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CCCC 2021: Storytelling and Surprises

Jennifer Marlow

CCCC 2021 was the first (and so far, only) virtual conference I have attended, and I admit I was skeptical (see Figure 4.1). After withdrawing my presentation from my panel session due to lack of preparedness after a year juggling all the pandemic things—working from home with a school-age child, decision fatigue, extreme stress due to fear and uncertainty, etc.—it felt like a lot of money to invest. However, I depend on Cs to help keep me up-to-date with what is happening in the field, and as someone who is "older" and mid-career, I find it easy to fall behind. I will also admit that having Roxane Gay as the keynote was a big draw for me.
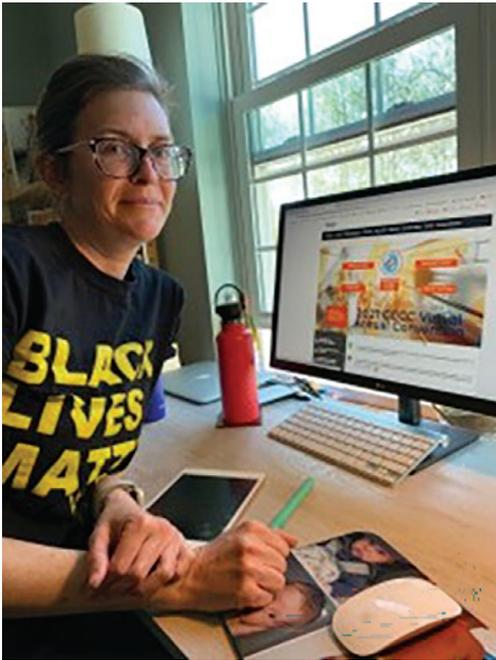

Figure 4.1. Me on day one, feeling skeptical, but ready to enter the virtual conference space. (Photo credit: my son Levi)

My skepticism was over whether I would get much out of a virtual conference. I felt there was no way I'd get out of it what I get from the in-person hallways filled with fellow conference-goers, picking out the best places to eat, and navigating new cities while fitting in sessions between sightseeing. I went into the whole thing with a kind of breezy attitude, thinking I would check in here and there, watch the keynote, and keep up with the rest of my life at the same time. Cs was held during my six-year-old son's spring break, and my wife works outside of the home, so I am a full-time work-at-home mom when he's not in school, which was a lot over the past year and a half. As is often the case in life, my experience attending a virtual conference while also parenting was nothing like my expectations.

Because I had put a good chunk of my own money into registering for the conference, I thought I should put some effort into checking out what it had to offer. Much like what happens when I settle down into my hotel bed with the program and a pen in hand each year, I got pulled right into the array of interesting-sounding presentations and offerings as I spent Wednesday morning perusing the PDF version of the conference program and loading up my online conference planner with on-demand and live sessions that I wanted to experience. I really wanted to attend the feminist caucus workshop as well as a couple of sessions that sparked my professional and creative interests—"Taking Action for Antiracist Workplaces: Developing Bystander Training for Writing Teachers and WPAs" and "Writing Creative Nonfiction: Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary"—but quickly found I couldn't attend them without sticking my child on a screen for excessive amounts of time. I did manage to attend one prerecorded session with live Q&A: "'Racism Isn't the Shark in the Ocean; It's the Water': Stumbling through Antiracist Language Pedagogies and Practices." Shawna Shapiro, the presenter, took us through ways to make the practice of engaging difference an explicit learning goal. As such, she discussed compassionate ways to acknowledge harm (call in versus call out culture) and reminded us that "behind every belief is a story."

Later, on a whim, I also jumped in on the Documentarian meet and greet, which I hadn't planned to do since it was at my son's bedtime. He did make a guest appearance as he came looking for his goodnight kiss, but as we all know by now, kids, cats, and dogs have become part of our collective Zoom norm. Additionally, I experienced the poster

session on the 2020 Documentarians Project. I learned about the ways in which this Documentarian work is grounded in story-based learning and live history approaches and draws on the work that Julie Lindquist and Bump Halbritter have done with literacy narratives as reflective narratives or Experiential-Learning Documentaries (ELDs), as they call them. I signed off for the day at 9 p.m. and was surprised to find myself as exhausted (maybe more?) as I am after an in-person conference day.

As I tend to do at conferences, I engaged in live tweeting. I always find conference Twitter a good way to find what others are thinking while also vicariously experiencing other sessions that I might have wanted to attend but that conflict with another session (Fig. 4.2).

