

Attending an Academic Conference: Story of a First-Time Attendee

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Abstract

This non-refereed contribution to the special issue of *Journal of Education and Research* portrays the reflective experiences of a novice researcher who attended the *First International Conference on Transformative Education Research and Sustainable Development* in Dhulikhel, Nepal, in October 2016. I begin by introducing my interest in participating in academic and scientific conferences, reflect upon the mentorship received during my Master of Philosophy study at Kathmandu University School of Education, examine my dual roles of a volunteer in conference organization and a poster presenter at the same conference, and share my impressions of the conference environment. I conclude with some final thoughts on how I could enlarge conference learning.

Keywords: Reflective Journey; First-time Conference Attendee; Academic Conference; Conference Learning

Reflective Journey

In 2010, I was doing my master's degree and one of my friends had gone to India to participate in an international conference. My teachers appreciated his work a lot and encouraged us to participate in such conferences. From that day it was always a dream for me to attend an international conference. I was interested in participating in an international conference but I had no idea how I could get to one of such conferences. Later I left my university after I complete my master's degree. When I left my university my desire to participate in academic conferences also vanished because my priority gradually shifted towards my work.

In February, 2015 I started my Master of Philosophy at Kathmandu University and one day, Associate Professor Bal Chandra Luitel came to my class and congratulated my classmates because their papers and posters were selected in an Indonesian Conference. For the first time I heard about the paper and poster acceptance at a conference. Frankly speaking I was still confused about conferences like what would happen if we participated in conferences? What would people do during conferences? I used to think that the

conference was just a get-together program of elite people with the foreigners and was organised only in five-star hotels. My confusions were not cleared yet and then I decided to meet my brother Rebat Kumar Dhakal, who was also my mentor, who had been to many such conferences and had been in the core team of organising conferences at Kathmandu University School of Education. I asked him a great deal of questions including the details about conferences, procedures to participate and the things to be done during conferences, etc. Till that time I was just thinking that we had to apply for participating in conferences, everything will be there in the conference and we just had to listen to the organisers. Truly at that day I thought I candidly understood about the conference, presenting paper and poster, and participating in conferences. Since then, my interest in participating and also being the presenter in such academic fora rose beyond my control. But I had not written any papers or prepared posters till that time. I was willing to write a paper but had no confidence at all. It was my research tutor Associate Professor Bal Chandra Luitel who further inspired me to write papers and participate in conferences.

Kathmandu University was really a turning point for me in terms of learning space because the assignments given by the professors gave me confidence to develop a paper or at least a poster. Finally, I along with my friend Santosh prepared a poster and sent to the organisers of the “*First International Conference on Transformative Education Research and Sustainable Development*”. Luckily, our poster got selected and we got an invitation to present our poster during the conference. As the conference was organised by my own university, I also got an opportunity to work as a volunteer at the same conference. My role as a volunteer helped me a lot to know about pre-conference work.

It was my first ever experience of attending any, let alone international, conference and I was very much excited. Luckily the conference date was in between Dashain and Tihar, two great festivals of the Hindus, and therefore, we had holidays. So I committed my full time to the conference. During day time I had to attend the meetings and during the evenings and mornings, I was practising the poster presentation. Two days before the conference date, I get nervous as we went to the conference venue – the conference hall was big, I lost my confidence and shared my feelings with my colleagues. They advised me to stay cool but on the other side I was planning to leave the conference because my English was not so good and among all the national and foreign delegates I had to present my paper. I thought that the people from all around the world will be presenting on big issues of transformative education but my poster had covered just a small issue – personal transformation. At that time I was thinking that my work had no quality at all and looking at my work some people might question about the educational quality of my university. Quickly I shared my feelings with my co-author and my colleague Deependra Budhathoki. I was so serious but they were making fun of it. They laughed at me and clarified that nothing senseless was going to happen. According to their past experience of participating in different national and international conferences, the quality of my work was very good.

They reminded me that my poster was selected by the local organising committee which meant they had already checked the quality of my work. I felt little bit easy but my fear had not completely vanished. I decided to talk about this with my teacher Binod Prasad Pant. He made me realise that the issue raised in my paper was good and I did not have to worry about anything.

One day before the conference began, the organising and volunteer teams gathered in the conference venue and started decorating the hall and the premises. We arranged everything in the hall in a very professional manner. I along with some other volunteers and the organising committee members were managed to stay at a guest house near the conference venue in Dhulikhel to assist the international delegates. The guests started reaching the venue and we began to assist them. I introduced myself with them as a student and volunteer at the conference. I still remember how hectic the day was; I even forgot to take any snacks in the afternoon. At night we all volunteers and the organisers gathered in the guest house and had our dinner. After dinner when I came to my room I prepared the details about the guests whom I had received. I found that most of them were Professors, PhD holders or PhD scholars. I again got nervous but at that time I had not shared my feelings with others because there was no chance to drop the conference in the eleventh hour.

