Afterword

Making Academic Conferencing Meaningful across Modalities: Lessons from Documentarians

Jennifer Sano-Franchini

This volume of CCCC Documentarian Tales offers a glimpse into the conferencing lives of fifteen CCCC Convention attendees, as the context and conditions surrounding us shifted and changed between 2021 and 2023. During this time, we were in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us had been working online and going about our day-to-day lives with limited face-to-face interactions for some time at that point (Budhathoki, Thomas). In response to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, CCCC experimented with online and then hybrid conferencing modalities. Together, these tales document how the contributors experienced the Convention in abundant ways, with a range of concerns, emotions, and encounters in mind. Moreover, we see how the authors' experiences are shaped by their teaching and administrative responsibilities, the pressures of academic review systems, their obligations as caregivers, and their concerns as individuals who must manage their own health and medical conditions. Importantly, these tales point to a number of other embodied and material factors that affect the experiences of conferencegoers; these factors include but are not limited to how our bodies are or aren't racialized and/or politicized (Kim, Patterson), disabilities and neurodivergence (Grouling), our professional and familial relationships and obligations (Jankens, Marlow), our nationality and citizenship status (Budhathoki), where we are in our studies or careers, and self-perceptions about how we fit into academia and academic trajectories (Ly), amongst other factors.

As the Program Chair for the 2024 CCCC Convention and as a digital rhetorician and technical communication scholar who's interested in the technological and infrastructural design of experiences, I cannot help but notice how this set of Documentarian Tales offers important insights for learning from the 2021, 2022, and 2023 CCCC Conventions, and drawing on the experiences of conference attendees to reimagine (large) academic conferences after the COVID pandemic, and now

that COVID has become endemic—a permanent fixture of our lives, in 2024 and beyond. I found myself reading these tales as user experience (UX) narratives that speak to the form, structure, and feelings associated with large academic conferences, and CCCC in particular, as well as with academia as an industry and line of work. Along these lines, some questions to consider include: What do large academic conferences like CCCC do and enable for attendees, in all its iterations? What are the values that inform and shape them? How might these values be fraught and informed by inequitable power structures? What aspects of traditional in-person academic conferences do attendees feel are important to maintain? How might the affordances of in-person conferences be most effectively translated for online and hybrid formats? How do digital technologies like Zoom, Whova, and other digital and hybrid conferencing platforms impact what it feels like to participate in a conference? And what can conference organizers do to support these changing technological and social contexts?

I can't answer all of these questions in this brief essay, but I can try to think through some of them. Below, I offer my reflections in the hopes that others might likewise be interested in engaging with these questions and in collaborating to—as Jones and Williams put it—reimagine academic structures for more equitable and justice-oriented futures.

WHAT DO ACADEMIC CONFERENCES LIKE CCCC DO/ENABLE?

This set of Documentarian Tales taught me a lot about the rhetorical work of CCCC—what people appreciate about it and what academic conferences like CCCC can do, or enable, for attendees. In brief, they describe how academic conferences like CCCC can be empowering, educational, practical, and enriching. They also describe the social element of conferences—how it can be a way to feel connected with others in the discipline through planned and serendipitous encounters. At the same time, it can be—and perhaps in certain ways by its very nature is—exclusionary, inaccessible, and demanding, bringing on feelings of guilt for those who might feel like they aren't doing "enough." And, as an intervention into the conferencing experience, the Documentarians project at CCCC can enable not only more open forms of participation but also reflexivity and the ability to navigate the conference with a sense of purpose.

Quang Ly's narrative reminds me of how academic conferences can be quite empowering as they create opportunities to actively contribute to a given discourse community, to shape the profession, and to build professional relationships. For Jason Tham, "going to the CCCC Convention was an effective way to learn about trends in the field, pick up new methods of teaching and research, and share my own practices with other interested attendees." For me, the CCCC conference, and more important, the people with whom I've interacted through the organization, have opened up research and collaboration opportunities, made me aware of new (to me) teaching ideas, given me an opportunity to reconnect with friends, and, at times, made my work in the profession not only bearable but also worth doing. In other words, I've found it to be a sustaining space, in a lot of ways.

Perhaps the most common thing that I hear people appreciate about attending academic conferences like CCCC is meeting up with their people, reuniting with graduate school friends, and/or socializing with others in their field (as Jennifer Grouling addresses in her chapter). As Ly writes, the CCCC conference "is more than just about presenting and learning about new research. It is the perfect opportunity to catch up with colleagues, professors, classmates, and friends (and to do a little sightseeing on the side)." At times, as Victoria Braegger notes in her chapter, what attendees remember aren't the content of the panels they attended but who they met, how they did or didn't connect with people, and how they felt during the conference. They raise questions about how we measure what we take away from conferences, and how they stack up with what we remember.

