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Significance

For students and early career researchers, the opportunity to present their research at internal seminars and external workshops and conferences is met with both excitement and trepidation. For researchers eager to receive feedback, and for experts in the field wanting to reflect and engage with the work they are doing, conferences provide a space for deep and invigorating development of their argument and research. However, instances in which commentary offered is overly critical, not mindful of the context of the work, and unhelpful, leave students and early career researchers questioning the value of their research, and increasingly disillusioned about academia. We offer a set of key questions that can be used to frame comments at conferences and workshops to maintain engagement whilst enhancing constructive feedback and minimising unhelpful criticism.

Introduction

There is an established and growing literature reflecting on what has been posited as a toxic culture in academia.[1,2] Undesirable practices may be hidden under the auspices of critical thinking, constructive feedback, or engagement.[3-5] Not coincidentally, this occurs alongside an attrition from academia both during and after PhDs, in part as a result of unhealthy research environments.[6,7] The literature has captured these impacts in cohort studies of PhD students, postdocs and campus-wide surveys, finding shared experiences in different parts of the world and across varied disciplines.[3-7] The reports of individuals captured within these works provide greater insight into the numbers that are reported in quantitative studies. Reflecting on personal experience, Roberts-Gregory recalls an engagement with a member of their graduate studies panel: "He denigrated the conceptual framing of my research, my chosen methods, my writing style, and my ability to conduct 'systematic analysis'"[5(p.132)].

As Hellyer[3] points out, these practices often take place at conferences and workshops, spaces in which students and early career researchers are often excited to share their research, and to have an audience who are engaged in and reflective of the work they have done, yet they may be met with unreasonable and harmful criticism:

> *One recent example highlighted online showed how a Bath University PhD student was attacked and ridiculed at a conference by a senior academic who said she should be "ashamed," pointing his finger in her face and calling her a "disgrace." When she tried to respond, he continued to attack her and her research.*[3(p.1)]

Rather than seeking to learn from the presenter and to approach a conference presentation with curiosity, such responses suggest that the audience member sees their role as a critic, tasked with finding mistakes in the work presented. As Harris and González[8] put it,

> *On the one hand, the university champions meritocracy, encourages free expression and the search for truth, and prizes the creation of neutral and objective knowledge for the betterment of society… on the other hand, women of colour too frequently find themselves 'presumed incompetent' as scholars, teachers, and participants in academic governance.*[8(p.1)]

These issues may contribute to increasing barriers to postgraduate student retention in academia[6,7], imposter syndrome[9,10], and unnecessary stress when attending departmental seminars, external workshops and conferences. Early career researchers and students in turn may feel discouraged from speaking in public (an already anxiety-provoking task for most) and attending conferences. Negative feedback received in these spaces is of questionable use to the professional development of the student, or the academic rigour of their work. Central to this is perhaps a lack of consensus on the meaning and understanding of constructive criticism or feedback, and how it compares to more detrimental forms of feedback.[11] This issue is arguably heightened in the context of neoliberal academia, which is characterised in part by precarious academic labour, the framing of achievement as inherently individualistic, and the resultant feelings of competition.[12,13]

It is estimated that 20% of students experience imposter syndrome[10], and as Pellier et al.[4] argue, it is the enabling environments in academia that allow toxic practices of unreasonable criticism to exacerbate these experiences. In 1993, Costa and Kallick[14] wrote of the role of a 'critical' friend in academia:

> *A critical friend, as the name suggests, is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working towards.*[14(p.50)]

While academic work during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed even greater concerns of toxicity relating to job insecurity, overtime work requirements, and a challenge in juggling parenthood and other care responsibilities with

academic work[15], research on the impact of denigrating feedback has continued to emerge through this period[16-18]. Research has also revealed a wide-ranging list of reasons for leaving academia which are parallel to, although often entangled with, the harms of overly critical feedback, including job insecurity, low pay, an over-saturated job market, and challenges in balancing family life with academia.[19,20]

To address one of these concerns, and in attempt to provide clear alternatives to toxic criticism in academia, we need a culture shift. This shift has already begun in many contexts, and requires multiple actors to work together in creating a less individualistic and competitive, and instead a more supportive environment, in which researchers feel that they have a safe space to share their work and ideas. Can we position ourselves as the 'critical friend', or indeed the 'interested listener' when attending workshops and conferences in which students and early career researchers present? Would this provide greater learning and development for these early career researchers than the disparaging comments that are so often veiled as 'constructive criticism', and in turn serve the intended knowledge generation and dissemination that forms the key purpose of academia? Following discussions in our Biometeorology research workshop, we argue that this can be initiated by the people posing questions to researchers, and who represent important role models for future generations of researchers, carefully reflecting on their own positionality when engaging. We present the framework below that we encourage all audience members to consider, and to remain reflexively engaged in. Although this list may, and indeed should, include what is common sense, and may for some be common practice, we encourage people to critically consider when in the audience of any presentation:

1. Why is the speaker there?

Are they being graded for their degree? Are they sharing their work? Are they there to learn? Would they choose to attend this workshop or conference if they knew this was the feedback they would get? Will they want to attend future workshops or conferences if they do receive unreasonably harsh feedback? Remember that, just like you, this speaker is here to share the research that has consumed their days over the past weeks to months to years. Let us retain their excitement to do so. For some, it may be their first experience at a conference or workshop, and perhaps the first time anyone in their family has presented their own research to a specialist audience.