Finally, it was the conference day, and we volunteers were supposed to be in the conference venue one hour before the conference inauguration time. We reached at the venue and checked everything. The guests started to gather and some of them were busy taking pictures of the conference venue and some of them were talking with each other. After some time of wait, the Vice-Chancellor and chief guest of conference came and the conference began with some formal programmes. Within the formal programme, there was a keynote address to be made by a speaker. The keynote speaker was no one other than my own dean. I felt a little bit comfortable and started observing his presentation. It was just like my class because participants were listening to the keynote speaker and at the end of his presentation he had allotted time to discuss the issue presented. Some of the conference participants raised some questions and he calmly clarified. Finally, the session was over. I found it was like our class discussion and the issue raised by the keynoter was so simple and he presented it in a simple language like he used to present in our class. The discussion was also similar to our classroom discussion. It was my first conference session and I got so excited that I decided to attend all conference sessions. Unfortunately, there were four parallel sessions at the same time after the keynote address, and I could not be able to attend all. I had to be selective – besides, I was needed to be around anytime – because I had also put on the volunteer's hat.

My poster presentation was scheduled for the next day so I was free to attend some sessions. I attended around ten presentations along with two keynote speeches and found

that my confidence was increasing gradually. As the first day of the conference came to close, I got more excited and gained more confidence for the next day.

On the day of my poster presentation, I was very much excited. Before our presentation there was schedule of remaining sessions of paper presentation. The closing ceremony of the conference was also scheduled for the same day, after the poster presentation, so I was busy on assisting the organising committee, as well. Before the last concurrent session we posted all the selected posters in an open space and all the presenters were then ready to present their posters. During the conference I had seen the people who presented their papers but I had not experienced poster presentation; still I was confident.

When the poster session began, all the participants gathered up and started discussing poster by poster. As a presenting author, I was supposed to describe my poster. I think I was confident because of my preparation. One of the professors from Australia came to see my poster and asked me to explain. I explained it to him confidently. While explaining I asked my co-author to take my photo and video so that I could share it on some social media. I was continuously explaining and in between my presentation, the professor asked a cross question which made me feel confused. Although I got his question and was ready to answer, I got nervous. The professor was so smart that he quickly changed his questioning pattern and made the question sound easy for me. Then I answered his question and thanked him for the support. He further consoled me by saying that “You’re as smart and good as many other researchers!” And finally, he introduced himself to me. He was Professor Peter Charles Taylor. He also introduced another renowned scholar Kenneth Tobin. I was baffled – at seeing the people who’ve written papers I’ve read. After all the participants observed our poster, I along with my co-author started observing other participants’ posters. I found that the participants had chosen simple topics and presented them simply. I found that those posters were as simple as mine and the only difference was the presentation skills of the authors. At that moment I realised that the main thing in a conference is the presentation of the issue. Finally, I successfully attended my first international conference. In the end, we went for the retreat where we had healthy discussion along with some sharing with the participants.

Enlarging Conference Learning

My first experience of an international conference developed confidence and then afterwards I started searching for different fora to participate, and also began to write in some issues. Still after attending an international conference I was lacking experience of writing and presenting a research paper. So I decided to present a paper in an international conference and finally after six months of my first conference I got an opportunity to participate and present my paper in New Delhi. It was my mentor Mr. Rebat Kumar Dhakal who arranged everything to participate in the conference and he was my co-author as well. Altogether five people from Nepal were there to participate in the conference on education.

I found that the intention of organising an international conference was not similar. The first conference that I attended was truly a scholastic conference but in the second conference all the participants were presenting the issues related to their thesis – meaning that most of the participants were graduate and post graduate students. There, I came to know that there is a kind of mandatory provision that in order to complete PhD all students should present their papers in international conferences, publish their papers in peer reviewed journals. This realisation made me thoughtful – were there such provision for us in the Master or Master of Philosophy programme as well, we would have been far better academics.

We five people from Nepal were together and we made our presentations one after another. We found that the knowledge level of all the participants was very high. We got impressed with their content knowledge. During my presentation I was afraid of possible cross questions from the participants as they were highly knowledgeable. The situation was favourable to me because my presentation was related to online teacher training in Nepal and it was a particular case study. They presented some queries and I confidently responded to them. At that moment I realised that due to the confidence developed from the first conference, I was able to smartly deal with the questions, and therefore look forward to presenting in similar conferences. Since then I have been continuously participating in different conferences. Now I feel that I can present confidently and can learn so many things in conferences. The participation in different conferences has provided me with ideas and knowledge useful for my academic career. Each time I attend any conference I remember my participation in the first conference back in Nepal. My teachers, friends, and mentors are the persons who encouraged me to keep engaging in scholastic work.