

Among My People: Trying to Pierce the Veil of the Writing Studies Discourse Community

Quang Ly

"I am so delighted to welcome all of you to CCCC 2023."¹

The annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (Cs) was upon us. I felt the presence of the Cs even before the conference started. I was sitting in the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport waiting for my connecting flight, when I overheard a group of women talking. It was their language that caught my attention—words like *archive*, *research article*, and *conference*. Right then, I knew the women were part of the same discourse community as me—the discourse community of writing scholars. I went over and introduced myself and asked if they were on their way to the Cs. They were. There were seven of them in the same sitting area, some from Georgia State University and some from Georgia Tech. I had no intention of conversing with anyone while waiting to board my flight, but loneliness struck me until I heard some familiar discourse. Maybe it was the thrill of attending an in-person conference for the first time in four years, or perhaps it was the simple fact that I understood their lexis. Whatever the reason, I wanted to go over and talk to fellow writing scholars about our research and profession. I wanted to be part of their inner circle.

One characteristic that creates a discourse community is that it has “acquired some specific lexis” (Swales 16). According to Swales, *lexis* is shared terminology that includes abbreviations and acronyms recognized by members of the discourse community (16). As I learned more about what it means to work in academia, I also accumulated a mental list of common jargon frequently associated with my line of work. Most of that jargon initially came from reading journal articles for seminar

1. The italicized quotes are excerpts from Frankie Condon’s greeting remarks. Condon was the program chair for the 2023 4Cs. The entire greetings can be accessed at <https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/2023-cccc-convention-program>.

classes. Some occurred through talking to classmates. Some occurred through listening to professors talk to colleagues and graduate students. And some occurred through reading conversations in a private Facebook group for rhetoric and composition students at my university. The lexis included *tenure-track*, *NTT faculty*, *teaching load*, *rhet/comp*, *reviewer*, *service*, *proposal*, and *scholarship*. The process of acquiring the lexis of my discourse community occurred organically and naturally; I learned the lexis because I was trying to enculturate myself into this community. After finishing my graduate program, that list only grew through continuous research and attendance at meetings and conferences.

As I sat on the connecting flight, I got a chance to ponder my professional identity in my discourse community. When I joined the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2022, I wondered whether there were a set of expectations that I had to fulfill to be taken seriously as a member. Once a person joins a discourse community, what should they do to become a sustained and established member? This is a rather complex question with an even more complicated answer. Just because people pay for their membership to an organization does not mean they are contributing members. If I pay for my annual membership and stay dormant, is that sufficient for people to see me as part of the discourse community? Can I tell people I belong to the CCCC organization if I am not an active member? It puzzles me when I think about why a person would want to be part of a discourse community unless they plan to do something meaningful with their membership. What does it mean, then, to be a member of CCCC?

“To those of you who have traveled to Chicago to convene in person—Yay!!!”

The 2023 Cs took place in Chicago. This windy city was chosen as the host site when the world was deemed safe to gather in person. The conference had not been held in person for three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference in Chicago, postpandemic, was a full-circle moment because it just so happened to be the same site as the first Cs in March of 1950 (CCCC, *Dates, Sites, and Themes for Past CCCC Conventions*).

The Cs was my very first academic conference. There is no better place to share our research and hear our peers' research than the Cs. Anyone who researches and teaches college composition knows that the Cs is the premier conference for the field of writing studies. It is

the *crème de la crème* of conferences for us. Even though I was aware of the Cs' existence as a graduate student, I had not officially joined the organization because I had not seen myself as part of that world or felt I qualified to be a member.

For the first few years of my graduate studies, I was oblivious to the fact that one part of being a professor was the expectation (and commitment) to conduct and present research at regional and national conferences. As a novice at that time, I saw the Cs as simply an event, a one-time conference. Through encouragement from one of my professors, I decided to submit a proposal that I wrote for my Introduction to English Studies class. My professor told the class that getting some experience presenting research was important for our academic careers. When my proposal was accepted for the 2019 Cs, I thought nothing of it. I only realized the magnitude of having a proposal accepted to the Cs in the final years of my program.

When I went to the Cs in 2019, I went there with no agenda. No goals. I did not know what I was doing or should have been doing. I felt lost. Looking back, I wish I had solicited some tips from my professors about how to approach these kinds of conferences. Doing the bare minimum, I presented my research and left. I neglected to go to any sessions. I did not network. I did not take advantage of anything the conference offered its attendees. Speaking frankly, I saw myself as an outsider, an imposter who did what he was told but did not understand the reason behind it. In fact, my battle with imposter syndrome started in 2016, right at the start of my PhD journey. Unbeknownst to myself, I desperately wanted to be part of this world but needed the right key.

