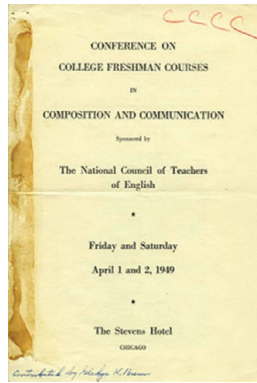


Afterword

“People Always Clap for the Wrong Things,” Or, Labor, Time, and Writing Have Always Been a Feminist Issue

Holly Hassel

Recollections from an Uncommon Time: 4C20 Documentarian Tales is both history and present, both a snapshot of the field in a moment of crisis, and the start of a larger experiment.¹ As the contributors of this volume illustrate richly, individual experiences of the pandemic—even within the relatively privileged class of academic workers—varied greatly, and the stories that are told in this collection illustrate both the mundane and traumatic experiences of colleagues who participated. I read these pieces alongside each other and feel their grief, anxiety, self-flagellation, and anger. I also read renewed commitments to work, to self-care, to family, and to gratitude.



What else stands out to me as the program chair of CCCC 2021—in which Julie Lindquist and I collaborated to continue the Documentarian feature—is how the intersections of labor, time, and writing have always been a feminist issue. The 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic revealed, more than other events in recent history, how the inequitable resource of time, and how the inequitably distributed value attached to labor, is raced, classed, abled, and gendered. Broadly, the *New York Times* reported as early as April 2020 that “One in three jobs held by women has been designated as essential, according to a

¹ The line “People always clap for the wrong things” is from *The Catcher in the Rye* and was the title of my MA thesis, an application of existentialist philosophy to the novel. As I started to sketch out this essay, somehow I seemed to be drawn back to it as I read and reread the Documentarian tales, and as the process of conference planning unfolded, folded, and refolded again.

New York Times analysis of census data crossed with the federal government's essential worker guidelines. Nonwhite women are more likely to be doing essential jobs than anyone else" (Robertson and Gebeloff). I do not think that the academy is exempt from this inequity.

I think about the question asked in the introduction to this collection: "What *is* a conference experience?" (10). And I also ask, "what *is* a conference?" and I also ask "What and who is a conference for?" These questions undergird the experiences of academics and of writing teachers (specifically) and are essential to take up. The radical reimagining of our daily lives and how we do our jobs called for by the COVID-19 pandemic has given us the opportunity to think about and rethink about the answers to these questions.

Though Documentarians were not exclusively in non-presenter roles (many concurrently were)—Documentarians have a role on the program regardless of whether they have a presenter role—it invites me to ask questions about how the Documentarian role is a feminist act, because it forces us to confront labor and time. Who, in a conference program and space, gets to write? Who gets to speak? Who talks and who is listened to? Who, with time and space in their academic employment, gets to spend time writing their own thoughts, making their own arguments, participating in a scholarly conversation, and who spends their time most days responding to the writing of others and meeting the needs of first-year students and their writing or supporting graduate teaching assistants, contingent faculty, and teachers of all employment statuses to do their work. Such tasks were enormously intensified in the pandemic, as Heather McGovern documents in Chapter 13, and as Miriam Moore's student's material reality illustrates in Chapter 8, responding to Moore's call to "spend some time thinking about the assigned reading and what it means for the way they viewed the world." "When? I mean . . . when? I have three kids and a husband and a job. I've love to sit and think about all this—but I have a life," said the exasperated student. Reflection and self-care are luxuries for the teachers and students whose time is not exclusively taken up by reading, writing, and reflection. I think about Seth Kahn's July 2020 *College English* article, in which he writes: "As long as faculty continue to proclaim to decision-makers that some kinds of teaching are less valuable than others, or than research, we can't be surprised when those decision-makers decide to mistreat faculty who teach—especially those who teach primarily lower-division general education courses" (592).

Likewise, if a conference is just about sharing research, then the vast majority of those who work *in the field of composition and rhetoric* (whose primary responsibility is teaching and supporting others’ writing, of supporting the literacy development of new college students, of maintaining the curricular foundation of most English departments and independent writing programs that underwrite and subsidizes majors and graduate degrees)—do not get to be part of what conferences do. If we attached the same value to conferencing as we do to the field writ large, if conferencing is showing up and sharing your writing, your arguments, your research (which, in the system of rewards that values lines on CVs, impact factor, and prestige, can be one of the primary motivators for conference participation) then we are excluding most people in the field from the professional benefits of the annual convening of this organization.

