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Planning a Virtual SWCA Conference: Reflections from the SWCA Board

Janine Morris, Eric Mason, LaKela Atkinson, James Hamby, Deidre Anne Evans Garriott, Brian McTague, Duane Theobald, and Laura Maegan Mercer-Bourne

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations both large and small have had to assess and transform their practices to accommodate social distancing and remote contact while trying to maintain connections with clients and staff. For many universities, the immediate need was to rethink how courses were delivered to students. Many institutions also delayed or cancelled events, froze hiring, revised budgets, and reassigned personnel to address critical needs related to health and safety. Writing centers in particular were often left in precarious positions as staff were cut, policies and procedures were revised, and services were limited (Brooks-Gilles et al.; Slayton et al.).

While these changes reshaped higher education, much of what academics do has always happened away from campuses, especially when it comes to disseminating research and networking with colleagues at professional conferences. As an organizer of such a conference, the SWCA board had not only to revise plans already put in place for our in-person conference (negotiating with companies with which we already had signed contracts, for instance), but also rethink what a professional conference that met the goals and needs of our members could look like. The SWCA board had never hosted an online conference before, and, unlike some larger conferences where the venue could be an impersonal hotel or conference center, SWCA conferences were typically closely connected with universities and their writing centers. To deliver a high-quality conference without such local support, we knew we would have to make some changes to how we designed and delivered the conference.

The field of rhetoric has long been interested in such periods of transformation when old practices no longer make sense and innovative ones emerge, when new technologies or concepts or events reshape old practices. As we reflected on the development and delivery of the 2021

SWCA conference, it occurred to us that one way to think through the process was to explore how our field’s own concepts have changed over time. Specifically, we considered how Collin Gifford Brooke’s reimagining of the rhetorical canon in his book *Lingua Fracta* might be used as a heuristic to reflect on the production of an online conference. In this book, Brooke considers how changes to how we think and talk about rhetoric have been prompted by digital communication technologies.

Compositionists are generally familiar with the rhetorical canon shown below. Brooke’s revised canon attempts to account for how digital ecologies and interfaces have changed, not just the form or shape of texts, but the connections that form within networks of discourse, modality, and technology. Thus, this revised canon seemed a useful tool for thinking through how we developed an online conference for the SWCA community.

| Traditional Canon | Revised Canon |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Invention | Proairesis |
| Arrangement | Pattern |
| Style | Perspective |
| Delivery | Performance |
| Memory | Persistence |

Below, we use Brooke’s revised canon to guide our reflection on our experiences planning and executing the 2021 SWCA conference. Brooke describes discursive change as the “ideal exigence” for both learning how to cope with change, and learning how to contribute to it in productive ways—to make our institutions and practices more responsive and more relevant, while perhaps making ourselves less rigid and more empathetic (*xix*).

This retrospective includes the voices of some of the SWCA board members involved in organizing the 2021 conference. Each section includes general information about the changes that took place as we transitioned the conference online alongside author narrative and responses. As more organizations consider the possibilities offered by hosting a virtual conference, we hope this reflection provides some insight into how the process worked for us.

Planning for Possibilities

Originally, we planned to hold the 2021 SWCA conference in Memphis, TN, hosted by Christian Brothers University. In May 2020, as much uncertainty circulated around the pandemic, the board began to consider what was possible under such conditions. “Proairesis” is Brooke’s term (borrowed from Roland Barthes) for a process of invention that focuses on the “generation of possibilities” rather than their elimination (86). Invention within today’s communication ecology allows for multiple ways of connecting with others, navigating interfaces, and creating collaboratively in ways that resist rather than hasten closure. This gave us confidence that a solution could be found (especially given the available time to plan between May and February). While many larger organizations were forced to cancel their conferences outright, the SWCA Executive Board reached out to current board and senior SWCA members to gather insights about postponing or redesigning the conference. Consider the perspective of SWCA board member Maegan Mercer-Bourne:

When the board discussed the format for the 2021 conference, I was excited to learn that it could be online. With a COVID baby who was less than a year old at the time, traveling out of town, let alone out of state, was a challenge. Our discussions were open and collaborative and we decided that having a virtual conference was a special opportunity to open the SWCA to people who usually were not able to attend.

Such reflections remind us that conference attendance is always conditioned on a range of personal and institutional factors, and while being virtual could open up the possibility of a greater number of attendees, simply being virtual would not eliminate all obstacles to participation.