And it's not only people they already know and are connected to that people appreciate meeting. As Tham noted, in-person conferences offer "opportunities for chance encounters and serendipitous connections." At times, these encounters even occur outside of the conference site. For example, Ly described running into and connecting with others on their way to the conference at the airport, thus enabling professional connections. Sometimes these connections are not verbal but small connections that are nonetheless meaningful—such as when Ly and a familiar colleague's eyes met at the convention space; when Adrienne Jankens and Jennifer Grouling saw one another at the elevators after having just met a few days earlier,

which would lead to a deepening and lasting friendship; and what Karen Tellez-Chaires described as simply but profoundly "[sharing] space" with others. It's these brief, fleeting moments that contribute to a sense of belonging and that can allow deeper, sustaining connections moving forward.

Ly's narrative also serves as a reminder that the CCCC conference is—whether rightfully or not—a big deal for a lot of people. It is viewed by some as an "elite club," as it is also a space around which the language of "belonging" often occurs. Probably because of this, academic conferences—or perhaps more to the point, the larger systems and labor conditions that make them possible and that emplace value onto them—can instill in people feelings of guilt, whether about not attending enough sessions or events in person, or not watching enough on-demand sessions online, even as what's "enough" varies (see the chapters by Joel Bergholtz and Analeigh Horton). Emily Plummer Catena, drawing on the work of Tara Wood, offers a theory to explain how these expectations we sometimes feel pressured to live up to may be informed in part by how we conceptualize frameworks for assessing participation in our teaching:

> Much like classrooms, we often conceptualize conferences as immediate and bounded in terms of participation: "expected to arrive on time, absorb information at a particular speed, and perform spontaneously in restricted time frames" (Wood 264); presentations begin at end at precise times with slots for questions and discussion, and then often presenters and audience members entirely disperse.

Thir Budhathoki's and Ly's tales also illustrate how conferences can stir up feelings of being an "imposter" and somehow inadequate. At the same time, I found it interesting how both Budhathoki and Ly described a trajectory where they initially felt out of place or inadequate, but through the conference experience and through their participation as Documentarians, came to have a stronger sense that they do indeed belong and can and do contribute to the academic discourse community through their participation in CCCC. "Eliteness" implies exclusion and gatekeeping, and I believe this is a fundamental aspect of academic conferences; however, I believe that the organization—and more specifically the people who volunteer their time to run and improve it—has worked hard to make its policies

and events, including the annual convention, more and more inclusive. Yet as with most institutional structures, there continues to be more work to be done. For instance, Tham notes, "Even as I was able to move around comfortably during the convention, I noticed numerous physical barriers and spatial challenges that could hinder attendees from a desired conference experience." This observation reflects Margaret Price's argument that "conferences are often among the least accessible spaces that people with disabilities encounter in the course of our work, since they combine the typical inaccessibility of public spaces with the fact that most participants are on unfamiliar ground."

On a phenomenological level, Documentarians describe how conferences often come with a shift in time, space, being, and embodiment (Patterson, Ly). For instance, Ly describes how conferencing time is different from the experience of time outside of the Convention space when contrasting the hustle and bustle of the Convention with the world and everyone else seemingly outside of it.

Centering on the notion of space, Kimberly Thomas described how attending a virtual conference and "Being in one central place—'locked' into a specific location—to teach, hold meetings, attend lectures, or watch presentations is one aspect of virtual space that denies the very concept of freedom that the metaverse was supposed to give us." And Tellez-Chaires mentions being in "conference mode," where her "body, mind, and spirit" were focused on the conference experience and all that came with it. During this time, she writes:

> Many of the tasks I'd set aside to be done at the hotel such as grading, and revising of chapters slipped to the back of my mind. All my thoughts were devoted to the role I would have as a co-hostess in the relaxation room during the Feminist Workshop, on my first opportunity to serve as a respondent on the Job Market Panel put together by Laura Micciche, and on my panel presentation.

She continues to describe how conferences, for her, are a moment to take a break from the responsibilities of day-to-day life, and to commit herself and her time to her scholarly work. On the other hand, this notion of conferences as a separate and distinct space from the rest of our lives is complicated by Braegger's tale where they describe how they attempted to use the conference as a way to use "productivity to

avoid processing grief," even as, ultimately, grief, which moves at its own pace and on its own timeline, would not, could not escape them.

