

CCCC 2021: My Academic Rite of Passage

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My first-ever participation in CCCC 2021 as a presenter, a Documentarian, and an awardee has been one of the most remarkable experiences of my life. I had submitted a proposal based on a qualitative case study that I initiated in my first semester as a graduate student in the US in 2017. My journey as an international graduate student and graduate teaching assistant since then has been tumultuous, at least on personal and emotional levels. Although it may sound hyperbolic, the seemingly ordinary work of grad school turned into an extraordinary feat for me. It may be because I was returning to grad school after a long gap and navigating a new discipline and academic culture in a country 8,000 miles from home. In any case, what I went through during those three years and seven months leading to CCCC 2021 shaped my perception of academia and where I stand in it. But I hadn't had the opportunity to reflect on what those experiences meant, why I felt the way I did, and what I could do about them moving ahead.

Being a Documentarian allowed me to reflect not just about the conference experiences but anything and everything leading to that point. In fact, I consider my active participation in CCCC 2021 as an academic rite of passage that has changed my beliefs about scholarship and my self-perception as an emerging scholar of writing studies. For a better context, allow me to share the back story even at the risk of a little digression.

It's quite natural for international students to experience challenges in transitioning to their new institution. But I think mine was relatively longer, even though I came to the US with a long experience of teaching college English in Nepal. I knew that it was not going to be an easy ride, but I wanted to challenge myself because I wasn't happy with the amount of time I was spending on teaching—literally being in the classroom for up to eight hours a day and six days a week. Although there was no “writing course” per se to teach, the undergraduate General English (comparable to required first-year writing here) as well as other literature courses had some academic writing components. But I had no specific pedagogical model or theoretical

framework that would inform it. I was doing what I knew or what and how I was taught. It was a pedagogy that involved more lecturing than actual writing in large-sized classes and a centralized evaluation system with a three-hour final examination at the end of the year.

Besides, academic writing remained a challenge for me even after having written two master's theses, and I found it to be challenging for most students I interacted with. This situation motivated me to specialize in writing studies and go for an advanced research degree. I decided to apply to graduate schools in the US instead of pursuing a PhD in Nepal because I wanted to come to the disciplinary home of writing studies, and I also thought that I wouldn't have enough resources for research nor would I have enough time, especially with the amount of teaching I was doing there, if I had stayed in Nepal. Therefore, after the preparation of about two years, I traveled to Tucson, Arizona, in fall 2017 to join the PhD program in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona, leaving my wife and children back in Nepal.

As I left for grad school, I thought I was prepared for the challenges it would bring. What I didn't realize is that being mentally prepared for challenges doesn't mean being immune to them. But it didn't take that long. Just a few weeks into a euphoric and disorienting first semester, I began to feel the heat. A major source of discomfort came with a realization that language difference is a much bigger issue than I had ever imagined. Being a speaker of the dominant variety of Nepali and a teacher of English in a society where it enjoys huge socioeconomic capital as an international language, I did not have the experience of being on the margin. But it all changed when I was the only international student in the classroom. No amount of cordiality on the part of the faculty and my classmates was enough to eradicate my sense of insecurity. At times, I even felt paralyzed due to excessive self-censoring. And I grew more insecure when I got to know about the professional development activities that fellow graduate students would frequently talk about because I had very little experience in this area.

But unlike my classmates, I had two master's degrees and more than a decade of experience teaching. Yet I constantly struggled to view myself as a scholar. Like Callie Womble Edwards, I believed that "scholars were always confident, always on-point, always perfect" (28). I always thought I was a student but not a scholar yet. In other words, I was experiencing imposter syndrome, which Pauline Rose Clance and

Suzanne Ament Imes first defined as “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness” (241).

