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Reflections on Hybridity in the Malta Networked Learning Forum 2021

Pen Lister

Digital Education, Department of Learning for Leadership & Innovation, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, pen.lister@um.edu.mt

Maria Cutajar

Department of Arts, Open Communities and Adult Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, maria.cutajar@um.edu.mtx

James Calleja

Professional Learning and Development, Department of Learning for Leadership & Innovation, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, james.j.calleja@um.edu.mt

Abstract

This paper discusses the practicality, successes and possible failures of the Malta Networked Learning (NL) Forum held in May 2021. The forum was held in a hybrid synchronous face-to-face and virtual context, with a wide range of international participants, planned at short notice due to continuing uncertainty of Covid-19 restrictions. The paper outlines contexts and understandings of hybridity in both events and pedagogical approaches, noting varying definitions and concepts that may utilise this term to indicate forms of barrier breaking, overcoming limitation or supporting flexibility. Further context highlights recent literature concerning other digitally hybrid conference events, the need for which have been accelerated in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and additional considerations of climate change for reducing the carbon footprint of academic communities. Discussion leads to the type of hybridity implemented for the Malta NL Forum in May 2021, where pandemic international travel restrictions, local regulations and participant planning uncertainty required the adoption of a face-to-face and virtual synchronous event. The local organising team (authoring this paper) provides commentary to critically reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the modality adopted. Emphasis is placed on designing for hybridity in future events, to improve planning and organisation for flexible and agile awareness to support the full range of participants in hybrid contexts and activities. The paper attempts to support those whose role is to convene and host similar events aiming to foster rewarding engagement for those participating, both presenting as well as attending.

Keywords: *conferences, networking, hybridity, online, virtual, covid-19*

Introduction

Academic conferences may be considered a significant aspect of the academic way of life (Sá, Ferreira & Serpa, 2019, p. 37), associated with international knowledge and research partnerships, professional community building and social networking, with other perks such as international travel subsidised by academic institutions. These events may be considered as “privileged spaces and moments for the dissemination of new ... knowledge, as well as for social interaction... for the establishment and development of social networks” (Sá et al, 2019). As Sá et al. describe, academic conferences have most often taken place in face-to-face environments, however more recent events have increasingly been held in virtual or hybrid modalities owing to restrictions imposed by Covid-19. These may have indeed now become the ‘new normal’ (Karunathilake et al., 2021), with attendant

advantages and disadvantages of participation cost, environmental footprint, equity of participation and issues of digital literacy or technological accessibility (e.g. Donlon, 2021; Carrigan, 2021; Flaherty, 2021).

Conference modalities may vary, from entirely virtual to ad-hoc mixtures of face-to-face and virtual sessions, and can depend on location and available broadband provision of the host institution as much as topic and duration of conference event (Falk & Hagsten, 2021). Conference sessions arguably have much in common with most conventional large lecture environments, and “require relatively simple substitution” for presentational practice, typically achieved using video streaming technologies such as Zoom (Cochrane et al., 2020). However this may not plan beyond initial concepts of the presentation, the presenter and the audience. Once an event moves into discussion rooms, with smaller concurrent group sessions based in prior presentation topics, things may become more complicated (Karunathilake et al., 2021), though others see virtual events as more advantageous to discussion possibilities (e.g. Hanaei et al., 2020).

The question posed in this paper is how well the Malta NL Forum coped with the hybrid, partly digital, partly face-to-face synchronous modality in order to achieve a participatory event that encouraged both presenters and attendees to contribute to conversations and outcomes of the event.

Contexts of hybridity

Defining hybridity

Hybridity as an umbrella term denotes the coming together of distinct states in creating a new state of being (Nørgård, 2021), or “ecotones” (Ryberg et al. 2018). For example within pedagogical contexts, teacher presence and learner presence merging into a hybrid presence (e.g. Nørgård, 2021; Koutropoulos & Koseoglu, 2018; Cochrane et al., 2020; Saichaie, 2020). In the realm of the academic conference event, hybrid conferences have been defined overall as a blend of virtual and face-to-face, including both online and ‘real-world’ attendees and presentations (Falk & Hagsten, 2021; Jones, 2008).