Some short years later, having taken more classes, read more theories, and completed more seminar papers, I began to understand the profession more deeply. I adopted a different mindset regarding conferences. I wanted to experience the Cs as a member should experience it. For the 2023 Cs, I wanted my experience to be more interactive. Productive. Meaningful. Better than my 2019 experience. I thought about what I wanted from this year's conference. I also thought about what could go wrong. For example, I was afraid I would not know anyone at the conference, which would make for an unpleasant experience (like my first one). I needed a game plan to help me navigate the intricacy of the Cs to get the best experience the second time around. Thus, I had to do some planning to make the most of my time. I browsed the program book online to see which of my classmates and

professors would be in Chicago and which sessions would enhance my pedagogical practices.

The reality is that people graduate from school. They change jobs. They move. But the one constant in our career is attending conferences. Conferences can serve as a shared space for us to congregate and talk as if no time has passed. People travel great distances to be among people in their discourse community because that is where they belong. I found this to be true with the Cs. Upon arriving at the Hilton hotel on day one, the same place where the conference was being held, the first person I saw was a former classmate from graduate school. I was in the lobby waiting to check into my room when I glanced behind me and saw my classmate sitting at a table doing work on her laptop. She came from New York, and I came from Florida, and here we were, both in Chicago. After I checked in, I went to talk to her. For twenty minutes, we conversed about our presentations, our current roles at our respective universities, and our post-graduate-school life. I felt at home because I knew my classmate would be one of the many friendly faces I would see.

The Cs is more than just presenting and learning about new research. It is the perfect opportunity to catch up with former (and current) colleagues, professors, classmates, and friends (and to do a little sightseeing on the side). On the evening of my arrival, I attended an Ohio University reunion that one of my professors organized. This event was held at a local bar down the street from the conference hotel. Though the reunion was not directly affiliated with the Cs, it was part of my overall conference experience. Traveling to a different city for work also means catching up with friends. I made sure to include some personal time in my planning. When I arrived at the bar, I saw a lot of friendly faces. It was nice seeing former classmates and professors talking, laughing, and just gossiping. By the end of the conference, I saw three of my former classmates and two of my former professors, all from Ohio University. Not only did I attend some of their presentations, but we also got to catch up on our lives during dinner and between sessions. Sometimes, being in a new discourse community can be a forlorn experience, so seeing familiar faces at these annual events and feeling that hint of belonging is always comforting.

“In the call for papers for our Convention, I invited us to do hope.”

Participating in an academic conference allows researchers and scholars to build their reputations. We do not just do research in

silence. We yearn to share our research with our peers. This is why conferences matter. Regardless of how often a person presents at a conference, getting a proposal accepted is something to celebrate. This achievement means reviewers from Cs (and other conferences) find a person's work significant and worthy of sharing with the world. When I received my proposal acceptance in October (four months before the event), I was beyond stoked because that meant I would be at the 2023 Cs for the first time as an official member of the writing studies discourse community.

Another characteristic of a discourse community is having a "threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise" (Swales 16). Not everyone can join one. Being part of a discourse community must mean something. It has to feel special. That is why there are requirements that prospective members need to meet. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the parent organization of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, membership is generally open to people who study, teach, or conduct research in the English field. Students and teachers can join. Even though a person does not need a graduate degree to join, I believe having one would help establish them as someone with "a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise." This characteristic means that membership in any discourse community is not automatic. Instead, a person needs to go through the process of earning their membership (i.e., meeting specific requirements).

Despite studying English and teaching college composition to undergraduates throughout my graduate program, it felt odd to consider myself part of the writing studies discourse community. I was a student and not yet a professional with a full-time job. I decided against joining the Cs organization as a student because I was still learning my craft. The first time I heard about imposter syndrome was in graduate school, a term that was constantly part of class discussions. Some of my professors and PhD classmates wrestled with their identity and placement in the community. Hearing my professors and classmates talk about their experience with imposter syndrome was shocking since they were more senior than me. At the same time, some experts long into their careers still hold this imposter syndrome mindset, including those in business (Dixon) and medicine (Vaa Stelling et al.). As I progressed in my program, I increasingly understood the imposter feeling.