In the next few weeks and months, I experienced almost all the clinical symptoms of imposter syndrome, such as “generalized anxiety, lack of self-confidence, depression, and frustration related to inability to meet self-imposed standards of achievement” (Clance and Imes 242). But I remained determined to work toward my goal, no matter what. In my first graduate seminar, I decided to use the final project as an opportunity to draft a research proposal for a qualitative case study in the hope of gaining some first-hand experience with research. I wanted to do some research work before getting to the dissertation phase, so I continued to work on it. But things did not always go as planned, and the data analysis part took much longer than I had expected.

Eventually, I was able to submit a proposal to CCCC 2021. By now, I was working on other projects in my coursework, but I yearned to be a part of the largest annual convention of rhetoric and writing studies, a discipline that I had joined not so long before. This entire process was my attempt to do what David Bartholomae called inventing the (American) university by “assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirement of convention, the history of discipline, on the other hand” (524). I think I was looking for a sense of belonging to the discipline—reassurance that I, too, was engaging in the same work as others, and that my contribution mattered to the field. Fortunately, it came with my panel presentation and recognition with a Scholars for the Dream Travel Award.

I decided to apply for the Documentarian position as well because I wanted to experience the conference to the fullest. As a first-time attendee, I had no experience with Cs, and it was taking place in an unprecedented time of a global pandemic. In any case, being a Documentarian prepared me better for the conference. Preflecting and reflecting before and after the events of each day made me more organized and deliberate about what I would do every day. The morning survey was useful to identify the goals and select the sessions for the day. I mostly followed the plan with a few exceptions. Although the reflection in the evenings was more productive, it was not always fun because of exhaustion and screen fatigue. But I completed most of them on the same night. One consistent theme that appears in my post-week reflection is the anxiety about technology. Since I relied on the shared internet at

my apartment complex, the connection was sometimes extremely weak because almost everyone was working from home. Also, learning to navigate the virtual conference platform was a new experience for me, and it took some time and effort. I was particularly concerned about the day of my presentation, but fortunately, everything went well, and I didn't have to use the backup internet data I had purchased on my phone.

But still, attending the virtual conference was not significantly different from my regular workdays because every day had been the same for over a year because of the pandemic. I had been doing all my work online as a student and an instructor. Because I was teaching asynchronous classes, I was able to prepare and schedule the lessons in a way that wouldn't require me to be available all the time. Besides, I was living alone in a studio apartment which had become my only living and workspace. So, the four days of the conference were not much different at least at the physical level except for waking up earlier than usual, partly because of the different time zone (the conference would start at 8 a.m. Arizona time), and for getting the drinks and meals ready and dressing fully and formally. Other than that, it was the usual routine during the COVID-19 pandemic—sitting in front of the computer screen. Yet emotionally, it was anything but usual.

Because of my medical condition, I was taking additional precautions against COVID, which means I hadn't had much human interaction for months. Such forced solitude was emotionally challenging in many ways. I experienced conflicting emotions: frustration over the lost freedom and a canceled trip home for the summer, stress over the challenges and complexities of teaching and studying online, and fear and anxiety about my own and my family's health on one hand, and a sense of privilege and gratitude for being able to work and learn safely from home on the other. However, it was not only during the pandemic that I was emotionally challenged; the pandemic just made it worse. As an international graduate teaching assistant (IGTA), I had been experiencing the feeling of being "trapped by invisible forces in difficult pedagogical relationships and the subsequent emotional drain" on many occasions (Zhang 11). But I did not let the challenges and frustrations get the better of me and continued to work at my own pace. What I didn't do, though, was meaningfully reflect on my struggles and hardships and the feelings and emotions associated with them until I served as a Documentarian. It may be the reason why my reflection as a Documentarian is not limited only to the four days of conference.