2. Why are you there?

To grade a qualification? To find the gaps or the weaknesses in the work presented? To fuel your curiosity and to learn? In the setting of a workshop or conference, it is most likely the latter. You are attending the workshop to keep up to date on current research, to present your work, and to meet with colleagues in the field. If your role is not to grade a student, or to find gaps in their work, do not impose this task on yourself.

3. What is your level of specific, specialist knowledge?

Some of the time, you will have specialist and specific knowledge far greater than that of the presenter. Often, however, they will be the expert on the nuances of their specific topic. They will be more familiar with which methods are viable and suitable, what data are available, and what the results represent in the local setting. You can learn from them, even if they sit much lower in the academic hierarchy. By all means, ask questions to understand, but if you are not familiar with all the literature on the topic, you probably do not know of a viable better way to conduct a study than the person presenting. Rather than stating that the approach you have thought up is better, ask how their approach considers the various limitations.

4. If it could have been done, it probably would have been

It is very easy to think up hypothetical projects with excellent data sets from the comfort of our seats. Obtaining and working with the data are often far more difficult than we might imagine, if not impossible. As an audience member, your role is not to tell the speaker how to do their study better, but to be curious about their results and interpretations of the work that has been done. In the same sense, you could positively enquire whether the speaker has ideas about work beyond their study, and express your own willingness to share data and expertise. This fuels both creativity and networking opportunities.

5. It is impossible to convey an entire 8000-word paper in 10 minutes

Conference or workshop presentations are invariably a very short summary of a much longer written paper and of years of research. If the full paper has been published, and you have read it in detail ahead of the presentation – wonderful! If you have not yet had a chance to do so, be mindful that a lot more detail is likely to be contained within it. If a speaker mentions that it is covered in the paper, make a note to go and read the full paper. You could always contact them later on with questions.

6. Do not badger the speaker

In competitive debating, badgering refers to offering so many points of information that the speaker cannot complete their sentence. The adjudicators or chairs will usually intervene. In academic presentations, this is similar to the dreaded 'follow-up' question, which is seldom a new question, but the audience member pushing their agenda or point of view over and over again. The speaker, and the rest of the audience, most likely heard and understood you the first time. Allow others to ask their questions. A good chair, similar to a debating adjudicator, will often intervene, but prevention is better than intervention.

7. Are you asking a question just to have your voice heard?

Although we do sometimes need to provide our institutions with proof that we attended a conference, individual presentations should not be treated as an 'attendance register'. You also are unlikely to demonstrate your expertise in the field through making a 'comment rather than a question'. If you are raising your hand to prove that you are there, or to demonstrate that you have knowledge of the topic, it probably is not of value to the person presenting or the audience. A more constructive input would be to simply commend the speaker.

8. Be mindful of your choice of words

Remember that just one word can have a profound and long-lasting effect. It should go without saying that telling a person that their work is "rubbish" is not acceptable. But are you not saying something pretty similar if you tell them that their work is "not sophisticated," that it is "poorly conceived," or that it is of "little practical value"? These are just a few examples. When raising your hand, think through what you plan to say, and how it could be received. Remember that a person's past experiences and their cultural background can influence how they both offer and receive feedback, and making a conscious effort to ensure that feedback is not hurtful is important.

Do...

After this long list of 'don'ts' you may now feel that it is not safe to engage or ask questions at a conference or workshop, or that you have been 'silenced'. That is not the aim at all! Critical, reflective and curious listening and engagement is wonderful. So many students and early career researchers are very keen to have an audience of people who really think about their topic, and to show enthusiasm for the work that consumes their everyday. So:

- Do ask questions.
- Do suggest literature that you think is valuable to their work.
- Do, politely, ask why the methods or site of the study were chosen.
- Do ask the researcher to share the limitations of their study and how they addressed these.
- Do ask for clarification on things that you did not completely understand in their talk, bearing in mind that this could stem from your own confusion.

- Do encourage further discussion in the breaks, rather than asking follow-up questions in the session.
- Do listen with curiosity and listen to learn.
- Do recognise the researcher's specialist knowledge on the topic; whether that comprises a small or large component of what they are presenting, there will be content that is new to you and the rest of the audience.
- Do reflect on the questions you were asked, whether it was decades ago or earlier that day, and consider which of those really helped you to advance your thinking.

We do also acknowledge the importance of a chair in facilitating a session of a workshop or conference where positive feedback is encouraged, and where problematic feedback is handled appropriately. We therefore also encourage prospective session chairs to reflect on both our lists of 'dos and don'ts', and to consider ahead of chairing a session what they might do in response to instances where harsh criticism is raised, researchers are badgered, or language is inappropriate. We do, however, recognise that chairs themselves may well be early career researchers, and that power dynamics may make this difficult.

Finally, this list is intended specifically for the setting of workshops and conferences. Many universities and departments hold internal seminars and presentation days, where the role of the audience members is to evaluate, grade and critique a student's work. While these questions could similarly be valuable in these settings, the answer for the first two questions would then be yes, and would frame the setting for the subsequent answers. Our aim is to be supportive in the context of current debates, and we welcome further discussion on these issues.

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Competing interests

We have no competing interests to declare.

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