DOCUMENTARIAN ROLE AS PRODUCTIVE DISRUPTION

Often, authors reflected on how the Documentarian role in some ways intervened in their typical conferencing experience. Several mention how this role and the way it was structured by the organizers and editors of this collection enabled them to navigate the convention with purpose and reflexivity (see the chapters by Emily Plummer Catena and Nitya Pandey). Indeed, as I write this Afterword, I've tried to think back to the virtual conferences I've attended since the onset of COVID, and it's mostly a blur. I remember exhaustion, pressure points from sitting in the same chair for too long, Roxane Gay's keynote where she shared stories about her experiences in the discipline, flashes of Anita Hill's face on Zoom, scrambling to get *something* onto the virtual platform for my on-demand session and feeling both guilt and resignation about the messy slides I quickly threw together and uploaded. I wonder how much more I might have been able to retain if I'd participated as a Documentarian.

WHAT DO DOCUMENTARIANS' TALES TEACH US ABOUT VIRTUAL CONFERENCES?

While virtual conferences went from being relatively uncommon to a requirement during the COVID-19 pandemic, I think it's fair to say that it's a platform that has yet to be fully and critically interrogated, revised, and refined. New modalities and platforms require a re-interrogation of how technical affordances support or must be reworked in order to meet existing outcomes. In this way, the Documentarian tales provide useful insights for better understanding what it means to conference online.

Accessibly designed virtual platforms can make academic conferences more inclusive in many different ways. For instance, it can enable access for those who are immunocompromised and who would be placing themselves at risk by traveling to and attending an in-person conference. It also supports access for those who are in close proximity to or who provide care for at-risk individuals. Emily Plummer Catena describes how asynchronous attendance helped her to feel "less pressure to 'perform' networking" and encouraged her to take time "to revisit and reconsider anew ideas that were already new." Likewise,

Jennifer Marlow describes how "[a]s someone with extreme social anxiety, the virtual conference experience ended up being a nearly perfect one in some ways," as it got her to attend events and meetings that she had never attended previously. Virtual conferences can also make attending a conference more accessible in terms of the cost to attend—no flights need to be purchased, and no hotels need to be booked. At the same time, virtual conferences can be inaccessible for some, particularly those who do not have access to a strong and reliable high-speed internet connection as well as those for whom being online for hours is more challenging or even debilitating than attending an in-person conference (Sano-Franchini et al.).

Given that a significant aspect of what conferences do involves interpersonal relationship building or networking, there is a need to learn more about how such connections might be best facilitated on virtual platforms, where we are generally not able interact with other participants in the same way—we sometimes can't see them or directly interact with them (see Karen Tellez-Chaires's chapter). We share virtual space with them, but it doesn't feel the same as being in the same physical space.

Tham notes how "presence promotes participation" and how for him, "the most apparent contrast between an online conference and an in-person conference is the awareness of others when engaging with the conference program." Perhaps relatedly, Tellez-Chaires also notes how it can be challenging to create lasting connections on a platform like Zoom, and we might ask ourselves how other conferencing platforms enable, facilitate, and/or hinder lasting connections among participants. Thomas points to some critical context for this idea of virtual conferences feeling disconnected, offering, "I will concede that the lack of belonging I felt during the 2022 CCCC Convention was probably due to the psychological implications of living through a global pandemic for so long, and attempting to reconnect in ways, i.e., virtually, that have left us disconnected." What can or should conference organizers and attendees do about this reality, to mitigate feelings of unwanted alone-ness or dis-connection?

In addition, new technologies require time and effort to figure out. As Tham notes, conferencegoers often find themselves having to navigate and learn frequently changing conferencing platform interfaces, some of which are easier to figure out than others. And there is also the stress of learning new genres that presenters must perform, such

as the video-recorded "talking-head presentation." What's more, new and emergent virtual platforms for sharing research and scholarship also necessitate that we attend to new and emergent questions about issues of authorship and intellectual property. For example, it's come to be more and more common to expect that presenters make their/ our work openly available to all—or at least all who register for the conference—so as to enhance accessibility, an important goal. At the same time, how might this digitization of scholarly exchange make the sharing of knowledge in academia more transactional, rather than relational and reciprocal? How does it matter to have a sense of who is listening to you and reading your work, particularly when it is unpublished work in progress?

On the other hand, Tham notes, "While presence promotes participation, it can also externalize non-participation," or the opting out of sessions and other convention-related events to sightsee and engage with the places and communities surrounding the conference—not that this is a bad thing! It leads me to wonder if such tendencies help to make in-person conferences manageable, as built-in time for breaks, breathing, and space.