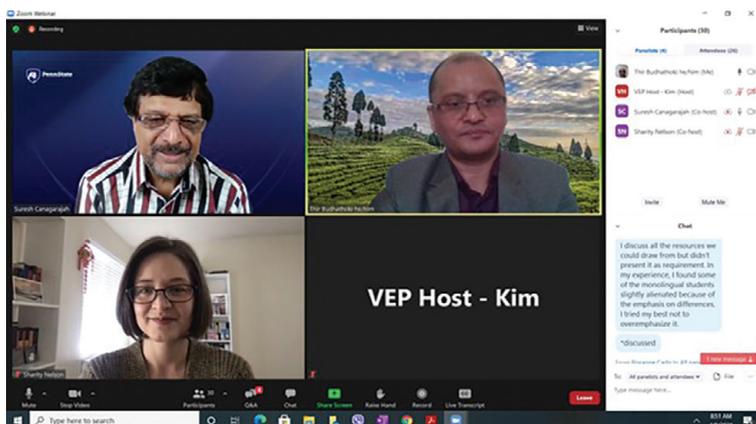


Figure 6.1. Presenting with co-panelists Suresh Canagarajah and Sharity Nelson.

When I sat down to reflect, I couldn't help but go back to my first graduate seminar where I had developed my proposal for the qualitative case study I was presenting. Through this reflection, I was able to connect my experience of the initial days as a grad student navigating a new space with the present moment of presenting at a national conference. First and foremost, my role as a Documentarian gave me a sense of worth as it allowed me to contribute meaningfully to the conference. When I reflected on the day I presented alongside renowned scholars in the field (see Fig. 6.1) and participated in a Q&A session, I realized that the work I was doing mattered to the field and I was in the process of building my scholarship.

Likewise, attending multiple sessions under different themes and categories and reflecting on the overall experience of the day helped me check my rigid and perfectionist notion of *scholar* and *scholarship* that each piece of work we share must be flawless. I developed a more realistic and pragmatic understanding of scholarship, an understanding that we all are creating knowledge from different spaces and positionalities, and it is an ongoing process. Sharing our research projects in whatever stage or form they are at the moment is an act of participating in a conversation and co-constructing knowledge with fellow scholars. My new understanding of scholarship was further strengthened when I reflected on the reception for the Scholars for the Dream Travel Award (see Fig. 6.2).



Figure 6.2. Reception of Scholars for the Dream Travel Award.

Sitting among the first-time presenters selected for the award, learning about each other's works, and being recognized for the work I was doing gave me the much-needed sense of belongingness I had long been looking for.

The more I reflected on the conference experience, the clearer it became that the imposter syndrome I was experiencing came from my faulty notion of who a scholar is. It was my rigid and perfectionist outlook that had created a false binary of student versus scholar. I realized that there is no specific point where a student ends and a scholar begins and that I need to embrace a new definition of scholar. In Callie Womble Edwards's words, a scholar is:

Someone who consistently strives to learn while concurrently educating others. Scholars embody the spirit of the expression "lifting as you climb." They come from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, including races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions. Scholars can gain their education formally or informally, and engage in a variety of ways of learning and knowing. No matter the concept, some scholars get "it" on the first try, and other scholars need several opportunities to grasp "it." Nevertheless, scholars persist. Scholars think inside, outside, and around the box. Scholars make mistakes, scholars grow, and sometimes failure is a part of the process that brings about a scholar's evolution. Ultimately, scholars decide what success and failure look like for them. (31)

However, this is not to say that these ideas were completely new to me. I was aware of most of them in theory, but the critic inside me was so strong that I was never comfortable putting them into practice. My active participation in CCCC 2021 as a presenter, a Documentarian, and an award recipient allowed me to engage in extensive reflection on my conference experiences and internalize these ideas in a way that is so liberating. It also helped me come to terms with my dual role as an international graduate student and writing instructor navigating a different academic space and culture, and identify the creative tensions it embodies. Now I fully embrace my positionality as one who dwells on what Gloria Anzaldúa would call the “borderlands” where confusion and contradictions give intense pain but offer creative possibilities as well. I have become more accepting of the confusions and contradictions and developed a more positive outlook on my individual and academic lives, thinking that “our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are” (68).

Although this process of self-actualization was long overdue, I am glad that I was able to attain it in a productive way by means of active participation in CCCC 2021.

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