The November 2019 position statement, “CCCC Statement of Professional Guidance for Mentoring Graduate Students,” makes similar calls: “make academic practice and conventions accessible,” and “validate and help students prepare for diverse careers,” admonishing that

. . . mentors should not invoke or imply damaging and unrealistic myths about what success on the (academic) job market must look like (e.g., that only R1 academic positions are desirable, that a national academic job search is the only way to secure satisfactory employment). Instead, faculty should work with graduate students to imagine myriad post degree options and follow students’ leads on working to meet their goals.

The CCCC as an organization and in its publication continues to “call for” these ideological and attitude shifts—and yet its practices continue unchanged.

I think about Holly Larsen’s award-winning article, “Epistemic Authority in Two-Year Colleges” published in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* in 2019, where she continues the scholarly conversation initiated by two-year college teacher-scholars like Mark Reynolds, Howard Tinberg, Jeff Andelora, and others. Larson asks

why aren’t two-year English faculty writing and publishing to move the theoretical gaze onto our institutions, our students, our challenges? Should the burden be upon the shoulders of community college professors to discipline our teaching experiences into

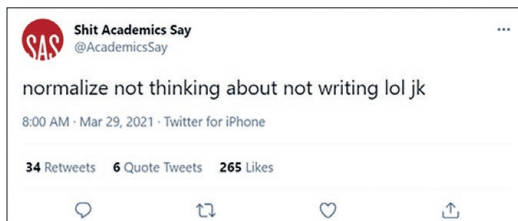
theory if we are to become equal knowledge makers and contribute to the discipline of composition studies? (118-19)

If two-year college teachers are representative of the “teaching-intensive” faculty members, as I would argue they are, I think there is a clear line between the marginalization of lore, of practice, of teaching as ultimately a different kind of intellectual activity from research and theory, one that alienates those who write for publication and professional peers and those who read the writing of others, whether students or scholars.

I think about the TYCA Workload Working Papers and report, which, as TYCA Working Paper #5: Two-Year College English Faculty Professional Development Workload (2020) reports,

Likewise, the workloads faculty shouldered—teaching loads, the particular labor demands of teaching composition, and service obligations—often left little time or energy for professional development, especially when faculty were expected to pursue it on their own time (and sometimes on their own dime)” (8).

Every time I see colleagues or strangers documenting their writing progress on social media (“wrote this many words today!” “Sitting down to write now!”), I think about what a luxury that is for most instructors of writing in the modern academic economy.



I’m writing right now, today, in a late-stage pandemic, because my husband took my two kids—both in virtual school—out of state for nine days, even though I currently work in a position that is structured with equal parts teaching and research. Writing this afterword has been on my to-do list for eight months. For most faculty in teaching-intensive positions whether they are contingent or tenure-track, it is normal not to think about one’s *own* writing—but we think about the writing of others all the time, and they are also academics.

The Documentarian role means that *participating* is also *listening*. It is *paying attention* as much as expecting others to listen to you. It’s

absolutely unsurprising when I look at the demographics that Lindquist, Straayer, and Halbritter account for in the Introduction to this collection, whether gender, race, or employment status. It suggests something about who is expected to listen, and who expects that their voice will be centered by others. Serving as a Documentarian is a structured opportunity to observe and reflect, and to have that observation and reflection-informed text be valued (at least in this moment and in this collection) as a form of knowledge. As Xiao Tan writes in Chapter 3:

I had never felt that what I do was lifesaving or game-changing. Not being able to see the immediate impact made me question how useful and worthy my work really is. But the Documentarian project gave me a new perspective of looking at my role in the world. As I may continue to feel vulnerable as a foreigner and racial minority, I can now scoop up the courage to think about what makes me scared in the first place, apart from the disease itself. I am also in a better position to voice my concerns and complaints and to expect that, together, we could right the wrongs.

What my hope is for the Documentarian role in 2020, 2021, and hopefully beyond, is that we create a space not for just those who participate in a certain way, centered and spotlighted. In the Documentarian role, we create a new opportunity for whose experiences can become centered in an online and print publication with NCTE’s SWR series, but it could also signal that this is a new and valuable way of “participating in the conversation.” That paying attention to what’s going on, and then describing that phenomenon, is both a useful labor for Documentarians, but also a valuable activity in and of itself for knowledge production—what do we know about what we do?