Several months after receiving my PhD in the spring of 2022, I decided it was time to join the Conference on College Composition and Communication, a professional organization for researching and teaching composition. It took several years before I deemed myself worthy of declaring membership. But those years were a necessary learning period to understand more about my professional identity and the field. Before that, I was a rhetoric and composition student studying to become a composition specialist. From my vantage point, I needed to have a PhD in my hand in order to meet the requirements of being a qualified and contributing member of the organization. I registered for my Cs membership once I began my teaching job later that fall semester because that was the point at which I felt ready to join the elite club. That was when I possessed the right key.

What I did not count on happening, however, was the imposter feeling lingering long after I finished my program and had already entered the profession. My foot was in the door, but my body had not made it through. I was in, but somehow, I felt out. Though Swales had identified several criteria that make up a discourse community, I would argue that another criterion is necessary: a feeling of belongingness.

“We have tried to create a Convention that surrounds you with opportunities to try out doing hope within and beyond workshops, panels, roundtables, and poster sessions.”

Giving effective conference presentations requires lots of preparation. I spent my Christmas break working on my research paper to have it ready. My father thinks that teaching is the only thing I do as a college professor. He often needs clarification on why I am constantly reading journal articles or writing papers, especially when there is no school. I must continuously remind him that I need to do research because it is part of my job. I tell my parents and relatives that there are three pillars associated with the role of a professor: teaching, research, and service. I do not just teach. I do research. And I also serve on committees. It is true that, depending on the job and university, a person may only be expected to teach. But to contribute meaningfully to the discourse community, research is a critical component that allows people to establish a name for themselves and advance the field.

Another characteristic of a discourse community is that it “develops horizons of expectation” (Swales 16). Certain routine things occur,

such as teachers creating lesson plans for new units. Likewise, there are certain things that people are expected to do or follow. Such expectations are typically understood just by being a member or being told. For example, even if a person has a non-tenure-track job, there is this expectation of volunteering for service activities, including participating in departmental committees or reviewing conference proposals and journal articles. These expectations are not requirements by any means. They are opportunities to give back to one's field. To help our discourse community where we can.

Some discourse communities, like the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication, depend on volunteers to keep their operations running smoothly. There is a member engagement hub on the NCTE website: "We are the organization we are today because of the expertise, time, and energy of our members ... Browse the list of volunteer opportunities below." On the CCCC website, there is a page inviting members to get involved: "It is because of committees that we have position statements, award programs, even a conference itself. We are always looking for potential committee members with expertise, energy, and collegiality. Indeed, we depend on such people" (*CCCC Committees and Task Forces*). After paying for my membership, I browsed the NCTE and CCCC sections of the NCTE website to find ways to be of service. Service is a vital part of our profession. We need people to do more than pay for their membership. We expect them to play an active role in addition to teaching.

Aside from volunteering, doing research is another aspect of playing an active role in the discourse community. Even though I am not in a position that requires me to produce research to keep my job, I feel I am expected to participate in such endeavors as a college professor. Especially for those who work for an R1 university, it is customary for professors to immerse themselves in scholarship to generate new knowledge. Whether one is required to conduct research as part of their job or wants to do it for personal gain, the world of academia demands that research be done. As challenging as it is to do research, it is an area where I strive to improve. However, doing research is, for lack of a better word, *hard*. Sometimes, finding the motivation to fill out an IRB application or write a literature review can be difficult. Still, research is a major part of my discourse community, and it is something that I was trained to do in graduate

school. Engaging in research activities does help me feel that sense of belongingness.

“In the program, you will find lists of sessions by emerging scholars—folx who are newer to the field, who should be heard and recognized.”

Each day leading up to my presentation, I learned more about what it means to present at a conference. Research has been done into how attendees can get the most from academic conferences (Popovic). However, I believe the best learning results from attending in person and learning from direct experience. I like to sit through several sessions to see how people present their projects. Do they read a paper? Do they show a slideshow? What do they share from their research? Day two of the Cs involved attending sessions on multimodality, reflective practice, archival research, justice pedagogy, and STEM writing. As someone new to the discourse community, I took the time to learn from seasoned researchers and scholars. To ask questions and to get advice. More important, I wanted to understand the current happenings within the writing studies field. One thing I took away from attending some of the sessions was that almost anything could be turned into a research project: journaling stories about people’s COVID-19 experience or writing about the healthcare experiences of LGBTQIA+ people.

My presentation was set for Friday afternoon. Before I delivered my presentation, I spent the morning by myself. I went outside to enjoy the snow, the cold, crisp air, and the beautiful sight of the city. I wanted to take a break from doing anything conference-related and take the time to appreciate life away from the chaos. Outside, the setting was different. There was not a crowd of people waiting in line for food. Nor were there people rushing to get from room to room. No, it was quieter in the streets of Chicago. It was a completely different world: conference and non-conference. I walked around the area for a bit to collect my thoughts and to have mini bursts of worry-free moments.

