cleary et al, 2013). However the work related demands placed on lecturers including those undertaking research studies, continues to escalate. The conflicting expectations of managing both the academic and researcher role may result in a delay in publishing or disseminating one’s research. Within the current Higher Education (HEI) sector, academic status and accomplishment are indisputably determined by research output and achievement (Happell and Cleary, 2013). As a result, nursing academics are urged and under pressure to meet these requirements.

This growing focus on academics to increase their research capability does not belittle the value of teaching but instead emphasises the importance of research in enhancing the teaching role. Thus such enterprise cannot be averted and ultimately, is a fundamental pre-requisite for a career in higher education. The option not to share research findings as doctoral students’ progress may stem from a mistaken belief that in order for their work to be deemed original, components of the research should not be published prior to completion and the final thesis submission (Cleary et al, 2013). Although convincing, it is argued that this position may prove challenging when the lengthened time period from the beginning of the thesis to the completed manuscript, is considered. The extended delay may obscure findings especially when subtle though relevant nuances encountered earlier in the study, could be forgotten or subsumed by the gravitas of the final thesis. The finer in depth analysis and results could always be published in a later paper.

Furthermore, it is worth recognising that condensing a comprehensive volume of work into a succinct article is challenging. Therefore, this account is a reflection of my experiential learning as a nurse academic doctoral scholar presenting the initial phase research findings at an international conference.

 This encounter has evoked an aspiration to share my research through presentations, doctoral seminars, workshops and the sought after ‘peer-reviewed’ journal publication. Unquestionably, I am more cognizant that in academia, scholarly activity is the benchmark which one is measured against and “should we not publish, then our work is unknown and our academic credentials are not fully established” (Roberts and Turnbull, 2003, p12). The purpose of this paper is to learn and share my experiences and includes relating my journey of publicizing my research, mid-research study, whilst juggling both the academic and doctoral student roles. This narrative also serves to motivate other research students and academics to disseminate their research by presenting at conferences, which will make the disseminating process less overwhelming. I also wish to inspire fellow students on this trajectory and to share my experiences of networking within a vibrant multi-cultural research community.

**Receiving approval for my abstract**

To develop my confidence in articulating my research within the research community as well as to receive feedback on my study, were the significant motivators for my abstract submission. When the acceptance letter from the 3rd National University of Singapore/ National University Hospital joint 20th Singapore Malaysian (NUS/NUH) Conference organisers was received, it signalled the start of my doctoral dissemination process and my very first attempt at presenting on an International stage. Initially I was disappointed as the poster abstract detailing my mixed method, longitudinal research on nursing students’ clinical decision-making and their ‘Approach-to-Learning’, was upgraded from a poster presentation to the ‘oral presentation by researcher’ category. This indicated that the option of just emailing a poster to share my research to the Conference organisers, for them to exhibit and me opting to take the ‘less stressful’ albeit the alternative with less academic kudos, was now not going to be possible (Macdonald and Shaban, 2007). Besides being apprehensive, I was also simultaneously excited as attending an International conference, let alone, presenting at one, was not something that I had even considered at the current stage of my research and work schedule. The unexpected upgrade to publicise my research at a conference was a pleasure that I potentially reserved for much further on my research journey. Once I grasped the reality of this accomplishment, I felt triumphant.

Having attended the United Kingdom’s (UK) National Health Service (NHS) and local University based conferences, my interest was rather restricted to topics that impacted directly on me, such as changes to educational and NHS care related policies. Besides my doctoral study, I granted a little latitude to the broader research domain. Previously, when attending conferences, I was a passive attendee and would just offer the occasional obligatory agreement and at times, mentally construct a moderately unbalanced critique of the presenter and presentation. Previous to this experience, I did not truly feel that I had something original and substantial to offer to the wider audience however, as Adler (2010) argues, being able to disseminate research findings by presenting at conference is a skill that researchers’ need to embrace. Although I approached the prospect of presenting with some trepidation, once the importance of this opportunity finally hit home, from a nurse education research standpoint, I knew that I had something significant to contribute. Although I am a professional teacher and am very capable of a sound presentation, I appreciated that this was a moment in time, in my doctoral as well as academic development, to relish. The snippets of apprehension that I felt, were expected components of this journey. On reflection, this recent conference participation has inspired change in my professional development, in addition to providing a direction for potential post doctoral engagement, with newly acquainted trans-continental academic colleagues.

**Reflections on the presentation experience**

On arrival at Singapore’s airport, I was acutely aware of the scrupulously clean environment. This immaculate ‘elegance’ was replicated throughout the city and was a noticeable change to our city’s appearance. I found the early morning sessions very different to other conferences, as registration was at 07h30 with key note addresses beginning at 8:00! Each day was packed with events until 17:30 however it was superb to have the opportunity to explore different sessions and listen to the multitude of dialects expound on inspiring research projects. The Eurasian diversity was another captivating experience with delegates attending from Japan to Indonesia, Philippines to Thailand and China. With this intertwining Eurasian mix and my Asian ethnicity, I felt ‘right at home’. I found people to be extremely warm and keen to engage in conversation and networking and developing international liaisons, came very naturally to me. In this research energised though relaxed atmosphere, conversations flowed and it was easier to get to know and embrace this International academic community (Ward, 2013). I now understand what I had heard about the power and value of networking, as I have returned from this experience with several new contacts, who share similar passions about nurse education, and with whom I will remain in contact.