In this way, the Documentarian Tales are also a fantastically useful data source for CCCC leaders to know more about what the convention offers its participants. Maybe it’s doing exactly what it should, *but maybe it is not*. In the last year of collaborative conference planning 2020 program chair Julie Lindquist, she and I have had to think about how to do this important part of the organization’s exclusively virtually, including the planning for a conference with an uncertain 2021 future, one that has to account for a year that just disappeared from the history of the CCCC convention, held annually since 1949. Initially, the Documentarian role launched for the 2020 conference followed the conference’s call to “Consider our Commonplaces”—as a term,

"commonplace" hasn't always been legible to general readers, and for me, I think about it as "something we take for granted"—some core elements of our practice that we just don't even question. What I loved from first reading about Julie's vision for the role was that it did exactly that—a commonplace about conferences is that they are a) in a place, b) where people go, c) to share their work.

And yet, all of these have been turned upside down, in ways that I think are needed. For example, going "to a place" has *always* been highly inaccessible for many CCCC members/academic workers: graduate students, contingent faculty, and independent scholars who have minimal or no academic funding; academics from under-resourced institutions like two-year colleges and some HBCUs and tribal colleges; disabled colleagues with needs that make travel uncomfortable, exhausting, or nearly impossible; parents of children at nearly any age whose care must be considered; caregivers of any other loved one who simply cannot be abandoned for four days to the care of others.

The Documentarian work of 2021 will, I hope, help us do even more to learn more about not just what *was* and wasn't in 2020, but about what a virtual convening will mean, do, and offer to attendees. Most of us expect that, somehow, we might return to "normal" and not the "new normal"—but what might we learn from the ways educators participate in Virtual 2021? Sessions are shorter, presentations tighter: recorded sessions means that the conference can be viewed, revisited and reabsorbed, and that attendees can (for once) go to multiple sessions in the same session block—even if it's not synchronously. What will this mean for a kind of *durability* of the conference, so different from the co-located conference model in which you're either able to be THERE doing THAT or not. As Shelagh Patterson writes:

As a full-time contingent instructor of first-year writing, life hasn't changed much. If anything, not having to go to campus and teach classes makes life easier. The classroom is my joy, but it also takes a lot of energy and coupled with the work of reading and commenting on essays, I am often exhausted by evening. Without spending energy in the classroom, I feel rested, but my time hasn't changed. I just have more of it: to spend reading, commenting on, and grading student essays. It's not comforting to realize that the demands on full-time contingent faculty require us to live lives of social isolation. (ch. 19)

What would it mean to make space for—virtual or otherwise—the work of instructors whose primary activity is talking with, writing with, and reading work by the first-year student writers whose labor props up the entire field of writing and rhetoric. I'm interested in using and building change on the insights gained from the 2021 Documentarians whose insights have already made the material realities of writing teachers visible through their reflective tales.

And my hope, moving into the role of chair of CCCC, the organization, in the coming year, is that these Documentarian Tales (2020 and 2021) can become an additional kind of resource, a data source collected to tell us something about what IS at the conference—in the past, most ephemeral moments of professional activity have not had the same durability, except to the extent that new collegiate relationships formed were continued, or conference feedback turned into publication. What will this mean for how we make and use the knowledge shared at the conference? What will it mean that the accounts themselves become published knowledge? Maybe it will make room for a different kind of work activity, as Hanson notes: “[w]ork couldn't heal my pain, but reflection and changing my perspective could” (ch. 6). Nobody wants to change work into self-care, but maybe more of work—more kinds of writing—could be nourishing, valuable, reflective, and descriptive. Or as Cheryl Price-McKell asks in Chapter 9, “Can we draw insight, empathy, and knowledge from recognizing and inviting nonacademic identities into our work without apology or rationale?” Or as Rachel Panton writes, in Chapter 21:

During a period of crisis, this new role, and the circumstances surrounding it, elevated my consciousness on student needs and my attention to their cognitive processes. It also grounded me in unexpected ways and allowed me to be a keener observer. These observations rooted me in the work of sacred writing and allowed me to engage in digital dialogic compassionate writing responses, both in my rhetorical responses to student writing and in personal written correspondence with them.

In other words, maybe the practice of listening to ourselves and to others—instead of talking at them—will cultivate attention to what we all know are a set of messed up values about labor—the activities we reward, the institutional values that are granted merit, status and

resources; and what we are encouraged to spend our time on in order to be perceived as “part of” CCCC (it ain’t teaching and service).

My hope is that—even as Virtual CCCC 2021 will be “less than” for those who are attached to the traditions of going to a place at a specific time—there will be something of a liberating function—that being at a place some time and then returning to review what you couldn’t see in the moment will help us learn something about how to meet the professional needs of a broader group of literacy professionals in the field. The 2021 Documentarian Tales will be one part of helping us move forward as an organization toward a sustainable future.

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