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, in studies (e.g. Fraser, Soanes, Jones, Jones & Malishev, 2017) or related past literature (e.g. Siemens, Tittenberger & Anderson, 2008), virtual and hybrid conference events are often discussed from the perspective of equity and accessibility, as they provide “multiple options for cost and involvement” (Jones, 2008), and extend dialogue “beyond barriers of time, space, and related cultural variables (Siemens et al., 2008). Fraser et al. describe several variations of a hybrid ‘hub and node’ model based around the principle of a host institution (or several institutions spread across time zones) with “virtual conferencing equipment, internet access and power, and fixtures for a smaller, in-person conference, such as a traditional conference hall, refreshments, and communal areas” (2017, p. 543). This essentially describes what may occur in general ways in any hybrid blend of virtual and face-to-face event, and as such was implemented at the Malta NL Forum in May 2021, further described in subsequent sections of this paper.

Issues relating to sustainability and the generated carbon footprint of international conferences is a prominent discussion in contexts of virtual or hybrid conference advantages. As far back as 2008 Jones comments on a ‘sustainability decision making protocol’ for the best use of natural resources, asking “(d)oes the conference minimize kilometers traveled? Can the conference maximize use of renewable energy sources?” further noting the target to offset 100% of carbon dioxide emissions and 50% of electricity from renewable energy sources (2008, p. 2). Fraser et al. (2017) remark on the irony of sharing conservation research findings by attending international in-person conservation conferences that generate high carbon footprint cost, as “by flying to international conferences, researchers contribute to one of the biggest long-term threats to biodiversity - climate change ...” (2017, p. 542). Clearly, the increased prominence of climate change debate across all fields of scientific and humanities based research, including education, may indicate that the ‘new normal’ of virtual or hybrid conferences (and perhaps even other aspects of working and educational life) may be here to stay.

Within learning and teaching contexts, hybrid pedagogy has become a more commonly used term in recent years to describe the various approaches to learning and teaching for both formal and informal learning. Pedagogical discussion of hybridity in Stommel (2012) centres around the “relationship between bodies and technology” and that “our flesh is made intangible in the digital age...”. Stommel expands his definition of the

word “hybrid” as having “deeper resonances, suggesting not just that the place of learning is changed but that a hybrid pedagogy fundamentally rethinks our conception of place” (2012, para 5). Prior to Stommel’s ideas, Pachler, Bachmair & Cook (2010) defined hybridity in terms of the structure of a curriculum, that according to Young (2006) included the crossing of disciplinary boundaries; the incorporation of everyday knowledge and the involvement of non-specialists in curriculum design. They saw hybridity in terms of what was being learned and how it was learned rather than any involvement (or not) in implementation and use of technology. However, Cook and other co-authors continue in more recent work (Cook et al., 2016) to consider hybridity as having two dimensions: (i) a hybrid combination of formal and informal social structures in an activity system ... (i.e. in terms of structural relations of the power and control in institutional and cross-institutional settings), and (ii) a hybrid combination of physical and digital tools; how cultural-historically developed tools (physical and digital) mediate the individual’s relation to the world where the competence to handle such tools is acquired in social settings through guidance from other persons or guidance from digital tools in a “50-50 partnership” (2016, p. 124). These concepts are briefly explored later in this paper in relation to how they may impact the participation of a hybrid conference event such as that of the Malta NL forum. Cochrane et al.’s (2020) work examined how to rethink the hybridity of design in learning environments for practice based learning. Practice-based learning does not easily transition to online learning using the one-to-many large lecture model of lecturer Zoom presentation to many viewers. One of their key points to support rapid redesign of this kind of learning is to consider “Remote to Hybrid Learning: using digital to amplify, accelerate and connect learners globally”, to facilitate distributed learning communities that may be present in smaller groups at real world locations. This echoes the concept of the hybrid conference, where small group discussion co-constructs understanding and shares knowledge, yet some members of these groups may be attending and participating virtually.

Focus in this paper is the amalgamation of face-to-face and online modalities participating in larger and smaller group events within the Malta NL forum. While one keynote presenter was physically attending in the host venue, other keynotes were attending virtually via Zoom. This arrangement also applied to other presenters from the attendee groups, where some early researchers were present physically at the host venue, while others presented virtually, again via Zoom. Breakout sessions where topic discussion took place additionally included both face-to-face and virtual attendees.

