

Neurodiversity, New Networks, and Conference Commonplaces

Jennifer Grouling

I guess I always felt like the world wasn't really designed for me, but before COVID-19, before a more fully virtual life, I thought the issue was *me* and not *the world*. Before that, life took place in person. That's just how it was. Not that there were many other options for me, growing up before the widespread use of the internet.

"In person" can be overwhelming for me. A crowded space is loud, invasive, and often provokes in me a low-level irritability and anxiousness. Even in the absence of people, electricity buzzes, machines hum; there is irritating noise everywhere. (And let's not even talk about the scents.... I still shudder at the thought of the lingering cologne scent a textbook rep once left behind in my WPA office.) Before COVID, I had a profound experience with a quiet room at a (nonacademic) conference. It's hard to describe the *relief* I felt entering that completely quiet space tucked away in the middle of a noisy group gathering. It was profound in a way that took me by surprise.

Likewise, a family cabin in Maine without electricity provoked in me a sense of calm I'd never fully known.

I passed these off as interesting experiences, unsure about their meaning. And then the world went virtual.

In 2020 there was no CCCC Convention, and in 2021, I didn't even try to plan for one. So, by CCCC 2022, I had become quite familiar with a virtual work-life. In both 2020 and 2022, I served in the Documentarian role. In this piece, I use my reflections from those years as touchpoints to explore coming to terms with my own neurodiversity and building new common places in a virtual world.

2020: ADJUSTING TO PANDEMIC LIFE

When the announcement came that classes were moving online, I cried: one of those big, ugly cries. I have difficulty with unexpected change. I also have a good deal of anxiety surrounding medical issues, not to mention second-hand medical trauma that was fresh from 2019

when I spent over a month of the year sleeping on hospital cots near loved ones.

In March 2020, all I knew was that COVID was real, we were going virtual, and I was scared. The CCCC Convention being canceled was on my radar, but certainly not the biggest of my worries. As Documentarians, we were asked to think about what our conference experience would have been like if the pandemic hadn't canceled it.

In-person CCCC was never about the presentations for me. After a couple of sessions, I had to step out of the humming hotel hallways. I never lingered at the parties. But my calendar filled with one-on-one coffees, dinners, and drinks. When completing the Documentarian survey on the opening day of CCCC, I wrote about the day I envisioned:

I'd be at the opening ceremony. I always love the speeches. I'd be presenting this afternoon. This evening I'd be going to the social hour from my PhD school and seeing all my friends. It would be a hugely social day.

That is how I had imagined my first day at CCCC 2020: "hugely social," and at that time "social" meant in person, and "friends" meant people I knew in person from grad school.

Instead, I was at home. My wife was also working from home, and we had to quickly adapt to working together in our open-floor-plan condo. In those early days, I remember huddling in the bathroom (the only room with a door) to take a phone call with my department chair while my wife had team-building games with her co-workers on Zoom.

I was panicked about COVID-19. I had just started high blood pressure medicine, and my doctor wanted me to come in for routine blood work. I did not feel remotely safe going to a doctor's office with a new, mysterious disease in the air. The office assured me that they were taking everyone's temperature, but there were no tests yet to see who actually had COVID-19. I wrote the following in my journal:

Then I get a message from dr. about coming in for routine BP and blood work and panic attack and an hour of crying. I don't feel capable. I'm starting to actually see anxiety as a disability—I can't function in this as well as I see others functioning. Maybe I can't function normally as well as others, and I've just been hiding it. I can't stop crying. I can't do much of anything. Literally

nothing seems safe or in control. That's what the new normal is. And it feels like exposure therapy for my anxiety or something, and maybe I'll come out better, but right now I just want to curl up and cry all day.

Although that day was one of the worst, my journaling from that week is filled with anxious thoughts from feeling responsible for others to being scared of dying alone to describing how I sterilized a grocery order delivered by a younger friend.

So when I say that I'm more comfortable, more productive, even more myself in a virtual world, it's not like that was a switch in my brain that someone activated overnight.

Yet, those early journals show signs of what was to come. I expressed joy at writing for the first time in weeks. I connected virtually with a WPA at a neighboring school about placement. I expressed relief at the quiet in my home. Slowly, I was building a new approach to my work and my life.

2021: THE BEST ONLINE YEAR

I did not apply to CCCC 2021. I knew there was no way I was flying to Washington state from the Midwest. I was angry, honestly, that an in-person conference was the plan. Meanwhile, as a WPA, I was fighting for more online classes, for GAs without health care to be granted online teaching to avoid risk. Sometimes I won; sometimes I lost.

But I was writing. Every day, I was writing. Working from home lent itself to a certain comfort, a routine that felt good to me. My wife went to work at 8:30 from home, and there was little avoiding the house being active then. So I, too, got up then, and wrote. It was the first time in a long time that I had a regular writing routine that I stuck to.

While I naturally missed my friends, I found that I had a growing network of online friends in writing studies on Twitter. I was not missing large gatherings of people at CCCC; I was craving more in-depth conversations with the colleagues I was interacting with day-to-day on Twitter.

On March 5, 2021, I tweeted the message shown in Figure 9.1.