Prior to my actual presentation, I appreciated the talks given by different intellectuals as this allowed me to discover greater insights into nurse education from a diverse International perspective as well as granting me the opportunity to observe how other researchers presented their research findings. This was extremely meaningful as it provoked further thoughts about my nurse educator role. Additionally, I was encouraged to contemplate and revise critical arguments in my research and thus enhance the significance of my study. Although I am experienced in addressing large student cohorts, I was fractionally nervous when the moderator introduced me, as I do not usually give my academic credentials much consideration nor have I heard myself being introduced in this fashion before. At this point, the realisation that my personal work was going to be scrutinised and was either going to be applauded or shredded by a global academic community contributed to this edginess. Moreover, this concern was compounded as the audience had just witnessed another delegate denounce a keynote Professor without much reservation. As a result, I felt a momentary quivering of my self-esteem. I mentally drew on Hartigan et al (2014) argument that “*although some of the success lies in the content, the rest lies in the speaker’s skills in transmitting the information to the audience*.” Once I began, the immediate engagement from the audience was evident and their keen and pleasant demeanours were most reassuring. This boosted my confidence. It was at that moment I realised that the audience viewed me as the expert on my research and I aspired to fulfil their expectations and present my work as an expert would. Miller (2013) asserts that connecting with the audience by ensuring that your voice is well projected and your argument is explicit are indicators of a good presentation. Elements, especially the demographics of the participants in my study drew audible gasps as interestingly, the Eurasian nursing students are usually below 20 years of age as compared to the participants in my study whose ages ranged from 21 to the 51-60 years of age category. I was also determined to present my talk within the allotted time as overrunning could frustrate the audience and reduces the discussion phase (Miller, 2013). The much anticipated barrage of questions that I was anxious about, focussed on the early statistical findings of my research findings, the University’s ‘widening participatory commitment’ and the challenges this presents for nurse educators. I found that I was able to respond with ease and confidence. Instead of this component being the section that I was dreading; this question/ answer forum, gave me the opportunity to clarify and elucidate my points. I acknowledge that my responses contributed to the positive feedback I received during the intermission as well as in writing from the Conference moderators. This has certainly increased my self-confidence and granted further validation of my doctoral research.

As fore-mentioned, I initially intended to exhibit my research in a poster format at this conference as I perceived this as the ‘easier less, stressful option’; like many delegates, I wandered through the halls lined with poster displays from a host of researchers but only stopped and granted a poster the cursory couple of minutes if the eye-catching graphics and pictures were impressively noticeable (Miracle, 2008). I recall reprimanding myself for being a harsh reviewer however on observing the other attendees, it was extremely apparent that most people ambled through the poster aisles without spending more than a minute or two perusing the displays. At this realisation, I personally chastised myself and was most grateful that I did not decline when the invitation to actually present my research to this global audience of educators and healthcare professionals. Research posters are designed to summarize information concisely and generate discussion however I have learnt that in order to engage an audience, posters have to allure and be eye-catching (Miracle, 2008). The poster graphics are actually persuasive hooks to reel and stimulate a curiosity within the reader. Therefore the layout should be visually pleasing but succinct and cluttered masses of complex data should be avoided (Erren and Bourne, 2007). The title of the poster is another key element which advocates your work hence titles that are advised to be poignant and compelling, in order to attract interest. Erren and Bourne (2007) argue that besides informing on the content of the research, posters are also viewed as an extension of the researcher’s personality. Thus a photograph of the researcher on the poster and having paper copies of the poster with contact details are self-confident strategies of sharing the study with the wider audience. This will also enable attendees to locate the researcher, in order to engage in further discussion. Attentive interaction with the audience and making eye-contact with people encourages dialogue and possible constructive critique about one’s study (Erren and Bourne, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Overall, this conference presenting opportunity was, to me an invaluable experience and I feel encouraged to attend, similar large-scale conferences. In doing so, I will overcome both the literal and metaphorical restraints of the constant juggle of academic/researcher demands and personal responsibilities, that part-time researchers’ experience. This encounter has encouraged me to embrace the wider intellectual environment, whilst defeating the challenges of the insular doctoral journey. Such experiences also encourages opening up to new ideas, thoughts and post doctoral research enterprise. It was also beneficial to note the differences in research styles, such as qualitative methodologies appeared to be less appreciated. This experience has allowed me to re-consider how my approach can be further developed with future research endeavours. Moreover, my appreciation of the strength of the longitudinal, mixed method study has been heightened as this methodology, examines participants’ perceptions of their learning and its impact on their clinical decision making to be explored from both the quantitative and qualitative perspective. It is thereby anticipated that this joint enquiry will enrich the outcome of the study. Ultimately this was a thought provoking introspection on how I may improve my researching skills and has also allowed me to contemplate the avenues beyond the doctorate. I now realise that the intangible benefits of the whole experience are definitely worthwhile. I realise that at the next opportunity, I would do this again. However for now it’s time to harness the renewed enthusiasm, to put all the inspiration to work and strive to complete what I started several years ago.

I have learnt from this conference to allow my work to take wings, to embrace opportunities to talk about my research and engage with the wider researching committee as the critique, moreover the personal acknowledgement of your research, does propel you forward on this journey.

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Table of changes

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| 3-1 | Addressed  |
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| 3-3 | The growing focus on academics to increase their research capability does not belittle the value of teaching but instead emphasises the importance of research in enhancing the teaching role. Thus such enterprise cannot be averted and ultimately, is a fundamental pre-requisite for a career in higher education.  |
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| 4-2 | On reflection, this recent conference participation has inspired change in my professional development, in addition to providing a direction for potential post doctoral engagement, with newly acquainted trans-continental academic colleagues. |
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