Two hours before I was scheduled to present, I returned to the hotel room for some last-minute preparation. As I reviewed my slides, I became nervous. I never enjoyed giving presentations because I have a slight fear of public speaking. As much as I wanted to feel calm like the streets of Chicago, internally, I was feeling chaotic. Over time, I have improved my public speaking skills through the many presentations I

had to give for class. When I sat through other people's sessions on days one and two of the conference, the panelists all exhibited confidence and authority, something I hoped to achieve someday. I practiced my speech Thursday night and was not as nervous Friday morning. As a tactic to help calm my nerves, I viewed the conference as another practice session but on a much bigger stage.

Another characteristic of a discourse community is that it "uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback" (Swales 15). In other words, receiving information and providing critical feedback is essential to improving a discourse community. When we present research at conferences, we hope to receive comments and questions that challenge our thinking and help us see our ideas through multiple perspectives. We should not have the sole goal of presenting our research and leaving. We should welcome criticism. It is our duty to help our peers. To learn from each other. Typically, when I finish working on a research project, I like to share it at a conference to hear the audience's thoughts. For me, presenting at a conference is integral to the research writing process.

My project was grouped in the session "Collaboration, Teamwork, and Peer Review." I was on a three-person panel and was second in line to talk. I did not want to disappoint myself or my discourse community, so I had to set aside my fear of public speaking and deliver a stellar presentation. I knew my research well enough that I did not need note cards. My nerves got the best of me as I talked, though, and I picked up speed. I went through my slides much more quickly than I had while I practiced, knowing I had forgotten to mention some key points. While presenting, I glanced around the room and saw one of my co-workers in the audience. We locked our eyes briefly, and, somehow, I felt calmer. Knowing there was support made me want to perform even better, and this meant ensuring I provided all the necessary points for the audience to understand my research. After that, I slowed down in my speech and moved steadily from that point onward.

After my fifteen minutes were up, I felt relieved. I was done. I had come to the Cs mainly to give this presentation, and I accomplished that. There were a few questions from the audience regarding my collaborative writing research (such as whether there was a systematic way to group students), all of which I had easily answered without stuttering or freezing up. The members of my discourse community fulfilled their duty because they provided thought-provoking feedback

to my research, which I later used to improve my project. Finally, the hour came and went. The session was over. The panel members and I received our applause, and we proceeded to the exit.

“Planning a Convention as big as CCCC requires a lot of labour on the part of a great many people.”

Delivering my presentation marked the beginning of the end of my conference trip. I attended the award ceremony on the third night. It was there that I questioned my belongingness (again). When people join a new group, they tend to want acceptance. If people feel they have a home and belong, they will likely retain their membership the following year. Joining CCCC was a crucial step in my career. And gaining acceptance to present my research at the conference was one testament to this feeling of belongingness.

The Cs is not just a place to hear about research in our field but also an opportunity to meet some researchers. During the award ceremony, people were acknowledged for groundbreaking, timely, and compelling work. People studied counterstory as a methodology, languaging practices of Chinese international students, and literacy practices in social media spaces. I was recognized as one of the Scholars for the Dream Travel Award recipients. When I first received news of this award, I was shocked. I did not think my research on collaborative writing was deserving of recognition. However, my peers thought otherwise. This level of recognition was a reassuring moment for me as an early scholar, especially as a new member of the discourse community.

Sitting in the audience among the award recipients, I felt inspired. Some people won two or three awards for their research. Seeing their article title on the screen made me want to do more research. Better research. At the same time, I felt intimidated and out of place. There were brilliant scholars to the left and right of me. They were the who’s who of writing scholarship. These were the people whom Swales would say have “a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise.” Though I have done my own research, it pales compared to other people’s work. I walked out of the award ceremony feeling under-accomplished. I left wondering whether I belonged to this world or whether I was simply an imposter with a really nice tie.

Following the last conference day on Saturday night, I sat in my hotel room, staring out the window. Time slowed as I was admiring

the city. I lost myself in deep thought. I thought about my professional identity. I thought about who I was and what I wanted from my discourse community. I even thought about the meaning of my CCCC membership. As I searched for the answers, blankets of snow continued to cover the ground. Even in the darkness, I could see the white snow. I was reminded of the temperature during the duration of the conference: the highest was 46 degrees Fahrenheit, with the lowest at 19 degrees. Thankfully, all the conference action was inside the hotel, and I only had to brave the elements when I went to get food or explore the city. An hour later, I was still sitting, staring, and searching. I think that being part of a discourse community is knowing you belong. How soon would I know that I do? How soon would anyone know?