Although I didn't end up organizing a party, I did reach out to at least five Twitter friends and scheduled one-on-one Zoom calls with them.



Figure 9.1. Screen capture of a Twitter post that reads “What if instead of a virtual CCCCs, I just organized a Zoom party to meet my Twitter friends ... ”

For a minute, let’s pretend that CCCC had been in person and that I was attending and that these individuals were also attending. I might go to one of their presentations; I *might* say hello and introduce myself. Maybe. Depending on how I was feeling and how many other people were around. It would have been one of those awkward hellos: “Um, yeah, I’m so-and-so, we’re, um Twitter friends. Nice presentation. Bye.” I know this because often the *C’s the Day* game has had a badge for meeting an online Twitter contact, and I don’t believe I have ever gotten this badge.

And yet, here I was, inviting these newfound friends to a 1-hr Zoom meeting, just the two of us. They all said yes.

We had great conversations. In one case, I had overlapping research interests with a junior scholar. In another, I had both professional and nonprofessional interests in common, and over the years we progressed from Twitter friends to someone I visited in person on a summer trip. One Twitter thread about D&D even led to a virtual gaming group that included both a senior scholar who I admired and a PhD student using the same methodology for her dissertation that I was using for my book. Suddenly, my connections in the field were more varied and diverse, spanning far beyond my previous “meet up with friends from grad school at CCCC” approach to professional contacts.

So, too, did my conference attendance diversify. While I didn’t go to CCCC virtually in 2021, I *was* attending conferences. I attended a

Zoom event put together by the Coalition for Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric & Composition on “Witnessing Anti-Asian Racism and Rhetoric,” an event I learned about through Twitter. I went to a national assessment conference that I otherwise wouldn’t have attended.

Virtual conferencing did take some getting used to. While at the assessment conference, I tweeted about how it felt odd to be both “there” and “here”—at a conference but also continuing with day-to-day work, such as committee meetings. But there were ways that it also mirrored the face-to-face experience for me. I tweeted:

So far at the virtual conference, I missed the first session to make my profile and upload the right pic, was late to the second session b/c it was 2:15 today and 2:30 tomorrow, and shouted and waved wildly when I saw an old friend at the 3rd session. So pretty comparable to IRL.

Yet, I was beginning to find a new sense of confidence in this environment. And it wasn’t only in virtual conferencing. I found that I really connected with teaching asynchronously online. In my undergraduate rhetoric course, I built an assignment on invitational rhetoric based on one done by Sharon Yam (again, something I learned about on Twitter and then read more about). I wrote:

I’ve prioritized human connection in my class this semester, and the majority of my students have been on board. They have given so much to each other that is so beautiful. And it’s happening asynchronously online.

I even shared my own narrative as an example of the class, writing about topics I found difficult to speak on, sharing perspectives and pieces of myself I would have been unlikely to with twenty-five faces staring back at me. Although not statistically significant, I received the best course evaluations I’ve ever gotten. By the end of the semester, I tweeted about my sadness of abandoning this educational environment:

A year ago, I was profoundly sad when we went online. Now, I look at all I’ve done for my online classes, and I am profoundly sad to go back in fall.

It was a sadness that seemed only shared by my Twitter friends.

My administrative connections also flourished in this online space. I reached out to WPAs in my state and began forming our own CWPA

affiliate organization. This was put on pause when Asao Inoue's call for a CWPA boycott came out, just days after we had begun to draft bylaws for our new chapter. But it wasn't just this that put the group on hold; returning to face-to-face the following fall sucked the energy from me to continue leading this initiative.

2022: THE BEGINNING OF HYBRIDITY

I remember the beginning of the 2021–2022 school year, my return to face-to-face. I refused to go to the huge convocation in person, but instead watched the livestream. The university president heralded the return to the “genuine conversations” in the classroom while I donned a mask both literally and figuratively. I felt so awkward back in in-person classes. I worked with my office door shut, hiding, crying sometimes, but more often just going home as soon as I could. When the mask mandate went away just after spring break in 2022, I panicked when a colleague without a mask gave me a friendly “how are you?” shaking and telling her I was not okay, then feeling embarrassed afterward.

That year I returned to CCCCs but was thankful that it was virtual. I had done an NCTE on-demand presentation in fall that year, so my CCCCs on-demand presentation was my second. Rather than throwing together a script in an airport lobby or hotel room (yes, I was that person), I put a lot of energy into my video. And I *wanted* to. I felt confident speaking, knowing I could use the pause button as needed or re-record. Rather than a room of faces staring at me, I felt safe, secure, confident to say what I had to say.

I attended the main session, partly while eating lunch, partly while snuggling in bed with my wife, our work-from-home tradition over the lunch break. It felt a little weird watching it, knowing that no one could see me, not knowing who else was there. But it also was comforting watching in my own safe space.

I especially enjoyed watching on-demand sessions when I wanted, often speeding them up a bit or skipping over parts that I was less interested in. Face-to-face, I often avoided panels where I wanted to see only one of the presenters, finding it too much of a social faux pas to come late or leave early. Live online sessions, I found to be a bit more awkward, but I was more comfortable than face-to-face, writing in my Documentarian survey:

I get less anxious actually writing a question in the chat than I do asking one in a big group, but I still feel anxious afterwards if I asked something good or not or if the presenters took it right or not.