One of the conversations we had once we decided to make the conference virtual was what we would charge for attending. Like many organizations, SWCA’s budget is largely generated through conference and membership revenue. We decided early on, though, that despite a potential budget shortage due to membership levels declining as a result of pandemic cutbacks, we wanted to make sure the conference was

affordable because we knew everyone else would be having budget shortages as well. The board spent significant time considering what types of conference structures would best serve the organization and its members, while accounting for the financial hardships many were facing. The proairetic process, Brooke claims, broadens one's perspective by revealing “what practices are encouraged or enabled” by a particular assemblage of elements (74).

Engaging in this process allowed the board to proceed more ethically and ecologically, making transparent the relationships and consequences involved in each decision. After gathering input from former and current board members, we decided to move forward with a low-cost option for attendance (\$15 for members and \$20 for nonmembers) and provided a tiered system for group registration. Comparatively, many academic conferences in Composition and Rhetoric cost upwards of \$100 for attendance. Board members weighed the consequences of different options and sought to make the conference as accessible as possible. On July 7, 2020, the board sent an announcement to members that the Memphis conference would be postponed and the 2021 conference would continue in a virtual format.

Playing with Patterns

Because the decision to postpone came in July, the board felt that there was not enough time ahead of the February conference to recruit a new conference host. Therefore, the decision was made that the board would collaboratively host the conference. While this arrangement broke from the standard pattern established by previous conferences, board members felt the inclusion of the whole board, drawing on the resources and expertise of individuals from multiple institutions, made the process more manageable. “Pattern” is Brooke’s term for how micro- and macro-views of the world emerge through our positioning, reminding us that movement, identity, and embodiment are still important elements in digital ecologies where the visual and textual often dominate our attention. Board members worked together on different planning and organizing tasks, such as drafting the CFP, reviewing proposals, organizing special events, determining the schedule, designing the program and website, facilitating registration, and composing communications. While conferences often represent a break in our

normal schedules from work and home responsibilities, we had to consider how to be responsive to how these commitments would continue to be active during a virtual conference. As SWCA board member Duane Theobald describes it:

Organizing sessions for our online conference can best be described as the most elaborate game of Tetris that I've ever played. It took some careful planning, double-checking Google Form responses, and considering themes and trends to help get accepted proposals into slots that worked. Organization was key, and I became a huge fan of spreadsheets and color coding. This work also required us to be willing to negotiate with presenters, especially as circumstances arose, availability changed, etc. In our conference planning, just as in our work as writing center professionals, we had to remember that we were working with real people. Flexibility was key, and sometimes plans needed to change.

The “Trauma and Transformation” theme that was chosen for the conference recognized that many individuals and centers were facing significant changes to their routines. It only made sense that the conference transform as well, breaking away from previous patterns in thinking about how key events of the conference might be reimaged virtually. Inspired by her mentor, Dr. Karen Keaton Jackson, SWCA board member LaKela Atkinson introduced the idea of engaging with larger conversations circulating in summer 2020 around racial injustice and the pandemic by having a keynote panel dedicated to elevating the voices, experiences, and practices of undergraduate and graduate tutors who identify as Black/African American. The SWCA board agreed that the keynote panel would be a great way to engage with voices we don't traditionally hear—both regarding position and culture—and to make space for students—particularly African-American students—to present their perspectives on the conference theme of trauma and transformation.

Dr. Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison was invited to chair the panel and keynote panelists (Chanara Andrews-Bickers, Adara Cox, Genevieve Onyiuoke-Kennedy, and Micah Williams) were nominated by their writing center directors and selected by a committee of board members. Even before the conference began, this decision provided us an

opportunity for critical reflection. Consider SWCA board member Deidre Anne Evans Garriott's report on one of the meetings between the panelists and the review committee:

During the first meeting with Talisha and the panelists, I was hopeful that they would take off with ideas relevant to the theme that the SWCA board had developed for the online conference. When the tutors were hesitant about the theme, I prompted them to be honest about what was causing the struggle, and the tutors pointed out several issues with the theme and CFP: once again, "well-meaning" white people were asking to consume Black trauma to learn from and, additionally, we assumed that trauma always leads to transformation, especially positive. The discussion with the tutors left an indelible mark on me as an instructor and Writing Center administrator, as well as a continuing member of the SWCA board. Because the tutors were able to speak freely with board members in this venue, they were able to push back against the microaggressions we committed. Ultimately, the keynote panel was one of the most provocative, powerful parts of the conference, and was only made possible because we broke established patterns. My hope for SWCA and all conferences is to look at our example, to reach out to peer, graduate, and professional tutors, and elevate their stories, voices, and status in our organizations.