Hybrid events and conferences

A growing body of literature examines hybrid academic events for overall advantages and disadvantages, particularly from perspectives of efficacy, equity and sustainability. Sá et al. (2019) carried out a comparative analysis of several different types of modality, also highlighting problems inherent in the conference system *per se*. Citing others, they state “the importance of conferences and participating in them in the visibility, consolidation and expectations is undeniable both at the professional, institutional and personal levels” (2019, p. 37). However, they follow with some problematic areas inherent in the academic conference system, such as the reaffirming of academic hierarchies and inequalities that may be present in event structures, drawing attention to issues of ‘gender, race and social condition’ (p. 37). Further citing Verbeke (2015), that “conferences can and should be sites and moments that foster the active building of knowledge among participants”, they offer Sköld’s 2012 work on the nature of the virtual space, and relationships to physical space, virtual space architecture and socio-cultural impact to foster effective learning. In terms of relevance to this paper, Skold notes that “virtual space affects our perception and understanding of physical phenomena ...”, the inherent “biases of virtual learning spaces”, and “(v)irtual space is culturally, politically, and socially biased” (p. 38). That is, virtual space is not neutral, impacting perceptions of both virtual and physical presence, either separately or as an enmeshed whole.

Falk and Hagsten (2021) make multiple sentient points that describe the current terrain of the pandemic drift towards embracing hybrid or exclusively virtual conference formats. Their accurate accounting of the complex planning and flexible organisation required of host institutions and convenors reflects the challenges present in virtual and hybrid events, also reflected in the Malta NL Forum event. Of various advantages (time zone/pre-recorded sessions, limitless numbers of attendees, access for poorly funded country nationals), Falk and Hagsten then point out that “(o)ften, a large part of the networking at conferences takes place during coffee breaks, in corridors or at the organised dinner”, that sometimes entire research projects have emerged from. They also cite Fraser et al. (2017), who conclude that a main limitation of the purely virtual conferencing model is that it cannot replicate face-to-face networking (p. 545). While noting there are various advantages of attending events virtually (such as those outlined in Siemens et al., 2008), this limitation may also be true of some hybrid event models. For example this might be where only face-to-face attendees have coffee and discuss the presentations

they have just attended, yet virtual attendees are left in isolated vacuums. While back-channels may be considered as a possible way to enhance community building and social networking in virtual and physical events alike, invisibility, disregard or unfamiliarity may lead to isolation and alienation, e.g. in Spilker, Prinsen & Kalz, (2019). Spilker et al. cite various other work to highlight issues around use of Twitter as a backchannel of communication and networking. For example, there is a higher rate of communication between similar people than among dissimilar people, challenging the hypothesis that Twitter may be an opportunity for young researchers to become actively engaged with the research community (2019, p. 7). The issue of diversity is again raised, that attendees of conferences (with various levels of expertise and professional experiences) are often examined (or planned for) as a homogenous group, not considering, for instance, the influence of gender on conference attendance (p. 9). Additional socio-cultural differences such as time zones, or emergent power differential structures including inherent academic hierarchies may also impact how backchannel social media can effectively provide an adequate platform for 'off-schedule' communication, knowledge sharing or network building.

Technological mediations in hybrid events

The impact of technological mediations on participation in hybrid events and the perceived value and usefulness for those taking part can take a variety of forms. These can include technical limitations of host institutions and individual attendees (Sá et al., 2019; Fraser et al., 2017), digital and media skills and competences of presenters and participants (Duruwala, 2020, p. 12), and the prior assumptions, expectations and predilections for choice and use of digital devices and technological processes. Access to suitable technology and reliable broadband provision can be problematic barriers not only for host institutions but also for participants (Jacobs & MacFarlane, 2005; Falk & Hagsten, 2021). In similar ways to cost and funding this potentially limits some institutions from hosting and some participants from attending such events, therefore hybrid (or exclusively virtual) events may not be as equitable as is indicated in prior literature such as Siemens et al. (2008). Siemens et al. raised other prescient points about online and 'Simultaneous-Blended Conferences', arguing that for example "use of podcasts, wikis, and blogs to promote conference events is not an overly challenging task" (p. 22). Nevertheless, others argue that digital skills and literacies are still patchy at best and the digital divide is deepening (e.g. Van Dijk & Van Deursen, 2014).