The particular week of CCCC was a challenge for me. Mentally, I was processing the death of a student who had died in a car crash the Friday before—the Friday before spring break, on his nineteenth birthday, after a fraternity party. The school didn't tell me about his passing until Monday, although my students did. But the school sure did tell me that mask mandates were gone as of the return from spring break, and that I could no longer require them in my classroom. Meanwhile, I missed the Anita Hill session at CCCC to take my eight-two-year-old father in for a minor medical procedure. All around me, life felt fragile.

I felt fragile.

My new sense of self felt fragile.

The year before, I had daydreamed about who I would be when I returned to face-to-face (see Fig. 9.2).

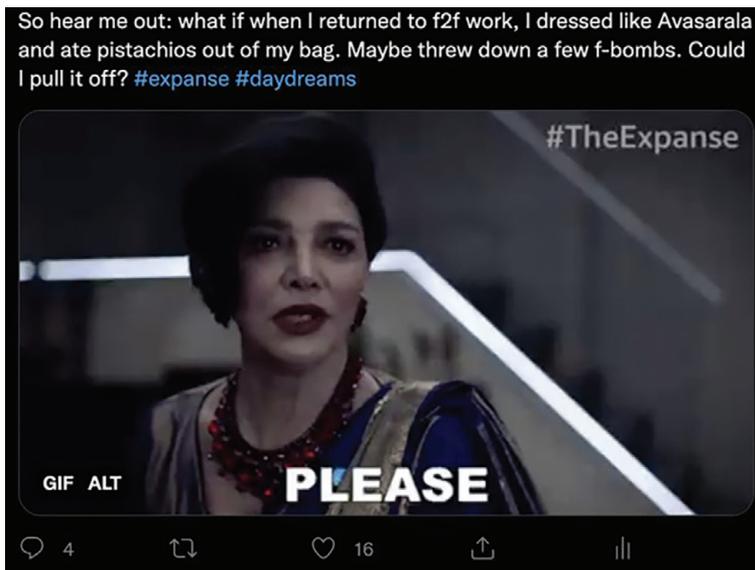


Figure 9.2. Screen capture of a Twitter post that reads “So hear me out; what if when I returned to f2f work, I dressed like Avasarala and ate pistachios out of my bag? Maybe threw down a few f-bombs? Could I pull it off? #expanse #daydreams”

For those unfamiliar with *The Expanse* (a sci-fi book and TV series), Chrisjen Avasarala is a powerful female political figure who speaks her mind freely, often with colorful expletives. She also wears bold and powerful, yet extremely fashionable, outfits.¹

Instead, I walked the halls looking at my feet, darted in and out of my closed office door, my anxious, embodied ways returning. On a daring day, I wore leggings with a long top, still recalling some anxiety from when I almost got detention for wearing leggings in high school.

Of course, my Avasarala side was still there, more than before. I might have dropped more f-bombs in meetings, sometimes in chat on Zoom, sometimes texting a friend during the meeting—backchannels not available in face-to-face counterparts.

And I finished writing my book, making the final revisions the same week as CCCC. My voice was there, and it was strong. A peer reviewer said my tone was “killing flies with a sledgehammer (in a good way).”

Yet, I now found myself split between my confident online self and an anxious, awkward, in-person self. And I found myself continually inundated with messages, like the one from the president of my university, telling me my face-to-face self was the real one, that this life was the “normal” one.

FINDING, NOT LABELING, MYSELF

While others frequently articulated their struggles with the pandemic life, with online teaching, virtual conferences, and Zoom fatigue, I had found a sense of confidence and self, an energy and productivity that I had never had before. I mourned (and still mourn) that 2021 may be the only year in which I am allowed to function in that virtual environment that clicked with my brain so well.

I searched for answers, reading about how autistics were more comfortable in Zoom environments, but also feeling like that identity did not fully fit my overall experiences. I attempted to explore it with my therapist, who suggested that Zoom fit with my introversion. Yet that possibility didn't seem quite right to explain the profoundness of the change. I know that I have a diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder, but that feels vague and less than meaningful.

1. I should also note that Avasarala's style is also tied to her cultural Indian identity and for me to fully adopt it would be appropriation. Rather, it was the confidence of her style I dreamed of emulating.

I've come to think that the label isn't the important piece. Unlike me, my wife has a talent for accepting what is and often finds the "why" irrelevant. So, for now, I am adopting a curious stance, knowing that my experience is different than some, that it is neurodivergent in some form, but focusing more on what it means for me and my work life rather than for how I label myself. I have no desire to give in to what Allison Harper Hitt dubs the "rhetorics of overcoming," somehow overcoming my neurodivergent preferences to meet external definitions of success in a face-to-face world. I simply want to continue to *become*.

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- Yam, Sharon. "Interrogating the 'Deep Story': Storytelling and Narratives in the Rhetoric Classroom." *Composition Forum*, vol. 40, 2018. compositionforum.com/issue/40/deep-story.php