These conversations convinced us of the continued need, not just to use the conference as a way to platform those on the margins, but to intentionally decenter whiteness from our discourse. The SWCA board felt this more inclusive and collaborative start to the conference did match the committee's overall approach to the event better than a solo keynote presentation would have, but we also realized that elevating the voices of Black/African-American tutors could not mark the end of our work. The panelists' experiences and feedback pointed to the need for the SWCA, as a predominantly white organization, to continue to interrogate its assumptions and practices. As SWCA board member Lakela Atkinson reminds us:

In our research and panels, we may discuss marginalized groups and the challenges they bring to writing center spaces based on

identity and personal experiences, but we may not always honor the first-hand stories they share. Not only did the keynote school us on their stories, but they reminded us that we as an organization still need to understand intention and impact. Having student feedback about the theme and its CFP challenged us to examine our own intentions and the way that those intentions come across to those we hope to impact. The student panelists reminded us to focus on uplifting stories. Trauma is all too familiar in the African-American community, and while I am an African-American woman and writing center professional, I am not immune to this reminder. I appreciate the students using their power to help us examine our practices as individuals and an organization, as well as encourage us to work alongside them in the future to ensure that our impact is more intentional and positive.

The keynote panel did provide Chanara, Adara, Genevieve, and Micah a platform, but it also offered new ways to theorize and plan keynote panels that include the people who are on the ground tutoring. It reminds us to intentionally seek out stories of victory and success, not only trauma and tragedy, as we try to cope with global tragedies. When we break from established patterns grounded in our assumptions of what a conference should be, we can also begin to dismantle the other systems that have held conferences back.

Changes were made to the presentation options and conference interfaces as well. Just as “new media writing subverts the expectations we have for print texts” (Brooke 93), making the conference virtual allowed us to subvert some traditional conference attendance expectations. In addition to traditional panels, roundtables, and workshops, participants were able to propose asynchronous multimodal presentations that were then linked to virtual discussions during the conference. Allowing a greater variety of presentation formats led to a number of creative and insightful productions that took advantage of genres and modalities not often used at SWCA conferences, from parody videos to interactive online galleries. Eventually, conference web pages were constructed showcasing digital ads from sponsors, interactive schedules were built allowing participants to easily add sessions of interest to their online calendars, and unique events such as the Discord game night hosted by the Nova Southeastern

University MA program in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media were developed. All of these digital innovations helped rearrange the typical maps of meaning that conference participants traversed, reminding us of the various roles each of us play as we wander across interfaces, creating links and leaving traces that change these spaces as we move through them. There was still much work to do in designing these interfaces, however.

Designing with Perspective

Putting together a digital conference means designing more than just the pre-conference communications, or the booklets and name badges attendees would typically receive on arrival, but a series of interfaces and interactions through which planners and participants would construct and access conference content before and as it happened. It requires thinking through the perspectives inhabited by different end users looking to accomplish various purposes. “Perspective” is the term Brooke uses to explore “what style might look like when we consider it in terms of interfaces rather than static texts” (114). While we intended for the conference to feel similar in tone to our in-person conference, we also wanted to embrace the possibilities that came from using virtual interfaces and online modalities in new ways. While changes like the pre-recorded presentations and events like the Discord game night helped accomplish this, as SWCA board member James Hamby reports, these changes also manifested in some unexpected ways:

After nearly a year of isolation in quarantine, we were able to make new acquaintances and see the interiors of houses and apartments other than our own. Seeing presenters with their bookshelves, knick-knacks, and artwork in the background gave us a sense of their personalities that we might never have experienced at an in-person conference. It was also delightful to have surprise visits from pets and small children; my own four-year-old son made an appearance while I was presenting as he groggily came downstairs looking for breakfast.

In previous years, such “interruptions” during professional events might have been cause for consternation, but the pandemic seemed to make people more accepting of the home circumstances of their colleagues,

and more aware of the difficulties of juggling professional and private lives. Such moments remind us that a key part of bringing people together for a conference is the building of community, which we felt was an urgent need for many during the pandemic. Though distanced, the perspectives we gained of each other were in some ways more fully human, leading to increased opportunities for empathy and understanding. As SWCA Vice-President Brian McTague reminds us:

In planning a conference, it is vital to not forget that the reason we come together at conferences is for a sense of community: engaging in dialogue with our peers, and sharing and learning things about our practice as professionals, but also forging and maintaining bonds, including meaningful friendships. Having a team that understood that this was an essential part of solving the 2021 conference “puzzle” helped us deepen our own relationships via an ongoing conversation that began with the first meeting about moving the conference online and continues with the unpacking of the entire process through this collaborative reflection.