“CCCC 2023 would not have been possible without the dedication of the NCTE/CCCC’s director and staff.”

They say planning a conference is taxing. I would agree. I would also say that planning for my Cs trip was thrilling, yet busy. I was amazed at how much I did in three days. Reflecting on my time in Chicago, I had a positive conference experience. I learned quite a bit from attending the Cs this time around. I deliberately came into the conference with a different mindset than when I attended four years prior. For the second time, I wanted to have a total immersion experience as an official member of my discourse community. Accordingly, I planned my schedule to ensure I experienced the Cs as someone should experience it. Fortunately, the Cs had a full program for each conference day to keep attendees busy from morning to night, so I created a game plan to take advantage of their offerings.

The amount of information I gained from my discourse community over the span of three days was truly remarkable. In total, I attended eight sessions: five on Thursday, two on Friday, and one on Saturday. By the time I retired each night, I was mentally exhausted from everything I heard and saw. The 2023 Cs sessions were eclectic. The topics were different but equally powerful (e.g., antiracism and social justice, inclusion and access, histories of rhetoric, information literacies and technology). I also checked out sessions I would not typically include in my schedule, such as the special interest group sessions, partly because I did not know what they were about but also because I was not one of the group members. At the same time,

I had a curious mind and wanted to see all things conference-related, so I decided to make an appearance. I briefly attended special interest group meetings on medical rhetoric and lifespan writing. From the ten sessions, seeing the diversity of research topics, the members' interests, and the excitement from people wanting to do more for the field gave me the energy to want to play an active role in the discourse community.

Of course, I did not just attend the sessions. When I put together my plans, I made sure to check out events beyond the panel sessions. I wanted to participate in some of the other major events to get the full conference experience. For example, I attended the grand opening session, the Scholars for the Dream reception, and the awards ceremony. During my time between sessions, I took advantage of the exhibit hall to peruse the latest books from NCTE. It was wonderful to see so many representatives speaking to attendees about the books at their stations. It was refreshing to know that constant research is being done on writing and that people are genuinely intrigued by the learning and teaching of writing. My discourse community is undoubtedly productive because the members want to continuously refine their craft and contribute knowledge to our field.

Being part of the writing studies discourse community, of any discourse community, means more than just paying for membership. It means being an active member. It means being engaged. A discourse community serves as a space for people to be among their people. To be among like-minded individuals with shared goals and interests. Joining a new discourse community can be a laborious task, though. There are many doors to open, and it is not always a walk in the park to gain access. People must earn the keys to open the right doors. I did. And I was glad I went through the process of earning my membership. People may struggle with imposter syndrome. They may question their place in a discourse community. But these are common feelings when people want to join a discourse community. It does not mean they do not belong. It is just part of the process.

As I sat at the airport, waiting to board the plane to go home, I once again thought about my professional identity in my discourse community. My conference experience made me realize something: I did belong. When I finally felt that sensation of belongingness, when I pierced the veil of the writing studies discourse community, it was a feeling I had long craved but one that felt familiar all along.

WORKS CITED

- “CCCC Committees and Task Forces.” Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2023, cccc.ncte.org/cccc/committees.
- Condon, Frankie. “Greetings from the 2023 Program Chair.” 74th Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 16 Feb. 2023, Hilton Chicago, Chicago. Speech.
- “Dates, Sites, and Themes for Past CCCC Conventions.” Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2023, cccc.ncte.org/cccc/review/pastconventions.
- Dixon, Lauren. “Imposter Syndrome in the Workplace.” *Rochester Business Journal*, vol. 37, no. 25, 2021, pp. 18–31.
- “Member Engagement Hub.” *National Council of Teachers of English*, 2023, ncte.org/engagement-hub/.
- Popovic, Celia, editor. *Learning from Academic Conferences*. Vol. 16, Brill, 2018. Critical Issues in the Future of Learning and Teaching.
- Swales, John. “Reflections on the Concept of Discourse Community.” *ASp*, vol. 69, Mar. 2016, pp. 7–19.
- Vaa Stelling, Brianna, et al. “Fitting in While Standing Out: Professional Identity Formation, Imposter Syndrome, and Burnout in Early-Career Faculty Physicians.” *Academic Medicine*, vol. 98, no. 4, Apr. 2023, pp. 514–20.