Prior expectations or attitudes towards technology - bias, *technophobia* (Brosnan, 1998), general prior experience - of virtual or hybrid past events or learning and teaching experiences may influence the efficacy and value of the hybrid conference for an attendee. Brosnan remarks in his opening chapter that "(t)echnology is everywhere. It is ubiquitous in work, home and leisure environments...", and that "avoidance of new technologies by certain individuals has led to suggestions of the existence of a 'technophobia' ..." (1998, p. 10). In 2021 similar concerns may still manifest variously in relation to hybrid conference events. Technological determinism positions use of technology as a prerequisite to professional practice (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013), yet computer anxiety, lack of confidence or other negative associations persist (Duruwala, 2020, p. 16), and perhaps should not be associated with "pathologizing of the individual nor diminishing the validity of resistance" (Brosnan, 1998). Being a 'luddite' (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013; Stommel, 2014) towards educational technology or technology in general may impact attending virtual or hybrid conferences. However, it may conversely be argued that if one is disinclined to be overtly social in 'real life' then a conference may be an intimidating environment and would be avoided by those not wishing to engage in face-to-face contact. Implications are that a mix-and-match approach to academic events might prove the most useful to the most people, indeed perhaps deserving of further research.

Hybridity and sense of place

Physical places may have disadvantages too. Practical problems of hard to reach locations, travel problems, inadequate funding, limitations of facilities or other issues at host locations (e.g. in Fraser et al., 2017) may limit who can attend as well as who can host. In hybrid events, individual attendee physical presence context can also impact quality of experience. What does it mean to attend a hybrid event with attendees from multiple remote locations and personal (individual physical presence) contexts? The experience of 'being' at an event, senses of presence in intertwined environments: physical real-time presence; digital, virtual 'telepresence' (Steuer, 1992; Jones, 2015a, p. 91); socio-cultural glocalities (Meyrowitz, 2005), multiple time zones, languages and personal commitments. These real-world and virtual spaces, competing senses of where one 'is', and how to perceive and interpret sensory input in order to convey meaning or share understanding become entangled challenges in contexts of the hybrid academic conference. Technology mediates participant experience between these multi-layered and intertwined terrains, in cognitive, social and affective intra-active (co-constitutive) relationships of

awareness, communication, learning or value, mingling with externalised physicality of light and heat, buildings, peers and the real-world and virtual conversations going on (e.g. Pyry, 2017; Barad, 2007). Traxler's (2015) description of 'the erosion of physical place' by "multiple mobile virtual spaces of multiple conversational interactions" is termed as 'absent presence'. These "physically co-located groups of people all connected online elsewhere" partially describe some of what occurs in hybrid events, though periods of digital presence are shared, "(p)hysical space in fact is emptied of significance, becomes less dense as thickness, as the dimension of virtual space is grafted on to it" (p. 198). These differentiations between 'place, space and presence' offer a mechanism of articulating how these fragmented areas of cognitive awareness compete for attention, 'replacing a solid stable spatial context' (p. 197) with a context where potentially "people emotionally and intellectually absent themselves from their shared physical location" and "others, people physically elsewhere, are now virtually present" (p. 197-198). He further reflects on "temporal and spatial contexts as some kind of resource or raw material (spatio-temporal capital, perhaps, or space-time as a commodity)" (p. 199), which may be a way of considering how attendees divide their attention, focus and energy directed at differing digital and real-world domains as their interest or motivation to contribute is sparked.

The Malta NL Forum Event

Following discussion provides the first hand experiences and reflections of the host team. This describes 'what actually happened' scenarios and how host conveners felt about what they did and how it may have impacted both the event as a whole and individual attendee experiences. The effectiveness of the event is reflected on from the perspective of the event's overall aims of seeking to offer useful and relevant keynote and early researcher presentations, to encourage a full and interactive participation from everyone. Support was especially focused on the early researchers attending the event, however those attending the event were drawn from a variety of academic professional backgrounds.