This team orientation was facilitated by the many digital applications, such as email, Zoom, and the Google suite, which allowed us to converse and collaborate synchronously and asynchronously on shared documents, forms, and spreadsheets. As Brooke writes, “one of the things that new media interfaces do stylistically is to help us move from the abstracted, single perspective of the reader of a static text or the viewer of a painting to the multiple and partial perspectives necessary for the many forms of new media” (114). This view of perspective as necessarily partial recognizes the value that board members with diverse experiences brought to these shared spaces, and the need for feedback and guidance along the way.

We were sensitive to the concern of how access to these spaces might change who attended the conference and how they engaged with conference sessions. Some of our special events, such as the Graduate Program Open House, were open to the public, and we displayed the url for this session publicly and encouraged SWCA members to share it with their home institutions. It didn’t seem advisable, however, to make all conference links and materials public. We did require password-based

logins for attendees to access links to conference events. Not only did we want to maintain some linkage between having paid to attend the conference and access to materials and events, we were also aware of the possibility of “Zoom-bombing,” in which someone might intentionally disrupt a session if able to do so (which has happened at other online conferences).

Additionally, we debated the value and risk of recording sessions for future access and ultimately decided that we would not record presentations, so that conversations could be as open and honest as possible without exposing participants to future scrutiny. Taking into account the perspectives of ourselves as a conference host providing access to paid participants, of presenters seeking to share their research and experiences, and of participants looking to have fruitful and meaningful conversations without worry, we felt we struck a balance that created a safe space for professional interactions.

Assembling the Performance

The content of the SWCA conference was distributed in a variety of ways using different media, including email messages, social media posts, videos, podcasts, and more. Pre-recorded presentations allowed participants to collaborate in new ways, and the real-time performances of presentations were broadcast from across the southeastern United States, and as far away as Lebanon. “Performance” is Brooke’s term that reminds us that digital media are not uniform experiences that are unaffected by their mode of delivery, but are always part of particular assemblages of discourse that happen in specific places and times that work to assign value and meaning to those events (192).

Zoom rooms were created for the various sessions, with presenters making use of embedded functionality such as surveys, breakout rooms, chat, and screen-sharing. Volunteers were scheduled to appear at the start of each session to ensure that things went smoothly and to confirm there were no technical problems. Various efforts were made to ensure that what James calls the “human touch” remained present even in a virtual conference, including a Zoom room (named the “Compass Room”) set up as an informal “help desk” which was staffed by a live board member throughout the conference. While board members included in this article

variously described their experience of the overall conference as “rewarding,” “impressive,” and “truly fantastic,” it was sometimes through personal exchanges in these third spaces where the important informal connections that accompany a typical conference happened. As Brian writes:

Some of the most meaningful interactions I personally had during the conference happened in the SWCA “Compass Room.” The hunger for human interaction in a professional, yet friendly environment, was very apparent, perhaps for myself most of all. While I still very much missed the in-person presentations, conversations, coffees, and meals, working at the “help desk” filled some of the void that so many of us experienced amid the pandemic and political unrest of the year. It was rewarding to be able to answer event-related and organizational questions, and to just have brief moments of laughter and connection. Having such a space part of but separate from the presentations of the conference seemed integral to its overall success.

Although we felt that the SWCA brought a high degree of professionalism to the design and implementation of our virtual conference, the real-time performance of the event was not without its difficulties, of course. As SWCA board member Eric Mason points out:

There were a good number of challenges to address that, for the most part, remained invisible to conference participants (and even to many SWCA board members), from issues with our event registration system, to needing to reschedule presenters who didn’t account for time zone differences when requesting their presentation times. This being our first time hosting an online conference, and doing so within a necessarily tight budget, in many ways we acted in the tradition of *bricoleurs*—improvising no-cost or ad-hoc solutions with the materials we had “at hand.” Every single presentation during the conference, for instance, was delivered within the regular Zoom accounts of just two people.

The combination of positive and challenging experiences throughout the conference illustrate the complexities of hosting a conference in a virtual

assemblage. Like Brooke’s work, we see our experience as an “ecolog[y] of practice,” which allowed us to focus “on the strategies and tactics we bring to bear on new media at the same time that our technologies constrain and empower us” (41). While elements of this ecology of practice shifted in going virtual, maintaining our focus on building community ensured that the values of the SWCA continued to take center stage.