On Thursday, I attended (what verb do we use for virtual conference sessions … experienced? viewed? saw?) three sessions and, on Friday, I attended one live session, one on-demand session, and Roxane Gay's keynote. I also attended the Mothers in Rhet/Comp business meeting on Thursday evening. So, most of my conference days ran from about 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday's keynote was followed by my institution's financial update, and I was deeply impacted by both of them in opposing ways—energized by the keynote, saddened by a dire financial situation that makes implementing some of the calls made in Gay's keynote seem all the more challenging.

Her calls to break down the gatekeeping role of the academy—one in which rhet/comp has historically been complicit—seemed also to reinforce the importance of storytelling—a form traditionally devalued in higher education. We need, she told us, to make space for writing that "sings." Accessibility means a broadening of audience, not a dumbing down of discourse. And to her students she says, "you're a great writer, and how do we make your greatness more visible?"

When Gay described her conference attending woes as an introverted person, I felt so seen.

jenn marlow @marlowjm · Apr 8

#OnDemand4C21 poster session, The 2020 Documentarians Project: Recollecting Common Experiences of an Uncommon Time, reminds us that storytelling (reflection and "preflection") has important place in scholarship and curation of knowledge of the field. #4C21

Figure 4.2. A tweet from the author re: the On-Demand Poster Presentation Re: the 2020 Documentarian Project.

In-person conferences always cause so much anxiety for me because I'm socially awkward. I've always known that I'm a quiet introvert who needs tons of alone time and in general avoids interactions with other humans, but this whole pandemic has made this all the more clear to me. As someone with extreme social anxiety, I found the virtual conference experience a nearly perfect one in some ways. I went to events/business meetings/SIGs that I never attended during in-person Cs. Breakout rooms made it manageable to actually speak and share with others. For example, on Tuesday evening I attended the CWPA "brekkie" for the first time since it wasn't super early in the morning. I discovered during a breakout room meeting themed around WPA work at SLACs that I desperately needed to talk to WPAs at other small liberal arts colleges, and I hadn't even known it. Part of what made the CWPA brekkie work so well was its clear structure: 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. All of this kept it from being an awkward online social gathering, which can be even worse than an awkward face-to-face social gathering—except for the part where it's easier to find excuses to escape (whoops … my Wi-Fi just crashed; unstable connection here, gotta go …). In addition to having the low-stakes feeling brought on by the easy escape of online sessions, much of my social anxiety melted away in the structured Zoom formats of chat boxes and breakout rooms. The SIGs and meetings that I did attend were so well orchestrated and carefully led that it took away all the discomfort from being in a room full of strangers. This surprised me. I was shocked by how many times I willingly unmuted my mic or put a question in the chat box.

During my three conference days, I was in a constant state of motion, moving between my office, yard, apple orchard with baby animals, park/playground, climbing trees, office again, kitchen, soccer practice, office again, bed (exhausted). The constant transitions between kid time (brain draining potty talk and never-ending interest in bugs and strange cartoon characters I know nothing about) and the conference (sociocultural theory of writing for audience, tacit racialization of placement materials, intellectual property and bots, and so on …) took a ton more energy than I had anticipated. As we've learned in the past couple of decades from research into the science of multitasking, there is an actual cost, known as cost switch, when one engages in

task switching—moving between two unlike activities. It's kind of like the extra energy it takes to start up a car as opposed to leaving it idling. I experienced that cost, and eventually it took its toll.

As I left the apple orchard with my son on Friday afternoon, I felt a twinge in my throat. I cleared it, thinking the cinnamon sugar from the cider donuts had perhaps irritated it, took a swig of cider, and moved on. By the next day, however, the twinge was a full-blown sore throat and my COVID-19 anxiety kicked in.

While it ended up being a cold, not COVID-19, I did not participate in the final day of the conference, and instead took the morning to reflect back on my week. Much of the reflection landed on comparisons between my years of in-person Cs experiences and my first and only virtual one (Fig. 4.3).

Overall, much of my surprise was about how unexpectedly well the whole thing went—especially the way I took advantage of meetings and events that I often miss/can't/or don't attend at Cs in person. I made unexpected connections with folks I've never had the opportunity to meet before online via Zoom and Twitter as well.

jenn marlow @marlowjm · Apr 8
I've officially added more on-demand sessions to my online planner than I can realistically watch over the next few days, but a beauty of the online conference is that I have more time to view all this wonderful work being done. #4C21 #silverlinings

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jenn marlow @marlowjm · Apr 8
another little on-demand gem = the pause button

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Figure 4.3. A tweet from the author re: advantages of attending on-demand sessions.