Malta NL Forum hybridity reflections

The Malta NL Forum was at the start planned as a physical event to be held at the University of Malta (UM) Valletta campus. When the forum was conceptualised soon after the biennial Networked Learning Conference 2020 it was not envisaged that the Covid19 pandemic would continue to disrupt travel and public events for a considerable period of time. As the date of the event drew nearer, it became increasingly clear that a fully on-location event was not possible. The final decision of a hybrid event was taken about a month before the event. For the actual event, most attendees joined online. The still very strict local Covid19 restrictions sparingly permitted the host team and two participating researchers to be on location. The local keynote also came in person to deliver his presentation but otherwise also attended the forum from a distance.

The hybridity facilities of the UM Valletta campus at the time of the NL Forum allowed for Zoom-based online meetings running on the resident conference room computer. A technician was in attendance all through the event controlling and overseeing the digital operations including the recordings of the forum sessions. The live meeting was streamed on the two huge display screens covering most of the front wall of the conference room. On location attendees were provided with desk digital microphones that could be switched on and off as needed. As on location attendees we were advised to also join in the online meeting from our personal computer but to keep microphones muted. The unfamiliar set up led to what one of the host team members described as awkwardness. She found herself frequently shifting from looking at the big wall-mounted displays to her small laptop screen. This was felt as if it was leading to a situation worse than talking to others from across the screen. It led to instances where she felt as if she was looking the other way instead of at the people she was talking to, or who were talking to her. An alternative was to simply turn off the camera of the personal computer but this would have led to total dependence on the technician who was controlling the streaming sessions. Besides, it felt contradictory to be switching off her camera when at the same time she was encouraging attendees to keep their camera on where and when they could to help create a sense of togetherness. Moreover, switched off cameras underscore the remote connectivity. Perhaps as hybridity becomes a mainstream modality option for conferencing events and study-course meetings, we need to rethink hybrid spaces to provide a more seamless across-space experience for all attendees. The current trend of institutional purpose built hybrid classrooms have additional cameras to provide a live visual from the back of the room and 'intelligent' microphones that filter out noise other than that of the speaker (mostly the orator at the front or in close quarters to it). However this is not enough to give a sense of a merged spatial presence of the offline and the online and leads to another unsettling issue that event hybridity raises, of potentially creating barriers between virtual and 'real' attendees.

Hybrid modality runs the risk of a them-and-us mindset. The on-location presence may be easily interpreted as a place of privilege (Bayne et al. 2019). Hybridity brings this problem of otherness more to the fore. Different spaces are not in hierarchical order of privileges (see our earlier discussion highlighting hybrid institutional social structures and physical/digital contexts in Cook et al. 20016, p. 124). Our limited imagination of how the digital may serve to bring down the barriers of distance needs to be taken more seriously. It is more useful to consider the different spaces and the digital technologies we have at our disposal as offering diverse ways of how to float within and across alternative spaces and moreover, places and presences. Rising above dichotomies in our thinking may help us better to see possibilities and alternatives of hybrid ways of being. This leads to another contentious issue that hybridity raises, of virtual and face-to-face communication in hybrid event discussions, particularly in the context of breakout rooms.

Hybridity and ‘breakout’ discussion rooms

Another host team member was in charge of managing breakout rooms. Breakout rooms were intended to engage attendees in discussions over questions posed by keynote speakers. Such spaces were thought to offer opportunities for ‘more focused’ interactions among a small group of not more than five participants. However, for some groups, interactivity appeared to fail. In at least two of the ten breakout rooms, participants did not even introduce themselves to the rest of the group. It appeared that no one was ready to take the initiative to start, as if they were unaware of what they should be doing. We think this happened for a number of reasons. First, there was a lack of explicit planning for how breakout rooms were managed so as to provide guidance, to put attendees at their ease when they entered an assigned breakout room. For example, interactions could have been enhanced had breakout rooms had attendee facilitators assigned to lead and facilitate the discussion. A second issue related to an Internet connectivity problem that inhibited the person managing the breakout rooms to attend to the initial challenges that participants faced. As a result, he had to quickly juggle work using a second laptop through which he had to request host permissions options in order to have access to all breakout rooms. This, of course, took some time (about 5 minutes) to settle. Without immediate support some members in at least two of the breakout rooms simply gave up and no discussion was held.