Benefiting from Persistence

We hope the innovations created, friendships deepened, and insights gained during the SWCA 2021 conference planning process persist into the future. “Persistence” is Brooke’s term for considering how our performances are not merely stored for later access, but actively construct patterns that remain available and influential as they create new connections and new opportunities for aggregation and invention in the future. Having successfully organized our first virtual conference with over 60 sessions, 250 presenters, and 350 attendees, the SWCA hopes that we continue to embrace innovation and flexibility, allowing a diverse range of individuals and centers to benefit from the conversations and support within the SWCA community.

Below, we close with some reflections on the lessons that persist from our memories of the conference, and how we think those experiences have shaped our understanding of the relationships and connections among our professional and private lives going forward:

Maegan: I have always loved attending the SWCA conference, but the one for 2021 will stand out in my mind for many reasons. The flexibility was just what I needed at this point in my life, and I hope that future conferences will be able to have some kind of online component for others like me, as well as those with other barriers such as physical ability or financial status. This year has stripped back a lot of the formality of discourse. It has made me realize that we have to have the difficult conversations, that everyone is responsible for change, and that everyone can be responsible for moving forward from this tragic year, instead of simply allowing the status quo to continue.

Duane: My biggest takeaway from the online conferencing environment connects to my biggest takeaway from COVID as a whole: I understand, now more than ever, the necessity for robust and engaging online presences for writing center work. The students my center has served online have been incredibly receptive and grateful for our presence in that environment, and I imagine the same is true for those who attended SWCA's online conference. They had access to a meaningful, purposeful professional development opportunity, at an affordable cost, and the SWCA must keep this in mind moving forward.

LaKela: The 2021 SWCA Conference emphasized multiple ways of connecting with colleagues and responding to various needs. We all need flexibility and accommodation at some point in our lives, and the success of our fully virtual conference during the COVID pandemic is testament to the fact that our members and attendees were awaiting this support, and that the conference experience can be delivered virtually without sacrificing quality. In fact, I felt more capable of processing information in the digital setting due to easy access to conference materials and due to not having to run here and there to attend or begin sessions. The engagement, feedback, and ability to document sessions are particularly valuable for future conferences.

Deidre: The 2021 SWCA Conference and its success emphasized the importance of accessible, online content for low-to no-cost as tutors and WCAs seek to make their centers more just places for learning. The move to digital environments not only made us rethink how to package the conference; it fundamentally changed who was provided a platform and, therefore, how authority was conferred. It demonstrates the importance of uplifting the voices of people who come from communities that white communities, especially academia, have historically targeted and marginalized. Working with those groups and putting aside our egos as we did when we listened to the keynote panelists should inform both future SWCA meetings as well as other conferences.

James: What I really valued about this conference was the way it highlighted the importance of community in our professional and personal lives. When the pandemic hit, writing centers everywhere had to adapt quickly to new realities in order to keep helping students, and the organizers of this conference had the same type of selfless attitude in doing whatever it took to create a meaningful experience for everyone who attended. Many people put in a lot of extra time and effort to keep our SWCA community connected through this conference, and it was inspiring to see how much it was appreciated by all who attended.

Eric: When taking over the SWCA digital content developer position, I didn't anticipate having to help design the interface for a virtual conference, but working as part of the SWCA team to plan the 2021 conference was a useful reminder that the conceptual tools and practical skills we have available to us as communication specialists (whether we call our field "writing," "rhetoric," "communication," "student services," or something else) are themselves very flexible, and prepare us to work responsibly and responsively in a range of ecologies.

Brian: As the SWCA vice-president during this tumultuous time, I leaned heavily on my previous experience hosting an in-person SWCA conference in 2018 at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. While we were in uncharted territory in terms of planning and executing an online conference, I was confident in my ability to mentor those in our community taking an active role in the process, guiding them with advice of lessons learned and best practices. It was a tremendous asset to have such a motivated and dedicated team of board members willing to take on all the tasks hosting a conference entails, and doing so in such a short time frame. The work accomplished is something we, and hopefully others, will be able to use as a model for future events.

Janine: Hosting the virtual conference in many ways was more difficult than we initially thought it would be when we decided to postpone the Memphis conference in July 2020. However, the feedback we heard and connections we got to experience made

the experience more than worthwhile. As SWCA president, I was so proud of our board members and grateful for the amazing community that makes up SWCA.

We hope reflecting on our experiences here provides readers some insights into what went into planning and hosting the 2021 SWCA conference and that our success may perhaps serve as a model for other professional organizations in organizing fully online or hybrid conferences. We look forward to future opportunities to bring the SWCA together as a community, and appreciate the work of all members of the SWCA in helping us confront the challenges brought on by the pandemic.

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