TAKEAWAYS FOR CONFERENCING IN 2024 AND BEYOND

So, how might we rethink how we go about participating in—and organizing—conferences in the future? Here are some preliminary thoughts that will most likely require further thinking, revision, and refinement.

Making Virtual Conferencing Meaningful

Joel Bergholtz suggests recommitting "ourselves to the habits and rituals that make our work meaningful *to ourselves.*" When it comes to rethinking how we engage with virtual conferences, then, my suggestion is to consider what things we appreciate about in-person conferences. Many conferencegoers take the initial step of browsing through the program and highlighting what sessions and events they want to attend. This is something I don't always bring myself to do when attending a virtual conference, in part because the information is often presented in a way that is difficult for me to navigate. So how can conference organizers present this information in a usable and maybe even enjoyable way?

For some, conferences are an opportunity to travel and enter into new spaces, while for others it might be a chance to reconnect with

grad school or other colleagues. How might these experiences be re-envisioned—even if they can't be replicated—in an online conference setting? For example, some people enjoy and are able to make time for sightseeing when they are taking part in conference travel, while others enjoy going to new restaurants. What if online conference attendees similarly made space and cleared their calendar for the entire week, even if they aren't traveling? What might happen if people portioned out some of this time as a way to experience the place where they live anew, by finding a new place to eat in town, if they can, or by going to a place they'd always wanted to visit but never did? What if they set up meetings, whether in person or online, with a colleague or friend? What if they used the conferencing platform or hashtag to arrange virtual meetups, perhaps not altogether unlike the serendipitous experience of running into other CCCC-goers at the airport (as Quang Ly notes)?

To do any of this, I think program and department administrators would need to allow for that flexibility, with the understanding that professional development is an important and necessary part of building a strong academic program. Understanding that people can't engage fully on top of all of their other local responsibilities, and that they need the time that they would typically take to do these things, what if administrators actively encouraged faculty and graduate students to block off their schedule, offer alternative, low-oversight, or asynchronous online activities, and not attend any inessential in-person meetings, just as they might have for an in-person conference (as Karen Tellez-Chaires observes in her chapter)? What if they funded lodging expenses so that online participants can remove themselves a bit from their typical home responsibilities and dedicate themselves more fully to the conferencing experience, if they so choose?

For the part of conference organizers, I think Catena offers a useful question that those of us organizing in-person conferences should take time to consider: "What are ways to move forward with the asynchronous as a purposeful component of an 'in person' conference?" In addition, reflecting on the notion of conference space and time, what if conference organizers created Zoom backgrounds as a way of signifying shared space and making it easy to keep personal spaces private? Marlow also offers the useful point that it is all the more important that those organizing virtual events have a clear structure, e.g., "a facilitator, scheduled speakers who knew what they wanted to say and said it efficiently, and then breakout rooms devoted to specific themes

with some guidelines for what attendees might want to address or talk about in these small-group sessions."

Conferencing with Intention

My final suggestion is that we do more to enter into conferences much like the Documentarians do—by taking a moment to reflect and intention-set. When I co-organized the 2022 Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) Virtual Conference with Donnie Johnson Sackey and Kristen Moore with the support of the ATTW Executive Committee, we all agreed that we wanted to open the conference with an intention-setting moment. In some ways, I think this idea resonates with how the Documentarians' role is set up. What might it look like for other conferences to adopt a practice like this? What if we called attendees together at the start of the conference to take some time to consider questions like:

- How will you make your time here meaningful, however you define that?
- What do you hope to gain from your experience at this conference?
- What can you do to heighten the chance that you'll have the meaningful experiences you hope to have?
- How will you care for yourself while doing those things?

Another thought: What if we included the Documentarian prompts at the beginning of each Annual Convention program, as a possible way for everyone to navigate the Convention?

WORKS CITED

Jones, Natasha N., and Miriam F. Williams. "The Just Use of Imagination: A Call to Action." *ATTW Blog,* 10 June 2020, attw.org/blog/the-just-use-of-imagination-a-call-to-action/.

Price, Margaret. "Access Imagined: The Construction of Disability in Conference Policy Documents." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2009, https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v29i1.174.

Sano-Franchini, Jennifer, André M. Jones Jr., Priyanka Ganguly, Chloe J. Robertson, Luana J. Shafer, Marti Wagnon, Olayemi Awotayo, and Megan Bronson. "Slack, Social Justice, and Online Technical Communication Pedagogy." *Technical Communication Quarterly, vol.* 32, no. 2, 2023, pp. 134–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2022.2085 809.