A third issue related to the role that this host team member had in order to supervise and support breakout room discussions. One key issue seemed to be whether the sudden appearance of the host in a breakout room could be seen by the group as an interference, and, rather than viewed as an observer and helper the host seemed to be seen as an invader of a ‘safe’ interactive space. Each time the host joined a breakout room (virtually) discussions appeared to cease. It seemed that as soon as the host appeared on screen, his presence interrupted the discussion and participants stopped to listen to whatever he had to say. Rather than facilitating the process, this ‘stepping into’ a breakout room appeared to halt interactions and participants exhibited confused looks. Subsequently, the host’s intervention - that the reason for joining was simply to check that ‘everything was going well’ and to make sure in case the group needed any help - seemed superficial, late or unnecessary. It is also worth mentioning that an additional drawback of using breakout rooms in such a hybrid event was that those who were physically present had to change rooms (physically), seeking a quiet place to listen and speak undisturbed. We think that while the breakout room feature is intended to offer the opportunity for discussion, it may also inhibit this purpose if it is not well designed to address the challenges outlined above.

The need to design for hybridity

Hybridity therefore merits to be designed for. The Malta NL forum 2021 was originally designed as a physically located event. The coercion of the pandemic crisis and related restrictions led to the event being turned into an online space. The departure of the activity design rooted in physical space meant a lost opportunity to think through a hybrid event design. The same would have been the case had the event design departed on the premise of a fully online event. In retrospect it is noted that the dedicated Twitter hashtag concocted in the run up to the event, intended to provide an alternative back channel for participants to connect collectively in small group and on one-to-one basis, did not take off. The reasons for this may be various, noting earlier discussion in this paper relating to the work of Spilker et al. (2019). A design approach specifically targeting hybridity would have potentially served to help create a seamless event for all. Perhaps, this would have not elicited the innocent comment of one of the on location participants to comment that those present in physical space had the privilege of informal learning conversation during the coffee breaks and those pockets of unstructured times when attendees can reach out to each other to connect and network.

In consideration of hybrid modalities and presences for learning and networking we need to be more sensitive to different possibilities of access for both those who are in physical presence and those who join in remotely. As per our comments earlier reflecting on what hybridity is and entails, we cannot assume that all involved have the same accesses. We admit that the mainstream solutionism (Jones, 2015b, p. 126; Morozov, 2013) attitude in quickly shifting an intended physical event to a hybrid modality was a missed opportunity to think things through in this direction as well. Whichever way participants joined in, the kinds of devices used, individual assumptions, presumptions and understandings about digital technologies for learning and networking, and the digital skills and literacies, all impact on the individual and collective experiences created and co-created. Preparation for these hybridity continuums should acknowledge the haves and have-nots across all the spaces, places and time regarding different kinds of access. This continues to emphasise the need for hybridity to be designed for.

Conclusions

In conclusion from these reflections we are seeing that hybridity demands of us to consider it not as an extension of the physical or virtual space, but a space in its own right, and as a merged space in its own right. So firstly it merits a targeted design. Secondly in considering the whole context of the hybridity instance, it is more productive to let go of otherness but think of opportunities and challenges in the matter of choices. Thirdly, we need to take a step back to seriously consider the situational availability of digital resources and seek to think beyond our blinkers of past experience and current knowledge; also open to possibilities considering the fast-paced socio-technological advancements in the world around. In summary, in going for hybrid modality for learning and development we need to rethink design, facilitation and the human (and non-human) possibilities for interaction within and across spaces which traditionally were conceptualised as distinct but which with hybridity are coming together into a merged space of alternatives.

Going forward, the potential ‘new normal’ of hybrid conferences may sometimes be ‘the most useful to the most people’, considering aspects of cost, funding, equity, accessibility and sustainability, notwithstanding the limits in terms of sociability and professional networking. While it is indeed possible that face-to-face conferences are preventative to attend for some in academic communities (reasons being further exacerbated in light of ongoing pandemic restrictions), efficacy of hybrid events may depend on designing for the academic discipline, purposes, and for the benefit of all attendees.

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